

an exegetical, canonical, and thematic approach

AN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

CHRISTIAN
BOOK OF
THE YEAR



BRUCE K. WALTKE
with Charles Yu

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THEOLOGY
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In memory of Henry George Waltke 1897–2001

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.” (2 Timothy 4:7–8)

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PREFACE

The last thing one settles in writing a book is what one should put in first.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 1.19

I. THE BOOK'S TITLE

Who is God? What is his name? What is he like? Who am I? What is the meaning of history and of my life? Orthodox Christian theologians by spiritual conviction find the answers to these questions in the Bible, not through rationalism, empiricism, or sentimentalism. The biblical writers answer these questions and others with a heavenly voice, and the biblical theologian's task is to reflect critically upon the writers' messages. Their messages give dignity and purpose to our lives, direction and significance to our choices, and a meaningful context for our worship.

This book is *a* theology, not *the* theology, of the Old Testament. There is more than one way of writing any biblical theology, depending in part on an author's understanding of the nature of the Old Testament and of the people to whom it is addressed. Biblical theologians differ in establishing the bases on which they rest their theologies, their understanding of their tasks, and consequently their methods. In the introduction I defend my basis, task, and method against other theologies. Nevertheless, even if these fundamental issues be accepted as most credible, each biblical theologian will develop them differently. The biblical material is too unruly to be fixed to a Promethean bed. Theologies also differ in their objectives, which must take into account their anticipated audience.

The approach of this theology is first of all *exegetical*. Any theology pertains to a critical reflection upon God's revelation of his character and purpose, and an Old Testament theology reflects upon the content of the books of the Old Testament and upon the whole. To think critically about the Old Testament's theology first involves that the theologian exegete the texts, which traditionally means interpreting their words in the languages that reflect their historical horizons.* In addition, as theologians have become increasingly aware, they must also think critically about the writer's rhetoric. Much of the Old Testament is artistic narrative. Through narrative the prophet historian aims to shape the people of God according to Israel's covenant ideals: Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and Davidic. To do this he provides an "x-ray" image of the soul. The Italians have a saying: "Italy is a country of many mysteries but no secrets." Israel's history is full of plots and intrigues, but the inspired narrators expose the human heart and God's responses. Their narrative plots educate the reader not by preaching or sermonizing, but by showing and enthralling. The narrators rely on a well-

disposed, active reader who takes the plot to heart and lets it be inscribed in the soul. In other words, they use rhetoric to communicate their message. Consequently the theologian must reflect critically on their rhetoric in order to engage with their messages.

The approach of this theology is also *canonical* and *thematic*, because to think critically about the Old Testament, the Christian theologian must integrate the Old Testament writers' messages with those of the inspired New Testament apostles. The Bible is not merely a collection of sixty-six books of various authors; it is one book, a canon inspired by one God, symbolized by the covers that bind them together as "The Holy Bible." The Old Testament theologian best achieves this holistic objective by batching major biblical themes and tracing their development as the faith community interacts with its ever-changing environment. In the case of the Bible, Aristotle's claim "All change is sweet" proves true. But the New Testament theologian is better positioned to reflect more fully upon the intertextuality of the two testaments (see [chap. 5](#)). In sum, I hope that when serious readers have finished this theology, they will understand the Old Testament and its function in the Bible. And my desire is that along the way they will gain a new appreciation for the artistry of this greatest literature ever written.

II. THE BOOK'S OBJECTIVE

“There is no Frigate like a Book,” wrote Emily Dickinson, “to take us Lands away.” In the Bible we sail on the clouds to heaven, submarine down to the depths of our hearts, and are transported back to ancient kingdoms that serve as paradigms for interpreting the present. The Bible explores and answers with authority the most fundamental issues facing human beings: Who are we? What is the world and our place in it? How can we find happiness in this conflicted world? How do we deal with choices that confront us, and what happens as a result? This is the stuff of great literature, and the Bible is the greatest expression of it.

This book is a profession of faith—a reasoning faith, I hope, and reasonable: what Saint Anselm called “faith out on a quest to know” (*fides quaerens intellectum*).

A. To Know God Personally

Since the Bible is the Holy Spirit’s revelation of God’s heart and mind through inspired spokespersons, those who by faith spiritually absorb this revelation into their hearts will know God. Knowing God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit has to be the ultimate aim of all Christian education. In the spiritual process of learning divine matters, one comes to know the Person behind the cognitive propositions and to encounter this Person through personal commitment (see chap 1, I: Introduction). There is no word for “theology” in the Hebrew Bible; the only phrase that comes close is the Hebrew phrase *daʿat ʾelohîm*, “knowledge of God.” But there is a vast difference between the two: theology, of Greek origin, means “the study of divine matters.” It first appears in Plato (*Republic* 379a) and implies an “I-It” relationship. This way of knowing has its place, but knowing God in Scripture is about an “I-Thou” relationship. The biblical phrase *daʿat ʾelohîm*, denotes a personal understanding of truth and a commitment to God. In his *Treatise on the Religious Affections*, the outstanding American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) argues that true religion is a matter of the heart (see [chap. 8](#)) rather than simply the intellect.¹ An authentic

relationship with God, however, demands intelligent reflection on his objective revelation. In Proverbs the sage lectures his son: “My son, if you accept my words ... you will find the knowledge of God” (2:1–5). The ultimate aim of biblical theology is to bring us to our knees in worship and prayer. Old Testament “theology” is about the pursuit of this kind of knowledge.

As an aside, let me explain why I uniquely, in a biblical theology, render God’s personal name—which is represented by the four Hebrew consonants *YHWH*— as “*I AM*,” not as “Jehovah,” “Yahweh” (as I did in my Genesis commentary)² or “LORD” (as I did in my Proverbs commentary).³ Providence has not preserved the vocalization of this tetragrammaton (“four letters”). Scribes, who in the Second Temple period (ca. 535 BC – AD 70) preserved and transmitted the Scriptures, read the tetragrammaton as, ^{ʾa}*dōnāy*. *YHWH* cannot be pronounced. That was the scribes’ intention but not the original author’s intention. “Jehovah” confounds the vowels of ^{ʾa}*dōnāy* with the four consonants. *Yahweh*, though the probable normalization, is nevertheless speculative. Moreover, it seems to demote the status of the living God to that of just another ancient Near Eastern deity, like Marduk of the Babylonians or Asshur of the Assyrians. This normalization alienates God from the modern reader—at least, so it seems to me.

The title “LORD” does not alienate the Christian reader and paves the way for the identification of Jesus with the personal name *YHWH*. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ ... you will be saved.... for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD [*YHWH*; Joel 2:32]’ will be saved” (Rom. 10:9–13). Using a title, however, establishes a less intimate relationship with a person than using his or her name. God’s name is a sentence, and in his own mouth means “*I AM*,” and in the mouth of Israel, “*HE IS*” (see [chap. 13](#)). His personal name paradoxically invites the hearer to enter into intimacy in his protective nearness and to stand in awe of him in his eternal being in contrast to human mortality. He is both “*I am here*” and “*I am eternal*.”⁴ Therefore, in this theology I choose to translate God’s name. Not to confuse my readers, I translate the name in its first person form (i.e., “*I*,” not “*he*”) and place it in uppercase italics, “*I AM*.” The church is somewhat familiar with this name from its songs and hymns. A line in a popular praise song says, “We will glorify the King of kings, we will glorify the Lamb; we will glorify the Lord of lords, who is the great *I AM*.”⁵ In Margaret Clarkson’s hymn “We Come, O Christ, to You,” we find the line “You are the living Truth, all wisdom dwells in you, the source of every skill, the one eternal TRUE, O great *I AM*.”⁶

B. To Understand the Nature of God's Revelation

An old French oxymoron says, “The more things change, the more they are the same.”⁷ This is an appropriate aphorism for understanding God's revelation. The Rainbow Bridge spanning Niagara Falls began as a kite. Those building the bridge flew a kite across the majestic waterway, and it came down on the other side of the gorge, linking the two sides with a thin string. Beginning with the string, its builders pulled more strings, then ropes, and eventually steel girders across the gorge. The more the almost unnoticeable bridge changed, the more it became what it was always meant to be. For our purposes here, the kite represents Genesis in salvation, and the rest of Scripture and church history represent the developing bridge to the eschaton (see [chap. 20.IV.C](#)). God's revelation unfolds before us in this progressive fashion. He does not change or disown his previous statements, but his progressive pronouncements resemble that of the bridge in its development. This continuity and transformation of key words, motifs, themes, and concepts wind their way through the Old Testament and reach fulfillment in Christ and the church and will find their consummation in the new heaven and the new earth. Reflecting on each stage of the construction causes admiration and understanding of the final form.

Like all metaphors, however, this one also has its limitations. There are discontinuities — issues on which the Bible presents more than one perspective. For example, why is there suffering? The book of Deuteronomy teaches that suffering may be due to God's discipline. Deuteronomy 8 asserts that God sent Israel out into the wilderness to break and humble them that they might learn that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of *I AM*” (v. 3). God intends his afflictions for the faithful to be remedial (i.e., to chasten and redeem); for the fool, to be penal and final. The book of Job, however, presents a different perspective on suffering. In this book suffering is a basic reality rooted in mystery. Somehow, in God's design, there is, within the boundaries of the cosmos, chaotic energy, which from the human perspective is mysterious, inexplicable, and traumatic; this chaos is hostile to life. For reasons unknown, God does not eliminate the chaos but sets boundaries to it. Thus, God says to the sea, “You proud waves” — there's arrogance and defiance in the imagery of the sea — “thus far and no farther!” Within the ordered universe of God, there is a place for floods, fires, and hurricanes, but they are always bounded.

A theology of the Old Testament must account for both the disparities and the unifying themes of Scripture. The discontinuities, the tension points, indicate

that the Old Testament is not monolithic. Its various genres, theologies, and modes of revelation create enormous strains and tensions in the building of the bridge. Theology of the Old Testament aims to bring to light the varied nature of this perplexing revelation, noting how it both confuses and unifies our experience of God. Nevertheless, there are themes — even an overarching theme — that unite the Bible’s disparate parts.

C. To Know Self

“Who am I?” is the fundamental question of our existence. Our self-identity is the window through which we perceive and engage the world; it determines all that we do. Our “inscape,” using the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins’s term, determines our landscape. This identity, or “inscape,” is formed by two factors: memory and destiny. Without a memory a person loses identity, and without a history to sustain it, a society and the world around it become virtually phantom realities. Memories of our past inform who we are, shape our self-understanding, and give us a vision of our destiny, and that vision or hope moves us forward, forging our will and determination. If we suffered amnesia, forgetting our home and community, we would confess that we were lost, uncertain of our identity. This is not only true for an individual; it is true for a community. Our collective history shapes our thinking; our sense of destiny moves us to reach beyond ourselves, motivating us to desire and to strive. As John McKay, former president of Princeton University, noted: “The road to tomorrow leads through yesterday.”

Each of us has multiple identities determined in the context of specific communities: a family, a company, a church, an ethnic nationality, a race, a political entity, and so on. Most of us consider our identities to be something inherent to our being. We are born into a family and into a nation, neither of which we chose. Basing our choices on physical, mental, and social gifts, we opt to associate with some groups and reject others. The factors of our culture, race, family, and natural gifts are powerful influences on our choice of communities, but they are not the sole determinants. While it is true that our circumstances predispose us to membership in certain communities, we also make conscious choices to enter into a community and identify with the memories and hopes of that community. Our capacity for such an undertaking is a fundamental assumption of the Christian faith. How does one consciously choose a community? The United States of America is a community based on an ideal,

not on ethnicity. Its memories include the War for Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and so on. Its destiny has changed over time, but something of the dream of individual freedom and social mobility still remains. When immigrants step onto the continent, they face a call to adopt the memories and destinies of the people of their new homeland. Many immigrants and most of their children do make this decision to become Americans, not only legally, but existentially.

Thus, Americans have ethnic ancestors from all over the world, but they trace their political identity to the ideals of the American Revolution and the Constitution. Likewise, the church has ethnic ancestors from all over the world; it is not bounded by political entities nor separated by class distinctions. Yet the individuals in this community, through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, make a conscious choice to identify with the memories and hopes of Jesus Christ and the community he heads.

The Old Testament contains much that *seems* trivial to the modern Christian. That is because we fail to understand the functions of these texts. Aside from teaching us about God, sin, and the need for redemption, a significant portion of the Old Testament recounts the history of the people of God. These are the narratives that constitute the memories of the Christian community. These memories inform our identity as Christians. Thus, Abraham is our spiritual father. His story becomes part of our past. The exodus, the monarchy of Israel and Judah, and the exile cease to be ancient tales of a distant people, but the triumphs and tragedies of our own history. Moreover, its ceremonial laws, such as abstaining from “unclean” foods are “visual aids” to instruct God’s people of all ages to be pure.

Our baptism into the community of faith is a proclamation that our true identity lies within this community. It is shaped by the collective memories recorded in the Bible; it is motivated by the destiny of being with Jesus Christ when he comes again. Not surprisingly, a large part of spiritual strength, of being rooted and grounded in the faith, is knowing our history, knowing who we are. Moreover, the history of “our forefathers” is given to us as “examples” (see 1 Cor. 10:6). George Santayana’s line — “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” — is much repeated but is no less true for that.

Furthermore, a commitment to this community may demand that we disown other allegiances. This involves rejecting other histories and cultures that oppose the Christian faith. We cannot be neutral. We have to follow Abraham’s example, leaving the land of our culture and family to enter a new land.

In this fashion the stories of the Old Testament communicate at a level beyond cognitive propositions. They challenge us to identify with Abraham as our

father, to share his faith that rejoices to see the day of Jesus Christ, and to look forward to a heavenly city whose builder and maker is God. They engender a transformed self-perception and an altered worldview. This is one of the most powerful functions of the Old Testament; unfortunately, it is also one of the least understood among the community of faith. In sum, a goal of this theology is to help the covenant community understand their identity as the people of God within the context of the memories and hopes proclaimed in the Old Testament. In short, biblical theology “is that learning by which a human being is made whole.”⁸

D. To Understand the Old Testament

Correlatively, I hope to transform the Old Testament from a portrait gallery of isolated icons of faith like Abraham and Moses to a dynamic, unified narrative in which by-gone heroes of faith and today’s saints — and that encompasses all who are made holy by faith in Jesus Christ—participate. The heroes of the Old Testament began the story, those of the New Testament carried it forward, and the church continues it until God finishes it. This unified history will give the reader a synoptic view of the Old Testament and help make sense of its parts.

To many Christians the Old Testament is an unfamiliar and untamed terrain. Although occasional panoramic peaks of grandeur jut out, its landscape appears to them to be mostly barren rocks and flat desert plains. Moreover, dangers lurk for those who seek to tame the land through strict doctrinal systems; the ground rebels against their hands. Many ill-prepared Christians beat a hasty retreat after a brief sojourn and return to the familiar surroundings of the New Testament or their church’s catechism and creedal statements. This book aims to help the covenant people to negotiate this difficult terrain by showing both the discontinuity of its parts and the unity of the whole. It is impossible to understand fully an individual block of writing without having an understanding of its whole context. This theology aims to provide that larger picture.

E. To Understand the New Testament

The average Christian’s ignorance of the Old Testament is an unfortunate state of affairs because it is difficult to overstate the importance that the role of the Old Testament plays in the New Testament. It is not enough to say that the

Old Testament provides the historical and theological context of the New Testament. Nor to say that the Old Testament begins the story that awaits resolution in the New Testament. Nor to say that the Old Testament contains prophecies about Jesus. We need to understand two more things about the Old Testament. First, the Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel, and to Jesus Christ the Old Testament is a valid testimony to his identity, his nature, and his being. We cannot identify the God of the Old Testament as an angry God and that of the New Testament as a loving God. They are one and the same. This identification is essential for the Christian faith. Second, when God composed the Old Testament in all its glory and complexity, he also fashioned a people who ate, drank, and breathed its very words. The exile in Babylon and its aftermath caused the remnant, the people of God, to turn to the study of their Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Brevard S. Childs argues similarly: “It is constitutive of Israel’s history that the literature formed the identity of the *religious* community which in turn shaped the literature.”⁹

By the time of Jesus, multiple text-communities existed across the biblical world whose identity and even their very patterns of thought were shaped by the words of the Old Testament. The New Testament authors are members of such communities. Consequently, everything they portrayed about Jesus, they did using Old Testament texts, themes, motifs, and concepts, and using the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. C. H. Dodd argues that the Old Testament formed the substructure of New Testament theology.¹⁰ The apostles reflected upon Jesus in Old Testament categories. He is the Anointed One, the Suffering Servant, the new Adam, the new Israel, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Word, the High Priest, the Paschal Lamb, and the pioneer in inaugurating the hoped-for kingdom of God.¹¹

Furthermore, the New Testament authors wrote this way to an audience similarly immersed in the words, themes, motifs, and theological categories of the Old Testament. They cited or alluded to the Old Testament more than 250 times. In the book *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, a number of chapters by various authors are devoted to these citations in the diverse literature of the New Testament.¹² Only those who have journeyed through the Old Testament can appreciate the full splendor and glory of the New Testament and fully digest its fruit, and those who have not cannot. The consequence of a general ignorance about the Old Testament among the people of God is a pervasive reduction of the full message of the New Testament to a basic gospel of atonement and individual ethics. I suspect many Christians feel spiritually undernourished because they live out their lives on the basis of about ten biblical texts. The

spiritual life of the church would be greatly enriched by kindling a love of the Old Testament through a more thorough program of adult Christian education. To this end, I hope this book will serve as a guide map for lay Christians. The challenge of the Old Testament is that much of its content does not fit a reader's preconceived expectations. Thus, when a reader encounters an inexplicable phenomenon, he or she experiences dissonance. One of the goals of this book is to prepare the reader by outlining a conceptual framework within which the central concepts and themes of the Old Testament may be incorporated into Christian faith and life.

F. To Contribute to Spiritual Formation

The inspired writers of the Bible energize faith, comfort the suffering, and pass on the identity-forming stories, hymns, laws, oracles, and aphorisms that transform a multitude from diverse backgrounds into one community. Through their writings, the community learns about God's identity, his sublime character, and his mighty acts. In its pages, the community staggers in the face of God's sovereign power in creation and mourns the rebellion of the first humans who spurn God's invitation to intimacy in the Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, here the covenant community finds its roots — sinful humans in need of salvation. In the Old Testament, the people of God witness their unique inauguration into history when their founding father, Abraham, believing God's promises to use him and his descendants to mediate blessing, steps in faith away from his community boundaries into God's calling. In the New Testament, the community learns the full extent of God's pursuit of his people and of his love for them in the lavish self-sacrifice that is the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, his one and only Son. Though the biblical text contains much that contributes to the study of history and literature, it is written for doctrine, rebuke, correction, and instruction in righteousness that the people of God will be prepared for every good work.

III. the book's audience

The Bible is written for the people of God composed today of both Jews and Gentiles who believe in their hearts that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and confess him as Lord with their mouths and who show their faith by loving God and their neighbors (see Rom. 10:9–10; Luke 10:27). Since this is the Bible's implied audience, it is also appropriately mine as one who seeks to interpret the Bible and to reflect theologically upon it on behalf of that audience.

To denote the true people of God, I use Paul's term "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) to show the unity of the believing community in both the old and new dispensations. Abraham's descendants through Jacob were called "Israel," but they included descendants who both shared and rejected his faith. Together with the prophets of the Old Testament, I use "Israel" with reference to the whole nation. "Israel of God" refers to all those who have shared Abraham's faith in God's covenant promises to bless the earth through his Seed/seed and who love God from the heart, according to the covenant Israel sealed with God at Sinai.

After the exile, the people of the elect community that came back to the Promised Land were called "Jews" within the Persian Empire for both political and religious reasons. This name has stuck to the present day. These returning "Jews" mostly included believing Jews who shared Abraham's faith, but in time the second Jewish commonwealth increasingly included Jews who were united only by their common blood and history, not by Abraham's faith. With the advent of Jesus Christ, the Jews who repented and said no to their old traditions that enslaved them in sin and said yes to Jesus by submitting themselves in baptism to Jesus Christ distinguished themselves from those Jews who said no to Jesus and submitted themselves instead to the leadership of the high priest and other Jewish leaders. These baptized believers came to be known as "Christians" (Acts 11:26). The religion of those rejecting Christ later became codified in the Talmud, and the Christian religion is codified in the New Testament. According to orthodox Jews, the Talmud is the Way; according to Christians, Christ is the Way. The apostolic community refers to the Christ-rejecting Jews, who now stand outside the true covenant community, simply as "Jews" (John 8:23–47; cf. Acts 4:23–28). Currently, the state of Israel self-consciously describes itself as nonChristian and has established the policy that any alleged descendant of Israel — the bloodlines are notoriously difficult to establish — be they Marxist Jews,

secularist Jews, Orthodox Jews, conservative Jews, or Reformed Jews, can emigrate to Israel, but Christian Jews may not. In the studied opinion of Israel's supreme court, a Christian Jew is not a possibility. Although their opinion is flawed, their verdict suggests that to the average person, "Jew" and "Christian" represent distinct religions.

The spiritual descendants of Abraham who said yes to Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Messiah are the true heirs of the Old Testament covenants. True Christians, be they Jews or Gentiles, are designated by the New Testament authors as "those whom God has called" (1 Cor. 1:24), "the church of God" (1 Cor. 10:32), "the people of God" (1 Peter 2:10), "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), and most frequently "the church" (Matt. 16:18; Acts 5:11). To the mostly Gentile church at Corinth, Paul called the ancient Israelites who wandered in the desert their "fathers," and the accounts of their wandering were written down for the church, upon whom the end of the ages had come.¹³ By the second century AD, the church consisted almost entirely of Gentile believers; they became spiritual Israel, "not Israel according to the flesh" (see Rom. 2:29; 9:6; 1 Cor. 10:18; Phil. 3:3). Traditionally, Christians distinguish between "the church militant" (which is the sum of all living Christians) and "the church triumphant" (which is all those who have died in faith). The latter includes all in the old dispensation who looked forward in faith to Jesus.

Hence, my terminological decisions: *Israel of God* refers to all believers of all ages and of all peoples. *Israel* refers to the whole nation from Abraham to their return from exile, and *true Israel* refers to true believers within "nominal Israel." *Jews* refers to the restored community from the restoration period to Jesus Christ and to Christ-rejecting Jews after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Jews who later believe in Jesus Christ sometimes call themselves "Christian-Jews," "Messianic Jews," "fulfilled Jews," and the like, but I will not be using these terms. *Church* refers to the people of God after the advent of Jesus Christ. To refer to Israel prior to the exile as "Jews" would confound biblical theology, for it hands over the Old Testament to those of Judaism, not to Christians, who are its true heirs and for whom it is intended, because they, not unbelieving Jews, belong to the abiding covenant community: "the Israel of God." Jesus Christ is vindicated by the fulfillment of his predictions of his resurrection from the dead and of the burning of the Jerusalem temple that symbolized the old order.

The Israel of God is an ensemble of two choirs: Israel and the church. Israel sang in anticipation of the coming of Christ; the church sings in memory of his coming and in the hope of his coming again. Israel sang the melody of the old covenant, structured by the Mosaic law code; the church sings the melody of the

new covenant, structured by the Holy Spirit. The world came to Israel to be blessed; the church goes into all the world to bless it. Though their melodies differ, their voices combine to form a glorious harmony—one song that points to the same True Reality. The Israel of God crosses all racial, ethnic, sexual, and socioeconomic boundaries, and their union with their one Lord through the Holy Spirit transcends their ecclesiastical divisions in the various branches of Christianity (cf. Eph. 2:11–22).

By nature, however, people of any community are a paradox. Carl Jung observed, “Only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life.”¹⁴ Within the fold of the Israel of God are bigots of every sort. The community espouses a superior brand of ethics, though within its ranks lurks the banality of everyday immorality, greed, and egotism. The community professes a love for truth, but its history is marred by intolerance, prejudice, and willful ignorance. Abraham, the “father of faith,” lied and risked his wife’s purity to save his own skin. Moses, the greatest prophet, ambiguously took the law into his own hands, killed a man, and fled into exile at the beginning of his career. David, the king “after God’s own heart,” committed adultery with Bathsheba, murdered her husband, and became destined to see his family torn by strife and bloodshed. Peter denied his Lord. And none stood with Paul in his first defense before Caesar (2 Tim. 4:16). Not always distinguished by thought or virtue, these “heroes” of faith and those who follow in their footsteps stand apart because they respond and continue to respond to the God who has spoken and still speaks through the Bible. They choose God’s rule instead of their own, depending on Jesus Christ to fully satisfy on their behalf the righteousness that God demands and relying on the Holy Spirit to enable them to live in love. By these manifestations, they are known as the Israel of God.

More specifically, this book addresses within the checkered church educative laypersons, students, seminarians, and pastors. Typically — and I think rightly—the work of research theology is done primarily in the classroom, and that educational process informs preaching and teaching within the local church. I hope this book will be used in that process, but I also aim to address the educated parishioner. Biblical scholarship ought to be focused on the theology of the Bible for its intended audience, not for the academic community, many of whom do not worship Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible.

“With a reach that covers the entire globe, the Bible is the best-selling, most earnestly studied book of all time.”¹⁵ Childs notes, “Augustine approached Scripture as a man who had been invited to a banquet table and in sheer delight partook of its richness. [William] Tyndale pictured the Scriptures as ‘comfort in

adversity,' 'medicine which every man applies to his own sores.' And [Johann Albrecht] Bengel wrote: 'The Bible, is, indeed, the true fountain of wisdom, which they, who have tasted, prefer to all mere compositions of men, however holy, however experienced, however devout, or however wise.'"¹⁶ Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that the Bible is the fount of life, the source of identity, and the supreme arbiter of ethics.¹⁷ Therefore, it makes sense that a book written about the theology of the Old Testament should be written for the church. After all, this people has more at stake in understanding the Bible's message than anybody else — they are the ones committed to live out fully the implications of that message to the point of dying for its truth.

IV. THE BOOK'S ORGANIZATION

This theology is divided into three parts: Introduction, Primary History, and Other Writings. The introduction inherits from T. C. Vriezen¹⁸ the threefold concerns to establish the basis ([chap. 1](#)), task ([chap. 2](#)), and method ([chaps. 3–6](#)) for writing a biblical theology. I argue that the historic doctrines of revelation, inspiration, and illumination constitute the only creditable basis for writing biblical theology. The task, I will argue, is to articulate the distinctive theologies of individual blocks of writings in the Old Testament and to trace the trajectory of their major themes and concepts to their fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his church to their consummation in Christ's second coming, the Parousia (see [chap. 20](#), excursus 1) that introduces the final eschaton.¹⁹ To fulfill this task, we will first consider “sacred hermeneutics” ([chap. 3](#)), then narrative theology ([chap. 4](#)), and finally rhetoric and intertextuality ([chap. 5](#)).

The Primary History, which includes the Decateuch (i.e., the Pentateuch [Genesis - Deuteronomy] and the Deuteronomistic History [Deuteronomy – Kings], plus Ezra – Nehemiah, not Ruth), is the backbone of the Old Testament. All of the other books in the Old Testament stem from it. “Spine trouble,” writes J. I. Packer, “limits what a person's other limbs can do.”²⁰ This history, known also as salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*), is an interpretation of Israel's religious history from the perspective of the Mosaic theology. We begin this history with a synoptic overview ([chap. 6](#)) and then delve into its development, first in the Pentateuch ([chaps. 7–17](#)) and then in the Deuteronomistic history ([chaps. 18–26](#)) and Ezra–Nehemiah ([chap. 27](#)). Developing this primary history into the New Testament epoch is the dominant theological perspective of Luke—Acts. Luke's coherent outline of this progress of primary history has three parts: the period of Israel, the period of Jesus' ministry, and the period of the church under duress.²¹

All the other books of the Old Testament in one way or another build on the common interpretation of Israel's history in the Primary History. “Must see books” in this collection are the corpus of prophetic books ([chaps. 29–30](#)), Ruth ([chap. 31](#)), Psalms ([chap. 32](#)), Wisdom (Proverbs [[chap. 33](#)], Ecclesiastes [[chap. 34](#)], Job [[chap. 35](#)]).

Biblical theologians commonly assume that their readers are familiar with the

biblical content and so batch their theological reflections from the raw biblical data under ideas arranged topically. My recent classroom experience has taught me that Generation Xers are biblically illiterate, and those who do know the biblical narrative know it superficially — only as stories of heroes of faith, not as theology. This is especially true in the Deuteronomistic history. However, every sentence of the Bible is fraught with theology, worthy of reflection. To meet both concerns at once—to know the Bible's raw content and to read and understand it as theological literature — I reflect theologically upon the narrative as it unfolds in the Deuteronomistic history, which narrates that history from Israel's entrance into the Promised Land to its exile from it, and batch its essential themes into unifying chapters. In some cases I batch the material on one or two subjects in connection with an individual book after familiarizing the reader with the book's basic plot and theological content.

V. the book's history

As with my Genesis commentary, an extended process of research and collaboration led to the creation of this theology. In spite of earning two doctorates — a Th.D. in New Testament and a Ph.D. in ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures — I knew a little about biblical theology in the New Testament and a lot about the history of Israel but next to nothing about the biblical theology of the Old Testament. The theology of the Old Testament and the history of Israel's religion are not the same thing; they are as far apart as heaven from earth. Theology is about God, who can be known only through his own revelation of himself in Scripture. The history of Israel's religion is about what Israel thought about God; it is about man, not about God. In addition, the history of Israel's religion for the most part deviates radically from the theology of Moses and the prophets. For example, the Bible narrates that in the religion of Israel, the usually apostate nation—from the perspective of Israel's prophets — worshiped Baal and Asherah and/or made images of *I AM* and probably even gave him a fertility consort. In digging up these images, archaeologists confirm, not discredit, what the Bible says about the religion of Israel.

In the late 1960s, students pressed me as head of the department of Semitic language and Old Testament exegesis to teach a course on biblical theology. Since I knew next to nothing about it, I began by teaching a course on Old Testament theologians. After studying the theologies of such noteworthies as Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, I began to formulate my own biblical theology. As a result of repeating that course annually — having a bad memory helps one to stay fresh — I came to see increasingly the strength of covenant theology in emphasizing the unity of the people of God in their common covenants and also the strength of dispensational theology in stressing the different ways in which God administered Israel and the church. The course ripened to the point in the late 1990s when I thought my notes were ready for publication.

I am much indebted with great gratitude to my teaching assistants. Charles Yu (1995–97) transcribed many chapters from my taped classroom lectures, edited many chapters — especially 11–16 — and stopped only because he was writing his dissertation at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Cathi Fredricks (1998–99), who also assisted me with my commentary on Genesis, edited

[chapters 1–13](#), 17–26, and 33. Alvin Ung (2003–5) and Cathi Fredricks edited the preface and [chapters 25](#) and [29](#). My friend Ivan de Silva, who is on the faculty of Trinity Western University, edited [chapters 27](#) and [28](#).

Students and librarians at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando) excelled in helping me to produce this theology. Under the able leadership of my teaching assistant Bryan Gregory (2003–5), the following students edited the Scripture cross references: Josh Anderson, Frank Castillo, Christopher Caudle, Chuck Donet, Bill Fullilove, Rick Gilmartin, Bryan Gregory, Josh Leim, Eamon McGraw, Chadwick Meyer, Patrick Owens, Jonathan Robson, Brian Salter, Cary Smith, Earl Smith, Jonathan St. Clair, and Ron Thomas. Mike Farrell and Josh and Keely Leim, research librarians at RTS under John Muether, placed every book in the footnotes at the fingertips of “Hurricane Bruce” so that I could assure the accuracy of the citations. Let me take this opportunity to thank John and Kathy Muether for preparing the indices; Andrew Jones, my 2007 Regent teaching assistant, for editing the Works Cited index; and Jim Ruark and Laura Weller for editing the book.

During the twelve years of my postgraduate education, later while I was teaching courses and writing articles, and now when I am writing books, my wife, Elaine, has stood faithfully at my side. She supported us during my graduate work and has always been a constant helper, encouraging me in the work while helping me to stay human.

Praise be to God from whom all blessings flow.

*When the Hebrew versification differs from that of English, I indicate the Hebrew versification in brackets.

[1.](#) Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on the Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959). First preached as a series of sermons in his own parish in 1741–42 and published in 1746.

[2.](#) Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

[3.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs: [chapters 1](#) – [15](#)*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); idem, *Proverbs 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

[4.](#) Cf. the claim of Jesus, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58).

[5.](#) Twila Paris, “We Will Glorify,” in *Words and Melody* (Singspiration Music, 1982), CCLI#417805.

[6.](#) Margaret Clarkson, “We Come, O Christ, to You” (1946, reprint Hope Publishing Co., 1985), CCLI#417805.

[7.](#) Sometimes credited to French novelist and journalist Alphonse Karr (1808–

90) in *Les Guêpes* (The Wasps, 1849).

[8.](#) Matteo Ricci, *The True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven*: cited by Jonathan Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us? How It shaped the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 27.

[9.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1979), 41.

[10.](#) C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The SubStructure of New Testament Theology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1952).

[11.](#) “Kingdom of heaven” is Matthew’s equivalent of “kingdom of God.” The New Testament terms refer to Israel’s God becoming King on earth, not to a place called “heaven” where the saved soul goes to live after death. The Jews understood the terms to mean that the King would come to Zion and the Jews of the Diaspora would return from exile, at which time the King would exact justice, vindicate Israel, defeat the pagans, and bring peace and prosperity to the earth.

[12.](#) D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988).

[13.](#) See Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 265.

[14.](#) C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 2nd ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1968), 16.

[15.](#) *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, ed. Glenn G. Scorgie, Mark. L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), back of dust jacket.

[16.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 146.

[17.](#) Ethics is the art of trying to work out what it is that makes a certain action or way of life right and of trying to live right. *I AM*’s covenant with Israel through Moses teaches to love God with all the heart and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. The ethics of the Bible is constructed on those two foundation stones.

[18.](#) T. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Dutch ed., 1949, rev. 1962; Oxford: Blackwell, 1958; 2nd ed. 1970), 118–26.

[19.](#) Articulating the distinctive theologies of individual blocks of writing in the New Testament is beyond the purview of this book, so this concept is used only in [chapter 20](#), which deals with the Land in the New Testament.

[20.](#) J. I Packer, “History Is the Backbone of the Bible,” in a brochure for the Biblical Museum of Canada (Vancouver: no publisher or date).

[21.](#) See Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 113–31, 145–49. In my

opinion Thielman mars his otherwise superb work by teaching that Luke expects Jesus to restore the kingdom to Israel (pp. 132–35). His thesis is based on inadequate exegesis, and he misreads the New Testament on a grand scale (see below, [chap. 19](#)). Jesus will restore Israel to the kingdom, which today includes Jew and Gentile, not the kingdom to Israel (see also [chap. 12](#).VI.C.3).

ABBREVIATIONS

PRIMARY SOURCES

b.
Ned. Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim*

b.
Ta'an. Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit*

KJV King James Version

LXX Septuagint

MT Masoretic Text

NAB New American Bible

NASB New American Standard Bible

NCB New Century Bible

NIV New International Version

NJPS Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the
Traditional Jewish Text

NKJV New King James Version

NLT New Living Translation

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

SP Samaritan Pentateuch

TNIV Today's New International Version

SECONDARY SOURCES

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AEL	<i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i> . M. Lichtheim. 3 vols. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973–80.
AJSL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature</i>
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969.
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969.
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
ASORDS	American Schools of Oriental Research Dissertation Series AUSS <i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 2nd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979.
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999.
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament. Edited by M. Noth and H. W. Wolff.

<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BZAW</i>	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBQMS</i>	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
<i>ConBOT</i>	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
<i>DJD</i>	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
<i>EBD</i>	<i>The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by Allen C. Myers. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FOTL</i>	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
<i>GKC</i>	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
<i>HALOT</i>	L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–99.
<i>HAT</i>	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IBC</i>	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>IBD</i>	<i>The Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by J. D. Douglas <i>et al.</i> Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1980.
<i>IBHS</i>	Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
<i>ICC</i>	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by George A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
<i>IDBSup</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume</i> . Edited by K. Crim. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>

ILR	<i>Israel Law Review</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBR	<i>Journal of Bible and Religion</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JOTS	<i>Journal of Old Testament Studies</i>
JPOS	<i>Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KBL	Koehler, L., and W. Baumgartner, <i>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros</i> . 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1958.
LB	<i>Linguistica Biblica</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NAPS	J. P. Fokkelmann. <i>Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis</i> . 4 vols. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981–86.
NBD	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by J. D. Douglas and N. Hillyer. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982.
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1981, 1985.
OtSt	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RHR	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
ResQ	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
SBF	<i>Studii biblici Franciscani</i>
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series SBT Studies in Biblical Theology
ScrHier	Scripta hierosolymitana
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SOTSMS	Society for Old Testament Studies Monograph Series
St Theol	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76.
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–.
THAT	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i> . Edited by Ernst Jenni, with assistance from Claus Westermann. 2 vols. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971–76.
ThLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by Ernst Jenni, with assistance from Claus Westermann. Translated by M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997.
TNBD	<i>The New Bible Dictionary</i> . Leicester, Eng.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

<i>TWOT</i>	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. 2 vols. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980. <i>TynBul Tyndale Bulletin UF Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WIAI</i>	<i>Wisdom in Ancient Israel</i> . Edited by John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WMANT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZBK</i>	Zürcher Bibelkommentare
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Part One

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

THE BASIS OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The foundation [of the Christian religion] is admirable; it is the most ancient book in the world and the most authentic.

The heretical books in the beginning of the Church serve to prove the canonical.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 9.601; 8.569

I. INTRODUCTION

If we collected all the books and articles with the words *Old Testament Theology* in their titles and looked for commonalities, we would have little to show for our efforts. As Phyllis Tribble explains, “Biblical theologians ... have never agreed on the definition, method, organization, subject matter, point of view, or purpose of their enterprise.”¹ R. W. L. Moberly responds, “That does not leave much left out!”² And Ben C. Ollenburger adds further confirmation when he notes that the term *biblical theology* can mean six quite different things.³ Yet, in one way or another, all biblical theologians speak of a corpus of books that they denominate as the Old Testament, or First Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, or the like and of the God to whom it bears witness, while emphasizing history as a central category in biblical faith.

From the beginning of the discipline, biblical theologians have differed in their understandings of an accredited basis, task, and method for doing biblical theology.⁴ Nevertheless, biblical theologians aim to construct and formulate a theology that accords in some sense with the Bible, while essentially agreeing with James Barr’s assertion: “What we are looking for is a ‘theology’ that existed back there and then.”⁵ Though this sounds like a pedantic, antiquarian study that “locks the Bible into the past,”⁶ it is nothing of the sort for the faithful. For them, what the Bible meant it means. The Bible is the normative standard for faith and practice in the church, and its “truth” demands a personal commitment and actualization in every aspect of their lives. This is so because its writers were inspired by God to give this revelation of his character, intentions, teachings, and commands to govern volitional creatures.

Many biblical theologians, however, reject this orthodox understanding of the Bible’s inspiration and its canonical authority. Some profess a new dogma that the Bible is only the product of Israel’s experiences and human thoughts about God. In effect, these theologians replace biblical theology with the history of Israel’s religion. Nevertheless, their views are sometimes wrongly represented as belonging to the discipline of biblical theology.

Recently, several excellent surveys have come out, giving us the lay of the land in this discipline; hence, it would not be fruitful to duplicate those efforts in this volume.⁷ Instead, I offer the following observation: Scholars commonly

locate the beginning of the discipline in 1787 when Johann Philipp Gabler, in his famous inaugural address at the University of Altdorf, Switzerland, sharply distinguished between biblical theology as a historical discipline and dogmatic theology as a didactic discipline. Fortunately, his distinction creates the space for scholars to read the Bible as a developing historical document; unfortunately, he steers the discipline astray from the start. Cut off from the foundation of dogmatic theology, Gabler seeks by the canon of reason to determine what is “true” in the Old Testament and of abiding value for dogmatic theology.⁸ Postmodernists realize the impossibility of grounding absolute truth on the finite human mind. Unfortunately, they do not look to the spiritual virtue of faith in the God of the Bible to resolve the human epistemological predicament.

Historically the church confesses that God reveals his nature and mind and inspires human agents to present them in infallible Scriptures and that his Spirit illuminates the meaning of the Scriptures to the faithful. Brevard S. Childs adopts and defends a self-consciously confessional approach: “The role of the Bible is not being understood simply as a cultural expression of ancient peoples, but as a testimony pointing beyond itself to divine reality to which it bears witness.... Such an approach to the Bible is obviously confessional. Yet the Enlightenment’s alternative proposal that was to confine the Bible solely to the arena of human experience is just as much a philosophical commitment.”⁹

In other words, the discussion of Old Testament theology must begin with certain philosophical assumptions.¹⁰ In my view the church is best served when biblical theologians work in conversation with orthodox systematic theology regarding the Bible (bibliology) as the foundation and boundary in matters of deciding the basis, goal, and methodology for biblical theology. As Karl Llewellyn, a famous law professor, once said, “Technique [read exegesis, [chapters 3–5](#)] without ideals [read theology, [chapters 1–2](#)] is a menace; ideals without technique are a mess.” Dogmatic (systematic) theologians serve the church best when they rely on orthodox biblical theology for explications of Scripture from which they frame abstract universal propositions in accordance with a coherent system appropriate to the church’s contemporary situation. Through this interpenetration of the two disciplines, we will be better able to present the theological power and the religious appeal of biblical concepts.¹¹

II. THE BASIS OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Resting on the logic that one does not need to prove the “rightness” of presuppositions (or they would no longer constitute presuppositions), but only their “reasonableness,” this chapter aims to establish an accredited understanding of the basis of doing biblical theology on the Bible’s claim to be God’s word to his covenant/faithful people.

A. The Theological Foundation

This book is built on the following confessions about the Bible.

1. Revelation

Theologians typically distinguish between God’s general revelation of himself in creation, which is made known to all people, and his special revelation of himself in the canon of Scriptures, which is not available by natural reason and cannot be discovered by the scientific method.

Through the words and verbally interpreted acts recorded in the Bible and through the incarnation of his Son to which the Bible bears witness, the God of Israel has revealed his heart, mind, wisdom, program, and purpose to his elect community, whom he regenerated to believe and understand that revelation by his Spirit. This God is neither a watchmaker who set the world in motion and left it to move in accord with inexorable laws built into its mechanism, nor an impersonal force or universal (un-)consciousness incapable of will, speech, or action. Rather, God is a person (i.e., having intellect, sensibility, and will) who chooses both to communicate with people whom he creates in his image and to intervene in their lives, as appropriate, according to their faith and ethical behavior. William Dyrness notes, “Revelation in the Old Testament always leads to a personal relationship between God and his people. If communion is to be possible, we must know the character of God through his personal self-disclosure.”^{[12](#)}

However, God accommodates his revelation to the human situation. We must make the Scottish distinction between God “in himself” (*in se*) and “toward us”

(*erga nos*). Cribbing the medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus, Francis Junius, a Reformed theologian in the late sixteenth century, maintains the distinction between theology as God knows it (*theologia archetypa*) and theology as it is revealed to and done by us (*theologia ectypa*).¹³ Theologians sometimes refer to the former as “God hidden” (*Deus absconditus*) and the latter as “God revealed” (*Deus revelatus*) (cf. Exod. 34:6; John 6:20; 1 Cor. 13:12). This distinction points to the critical relationship between God’s comprehensive knowledge of himself, which is hidden and incomprehensible to humans, and human-restricted epistemological knowledge of God. Although the latter is severely restricted, it is nevertheless true because it is grounded in God’s own ontological knowledge.¹⁴

Moreover, in the Bible God progressively reveals himself within the restrictions of human history and human personality. In that developing context he climactically revealed himself in a Son, not merely a prophet, in the God-Man, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–3). However, as Jesus promised, God saved the very best for the revelation authored by God and by the ascended Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit through the medium of Christ’s apostles and other writers of the New Testament. They interpreted Jesus Christ’s life, teachings, and work for the universal covenant people of God (John 15:12–15; Gal. 1:1–20).

God’s revelation in the Bible transcends his historical words and acts. The Bible records God’s special revelations in words and acts at certain times and certain places that were relevant to certain peoples such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but the church now has those revelations in biblical texts that transcend those historical and particular revelations in two ways. First, the biblical narrators place those earlier revelations within the context of their own messages or theologies, which were intended to be relevant for a particular audience and for the universal audience of God’s covenant people (see [chap. 4](#)). Moreover, the particular revelations to the historical personages of the Bible and universal revelations of the biblical writers find their full meaning in Jesus Christ. In other words, it is wrongheaded of the historicists to seek to penetrate to the historical event beyond the biblical text, for the events cannot be known apart from the texts that form the canon (see [chap. 4](#)). In short, God’s revelation in Scriptures individually and collectively constitutes the basis of this theology.

Moreover, this revelation has both an objective and subjective aspect. The biblical text is the eternal Word of God, but that Word is heard only by those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit to hear it for what it truly is. The unregenerate are deaf and blind to revealed biblical theology because for them there is no dynamic connection between the Bible and God’s Word. For the

people of God, however, their faith experience in connection with the biblical text authenticates to them that the Bible is God's revelation, and so for them the biblical texts are not historical artifacts of revelations but a living, contemporary revelation. What were once particular and historical events and texts are now by the Holy Spirit a living, life-changing contemporary revelation to the faithful. In other words, the historical revelations of the Bible are a prelude to the Christian's experience of revelation through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. In sum, although we can intellectually analyze revelation, inspiration, and illumination as distinct components for theological reflection, in Christian experience they are inseparable and together constitute the basis for our faith.

2. Inspiration

W. G. T. Shedd, one of the great nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologians, distinguishes revelation and inspiration this way in his *Dogmatic Theology*: "Inspiration is like Revelation, in that it is a superhuman influence upon the particular person selected to be the organ of the Divine mind. But inspiration goes no further than to insure freedom from error in presenting that truth which has been obtained in the ordinary ways in which men obtain truth."

God's Holy Spirit *inspired* chosen individuals to produce the biblical texts. *Inspiration* here means that God spoke through his prophets and apostles in ways that involved, but were not limited to, their hearts, minds, and emotions. The divine and human agencies complemented, not competed, with one another.

On the one hand, the Spirit-inspired revelation of all of Scripture assures mortals that the text of the Bible provides them with trustworthy accounts of God's thoughts, plans, and desires. The biblical text is the end product of inspiration by the God of Israel, who does not lie or mislead.¹⁵ The character of God assures us that what is written is trustworthy, even if, as M. B. Moberly writes, "we simply do not know nearly as much as we would like (numerous learned and detailed monographs notwithstanding) what went on in either the formation and composition of the text, or in its reception and canonical compilation."¹⁶ Moreover, coming ultimately from the mouth of God, its teachings are not up for grabs. They must be kept out of faith in the God who inspired them.

On the other hand, Peter Enns serves the church well by emphasizing the human dimension of Scripture. He, with other theologians,¹⁷ likens the incarnation of Scripture to the Chalcedon doctrine of the incarnation of Christ: both are truly divine and truly human. He argues, however, that with regard to Scripture, evangelicals tend to commit the same error as the Docetists: they deny

the real humanity of the Scripture.¹⁸ William Henry Green stated with regard to all human achievements, “Every production of any age bears the stamp of that age. It takes its shape from the influences then at work. It is part of the life of the period, and can only be properly estimated and understood from being viewed in its original connection.”¹⁹ B. B. Warfield put the divine and human together in what is sometimes known as the *concursum* theory: “The whole of Scripture is the product of divine activities which enter it, not by superseding the activities of the human authors, but by working confluent with them, so that the Scriptures are the joint product of the divine and human activities, both of which penetrate them *at every point*, working harmoniously together to the production of a writing which is not divine here and human there, but at once divine and human *in every part, every word and every particular*.”²⁰

We can say, on the one hand, that true Israel’s religious instinct is a sponge that absorbs elements of other religions in its environment that are harmonious with the covenants *I AM* made with Israel. On the other hand, her religious instincts are a repellent to elements of other religions that are discordant with those covenants. As early as 1895, Hermann Gunkel made the case that Old Testament writers borrowed fundamental elements from the culture, religion, and theology of the ancient Near Eastern creation myths in articulating their own accounts of creation;²¹ Frank Moore Cross made the same case in connection with Canaanite literature for the Old Testament more broadly.²² The parallels between the Bible and this ancient Near Eastern literature suggest that elements in other religions congruent with the Israel of God’s faith contribute to the opening flower of sound theology. The changing contextualizations of the Bible’s authors in the process of history provide the dynamic for a developing biblical theology. Nevertheless, in spite of this historical conditioning, it must be stressed that the Bible, due to its divine inspiration, possesses a genetic unity to God’s immutable covenants that true Israel accepted by God’s sovereign grace and to *I AM*’s developing history of salvation in Christ.²³

3. Illumination

A third confession about the Bible is that God completes the process of revelation by the *illuminating* work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, who is the first cause in our regeneration to faith, illumines God’s words so that his people may understand his revelation, but not apart from human research and reason. The *propositional* knowledge we have of God through our reflection upon his revelation of himself in Scripture is the vehicle to *personal* knowledge of God.

Propositional knowledge about and personal knowledge of God are the obverse and reverse sides of faithful theology. In sum, God is involved in all aspects of this process of communication: God reveals himself in speech, acts, and above all in Jesus Christ, in historical particulars; he inspires the writing of those revelations in Scripture, which records and interprets this revelation so as to become a text revelation; and the Holy Spirit empowers a dynamic relationship between the text inspired by God and his people. This dynamic identity of text-revelation and faith-people entails their divine enablement to understand, interpret, and appropriate the texts to their lives. This entire process is a gift of grace from God to nourish the continuing life of faith. John Calvin expressed the point well:

The Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed with the inward testimony of the spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded....

Even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty ... that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.^{[24](#)}

As a result of this Spirit illumination of God's revelation in his inspired Scripture, the covenant people of God hear God's word as certainly as when he spoke to their fathers. John Owen put it this way:

Before the committing of the Word to writing, most God-fearers had no other guarantee of the divinity of the doctrines than the fact that blessings flowed to them through the ministry of the few recipients. Once the mind of God had been reduced to writing, each mortal and individual man, to whom the Scriptures may come, *has God speaking to them no less directly than if he were hearing God speaking with His own voice to them*, exactly as did Adam when he heard the voice of the Lord in the garden. Even the spoken voice cannot reach the ears of men but through a communicating medium, that is, the air in which it is formed; so it cannot be denied that it is the voice of God speaking to men, though it is handed on through the communicating medium of writing. It is in no way diminished by being

reduced to writing, having first been revealed to those sorts of chosen men whom we mentioned before, for the divine element remains in the written Word of God as clearly as in those immediate revelations which gave so clear an evidence of their heavenly truth to those to whom they were granted.²⁵

Spiritual discernment is a prerequisite for doing Old Testament theology because, like a parable, it is a masterpiece of indirection, yielding its wealth only to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

4. Narrow Canon

Finally, this theology assumes the Protestant narrower canon, the list of sixty-six books²⁶ in both the Old and New Testaments and shared by all branches of historic Christianity.²⁷ As Puritan preacher Thomas Watson put it, “The two Testaments are the two lips by which God has spoken to us.”²⁸ The church recognized God’s voice in these books. Kurt Aland, one of the editors of the most widely used Greek New Testaments, says, “[The canon] was not imposed from the top, be it by bishops or synods, and then accepted by the communities.... The organized church did not create the canon; it recognized the canon that had been created.”²⁹ Indeed, the canon created the church. Since God inspired these books, they uniquely function as authoritative and normative for the faith and life of the church in contrast to other books, confessions, and Christian experience. It shows the *Credenda*—what we believe — and the *Agenda*—what we practice.

The church is the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim. 3:15) — that is to say, the church, like a pillar and foundation, supports truth, but truth is not derived from the church. Rather, the church receives the truth that it holds firm and lifts up on high from the inspired teachings of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20).

Although the issue of canon is a rich discussion in its own right, and an adequate treatment of the subject is outside the purview of this present volume, some brief comments are necessary, since several non – Roman Catholic biblical theologians³⁰ have recently argued to blur the boundary of the canon to include, without being specific, at least some books of the Apocrypha. Therefore the following six points to refute this blurring of canonical boundaries are in order:³¹

1. By definition, *canon*, has strict boundaries for a confessing community and cannot have fuzzy edges. A book is either authoritative for establishing doctrine and practice or it is not. A fuzzy edge is possible only for someone who has a

fuzzy idea about any inspired writing.

2. Roger Beckwith, whom the well-read Barr curiously does not mention, shows convincingly that the narrower, Jewish canon was closed by the time of Judas Maccabeus (165 BC) *and that this was the canon of the New Testament church?*³² Although most of the apocryphal books were already in existence at the time the New Testament was being written, the New Testament *never* cites them. The omission is not merely negative evidence. Much in Sirach agrees with Paul's thinking, and Paul is not one to lose an opportunity to support his doctrine by citing Scripture. Yet Paul never cites Sirach—or any other apocryphal book. Undoubtedly, the apostles would have known of these books, since the rabbis commended the reading of them. Therefore, their not citing them is moot evidence of their preference to the established narrower canon. Barr alleges that the canon “remained open for some deviant groups, among which the origins of Christianity are to be found,”³³ but he does not interact with the evidence that the New Testament church never argued with the Jews about the canon. The fact that later Christian traditions, such as that represented by Augustine, included at least some of the Apocrypha—and this was never settled in the Roman Church until the Council of Trent — does not shake this fundamental fact of apostolic doctrine.

3. Barr makes much of the fact that Jude 14 quotes a prophecy in the First Book of Enoch (1 En. 12:4) from the first century BC.³⁴ What he fails to note for his readers is that Jude does not document his source. It may well be a tradition handed down from “Enoch who walked” (i.e., who walked and conversed with God). Jude's point is that the prophecy is very old. Barr also fails to note that the First Book of Enoch is part of the pseudepigrapha, which never has been part of the Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox Bibles and is only accepted as canonical in remote regions (e.g., in Ethiopia, in some Syriac-speaking churches, or in Slavonic cultures), “in so far as anyone knew anything about them.”³⁵ Perhaps Barr fails to note this important fact because he curiously asserts “for our purposes the distinction between Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha is not important and will be ignored here for the most part.”³⁶ But how can the fact that large segments of the Christian church distinguish between them to mark the boundaries of the canon be a matter of indifference in an essay on the limits of the canon?³⁷ Considering that the church was spread out over the known world without ready communication with remote areas, it is not surprising to find minor differences in its understanding of the canon. What is surprising is the unanimity of its opinion.

4. The Reformers centuries ago pointed out “false doctrines” in the

Apocrypha, where one can find, contrary to the rest of Scripture, the doctrines of purgatory, atonement after death, and prayers for the dead (cf. 2 Macc. 12).³⁸

5. The apocryphal books are often edifying, like other human writings, and are important for a better understanding of New Testament background. For example, according to 1 Maccabees 9:27, prophecy ceased long before that writer's time, making John's appearance on the stage of sacred history in the fullness of time more remarkable (see [chap. 28](#)). In other words, Heaven was essentially silent for four centuries, during which time, on the one hand, prophecy matured and developed into a vivid messianic expectation, and on the other hand, traditions were introduced that voided the Scriptures. Then quite suddenly and unexpectedly, yet in the fullness of time, Israel again heard the voice of God in John the Baptist, who announced that the kingdom of God had come. This public recognition of a prophetic voice differs sharply from the few claims of some high priests in the Second Temple period, such as John Hyrcanus, to have received a revelation (see [chap. 28](#), n. [11](#)). In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Hartmut Gese put it, "the boundaries being and not-being fall down. Being comes to be and truth became historical."³⁹

6. Our assumptions preclude the possibility of "a canon within a canon"; all sixty-six books together serve as God's authoritative revelation of truth. But not all truth is of equal value to the faithful community; a hundred dollar bill and a fifty are both authoritative currency, but they are not of equal value. For this reason the faithful favor some texts above others, giving the impression that *de facto* they recognize a canon within the canon. The faithful people of God, however, including even the Lord Jesus Christ himself, hear and recognize the voice of God in all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, and for over the last two millennia, they also confess hearing the voice of their Shepherd in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The church does not make the canon but acknowledges hearing the voice of God in this vehicle that expresses the divine reality. Because the Bible mediates the revelation of God, it is possible to do biblical *theology*.

B. Implications

These doctrines of revelation, inspiration, and illumination of the Scriptures by the Spirit of God necessitate four ideological and methodological stances in the practice of biblical scholarship; each is critical to the discipline of biblical theology, and each is assumed in this book.

1. Biblical Theology Is a Branch of Theology, Not of History

Literally, *theology* is “words about God.” When we use the word *theology*, we refer to formulations and conceptions about God, his nature, and his relationship to humanity. However, in our consideration of the word *theology*, we need to distinguish carefully between God’s inspired words about himself and uninspired human formulations and conceptions about that God. Both inspired and uninspired words about God are bound by culture, but at best uninspired human thoughts are sinful (i.e., tainted by self-regard) and limited to human experience on earth. Apart from divine intervention, uninspired thoughts are without access to the divine sphere. And these limitations of human rationality become exacerbated when separated from the Holy Spirit’s illumination of inspired writings.

Nevertheless, ever since the eighteenth-century development known as “the Enlightenment,” biblical theologians have typically held to faith in the power of the human mind. However, “the mind is not free from the dangers of being misled.” Howard Rice comments, “Calvin, who treasured the gift of the mind as absolutely central to the definition of human, could also recognize the limitations of rationality. ‘For we know all too well by experience how often we fall despite our good intention. Our reason is overwhelmed by so many forms of deception, is subject to so many errors, dashes against so many obstacles, is caught in so many difficulties, that it is far from directing us aright.’”⁴⁰

Though God does not change, our theological reflections about him vary from culture to culture and generation to generation.⁴¹ Therefore, though we value the creeds of the church and the treatises of great theologians of the past, we cannot treat them as sacrosanct. We respect their work and inherit their tradition, but we face new challenges that must be met with new formulations of God’s nature and his dealings with humankind.

Thus, implicit within the definition of the word *theology* as it is commonly used is the idea that the formulations and conceptions about God are authored by human beings. In other words, theology is usually taken to mean “(human) words about God.” This needs to be pointed out because the Bible also claims to contain “words about God,” making assertions about God’s nature and his relationship to humanity. Hence, the Bible is frequently referred to as a theological document. The problem with this appellation is that by categorizing the content of the Bible as “theology” and neglecting the doctrines of revelation, inspiration, and illumination by the Spirit of God, theologians implicitly relegate the Bible to the realm of “(human) words about God.” But by doing so, they

transform the Bible's claim to absolute truth into the relative truth of only human thought; sometimes they even trivialize the Bible as merely the record of the religious thought of ancient peoples: the ancient Israelites and early Christians. However, the result of this conceptualization of biblical theology is catastrophic: biblical theology is moved into a branch of history and transformed into the study of ancient Israelite religion. The Bible's absolute values are transformed into human evaluations.

In contrast, the present volume makes explicit that although the Bible does contain "words about God," they are "God's words about God." In other words, the Bible is God's formulation and conception about his own nature and his relationship to humanity—his interpretation of his acts in history. To be sure, God used human language and human authors within historically conditioned contexts for this remarkable revelation about himself (therefore, one must take seriously the human dimension of the Bible, e.g., language, culture, etc.), but the divine aspect of the Bible must reign supreme in the mind of the biblical theologian.

The God to whom the Bible bears witness and who is the subject matter of biblical theology is an unchanging aseity and transcendent over time and space. Biblical scholars who set out to explicate the Bible's message perform a theological task by producing human formulations and conceptions of this eternal and unchanging God for their own generation. In consequence, biblical theologians cannot limit their work to the descriptive approaches of what ancient peoples thought about God; they cannot claim to have understood the Old Testament by explaining the religious mind-set and practices of the ancient Israelites. They must move beyond the historical realm into the moral imperatives of the theological realm.

2. The Bible Is Authoritative and Infallible for Faith

The Bible is from God, and God does not lie or mislead.⁴² Therefore, the Bible is a revelation that is authoritative and infallible for our faith and practice. Geerhardus Vos writes, "If God be person and conscious, then the inference is inevitable that in every mode of self-disclosure He will make a faultless expression of His nature and purpose. He will communicate His thought to the world with the stamp of divinity on it."⁴³ As God's inspired word, the Bible is authoritative in itself, and as such it calls for responsiveness and interplay on the part of its audience. In other words, the Bible is the measure of man, not vice versa. Indeed, human thought is incapable of comprehending God: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares *I AM* (Isa.

55:8). Alexander Pope captured this truth in his heroic couplet: “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is Man.”⁴⁴

The assertion that the Bible is authoritative raises questions for Christians on the practical level. Most of the difficulties revolve around Old Testament laws and their modern-day application. Must Christians follow Old Testament laws and regulations? What are the hermeneutical principles for determining which laws apply and which do not? I address this particular question more comprehensively in the chapter on the Law (see [chap. 15](#)). Here I will touch on two foundational principles.

First, modern-day Christians are the covenant people, in the spiritual tradition of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Christians, whether ethnic Jews or Gentiles, are the “children of Abraham” according to the apostle Paul (Gal. 3:29 NLT), and are “a chosen people, ... a holy nation” according to the apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:9). Contemporary Christians share in the covenants made with their forefathers: Abraham, ancient Israel through Moses and David. This is a foundational proposition: The Old Testament is written to the covenant people; therefore, it is written to the church today. I do not adhere to the hermeneutics of Dispensationalism, which teaches that the Old Testament contains latent, eternal truths that are applicable to the church but in a strict sense is God’s address to the Jews only (see preface, III).⁴⁵ The apostles do not express themselves in this way. They regard the whole church, by its baptism into Christ, as Abraham’s seed and as joint heirs of God’s covenant promises to Abraham (Rom. 4:16–17; 11:11–21; Gal. 3:29; 6:15; Heb. 3:1–6; 1 Peter 2:4–10). Christ and his apostles cite the Old Testament using the present tense and refer to the Old Testament saints using the first person pronoun “our fathers.” In other words, they view the Old Testament as being addressed to the Christian (Rom. 4:3; 10:8; 1 Cor. 9:8–9; 10:1–10; Gal. 3:16; 4:30; Heb. 12:5–6).

On the other hand, classic Dispensationalism correctly asserts that there are dividing lines in the way God administers his people, but it errs in failing to grasp the organic, spiritual relationship between ancient Israel and the church through their common faith in God who manifested himself in Jesus Christ and God’s inclusion of both Israel and the church in the same covenants. In a strict sense, the Old Testament addresses as its implied audience, the church, the newer expression of the people of God, not merely ancient Israel, the former expression of his covenant people.

Second, a proper hermeneutics of Scripture requires the recognition of “dispensations” in Scripture. This assertion may seem contradictory to the previous paragraph, but it is not. By the term *dispensation*, I do not here mean

the acceptance of the doctrines and exegetical framework of Dispensationalism, which narrowly relegates the Old Testament to “Israel” in contradistinction to the “church.” Rather, I am speaking of a simple recognition that God administers his people differently at different times. F. Milderberger notes that when the dogmatic tradition talked of the Old and New “Testaments,” it had in mind not the two corpora of *text* but two different dispensations (*Setzungen Gottes*).⁴⁶

Of this latter observation, there can hardly be doubt. At one time God administered his people through the old covenant (i.e., the Mosaic law), but now he administers them through the new covenant and the Holy Spirit. The New Testament evinces this changing nature of God’s administration: formerly membership in the covenant community was signified by circumcision; now it is signified by baptism. Formerly, Israel offered sacrifices that foreshadowed the atoning death of Jesus Christ; now that Christ has fulfilled that death, the church celebrates the Lord’s Supper, which commemorates the inauguration of the new covenant through his atoning death. To organize and classify this progression in God’s dealing with his people, theologians label each distinct era as a dispensation. To be a “dispensationalist” (with a lowercase *d*) is to affirm this fundamental concept.

By recognizing distinct dispensations, it becomes possible to outline hermeneutical principles that distinguish the various aspects of God’s previous administrations that remain in effect today. Thus the questions must be asked: What has changed? What still continues? Though some of the particulars of these questions still await resolution, the starting point of the discussion lies in an understanding of “dispensations.” In sum, while in the history of redemption the biblical authors addressed changing historical audiences of covenant people — each in its own unique environment — their inspired message is eternal and their implied audience is the universal covenant people.

3. Locus of Revelation for Theological Reflection Is Text, Not Event

Heretofore I implied the notion of propositional revelation. At the same time, I do not deny that God revealed himself through his mighty acts in history. God, however, also authored texts that bear witness to his acts in history. Between the acts and the texts that record these acts, the locus of theological reflection must be the text. Why?

First, a crucial point for biblical theologians to remember is that biblical history is *Heilsgeschichte* (i.e., “sacred history”). In this sort of history, it is not possible to separate the events from the texts that bear witness to the events. The theologian has no access to the events except through the text itself.

Archaeology can produce some artifacts that may shed light on the social customs of a particular historical time, but despite the best efforts of scholars in this field, the Bible remains the main and, for the most part, the only witness to these actions of God in history, and more important, the only authoritative interpreter of the events.⁴⁷

Second, the theologian cannot divorce events from the text, because these texts not only record history but also interpret the events through certain perspectives. Here, three important truths need to be grasped:

a. *All reality is infinite.* At any given moment in time, an infinite number of actions, thoughts, and states of being exist. Any attempt to speak of an event or to record it necessarily results in the process of selecting and editing material. Therefore, every recounting of an event is also an interpretation of that event.

b. *The doctrine of inspiration stipulates that the interpretive framework of the authors of Scripture is also part of God's revelation.* God not only acts in history and records it, he also provides the "correct" interpretation for these events. Thus, in practice the theologian must concede the a priori right for the authors of these texts to interpret the events for their audience because these interpretations of the events represent "truth."

c. *The Bible gives primacy to word over event.* The sequence of God's word before his mighty acts prevents one from crediting the interpretation of the event to human reflection. The Old Testament validates this primacy of the word over event. In Genesis 1 God gives the command (i.e., his word), and the earth comes into existence (i.e., his mighty act). In Genesis 3 God gives the promise of the seed before the arrival of the seed. In Genesis 4 God warns, "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you"; the murder of Abel follows. The warning about the flood precedes the flood. The pattern continues repeatedly throughout the Old Testament: word, then event. God predicts his actions and offers commentary before, during, and/or after the event, thereby asserting his role as the instigator and interpreter and precluding the possibility that the original witnesses might ascribe his mighty acts to chance or to other deities. This is also a caution to later readers not to credit the events and/or their significance to the writer's own creativity. Together, prediction and interpretation of the historical events assure a recognition of God's sovereignty over history, and the events are his vehicle of authenticating the truth he desires to communicate through them. This is why the Bible repeats the phrase "As God has promised" or the biblical writer uses the recognition formula with respect to God's miracles: "And you [they] will know that I am the LORD." The people of God have come to see him as the one who speaks and then acts to fulfill what he has spoken. Barr rightly comments,

Far from representing the divine acts as the basis of all knowledge of God and all communication with him, the Old Testament texts represent God as communicating freely with men, and particularly with Moses, before, during and after these events. Far from the incident at the burning bush being an “interpretation” of the divine acts, it is a direct communication from God to Moses of his purposes and intentions. This conversation, instead of being represented as an interpretation of the divine act, is a precondition of it. If God had not told Moses what he did, the Israelites would not have demanded their escape from Egypt, and the deliverance at the Sea of Reeds would not have taken place.⁴⁸

This primacy of word over event is not unique to the Bible. Bertil Albrektson’s *History and the Gods* argues that the gods of other nations had also “acted in history” to make known their power, mercy, and wrath. He draws his essay to conclusion by saying, “The Old Testament idea of historical events as divine revelation must be counted among the similarities, not among the distinctive traits: it is part of common theology of the ancient Near East.”⁴⁹ The Bible’s uniqueness lies in *I AM*’s faithfulness. God’s faithfulness resides in his ability to bring about what he promises. This fact, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit’s empowering, explains why *I AM* alone of all the gods of the biblical world continues to live. Where is Enlil of the Sumerians, Shamash of the ancient Babylonians, Asshur of the Assyrians, Chemosh of the Moabites, Amon of the Egyptians, Baal of the Canaanites, Marduk of the Neo-Babylonians, or Zeus of the Greeks? They all died, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ today inhabits the petitions and praises of the church. Although his people often prove unfaithful, he remains faithful to them.

4. The Bible Is a Unity

In this section I first argue for the Bible’s unity and then reflect on the hermeneutical implications of that truth.

The Old and New Testaments are unified by their common Author, their common audience, their common theme, and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in Jesus Christ. All Scripture, says the apostle in reference to the Old Testament, is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:15) and so are the apostles of Jesus Christ (John 16:13; 2 Peter 1:21; 3:16). Moreover, the New Testament writers consistently understand the Old Testament as written to the universal, new covenant people of God. Paul spoke of the Mosaic legislation not to muzzle the

ox when it is treading the grain as having been written for us: “Surely [Moses] says this for us, doesn’t he? ... Yes, this was written for us” (1 Cor. 9:9–10). The writer of Hebrews understands the father’s lecture to his son in Proverbs 3:11–12 as being addressed to the church: “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline’ “ (Heb. 12:5–6). As for their common theme, I contend in [chapter 6](#) that the two testaments are united by the ideology that God is establishing his kingship over a hostile world to establish his glory. The bond that unites the testaments is the sense of God’s divine activity in revelatory history in progressively establishing his rule in heaven on earth from the creation of the cosmos (Genesis 1) to his creation of the new cosmos (Revelation 21–22). Finally, the writers of the New Testament understood their writings as continuing the witness of the Old Testament to Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ Jesus Christ himself lays the foundation for this conceptualization of the Bible. He interprets from Scripture the things “concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). His last words on the cross, before he bowed his head in death, were, “It is finished,” by which he meant he has completed what he was sent to do according to the earlier Scriptures (John 19:28–37).

The assertion that the Bible is a unified work has exegetical implications. Brevard Childs surveys what he perceived to be a crisis in biblical theology in 1970. In his view, the biblical theology movement tried to combine a liberal critical methodology with normative biblical theology but could not bridge the gap between exegesis based on historical criticism and theology. Childs feels the gap between exegesis and theology can be bridged only by viewing the texts in the context of their own literature, namely, the canon of Scripture. The Bible, in Child’s view, must be recognized as the normative vehicle of revelation and, being such, as inspired.⁵¹ Since God is the ultimate Author beyond any historical biblical writer, the meaning of the text may transcend the time and context of each individual biblical writer.⁵²

To put it another way, in interpreting Scripture there are two horizons. First, there is the finite horizon of the inspired author that encompasses all the knowledge of the author and his historical situation. Second, there is the infinite horizon of God, who sees all things holistically. The existence of this larger horizon allows modern interpreters to go beyond the specific historical context of the biblical writers and in retrospect pursue connections and themes in the metanarrative that embraces the whole range of biblical material. As a result, we may arrive at themes and interpretations that are grander and more evocative than the human biblical authors could have ever thought of, restricted as they

were by their historical horizons; yet God intended this fuller understanding from the beginning.

C. Genre and Modes of Inspiration

Each part of the Old Testament has a dominant genre of writing. Although the Primary History contains hymns, law codes, parables, and prophecies, etc., its dominant genre is the narrative. Indeed, the other genres are usually embedded into the narrative as the speeches of characters. Moses gives the Book of the Law, Miriam leads the singing of songs, and Balaam proclaims prophecies. The genre of each block of writing determines the method of interpretation. This idea that each genre should be correlated to a unique method for interpretation is not alien to biblical thought. On the contrary, the author of Hebrews demonstrates awareness of the diversity of genres contained in the Old Testament, pointing out that this diversity is a result of the varying modes of inspiration: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1). This New Testament author is conscious of differing modes of inspiration as well as the diverse forms of literature in the Old Testament.

Awareness of this diversity is also found in the Old Testament itself. Numbers 12 is such a passage; it demonstrates an awareness of varying modes of inspiration and of the significance of that awareness to hermeneutics. In the narrative of that chapter, Aaron and Miriam speak against their brother, Moses, on account of his Cushite wife.⁵³ These objections are probably not motivated by racism as such, but by the fact that she is not a descendant of the chosen people of God, a seed of Abraham.⁵⁴ Aaron and Miriam are prophet and prophetess. Tension develops between them and Moses when they begin to question his authority: “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” (v. 2). In so doing, Aaron and Miriam set up their own pronouncements as equal to, though in tension with, the pronouncements of Moses.

In response, God calls them out to the Tent of Meeting, where God meets with his people outside the camp. Then God proceeds to make the following distinction:

When a prophet of the LORD is among you,
☺☺☺☺☺I reveal myself to him in visions,
☺☺☺☺☺I speak to him in dreams.

But this is not true of my servant Moses;
 ☞☞☞☞he is faithful in all my house.
 With him I speak face to face,
 ☞☞☞☞clearly and not in riddles;
 ☞☞☞☞he sees the form of the LORD.
 Why then were you not afraid
 ☞☞☞☞to speak against my servant Moses? (vv. 6–8).

There are two elements in this divine pronouncement that distinguish Moses from the prophets. The first is the experience of revelation. The Hebrew word glossed “visions” (Heb. *hâzôn*, from the root *hzh*, “to see visions” or “to hear auditions”) describes a supersensory experience within the inner psyche usually unheard or perceived by others. (An example in the New Testament is Paul’s Damascus road experience, where he hears Jesus’ voice while others do not understand the voice [Acts 22:9; cf. John 12:29]). While prophets receive revelation through *hâzôn*, Moses receives revelation through theophany (i.e., a face-to-face encounter with God). This is a qualitatively different experience from the *hâzôn*, of the prophets. Thus God’s speech in this passage is intended to discriminate between the two modes of inspiration, elevating Moses over his siblings because his experience of revelation is more direct and immediate than that of the prophets.

The second distinction is that God spoke to Moses “clearly and not in riddles.” In contrast to the dreams and visions of the prophets, which stand in need of interpretation, the message to Moses is communicated in a clear and straightforward manner, such as in the giving of the Law. This verse implicitly instructs readers to adopt a different hermeneutics for interpreting material attributed as spoken direct to Moses in contradistinction to the prophetic material. The legal material addressed to Moses is plain and straightforward; the prophetic materials require more rumination, for they are in the form of riddles and allegory, with a dreamlike, symbolic quality. This symbolic quality becomes even more exacerbated in apocalyptic literature, such as Daniel and Revelation.

Because Moses’ experience of revelation was more immediate and the form of his revelation had more clarity, his revelation was superior and so more authoritative than that of the prophets. Consequently, if there is any tension in interpretation between Moses and the prophets, Moses has priority. God also points to Moses’ status as his slave — a high accolade — in his house: “[Moses] is faithful in all my house.... Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” This idea of relative honor that entails relative authority is picked up by the author of Hebrews: “Moses was faithful as a servant in all

God's house [see Num. 12:7] But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house" (Heb. 3:5–6). Both Moses and Christ are faithful to God, but Moses' status is that of a servant in God's house, while Christ's status as a son over the same house is greater. Since Christ's honor is greater, so are his words more authoritative. Consequently, if there is any tension between Christ and his apostles versus the original author, Christ and his apostles have priority. Our task is to understand and to accept both as the Word of God, while giving the final word to Christ and his apostles.

These two passages from the New Testament and Old Testament show that the Bible's authors reckoned with different modes of inspiration and so also of their interpretative strategies. In addition to prophecy and law, the Bible also contains wisdom literature (see [chaps. 31–33](#)). In contrast to Moses and the prophets, a sage does not appeal to theophany or to the prophets' experience of *h'âzôn*. Rather, he or she (cf. Prov. 31:1) pays attention to what is seen: the field of a sluggard, the seduction by a strange woman, the peer pressure of wicked men, and so on. He reflects upon his observation in light of the general revelation of conscience and of Israel's covenant values. On the basis of the created order as interpreted by the order of redemption, he teaches the covenant youth. "This is the way the world functions," he proclaims. So he validates and/or applies divine realities from his observation of creation rather than by seeing a form of God or by hearing the word of God in his inner psyche (see [chap. 31](#)).

In sum, our theology is based on the sure foundation of the Bible's Spirit-inspired revelation of God in human language. This revelation is understood by spiritual discernment and by using appropriate reading strategies for its distinctive genres. Though always normative for faith, its specific commands must be put into practice in accordance with the different modes in God's economy of administering his covenant people.

THOUGHT QUESTION

Is the Old Testament command to bring sacrifices to one central sanctuary normative for the faith and practice of Jews and/or of the church? Why is the Bible normative for Christian faith but not necessarily for Christian practice? Who are the biblical authors addressing?

1. Phyllis Tribble, "Overture for a Feminist Biblical Theology," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930–1990*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 451.

2. R. W. L. Moberly, "Theology of the Old Testament," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 453.

3. Ben C. Ollenburger, "From Timeless Ideas to the Essence of Religion: Method in Old Testament Theology before 1930," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, 3.

4. I am indebted for this analysis of introductory issues in doing Old Testament theology to the chapter "Basis, Task and Method of Old Testament Theology," in T. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958; 2nd ed. 1970), 118–27.

5. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 4.

6. James Sanders, cited in *ibid.*, 15.

7. For a collection of representative essays of all the major scholars who contributed to Old Testament theology, along with overview essays by the editors, see Ollenburger et al., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*. For a good survey of the recent literature, see Moberly, "Theology of the Old Testament," 453. For a good introduction to the literature, see Robert C. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (New York, Seabury, 1963); John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); and R. L. Hubbard Jr., "Doing Old Testament Theology Today," in *Studies in Old Testament Theology*, ed. R. L. Hubbard Jr., R. K. Johnston, and R. P. Meyer (Dallas: Word, 1992), 31–46. For magisterial

surveys of the field, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 1–114; and Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*.

[8.](#) Johann P. Gabler, “An Oration of the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each,” in Ollenburger et al., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, 489–502.

[9.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 12.

[10.](#) Childs (*ibid.*, 73–74) sketches the relation between biblical theology and dogmatics.

[11.](#) Cf. James Barr, “The Theological Case against Biblical Theology,” in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of B. S. Childs*, ed. Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 16.

[12.](#) William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 26.

[13.](#) See R. Scott Clark, “Janus, the Well-meant Offer of the Gospel, and Westminster Theology,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David Van Drunen (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 149–79.

[14.](#) Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1.4.A, 1.338.

[15.](#) In light of the text’s compositional development in some Old Testament books, evangelical text critics now debate determining the line between inspired composition and corrupt transmission. Restoration of an original text, by Moses for example — the traditional view of orthodox theologians — is not tenable (cf. [chap. 17](#)). J. Daniel Hays (“Jeremiah, the Septuagint, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Inerrancy: Just What Exactly Do We Mean by the ‘Original Autographs’?” in *Evangelicals and Scripture. Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, ed. V. E. Bacote, L. C. Miguez, and D. L. Ockholm [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004], 133–49), using emotive language, conceives of the original text as the earliest attested text form, but he fails to take seriously enough the widespread use of the Masoretic text before the Christian era and of the attempt of early text critics, such as attested in the proto-Lucianic recension, Origen and Jerome, to conform the Hebrew text and the Greek translation to the proto-Masoretic text. Roger Beckwith (“Toward a Theology of the Biblical Text,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*, ed. Donald Lewis and Alistair McGrath [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996]: 43–50) plausibly speaks of multiple texts instead of an original text, but this point of view unnecessarily leaves exegetes and biblical theology without a firm foundation. In my view (“Reliability of the Old

Testament Text,” in *NIDOTTE*, 51-67) it is best to think of a final text: a pristine proto-Masoretic text.

[16.](#) M. B. Moberly, “How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology,” *TynBul* 53, no. 2 (2002): 196.

[17.](#) E.g., Allen D. Verhey, “Notes on a Controversy about the Bible,” *Reformed Journal* 27 (1977): 10, and “Bible in Christian Ethics,” in *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Rev. Ed., ed. James Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 57–61, esp. 58.

[18.](#) Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). I disagree, however, with much in this book — for example, that some diversity in the Bible implies contradictions; that the New Testament writers used stories invented during the Second Temple period as a basis for theology; and that they employed the highly arbitrary and sophisticated *peshar* method of interpretation, which was used in 1QpHab. According to this method of interpretation, the people who believe they are living in the eschaton impose their convictions on reluctant Old Testament texts.

[19.](#) William Henry Green, *Moses and the Prophets* (New York: Robert Carter, 1883), 17–18.

[20.](#) B. B. Warfield, “The Divine and the Human in the Bible,” in *Evolution, Scripture and Science: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David N. Livingstone (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 57, emphasis added. Article originally published in *Presbyterian Journal*, 3 May 1884.

[21.](#) Herman Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos*. See the new edition, H. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: Religio-historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

[22.](#) Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[23.](#) Cf. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*.

[24.](#) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 1.7.4–5.

[25.](#) John Owen, *Biblical Theology, or, The Nature, Origin, Development, and Study of Theological Truth*, in six books (1661; Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria Publications 1994), 374–75.

[26.](#) Canon is used in two ways: (1) the *norma normans*, the rule of faith articulated by the Scriptures, the authoritative principles and guiding spirit that govern belief and practice, and (2) the *norma normata*, the list of books

recognized as inspired Scripture.

[27.](#) The Christian church has been divided as to whether to restrict the Old Testament canon to the narrower Jewish canon (e.g., Jerome), or to expand the canon to include apocryphal books plus Maccabees (e.g., Augustine). The Council of Trent (1545–63) canonized the latter position for the Roman Church (see Alfred Jepsen, “Kanon and Text des Alten Testament,” *ThLZ* 74 [1949]: 66–74). Nevertheless, the Jewish canon has continued to function as an authoritative norm for all branches of the geographically dispersed church throughout its history.

[28.](#) Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly’s Catechism* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 18.

[29.](#) Kurt Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London: Mowbray, 1962), 24.

[30.](#) Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 563–82.

[31.](#) Although Barr regards F. F. Bruce as a distinguished New Testament scholar, he curiously fails to mention Bruce’s work *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

[32.](#) Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

[33.](#) Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 370.

[34.](#) *Ibid.*, 568.

[35.](#) *Ibid.*, 570.

[36.](#) *Ibid.*, 563, 564.

[37.](#) According to Terry L. Wilder (*Pseudonymity, the New Testament and Deception* [Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004]), in the ancient world there existed the notion of literary property, and it was deemed unacceptable to ascribe works to other than the actual authors. Orthodox theologians would not knowingly accept such works into the canon.

[38.](#) Barr (*Concept of Biblical Theology*, 573) tries to mitigate this argument of the Reformers by noting that the apostle Paul invokes “baptism for the dead” as a reality upon which arguments for resurrection may be based (1 Cor. 15:29). “It is clear,” he says, “that there was such a practice, and that Paul takes the factual reality of it as evidence for the reality of resurrection.” In truth, however, his interpretation of this disputed passage is anything but clear. F. Godet (*Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, trans. A. Cusin [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889–90], 382–89) presents some thirty interpretations. For still more views, see B. K. Waltke, “The Theological Significations of *Anti* and *Huper*” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1958), 316n83. St. Chrysostom (*Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the*

Corinthians [40.1] in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. P. Schaff [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 12:244) lampoons Barr's interpretation: "Or will ye that I first mention, how they who are infected with the Marcionite heresy pervert this expression? And I know indeed that I shall excite much laughter; nevertheless, even on this account most of all I will mention, that you may the completely avoid this disease: viz. when any Catechumen departs among them, having concealed the living man under the couch of the dead, they approach the corpse, and talk with him, and ask him if he wishes to receive baptism; then, when he makes no answer, he that is concealed underneath saith in his stead, that of course he should wish to be baptized; and so they baptize him instead of the departed, like men jesting upon the stage.... Then being called to account, they allege this expression saying that even the apostle hath said *they who are baptized for the dead*." The most plausible interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:29 is that of E. H. Blakeney (*Huper* with Genitive in New Testament," *ExpTim* 55 [August 1944]: 306): "In 15:29 (1 Cor.) Paul is speaking of those who are wont to be baptized *huper ton nekron* = in place of the dead; this use is precisely parallel by a sentence in Dion. Halicar. Viii: these men after assuming office, thought it right to enroll other soldiers *huper ton apothanonton in toi polemoi*, "in the place of those dying in battle." This philologically felicitous interpretation harmonizes with the following context about suffering and persecution. "Why enter into this place of jeopardy and death occupied by others if there is no resurrection of the dead?" The paragraph break in Nestle's text indicates that he too recognizes a new thought commencing with v. 29, which finds its completion in v. 32.

[39.](#) Cited by Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 372.

[40.](#) Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 284, citing Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.25.

[41.](#) Peter Enns, "Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward a Viable Model of Biblical Coherence and Relevance" (paper read at the Eastern Regional ETS, Souderton, Pa., 1 April 2005).

[42.](#) The common idea of an evolutionary development of biblical monotheism emerging from within Canaanite religion contradicts the Bible's own claim for the historical otherness of the true faith, including a monotheism that goes back to the patriarchs. The evolutionary model of the religion of Yahweh in the last decades has found support in recently discovered inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (in northeast Sinai, 800 BC) and from Khirbet el-Qom (near Hebron, 725 BC), which show that Yahweh had Asherah, a Canaanite fertility deity, as his consort. See J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrrud," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 2–20; John Day,

“Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 385–408; William Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kom,” *HUCA* 40–41 (1969–70): 165–67; A. Lemaire, “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom et l’Asherah de Yhwh,” *RB* 84 (1977): 595–608. On this and other evidence, the writings of even some senior scholars in the field reflect a growing consensus that true monotheism emerged only late in Israel’s history, probably in the exile as represented in Isaiah 40–55. See essays (by Miller, Peckham, Coogan, Freedman, Mendenhall, contra Tigay, Oden) in Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride, eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990); Johannes C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1990, 1997); Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, JSOTSup 24 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1997); and Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel*, SBLMS 34 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). But this inscriptional evidence can better be interpreted to validate the biblical testimony that Israel constantly whored after the Canaanite fertility gods (cf. Deut. 16:21–22). Professors of the history of Israel’s religion who seek to topple the biblical account that Yahwistic monotheism reaches back to patriarchal times and to replace it with an evolutionary model developing from polytheism to monotheism do so with a broken reed of ambiguous textual and artifactual evidence.

[43.](#) Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 20.

[44.](#) Cited by R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 237–38.

[45.](#) Dispensationalists traditionally believe that God is pursuing three distinct programs: for the Jews, the Gentiles, and the church. Consequently, they systematize the Bible according to these three groups. According to their formulation, most of the Old Testament and the Synoptic Gospels pertain to the Jews; the letters and epistles of the apostles and the first two chapters of the book of Revelation belong to the church; and the book of Acts is thought of as a transition from the Mosaic dispensation to the church age. In contrast, covenant theologians emphasize the unity of all the people of God, regardless of the dispensation in which they lived, both through their common participation in an eternal covenant mediated and effected through the faithful obedience and death of Jesus Christ and through their common participation in the covenants God made with creation, Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David. But whereas Israel was

administered by the Mosaic covenant, the church is administered by the new covenant. Though each period of redemption history is distinct, they fit together, each rooting itself in the previous, assuming it and further developing it. And it all culminates in Christ, who as God is the unchanging ontic Reality behind all the changing historical particulars and who as man consummates all that precedes and brings to realization all that was intended from the very beginning. The diversity of “dispensations” only accentuates the eventual unity.

[46.](#) F. Mildener, *Biblische Dogmatik* 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991): 254, cited by Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 522. Barr (692n14) adds: “I had just this in mind in entitling my own earlier book *Old and New Interpretation. A Study of the Two Testaments*.” He also says, “This reminds one of the thoughts of Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*.”

[47.](#) A focus on the text is not tantamount to a rejection of the historicity of the events. The God who reveals himself in text rests his trustworthiness on his actions in the history to which the text bears witness. The actual events in this history of redemption are the brute facts of God’s revelation.

[48.](#) James Barr, “The Interpretation of Scripture: Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology,” *Interpretation* 17 (1963), 1977; quoted by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 30.

[49.](#) Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (Lund: Gleerup, 1967), 114.

[50.](#) See the superb work by Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

[51.](#) Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

[52.](#) What some scholars call the *sensus plenior*. See Raymond E. Brown, “The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years,” *CBQ* 25 (1963), 262–85; J. Coppens, “Le problème des sens bibliques,” *Concilium* 30 (1967): 107–18.

[53.](#) Possibly their reason is an illocution for Moses’ desiring the seventy elders to exhibit the gift of prophecy, not forbidding the prophesying of Eldad and Medad, and, in fact, his wishing all the people had the gift. This extraordinary extension of the prophetic gift probably threatened the unique status of Aaron and Miriam as prophet/prophetess along with Moses in the community (cf. Num. 11:21–30).

[54.](#) Scripture does not censure exogamous marriages or insist on endogamous marriages, provided that the spouse is faithful to the covenant. God does not

oppose Moses' marriage to his Cushite wife, and as we shall see, she actually helps Moses to keep covenant. In short, like Rahab and Ruth, Zipporah embraced the faith of the covenant community.

Chapter 2

THE TASK OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Jesus Christ, whom the two Testaments regard, the Old as its hope, the New as its model, and both as their centre.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 12.740

I. PRELIMINARY ISSUES

As we have seen, the theological foundation examined in [chapter 1](#) places numerous constraints on the biblical theologian. To summarize, the sole basis of the Old Testament theologian's work is and can only be the Word of God as attested in its sixty-six books. This is God's word to the church — *deus dixit*— not merely a historical artifact of Israel's religion. In the Bible's pages, the church learns what to proclaim and how to live as a kingdom of priests, a holy people, and a light to the nations — to act justly, love mercy, and walk circumspectly. The church learns how to worship, pray, adore God, and confess sin. The theologian should consider the Bible's Source as inerrant and its teaching as infallible; should study the text for meaning rather than just as an account of the events recorded therein; should read the Old Testament as a unity, a product of the one Author; should read reverently, recognizing the authority of the text for the present day. This bit of ground clearing gets us to our view of the task of Old Testament theology.

Theology is essentially a self-critical task in light of God's special revelation. He has the last word, and in response to his Word, the church reflects upon what it should say and do. To help the church to understand and respond appropriately to God's Word, the biblical theologian seeks to encapsulate its message and give the church a perspective on its place in sacred history.

Walther Eichrodt defines Old Testament theology as giving “a complete picture of the Old Testament realm of belief.” More realistically, an Old Testament theology should seek the answer to the questions: What are major religious concerns and ideas (i.e., what is the message)¹ of the Old Testament, and how did that message develop? Rikki Watts defines “ideology” as “*that all-pervasive interpretive framework by which a group not only understands itself, but also justifies and projects itself over against other groups.*”² But before we can answer these questions, we must address three challenges: the diversity of the Old Testament corpus, the traditional relationship between systematic theology and biblical theology, and the intertextuality and compositional history of the Old Testament. So to these issues we turn.

A. Diversity

Is there a single message to the Old Testament? In [chapter 6](#) we argue that a core message pervades all the biblical literature. But each book has its own theology and emphasis. Some books need to be held in tension against other books, for they approach the same issue from different perspectives. Though they all agree about God's sublime attributes, humanity's depravity, and God's plan for redemption, they offer *differing points of view* about divine matters. This should not surprise anyone. The Old Testament contains books by several human authors and thus comes to us through the medium of distinctive human personalities living in diverse situations whose role is to meet different needs of the covenant community. Though the Primary History (Genesis –2 Kings) and Chronicles cover essentially the same history, the writers select their material to meet different needs. For example, the Primary History omits Manasseh's repentance (cf. 2 Kings 21:1–18; 2 Chron. 21:1–20), and the Chronicler omits David's adultery and murder in the Bathsheba incident (cf. 2 Samuel 11–12; 2 Chron. 20:1–3). The two histories differ because the Primary History asserts to the exiles that Israel, not God, failed to keep the covenant, and the Chronicler proclaims to those who returned from the exile that they have a noble heritage and are the rightful heirs of God's covenants with Israel. The books of Kings and Chronicles harmonize by singing different parts.

This diversity does not, however, entail that the term *Old Testament theology* should mean nothing more than a mere collection of the disparate theologies of the individual books. An Old Testament theology is not a compendium of the theologies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other books of the Old Testament. Although the Old Testament consists of diverse works, each with its own message(s), the Old Testament corpus contains strands of major themes that wind their way through the texts.

A theme is “an idea which is part of the value-system of the narrative.”³ It is normally associated with a key word or motif (see [chap. 3](#)). A biblical theme winds its way through the whole canon of Scripture. Within the progression of that literary corpus, the themes are developed, transformed, and reinterpreted. Thus, a significant part of the task of Old Testament theology lies in tracing these themes through the various books. The disparate melodies of the individual books form a harmony, not a cacophony, because all the books assume the ideas entailed in *I AM*'s covenants with Israel and contribute to themes associated with those covenants. In spite of their sharing this common musical key, an Old Testament theology cannot faithfully present the themes and messages of the

Bible by systematizing them by a central theme or message. Although we will argue that the central message of the Bible proclaims that for his glory God is breaking into this hostile world with his rule and that this theme entails certain themes (such as a common people, land, law, and leadership) — all of which contribute to a common memory — the material is too unruly and extensive to be tamed to develop that theme systematically. Each book also demands its own exegesis and theological reflections.

The discipline of Old Testament theology is necessarily reductionistic — the emphasis has to be on the selection of major concepts of the books and on the development of major themes that are shared by the various books. Even the commentaries and theologies of the individual Old Testament books must be reductionistic. No biblical theologian has attempted a comprehensive theology of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, Eichrodt's ideal to write "a complete picture of the Old Testament realm of belief" is unquestionably impractical and probably impossible.

B. Relationship to New Testament Theology and Systematic (Dogmatic) Theology

Charles Hodge taught that the systematic theologian's task is to collect the facts of the Bible and to arrange them in an order of logical relationships, and that the task of biblical theology is to ascertain and state those facts. However, Hodge failed to realize adequately that the biblical writers had their own priority of ideas and coherency of thought and that the biblical theologian aims to honor that priority and arrangement by tracing the trajectory of the themes that are found in and run through the books.⁴

What are these major themes in the Old Testament? Traditionally, some biblical theologians have used the categories of dogmatic theology, such as God-Man-Salvation, to arrange their theologies of the Old Testament.⁵ To be sure, the biblical writers essentially agree about these doctrines, and each more or less contributes to them. But dogmatic theologians have typically derived these categories of thought from logic. The problem with this approach to the task is obvious when one considers that these three categories are appropriate to any religion. This approach runs roughshod over the emphases and intentions of the Old Testament authors, funneling them into categories that are somewhat alien to the emphases of the Old Testament writers. The authors of the Old Testament have their own categories and concerns; their themes and messages diverge from

— not contradict—those of New Testament authors who seek to present the Christian faith in their contemporary Jewish and Hellenic world. The essential themes and messages of the Old Testament can only be discovered through a close reading of its own texts. In this book we will eschew external categories in favor of those discovered in the text through the disciplines of poetics and intertextuality.

C. Four Histories

Because Old Testament theology is here conceptualized as diachronically tracing major themes through their development in the corpus, the theologian must become keenly aware of the historical contexts in which these themes evolved and were transformed and/or reinterpreted. This is what we mean by “progressive revelation,” a process that culminates in the revelation of the life and death of Jesus Christ and the formation of the New Testament canon.⁶

Old Testament theologians typically trace the development of the major biblical themes within four “histories” that need to be carefully distinguished and critically appraised. By “history” I mean the chronological sequencing of significant events affecting an understanding of an institution, a nation, a movement, or a practice. History is the recording of facts within a sustained interpretative framework to persuade its audience about the importance and significance of the recorded facts. In other words, history includes both story and plot (see [chap. 4](#), “Narrative Theology”).

1. Ancient Near Eastern History

Old Testament doctrines obviously evolve in the broad landscape of *ancient Near Eastern history*, an environment that helped shape the Bible’s *unique* theology.⁷ Eichrodt writes, “No presentation of OT theology can properly be made without constant reference to its connections with the whole world of Near Eastern religions.” The Word of God became incarnate in this world. Just as Jesus Christ took the form of a man without losing his deity, so also the prophetic message took its language and forms from its world without losing its distinctive theology. Earlier Eichrodt wrote, “For in the course of its long history it [the religion of the Old Testament] not only firmly consolidated its own *unique* contribution, but also, by a process of absorption and rejection, has forged links with the most varied forms of paganism.” Eichrodt adapts Adolf

Harnack's dictum that "the man who knows only one religion knows none" to say, "The man who knows the religion of the OT knows many."⁸ In any case, this theology will take note of the ancient world to the extent that it helps clarify the biblical message.

2. Heilsgeschichte

A second history is the *biblical history* of Israel — that is, the salvation history of the people of God "expressed in the Word" (*Heilsgeschichte*).⁹ This sacred history has an interconnectedness that transcends prophecies and types. Theologians who seek to expound this linear history are said to belong to the "salvation history school." "Since Jesus Christ is the primordial goal of the world to which salvation history aims and from which it receives its meaning, the OT contains salvation-historical proclamation."¹⁰ Ben C. Ollenburger comments,

Central to the concern of these "salvation [history] historians" ... are the origin of the history of Israel and of the world in the activity and decree of God; the importance of the "facts" of God's activity in Israel's history, which forms an organic whole; the consequent conception of Old Testament theology as historical in nature; the actual or virtual correspondence between the Old Testament narrative and history; and finally, the participating in the spirit of revelation — or God's spirit rather than human spirit ... as the condition for understanding the history of revelation (Oehler 1845:32–34; Schultz 1869:72).¹¹

This biblical history of Israel is presented by two corpora: the Primary History (Genesis –2 Kings), which presents an unbroken account from creation of the cosmos to Judah's exile in Babylon (ca. 550 BC), and the Chronicler, who presents a second history from Adam to the restored community (ca. 500 BC); this second history is completed by Ezra-Nehemiah with the account of the social, political, and religious institutions of the second Jewish commonwealth (ca. 460–430 BC). What is important about salvation history is that it is the inspired recounting and interpretation of the historical events. It is this interpretation of history that is relevant for the Old Testament theologian. Frank Thielman notes that Israel's salvation history is one basis of the structure of Paul's theology. He also notes how Paul builds on that history in the career of Jesus Christ in life, death, resurrection, and ascension until he unites all things under himself.¹²

The salvation history represented in both the primary and secondary history of the Old Testament moves toward the goal of fulfillment in Jesus Christ and everything after him, including the Gospels, which represent the church's reflections on Jesus, a developing interpretation of him in the canon of the New Testament. In other words, Jesus is the hinge on which the Old and New Testaments turn. This entails that all Scripture should be interpreted in light of the Lord Jesus Christ as represented in historically conditioned sources.

3. "Historical Israel": Historical Criticism

A third "history" in many academic theologies of the Old Testament is the so-called *historical Israel*. The Enlightenment, whose epistemology is based on reason, not revelation, gave rise to "historical criticism." The roots of historical criticism, as expostulated by Ernst Troeltsch, are skepticism, analogy, and coherence. By *skepticism* is meant reading the Bible as any other ancient myth. By *analogy* is meant testing the historical accuracy of the Bible by modern experience. For example, if people are not raised from the dead in the present time, they were not raised from the dead in the past. By "coherence" is meant that every event has a natural, historical cause without positing divine intervention. The fruit of historical criticism is systematic, practical atheism.

This history of Israel is also reconstructed by giving priority to the archaeologists' interpretation of excavated artifacts and often by giving priority to other ancient Near Eastern literary texts over the Bible. As a result, the reconstructed histories sometimes diverge sharply from salvation history. For example, some replace the biblical conquest of the land with a reconstructed settlement of the land or with a social revolution by the indigenous inhabitants of the land against their overlords.¹³ Nevertheless, these revisionists parade their history as the "real" history, but the lack of consensus on their reconstructed histories suggests that they are in fact subjective, philosophical interpretations of history. An Old Testament theology based on a history of Israel that has been reconstructed from a worldview alien to the biblical writers and from data that falsifies their claims is patently not a theology of the extant Old Testament. In fact, such a theology represents another religion.

4. Compositional History

A fourth "history" is the compositional history of the Old Testament as postulated by scholars. Based on various phenomena in the text, scholars reconstruct the historical process that resulted in the final form of the Old

Testament. This fourth “history” may serve to explicate a book’s message and point to its final date of composition and its narratees (i.e., the original addressees), but the practice is mostly eschewed here for three reasons. First, the recovered sources within the text are often too speculative to be foundational for the discipline of biblical theology. And even if literary documents can be recovered, we still do not know how the biblical books were developed. Even more speculative are the attempts to generate a theology based on the oral traditions that allegedly circulated prior to the composition of the alleged sources. That many scholars accept such approaches as the focus of their attention—speculations built upon speculations with only a smidgen of actual evidence—partially explains the irrelevance and the bankruptcy of much biblical scholarship today. Sound doctrine cannot be based on guesses.

Second, the focus of attention is commonly misdirected. The focus of biblical theology should be on the message of the final form of the canonical text. Biblical theology is not a study of ancient Israelite religion. The excavation of the various stages in the development of Israelite religious thought prior to its representation in the extant text is useful for biblical theology only to the extent that it explicates the message of the canonical text. A theology of an alleged book of “J” is speculative and beside the point.¹⁴ Such a theology (and there are a legion) presents the message of a book that does not exist in the final form of the canon. The compositional history of the text will be brought into play here only in those cases where there is convincing evidence and it is patently relevant to the explicating the Old Testament message.

Third, reading the Old Testament in the order in which it is chronologically composed (even assuming this is possible) is tantamount to reading a novel in the order of its composition, an enterprise that may clarify the author’s final meaning; but if made the sole means to finding an author’s intention—as often happens in biblical scholarship — may actually mislead the interpreter. As any writer would testify, an author hardly ever writes from the first word to the last in that exact order. But the compositional history of a book has a very limited relevance to the interpretation of the book. Certain parts of Genesis may be written after the settlement of Canaan, but reorganizing the Old Testament into the order it was written in reconstructs a theology other than that intended by the final author and by the canonical shaping of the text.

II. BLOCKS OF WRITING

If we do not read the books of the Bible in the chronological order of their compositions, how do we begin to pull together the various pieces of the Old Testament corpus? The answer lies in this crucial concept: blocks of writing. A careful reader of the Old Testament immediately notices that although the Old Testament is a collection of books of different kinds and periods, certain books share commonalities with others: vocabulary, literary genre, thematic continuities, and other intertextual evidences. These natural boundaries, not imposed by a scholar seeking to systematize, but present in the text as a reflection of the authors' intentions, allow us to organize the Old Testament books into blocks of writing and in turn to track the themes of the books both within and among the blocks. By taking these natural boundaries seriously, we begin the process of building a coherent theology that is based on the shape of the canon and/or on the thrust of the texts themselves. This a posteriori approach to the shape of the canon finds some confirmation by its shape in the Talmud: Torah (Genesis — Deuteronomy), Prophets — former (Joshua—Kings) and later (Isaiah – Malachi), and Writings (the rest of the corpus).

A. Primary History

Assume for a moment that the Old Testament does not come to us as a bound volume with the ordering of its books predetermined by tradition, but as a random pile of thirty-nine individual volumes. How would we begin to organize this pile? Which book would we begin to read? The book of Genesis would likely strike us as a promising candidate — “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” However, the story of Genesis is incomplete. The various promises and covenants made by God to Abraham do not come to fruition: no nation, no land, no blessing to other nations. Instead, the book ends with the sons of Israel residing in Egypt, not in the homeland God promised them.

The book of Genesis requires a sequel, and we find it in the book of Exodus. In terms of chronology, the book of Exodus picks up four hundred years after the

end of Genesis, continuing the story of the sons of Israel and their march toward nationhood. Plot, however, is not the only connection between the two books. Various textual phenomena, easily observable to the careful reader, reflect an intentional effort by the author or authors and/or editors to maintain continuity between the two books. We provide one such example that clearly demonstrates the length to which an author or authors and editors go to achieve continuity.

In the traditional Hebrew text of Genesis (i.e., the Masoretic Text),¹⁵ the book of Genesis ends with the sons of Israel, numbering seventy (Gen. 46), sojourning in Egypt. As expected for a sequel, the book of Exodus begins with the sons of Israel in Egypt, numbering seventy. The example becomes much more illustrative when we examine the evidence from the ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint.¹⁶ In the text of the Septuagint, chapter 46 of Genesis records that the sons of Israel number *seventy-five*—five more than the number recorded in the Masoretic Text.¹⁷ Correspondingly, the text of Exodus in the Septuagint begins with seventy-five sons of Israel in Egypt. The lesson to be drawn from this discussion is not whether there were seventy or seventy-five people who went down to Egypt. Rather, the point is that in both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, continuity is strenuously maintained so that the narrative flows seamlessly from Genesis to Exodus.

Other books are drawn into this block of writing by similar textual phenomena: Exodus and Leviticus are tied together geographically. Exodus ends at Mount Sinai; the entirety of Leviticus takes place at Mount Sinai. Furthermore, the section on ceremonial law extends from Exodus 25 to Leviticus 9. This material is so unified that one could easily argue that it is part of the same book. Geography and time line continue to serve as the unifying agent for Leviticus and Numbers: Leviticus takes place at Mount Sinai; Numbers traces the path of the Israelites from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab. Furthermore, the two books are also tied together by their last verses. Leviticus is drawn to this conclusion: “These are the commands the LORD gave Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites” (27:34). Numbers has the conclusion: “These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho” (36:13). Except for the change in location, the two verses express the same idea, linking the books together. Deuteronomy rehearses Israel’s history during the period covered in Numbers, not in Exodus, to Moses’ transference of leadership to Joshua and to his death.

Following the line of plot development and inner-textual links, we would eventually arrive at 2 Kings. Joshua 1 is a pastiche of Deuteronomy (see [chap.](#)

[18](#), n. [10](#)); Judges 2:6–8 repeats Joshua 24:28–31, but in a chiastic structure bringing closure; 1 Samuel brings closure to the period of the judges; and 1 Kings 1–2 brings the so-called “succession narrative” (about David’s heir to the throne) begun in 2 Samuel 9 to a close. We need only observe this unity here, not debate how it came to be.^{[18](#)} Hence, we have one unified story, from God’s creation of the world to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people of God to Babylon, the Primary History.

Although composed of many earlier blocks of writings, the Primary History in its final form consists of two great collections. The Pentateuch (the Jewish Torah, Genesis — Deuteronomy) traces the history of Israel from the creation of the cosmos to Israel’s being perched on the threshold of the Sworn Land (the Promised Land), and the Former Prophets (Joshua–2 Kings, apart from Ruth) continues that history from Israel’s conquest of the land to their exile from the land. But the Talmud and modern scholarship differ on where to place Deuteronomy. The Talmud places it with the Pentateuch, and modern scholarship joins it with what the Talmud calls the “Former Prophets.” This Deuteronomistic History —its label in contemporary scholarship — embraces Deuteronomy–2 Kings, apart from Ruth. Both groupings can be defended. The linchpin of the Primary History, binding together these two great histories, is the book of Deuteronomy. Paradoxically, Deuteronomy is both the capstone of the Pentateuch and the foundation stone of the Deuteronomistic History. This is so because the core of the original book of Deuteronomy is what the so-called Deuteronomist^{[19](#)} calls “The Book of the Law” (see [chap. 17](#).III). To this earlier book the Deuteronomist during the exile added at least fifty-six verses, such as its introduction (Deut. 1:1–5) and Moses’ obituary (34:1–12), in order to link the Mosaic core within Deuteronomy and to interpret Israel’s history from the conquest to the exile in light of Deuteronomy, a covenant renewal document. Through this dual authorship of Moses and the Deuteronomist, Deuteronomy becomes the janus (or transition) book that binds together the two great documents of the Primary History.

This analysis confirms the intention of the editors who shaped the Primary History. In both the Hebrew and Greek canons, the Primary History is a unity that is given priority in the shape of both the wider canon of some Christian communities and the narrower canon of other Christian communities. It is not by accident that the Old Testament corpus begins with the Primary History. This long-running narrative forms the backbone of the Old Testament and serves as the historical framework within which the rest of the Old Testament is to be interpreted. Indeed, all other books make allusion to characters or historical

situations found in the Primary History.²⁰ Hence, the Primary History is the foundation for the rest of the corpus; familiarity with its story line is assumed by the authors of the other blocks of writing. Moreover, diverse types of literature are inserted into this running history of Israel: legal materials are part of the “Moses narrative”; songs and hymns are inserted into the Deuteronomistic History; Solomon’s writings are represented as part of this story.²¹

This sequence has hermeneutical implications. First, it facilitates distinguishing the changing modes by which God administered his people and which modes remain normative for the practice of the church. Second, the clearer texts normally precede the less clear. For example, the Torah more clearly presents the biblical worldview than the historical writings. In Deuteronomy *I AM* clearly lays out the terms of his covenant with Israel, but in the Deuteronomistic history, since few heroes fully measure up to that relationship, their behavior must be evaluated in the light of Deuteronomy. In other words, the sequence is important to the extent that it facilitates the old principal that ambiguous texts should be interpreted in the light of clear texts. This principal explains the primacy of Paul in the canon and in Reformation theology. Eschatology should be based on the clear Epistles, not on the symbolisms of the Apocalypse, the last book of the canon.²²

B. Other Blocks of Writing

Though the Primary History provides the principal account of the history of the kingdom of God, other books also serve to recount portions of this same history. The book of Chronicles charts the story from Adam through the exile and extends the plot beyond the Primary History to the enthronement of Cyrus, the king of Persia, who allowed the Israelites to return to Judah to rebuild the temple. This story is then continued by Ezra-Nehemiah, which recounts the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple and the city wall of Jerusalem. Hence, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah form another block of historical narrative, tracing Israel’s history from Adam to the reestablishment of Israel in the land as the second Jewish commonwealth with its religious and political structures fully in place so that it can survive under the successive hegemonies of Persia, Greece, and Rome. Although both pertain to God’s covenant relationship with Israel, these two historical blocks (i.e., the *Primary History* and *Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah*) present two distinct theologies. The former reviews the history of the people of God leading up to the exile to explain why God sent

his people into exile. The latter assures the returnees that they, not the “bad figs” left in the land, are the principal heirs of Israel’s preexilic heritage and emphasizes their need for faithful worship, purity, and trusting obedience.²³

The remaining books can be divided based on genre and function. The books of the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and the “Twelve” [Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi]) easily form a single block—the *Prophetic Literature*. The five books that make up the book of Psalms, which evolved from earlier anthologies of Israel’s liturgical petitions and praises, stands alone comprising the *Hymnic Literature*. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job form the *Wisdom Literature*. Finally, we are left with Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs, which do not fit easily within any one block, nor do they constitute one themselves. However, it is still possible to incorporate these texts into the whole of Old Testament theology. Ruth has strong thematic connections to the Primary History; Song of Songs is ascribed to Solomon and has strong connections to Proverbs 7;²⁴ Esther, concerned with the preservation of the people of God, evokes echoes of another attempted genocide in the book of Exodus and brings to conclusion God’s command to the Benjamite Saul son of Kish to exterminate the Amalekites centuries later by another Benjamite, Mordecai, probably a distant descendant of Kish (Est. 2:5).

C. Their Common Inspiration

Although these blocks of writings can be distinguished by literary forms, we need to underscore that the Spirit inspired all of them. Scholars commonly neglect the inspiration of the prophet-historians of the Old Testament. These writers drew from various oral and literary sources, edited them, and wove them into the brilliant narratives of Primary History, the Chronicles, as well as other books such as Ruth. They are anonymous; they do not identify themselves in the text. Nor do they claim to experience theophany or to have auditions and/or revelations (Heb. *hāzōn*) when they compose their work. On the contrary, they blank their mode of inspiration.²⁵ Yet it is obvious from their omniscience (as we will see), and essential to our task to write God’s messages through the narrators of the Old Testament, that these authors are prophets as well as historians.

The prophetic status of these writers is clear from the nature of their work. From Genesis through Kings, these anonymous²⁶ writers communicate their

thoughts from the perspective of the omniscient narrator. They know what God in heaven is thinking and what a couple says in the privacy of their bedroom; they know the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of their characters, including God; and they evaluate events from God's perspective. In essence, they are as omniscient as God; they speak for God, the classic definition of a prophet. If we deny their prophet status, then we have to conclude that their work is fiction; there is no middle ground. These authors could not have written trustworthy historical annals about events beyond human epistemology without divine inspiration. Their compositions are the products of either creative imagination or divine inspiration (*theopneustos*). If the former, they are not infallible; if the latter, they are infallible, for their Source is Truth. Our theological presupposition dictates that we interpret these authors as prophet-historians, who write prose narrative in contrast to the classic prophets, who spoke poetic oracles that were written down and collected in the Later Prophets. Indeed, the Jewish division of the Old Testament designates these historical texts as the Former Prophets. It is an exceedingly apt designation.

The autobiographies in Ezra-Nehemiah are written *mostly* from a human perspective (see [chaps. 4.I](#) and 28.I). Unlike the prophets, these reformers do not know what the future holds, but like members of the covenant people, they depend on Providence to work through their prayers (cf. Ezra 8:21–23; Neh. 2:4–5). Nevertheless, their memoirs are yet another form of inspiration, for their editor and their writings themselves interpret that Providence with authority (e.g., Ezra 7:9, 28), and the covenant community recognizes the book containing their memoirs as part of the canon, whose authority resides in its inspiration.

Israel's petitions and praises, which are recorded in the Psalter, mostly originated during the First Temple period (ca. 950–600 BC) but were collected into the book of Psalms during the exile or shortly after. David, who authored about half of the psalms, is regarded as inspired by the Spirit of God. He introduces his last word: "The inspired utterance of David son of Jesse ... The Spirit of *I AM* spoke through me, his word was on my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2 TNIV). The apostles attribute Psalm 2 to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "You [God] spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage ...'" (Acts 4:25). When the king and Solomon's temple ceased to exist, these hymns became teachings to be meditated upon (cf. Ps. 1) and were reckoned by the believing community as Scripture (see p. 885). Petitions and praises in response to God constitute yet another form of inspiration.

III. THE TASK OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The late Gerhard Hasel rightly argued that “the task of biblical theology is to provide summary explanations and interpretation to the final form of these blocks of writing, with a view to letting their various themes emerge, to indicate their dynamic interrelationship, including their continuities and discontinuities with one another, and to expose the progressive revelation of divine matters.”²⁷ James Barr agrees with this conceptualization of the task: “Biblical theology is concerned with the vital central ‘message’ of Biblical texts, with the interrelations of ideas that link one text with another, and with the deep underlying convictions that inspired the texts and united them as a composite and yet unitary ‘witness’ to ultimate theological truth.”²⁸ As I will argue, the ultimate theological truth that unifies the whole of Scripture is the irruption of the merciful King’s rule to his glory.

Biblical theology builds on the other modes of studying the Bible, such as textual criticism and matters of biblical philology and historical background. But this description of the text must turn to evaluation if any kind of systematic or structural account is to be offered. By “system” or “structure” is meant a sort of grid that could be placed within the material and be seen to provide some degree of order and coherence.²⁹ The system is a structure that can accommodate variation. “The system consists of main structures, within which a variety of contradictory details may fit.” This is as true of Old Testament theology as it is of a country’s political or economic system.³⁰

Though the texts themselves are not theology, they contain theological material from which theology can be drawn by critical reflection. By contrast, “Theology is a reflective activity in which the content of religious expressions is to some extent abstracted, contemplated, subject to reflection and discussion, and deliberately reformulated.”³¹ Critical reflection upon the text shows that biblical writers faithfully utilize their traditions and creatively respond to new situations. Tradition is about continuity and change. Through the development and reformulation of biblical themes in authoritative texts, the biblical message becomes ever clearer, richer, stronger, and more complete.

To illustrate, let us take up the theme of the “seed of the woman” in Genesis

3:15. To whom does the “seed” refer? When God promises that there will be a seed of the woman that will eventually destroy the Serpent, what is the proper textual context within which we should conduct our interpretation? The first possibility is that we limit ourselves to the original historical situation. In this case, the meaning of the “seed” would be restricted to what Adam and Eve understood its meaning to be. Probably Eve at first thought Cain fulfilled the promise, but when he proved to be a murderer, she probably replaced Cain with Seth (cf. Gen. 4:1–25). In other words, if we interpret the meaning of the “seed” within the first literary section of Genesis (the first *tôledôt* [“these are the accounts of”], Gen. 2:3–4:26), we arrive at Seth as the righteous seed. If we expand our range to include the whole of Genesis, then the lineage culminates in Judah (cf. Gen. 49:10). But Judah is an unsatisfactory conclusion to the thematic anticipation of a seed who will gain victory over the Serpent. Thus, the book of Genesis is in want of a proper ending.

Examined in light of the entire Primary History (Genesis – 2 Kings), the idea of “seed” becomes meshed with the Davidic covenant and a righteous king in the tradition of David (see 2 Sam. 7). But even here the Davidic line falters, unable to fulfill the promise of victory over the Serpent (see Ps. 89). When we include the Prophetic Literature, we find the concept of the “seed” linked with the righteous remnant, a faithful group of the people of God who will outlast the judgment of the exile. Furthermore, the failure of the Davidic kings creates an expectation for the ultimate Davidic king, the victorious Messiah. Surely the most satisfactory identification of the “seed” is Jesus Christ and the church. As Paul writes in Romans 16:20, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” By using the entire canon as the interpretive context, we arrive at Christ — and through him, the church—as the seed promised in Genesis. In sum, the doctrine of Israel’s tradition of the promised seed, though developing, remained constant and unchanged.

A grammatical-historical approach asks questions such as “What is the original historical situation?” and “Who was the intended audience?” These are helpful questions, especially when the author can be named. But in the case of anonymous narrative, they must be answered by reckoning with the text’s transformation in changing environments and with the fact that the Primary History was edited during the exile. The organic incorporation of books within blocks of writings testify to this editorial process. The books and blocks of writing in the Primary History may be anonymous and undated precisely because one cannot speak of one author. Moreover, its writings may be without designated addressees because they were meant to function as vehicles of divine revelation to the universal people of God. Undoubtedly, there were “original”

authors and/or editors at earlier stages of individual books who wrote to unique historical audiences, the “narratees,” but in the extant form of that history, they are addressed to an implied audience, the universal people of God. The incorporation of these books into the canon of Holy Scripture entails this wider audience.

Understanding that the intended audience of the Bible is the Israel of God is critical. Since we are part of this community of faith, we are part of the intended audience. Thus, it speaks to us. The danger of the grammatical-historical method is that it restricts the audience to the narratees and so tends to make the Old Testament appear to later generations antiquarian and irrelevant. This restriction to a past audience alone does not do justice to the writer’s intended audience: the universal people of God. When we understand the concept of an inspired author writing to the community of faith that transcends culture and history, the Old Testament becomes relevant and challenges its audiences to respond in a way appropriate to their situations.

In sum, biblical theology is more than a descriptive discipline of what Israel believed. To be sure, biblical theology has the primary task of expounding the theology of the Bible in its own historical settings and in its own terms, category, and thought forms. But the Bible’s inspiration, its story of sacred history, its content of transcendent truth, its call for critical reflection, and its audience of the universal Israel of God all entail that biblical theology also reflects upon what the Bible *means*, not only upon what it *meant*.

IV. CONTRAST TO OTHER TYPES OF THEOLOGIES

Our understanding of the basis, task, and method of expounding the message of the Old Testament can be helpfully clarified by profiling it against other theologies and the history of religion approach.

A. Natural Theology

Biblical theology and natural theology fundamentally differ because they base themselves on different epistemological foundations. Biblical theology is founded on the special revelation of the biblical books. Natural theology is based on God's general revelation in the creation, human conscience, and human reason; nature itself is God's oracle. Paul, in his speech to the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–34) and in the book of Romans (1:19–20), argues that from nature we may learn about God's divine nature, power, and wisdom, and that people are his offspring. That inference conforms with special revelation. But theologians who build their theologies on nature typically prefer that basis to the Bible; if the two disagree, priority is given to nature and reason over special revelation.³² Nevertheless, much of the Western tradition of natural theology, which featured prominently in Greek philosophical thoughts about God, was helpfully incorporated into Christian theology.³³ Karl Barth strongly attacked natural theology, but James Barr argues for its proper place in Christian theology.

B. Systematic (Dogmatic) Theology

Systematic (dogmatic) theologians present the Christian message to the contemporary world. They draw the impetus for organizing this message from outside the Old Testament. John Calvin, in his justly famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, organized his material according to the four divisions of the Apostles' Creed. Philip Melancthon organized his theology according to one

book of the Bible, Romans. Since the seventeenth century, theologians typically employed philosophical categories derived from Greek thought, such as Bibliology (the study of the Bible), hamartiology (the study of sin), pneumatology (the study of the Spirit), and so on.

Biblical theologians differ from dogmatists in three ways. First, biblical theologians primarily think as exegetes, not as logicians. Second, they derive their organizational principle from the biblical blocks of writings themselves rather than from factors external to the text. Third, their thinking is diachronic—that is, they track the development of theological themes in various blocks of writings. Systematic theologians think more synchronically — that is, they invest their energies on the church's doctrines, not on the development of religious ideas within the Bible.

C. History-of-Religion School (*Religionsgeschichte Schule*)

“Religion” in “history of religion school” means the concentrated expression of *human* belief. History of religion and biblical theology *as it is commonly practiced* have much in common. (1) Both give an account of the development of Israelite religion, the phenomena on which biblical theology depends. (2) Both present the biblical texts from the perspective of historical probability, logical consistency, and cultural relativity. (3) Both typically base themselves on historical criticism and biblical criticism, which do not take the biblical account of its authorship seriously. More specifically, both separate the biblical books into earlier literary sources that are partially identified by the scientific principles of the Enlightenment and describe the religion of the alleged sources according to the chronologically successive strata. During the heyday of *Religionsgeschichte Schule* (1880–1930), it correlated that sequence of thought with the evolution of religion in general, but that is no longer the case.

But the two disciplines can be differentiated. (1) *Religionsgeschichte*, in contrast to biblical theology, emphasizes social factors, economic forces, and political influences to explain religious changes. Biblical theology breaks the fetters of the tyranny of historicism by insisting on theological “givens” that Israel's environment only shapes. Oak trees have different shapes depending on their environment, but their genetic code, “the given,” makes them oaks. G. Ernest Wright notes, “A living organism is not a blank tablet on which all writing is done by environmental, geographical and historical conditioning. If it

were, then a description of a historical process might be sufficient to enable us to comprehend its inner significance. But in every organism there is something given which determines what it is and what it will become.” He adds: “There is in the Bible something far more basic than the conceptions of environments, growth and genius are able to depict. It is this ‘given’ which provided the Bible’s basic unity in the midst of its variety and which sets Biblical faith apart as something radically different from all other faiths of mankind.”³⁴ Unlike the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which aims to formulate expressions of the living religious experiences of Israel in light of their religious environment, this theology aims to formulate timeless truths within the Bible’s religious environment. Biblical “givens” are “timeless truths” because they are mediated by supernatural revelation in Israel’s historical context (see [chapter 1](#)).

(2) The history of religion school regards human activity as the only legitimate object of historical study. Biblical theology also appraises a religion’s claim to divine revelation and to truth. (3) History of religion emphasizes the comparative, similar elements of religion to explain Israel’s religion; biblical theology may use the comparative element to illuminate biblical thought.³⁵ (4) History of religion considers the religious phenomena broadly and does not restrict itself to written texts; biblical theology, as stated, uses the comparative method exclusively to interpret the Bible. (5) History of religion emphasizes the phenomenological: customs, rituals, architecture, and so on; biblical theology emphasizes the intellectual aspects of the Israelite religion in a systematic way; it emphasizes its ideas with a focus on its transformations and trajectories. (6) But above all they differ in their objectives. History of religion seeks to be descriptive, self-consciously avoiding value judgments; biblical theology looks for abiding, normative truth. James Barr, to whom this discussion of comparisons and contrasts owes much,³⁶ differentiates them thus: “ ‘History of religion’ is concerned with all forms and aspects of all human religions, while theology tends to be concerned with truth claims of one religion and especially with its authoritative texts and traditions and their interpretation.”³⁷

The *Religionsgeschichte Schule* eclipsed theology for a half century (1880–1930). Hasel says, “The year 1878 marks the beginning of the triumph of the ‘history-of-religions’ approach over the salvation history approach with the publication of the *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918).”³⁸ Ollenburger notes, “The first to conceive Old Testament theology purely as the history of Israel’s religion was August Kayser, in 1886; the second and subsequent editions of his work were written by Karl Marti, who changed the title of the third edition from ‘The Theology of the Old Testament’

(Kayser, 1886) to ‘The History of Israelite Religion’ (Marti, 1897).”³⁹

Robert C. Dentan suggests several factors that contributed to the decline of the *Religionsgeschichte Schule* at the time he wrote his *Preface* (1967): (1) “the general loss of faith in evolutionary naturalism”; (2) “a reaction against the mid-nineteenth-century conviction that historical truth can be attained by pure scientific ‘objectivity’ or indeed that such objectivity is itself attainable”; and (3) “the trend of continental theology back toward the Reformation—a trend which both rehabilitated the somewhat suspect term ‘theology’ and gave a new impetus to biblical studies as being profoundly relevant to modern theological problems.”⁴⁰

Perhaps more important, the spade of the archaeologist brought to light the cultures (e.g., the Assyrian and Egyptian) surrounding the biblical world and Israel’s “borrowings” from their whole world of ancient Near Eastern literature and religions. While the history of religion embraced the flood of material, the new data contradicted the presumed evolution of religion. The Mosaic law has striking parallels with the Code of Hammurapi (ca. 1700 BC), and the Prologue of Proverbs ([chaps. 1–9](#)) strongly resembles in vocabulary, form, and motifs Egyptian instruction literature (2500 BC to 500 BC).⁴¹ Old Testament poetry shows the most affinity to the Ugaritic literature (ca. 1350 BC).

Nevertheless, the reconstruction of Israel’s sources from the heyday of the history of religion school continues to deeply influence Old Testament theology by creating an entirely new picture of the development of Old Testament theology. Biblical theologians typically continue to develop the theology of the Old Testament through documents excavated from the text. For example, the theology of the Pentateuch is developed through the “J [for the writer who uses Yahweh, German Jahwist]” (950 BC), “E[lohism, for the writer who uses Elohim, ‘God’]” (850 BC), “D[euteronomist]” (622–587 BC), and “P[riestly]” (fifth century BC) documents and not sequentially according to the extant text, which attributes the Law, but not the extant Pentateuch, to Moses.⁴² Geerhardus Vos already in 1886 successfully defended the essential Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and elsewhere I argue that later editors may have added minor additions to meet the needs of the postexilic community.⁴³ Moreover, the historians of religion have not heard Hasel’s complaint: “What needs to be emphatically stressed is that there is transcendent or divine dimension in biblical history which the historical-critical method is unable to deal with.”⁴⁴

On the basis of the principle of *vaticinium ex eventu* (events prophesied at the time of writing), historic critics contend that prophets such as Amos and Micah thundered oracles of doom in light of the Assyrian juggernaut, but not those

promising Israel's restoration, which they date to the restoration period. In their view, many portions that the Bible attributes to prestigious charismatic authorities are pseudepigraphal. If they are right, the Bible is morally tarnished. Those who make this confession often differ in their historical reconstructions of the literary and/or oral traditions, demonstrating the subjectivity of their constructions and the lack of independent criteria to verify them. Moreover, were the writings fake, it is hard to believe that their original recipients would have risked their lives and fortunes to follow them.

Second Isaiah (chaps. 40–55), however, needs special treatment, for it is clearly addressed to Babylonian exiles (see pp. 844–45), 150 years after First Isaiah (700 BC), who preached in the Assyrian context ([chaps. 1–39](#)). While confessing verbal inspiration and the infallibility of Scripture and rejecting the historic critic's confession of *vaticinium ex eventu*, I agree with J. Ridderbos (*Bible Student's Commentary: Isaiah*, Zondervan, 1985, pp. 14–20) that a disciple of Isaiah could have authored Second Isaiah. Even after Cyrus appears on Israel's radar screen, it would be amazing, contrary to all expectations (41:21–29), that the uncircumcised conqueror of Babylon would restore the Jewish exiles to their land and build their temple out of his own treasures (44:24–45:8). No prophet of any other nation foretold this reversal of history. I am not arguing for the notion of a Second Isaiah; Isaiah 40–55 lacks a superscription, and the New Testament *seems* to assume one Isaiah (John 12:38–39; Rom. 9:27–29). I am arguing that the authorship of these chapters ought not be a test of orthodoxy. In any case, the book in hand is a unity (1:1).

An abiding value of the history of religion approach, however, is that it profiled both the distinctive ethical monotheism of Israel's faith (that is, one Sovereign who rules history according to justice) and the transparent superiority of that faith to the polytheistic religions of their neighbors.⁴⁵ Instead of worshipping an omnipotent and omniscient holy God who rules history according to justice, tempered by his sublime attributes of grace, mercy, love, fidelity, and patience, pagans worshiped gods in their own image, fickle gods who engaged in adultery and murder.

Biblical theology prevailed for about the next half century (1930–80), but the history of Israel's religion approach has been revived in postmodern dress.⁴⁶ Biblical theology typically accepts the biblical values, but this neo-history of religion typically, not uniformly, questions all value judgments. According to this view, the biblical viewpoint of what is good and bad is only the worldview of the "elite," a postmodern pejorative term for the social group that prevails and writes history to justify itself. The Enlightenment and the history of religion

school, which reduces the Bible to its human aspect alone, represents the Bible as containing only evaluations, not absolute values, as Harvey Cox advocates in his *Secular City* (1965). According to this history of Israel's religion, the Bible represents only what certain people thought at a particular time about divine matters, but their thoughts carry no absolute truths for today. Tragically, the mass media indoctrinate the *populus*, who commonly do not attend church, in this point of view.

D. Other Biblical Theologies

1. Introduction

The discipline of Old Testament theology is so vibrantly multicolored that one cannot do justice to the field.⁴⁷ Some see their task as in some way combining the history of religion approach with theology, and most accept as their basis the results of historical criticisms, including the source analysis of the Pentateuch into the sequenced strata of J, E, D, P. Others also rely on reconstructed oral traditions. James Barr notes, "Biblical theology was very closely linked with the entire tradition of critical scholarship."⁴⁸ Barr systematizes the main movement into five categories:

1. Collection of ideas and doctrines, on a pattern said to follow that of traditional systematic theology (Köhler); 2. synthetic, comprehensive view of the Old Testament world of faith (Eichrodt); 3. explicit Christian approach working with Christian view of revelation (Vriezen); 4. following out of development of various traditions, with their own inner reinterpretations and actualizations (von Rad); 5. "canonical" approaches (Childs).⁴⁹

With regard to how to organize their works, earlier biblical theologians used the doctrinal categories of God-Man-Salvation (Ludwig Köhler [or Koehler]). Later, some expounded an organizing theme: covenant (Walther Eichrodt), holiness of God (Ernst Sellin), election of Israel (Hans Wildberger), communion with God (T. C. Vriezen), God's sovereignty (Benno Jacob), Yahweh the God of Israel, Israel the people of Yahweh (Julius Wellhausen, cited by Rudolf Smend), promise (Walter Kaiser). Georg Fohrer proposed the dual theme of God's rulership and communion between God and humanity. Walter Zimmerli and

Brevard Childs opted for a multiplicity of themes. There are many recent, excellent surveys of the field, as noted in [chapter 1](#), so that another survey would be superfluous and not useful for my purposes in writing this book.

In my thinking, Eichrodt came closest to a center when he proposed the irruption (definitely not to be mistaken for “eruption”) of the kingship of God as the center of pan-biblical theology. The message “that ... binds together indivisibly the two realms of the Old and New Testaments — different in externals as they may be — is the irruption of the Kingship of God into this world and its establishment there.”⁵⁰ Jesus drives the message home in his model prayer, wherein he teaches his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Since the relatively recent works by Walter Brueggemann and James Barr appeared after most of the surveys cited in [chapter 1](#), it is useful to appraise critically their works here because their influential theologies reject the church’s historic confessions regarding the role of the Spirit in revealing God through the text, inspiring the text as an infallible witness to truth, and illuminating the text to certify its truthfulness and meaning.⁵¹

2. Walter Brueggemann

The *Theology of the Old Testament* by Walter Brueggemann has many strengths, not least of which is his magisterial survey of the discipline, demonstrating his profound scholarship.⁵² His style is eloquent with flashes of brilliance, but he hinders his communication by unnecessary abstractions and neologisms. His theology is salted with insights into the importance of rhetoric and with applications of the biblical faith to current social issues, but he spoils his applications by his flawed epistemology (see below). For example, his advocacy of creation faith invites “reflection on human responsibility for the well-being of all creation,”⁵³ but he draws an otherwise excellent discussion to conclusion with skepticism about *I AM*’s promises: “In the end, our consideration of these promissory statements is as it always was for Israel: a massive assurance grounded in the flimsy evidence of the witnesses.”

With regard to epistemology (i.e., his basis for doing theology), Brueggemann embraces what he calls a “postliberal, non-foundational” approach. By this he means that he rejects both historical criticism and the orthodox confessions of the church. He complains that the “practical effect of this [historical criticism] enterprise was to relativize the revelatory claims of the text and treat it like any other book.”⁵⁴ By default, however, Brueggemann’s own reasoning, unaided by

the Spirit, becomes his final frame of reference for knowing.⁵⁵ Without recognizing the work of the Spirit in his epistemology: “the authority of the [biblical] witness is grounded in nothing more and nothing less than the willingness of the text community to credit, believe, trust, and take seriously this testimony.” In other words, he relativizes the authority of Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament and of Jesus Christ and his apostles in the New Testament solely to the reader’s response. Consequently he is incapable of affirming what the biblical testimony calls true prophets over against false prophets. “No objective evidence can be given that one has been in the divine council.”⁵⁶ Robert Moberly laments, “It is dismaying that at the crucial moment, where what is needed is the classic language and disciplines of moral and spiritual discernment (the primary and perennial forms of theological hermeneutics), Brueggemann lapses into the language of pure positivism.”⁵⁷

The church knows God has chosen it because the gospel comes to the church not simply with rhetoric, but “also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:4). The ultimate basis for the Bible’s authority is not in the willingness of the community to accept it, but in the work of the Spirit to generate that willingness. Indeed, we know we are born of God if we truly believe the Bible’s testimony (such as Christ is risen from the dead), because the natural man does not receive that testimony. In addition to shifting the authority of the text away from a Spirit-empowered testimony to the willingness of the community, Brueggemann also shifts it away to the interpreter. Since there is no interest-free interpretation, whether canonical or critical, he argues, the interpreter must “stay engaged in an adjudicating process.”⁵⁸ However, by that deft move he shifts authority away from the text to the interpreter.

The interpreter’s adjudication is necessary in Brueggemann’s epistemology because the text is nothing more than Israel’s testimony to God: “*The God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with and under the rhetorical enterprise of the text and nowhere else and in no other way*”⁵⁹ In other words, Israel’s testimony constructs *I AM*, a textual ontology. The reality to which that speech bears witness is unimportant to Brueggemann, for it cannot be validated. In his epistemology we can be sure only that *I AM* exists in the text, not in his existence and historicity outside the text:

It may well be, in the end, that there is no historicity to Israel’s faith claim and that there is no “being” behind Israel’s faith assertion, but that is not a claim made here. We have, however, few tools for recovering “what happened” and even fewer for recovering “what is,” and therefore those

issues must be held in abeyance, pending the credibility and persuasiveness of Israel's testimony, upon which everything depends.⁶⁰

In other words, Israel's rhetoric can never lead to final and absolute truth.

The Old Testament in its theological articulation is characteristically dialectical and dialogical, and not transcendentalist.... This rhetoric is ... endlessly open-ended, sure to be taken up again for another episode of adjudication, which this time around may have a different—but again provisional—outcome. And because the God of Israel lives in Israel's rhetoric, we may say finally that Israel's God also partakes of this provisional way in the world.⁶¹

Is it too harsh to recall that the Serpent also asked, "Did God really say?" Brueggemann's epistemological uncertainty—like that of Wilhelm de Wette, who drew a similar conclusion centuries earlier, and of Agur, who more than two millennia before said the same thing prior to his finding wisdom in God's word that does not lie (Prov. 30:2–6) — is due to his dependence on his finite human mind. The witness of the Spirit certifies these realities to the faithful so that uncertain relativity is not a necessary human condition (see pp. 316, 940). In short, although Brueggemann derides the Enlightenment, he is very much a child of it. He ultimately depends on the epistemology of positivism to validate the text.

Brueggemann's conceptualization of the biblical theologian's task is rooted in his conviction that the biblical testimonies about *I AM* contradict each other. "Because the work and life of the Old Testament text is primarily to state competing claims, primary attention must be given to the rhetoric and the rhetorical character of faith in the Old Testament."⁶² In Brueggemann's view the task of the theologian is to expose and reflect theologically upon competing claims that God is good and that God is not good. To expound the message of the Old Testament, he invokes the model of a courtroom. He divides the book into four parts — two of which warrant our attention here. Part I presents "Israel's core testimony," in which biblical writers testify that *I AM* is a loving Savior. This is too well-known to need rehearsing. Part II, "Israel's counter-testimony" (e.g., Job, selective narrative and complaint psalms), gives witness that *I AM* has self-regard without love for his creatures. This latter witness, Brueggemann alleges, presents *I AM* as abusive, contradictory and inconsistent, unreliable and unstable: "What is clear to us, and to the narrative [of Saul and David] before us is that the lived experience of Israel has to come to terms with

this inexplicable, inscrutable ‘tilt’ that does not act morally or reasonably or honorably or consistently.”⁶³ He blasphemously charges: “In my judgment ... Israel’s text and Israel’s lived experience kept facing the reality that Yahweh’s self-regard keeps surfacing in demanding ways.... It may emerge something like wild capriciousness and sovereignty without principled loyalty. It is this propensity in Yahweh ... that precludes any final equation of sovereignty with covenantal love or with pathos.”⁶⁴

Moreover, according to the counter-testimony, Brueggemann alleges, *I AM* is narcissistic: “Yahweh in effect has no interest in Israel, but Israel is a convenient, ready-at-hand vehicle for the assertion and enactment of Yahweh’s self-regard.”⁶⁵ Brueggemann draws the heretical conclusion from these contradictory witnesses that there is an internal contradiction in God himself. Is it too harsh to recall that the Serpent also denied that God is good and that Cain could not affirm that God was just? Moreover, if I follow his argument, the counter-testimony must prevail because it is based on hard experience, while the core testimony is based on uncertain traditions about God’s demonstration of his sublime attributes in the exodus, the conquest, and so on. An impartial jury must draw the verdict in favor of the counter-testimony because it is based on certain, not hearsay, evidence that cannot be validated.

Brueggemann draws his heretical theology from his flawed exegesis: he bases his understanding of the core testimony on adjectives and verbs, not on the accredited method of determining the meaning of words in their literary and historical contexts. In his method of interpretation, the reader’s response always trumps the author’s intention. Likewise, he uncovers an alleged counter-testimony by proof-texting (*dicta probantia*), not by the rhetorical criticism that he applauds. He constructs a hermeneutical superstructure and selectively slots the texts into it. The complaint psalms, with the exception of Psalm 88, conclude with praise (see [chap. 32.II.B.1](#)), and the book of Job teaches there is mystery in chaotic physical and spiritual energies, but *I AM* always restrains them. The book of Job does not teach that God is internally inconsistent but that Job’s worldview was too restricted (see [chap. 35.VI](#)). In fact, Job repents of his hubris, but Brueggemann praises it. As for his selective reading of narrative, Brueggemann’s reading does not take account of the a priori rights of the canonical writer and lacks sympathy with *I AM*’s repugnance of unbelief and sin. In short, his theology fails because his exegesis is inadequate.

3. James Barr

The most important recent biblical theology that rejects the church’s historic

creeds about the Bible is that of James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, which eclipses in scope other surveys.⁶⁶ This magisterial treatment of the field, which appears to be a collection of Barr's lectures and writings — a fact that may explain its repetitiveness — superbly summarizes viewpoints of both earlier and recent biblical theologians, though I found his welcome treatment of some German theologies occasionally too dense. I suspect this is the fault of the German theologians, not of Barr. I have already critiqued, and will continue to do so, some strengths and weaknesses of his work (see index). In contrast to Brueggemann, Barr attempts no sustained argument. His thirtytwo chapters are not and cannot be batched, though he repeatedly argues against neoorthodoxy and, in particular, Brevard Childs's canonical approach and tries to reinstate higher criticism and natural theology.

To my praise of the many strengths of Barr's work, which are noted elsewhere in this book, let me add here that I appreciate his critiquing the neoorthodox view, which dismissed natural theology too quickly. He added much to my understanding of the nature of divine revelation in connection with the human dimension. On the other hand, in [chapter 1](#) I complained about his fuzzy view of canon and his desire to use the Apocrypha for biblical theology. Moreover, Barr treats with irenic respect every new theology that rejects orthodoxy and bases itself on the principles of historical criticism. By contrast, he becomes abusive toward more orthodox theologians, such as Childs, who insist on interpreting individual texts in light of their canonical setting, which for Childs is the ultimate basis of rightness in the exegetical method and in biblical theology. For example, Barr writes sarcastically, "Childs transcends the narrow, stumbling, prejudiced world of scholars, their simple minds darkened by (most commonly) the assumption of the Enlightenment."⁶⁷ Of other conservative theologians, he finds nothing profitable and mostly ignores them; presumably they are unworthy of his consideration.

Although Barr's work is an indispensable appraisal of others, his concern, besides restoring natural theology and the role of science and reason to overcome dialectical theology, represents portions of the biblical narrative, such as Genesis 1–11, as myths and legends that are divorced from ostensive events.⁶⁸ To be sure, as for plot, the narratives of Genesis 1–11 are more creative than and rely more heavily on ancient Near Eastern myths than other portions of the Primary History, but as for story, no biblical narrative floats free from history (see [chap. 4.II](#)). The events they speak of involve real persons in the situations represented (see [chap. 4.I.B](#)). No textual evidence suggests that the editors of the Primary History distinguished between the historicity of Noah and his building

the ark to spare the creation through the Flood and the events of Israel's exile. Barr has more faith in human theology than in the Bible and the Spirit's illumination of it; in fact, "illumination" is not even listed in his topical index. His faith in human reason is not one to which I could and/or would commit and entrust my life and my eternal destiny.

V. “CHRISTIAN” ATTITUDES TOWARD THE BIBLE

All Christians believe that God spoke in the Bible in some way, but they differ in understanding just how God speaks. In this section, we will look at these prejudices, and in the next section, we will look at how these attitudes manifest themselves in various approaches to the discipline of biblical theology.

To distinguish these various understandings, I find it helpful to make use of five prepositions as labels. This schematic is obviously simplistic and not intended to provide precise analysis of the various understandings; nevertheless, I hope this cartoonish presentation with its hard lines will help the reader to recognize and remember the various, and sometimes confusing, approaches that “Christians” take to the Bible. The various positions can be generally categorized under the labels: liberal, neoorthodox, traditionalist, fundamentalist, and evangelical.

A. Liberal Theologians Stand *above* the Bible

Broadly speaking, “liberals” detract from the authority of the Bible by making reason, which includes experience, the ground floor of theological reflection. By “liberals” I mean here those who put reason above revelation and even more specifically embrace historical criticism and so set another canon above the Bible — namely, a set of a priori assumptions derived from the Enlightenment, whereby they critique the biblical content, especially with regard to historical accuracy. Here one thinks of the French philosophers such as Denis Diderot, Voltaire, and Constantin Volney; English names such as Richard Price and Joseph Priestley; Scottish thinkers such as David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, and Thomas Reid. “Reason” is also God’s oracle, and under the rubric of “reason” certain assumptions are made by liberals in view here.

First, liberals read the Bible under the canon of skepticism, that is, with the same skepticism they apply to any other ancient Near Eastern myth. Liberals recognize that the Bible contains religious insights that are morally superior to other ancient mythologies, but, nevertheless, it is solely the product of human

mythopoeic imagination, that is, the human capacity to generate, evoke, and articulate images or myths of the divine reality. Liberals give no more credence to the historicity of Yahweh's intervention in human affairs than to the historicity of the intervention of other gods in the ancient Near Eastern myths. In short, liberals are the heirs of French skepticism.

Second, liberal theologians read the Bible under the canon of coherence, which assumes there is an inexorable "natural" nexus between every effect and its cause. By "natural" I mean that invariable laws, be they economic or political, determine human events. Isaac Newton's *Principia* (1687) showed that God's world was orderly, dependable, and predictable, abetting this notion. The biblical worldview insists that God's providence determines historical events, either immediately through divine intervention or ultimately through "natural" means.⁶⁹ In short, liberals are the heirs of English deism.

Third, these liberals apply the canon of analogy, which assumes that nothing happened in the past that does not happen in the present, such as rising from the dead or ascending into heaven. In other words, the set of causes of human events in the present must be analogous to those in the past. With these assumptions, liberals read the Bible to find out what "actually" happened, seeking to strip away the accretion of tradition and mythology. Iain Provan rightly complains about this rewriting of Israel's alleged "real" history by the liberal theologians:

Confessionalism of a religious sort is attacked in the name of critical inquiry and objectivity, but the noisy ejection of religious commitment through the front door of the scholarly house is only a cover for the quieter smuggling in (whether conscious or unconscious) of a quite different form of commitment through the rear.⁷⁰

These assumptions of the historico-critical approach directly contradict the assumptions of the biblical writers to whom God was a passionate, powerful, awesome, and not necessarily predictable reality. Moreover, they lead to an openness of all liberals to other authorities: community, tradition, new experience, and reason.⁷¹

B. Neoorthodox Theologians Stand *before* the Bible

The neoorthodox movement is a postliberal movement. Those who found that liberal theology is in practice "systematic *practical* atheism" and experienced

God through the biblical “witness” to Jesus Christ returned to Jesus Christ as the foundation for the knowledge of divine matters. The theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968), the pioneer of this theology and its leading conservative theologian, is sometimes called the “theology of crisis” because of its emphasis on the judgment (Gk., *krisis*) of God’s revelation against culture or “dialectical theology” because of its emphasis on the antithesis or polar opposition between God and humanity: “ ‘God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.’ The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.”⁷² Neoorthodox theologians emphasize the need for an “I-Thou” encounter and are skeptical of the “I-It” relationship.

These theologians stand *before* the Bible in the expectation that through preaching the words of the Bible will *become* the word of God as the Bible’s audience encounters them in the written “witness” to Jesus Christ. Barth is famous for the syllogism “the Word written; the Word preached; the Word revealed.” In other words, the written words of the Bible become the Word of God to the church through the preaching of Jesus Christ. As the Bible engenders faith in Jesus Christ, it becomes the Word of God. Surely it is important to combine Word and Spirit to know God in Jesus Christ, but to restrict the revelation of the word of God to the human encounter with God in that preaching locates the Bible’s authority in the Christian’s experience of revelation, not in the Bible’s divine inspiration of that revelation.⁷³ God’s Word is God’s Word whether or not it is recognized as such, just as a father and mother are a child’s parents whether accepted or rejected by the child.

The neoorthodox tend to distinguish between Jesus Christ as the Word of God and Scripture as a “witness” to the Word of God. Barth grounded his dogmatic theology on an orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God and of God’s purpose for humankind, but regrettably not on the whole Bible, which he did not regard as inerrant. According to neoorthodox theology, biblical statements that do not contribute to the witness to Jesus Christ are not necessarily true. This position is unstable because it exalts Christ by depreciating the text that bears witness to his exaltation. In other words, according to the neoorthodox, one hears the Word of God in the Bible as one hears music on a scratched record. In this way they tend to set up the canon of the message of Jesus Christ (i.e., the music) as more valuable than the whole canon of Scripture (i.e., the record): a canon within the canon. This dichotomy creates an unstable theology—evangelical and unorthodox regarding the authority of all Scripture. A canon-within-a-canon theology ultimately places authority in the audience. As

Pascal writes, “All the false beauties which we blame in Cicero have their admirers, and in great number” (*Pensées*, 22).

C. Traditionalists Place Traditions/Confessions *alongside* the Bible

The church is the heir of all the ages. Though our standard is the Bible, that Bible comes to us with the rich history of the church and of its interpretation, not from the synagogue or from sects and cults. Some, however, find their *authority* in both the text and in the tradition that accompanies it. Jewish theology stands on the bases of the Hebrew Bible on one side and the Talmud and Midrash on the other. Matitahu Tsevat takes this thought even further: “The Talmud and Midrash Judaize the Old Testament”⁷⁴ and “the Old Testament is absorbed in Talmud and Midrash.”⁷⁵ There is no Jewish theology based on the Bible alone.⁷⁶ It is commonplace in Roman and Greek Orthodox Christianity, along with traditional Judaism, to affirm that revelation is comprehensible only through the authoritative tradition of interpretation. These interpretations, however, though intended to maintain orthodoxy,⁷⁷ many times nullify the Word of God, as Jesus complained (Mark 7:13). The protest of the Reformers, “*sola scriptura*” aimed to correct this abuse. Nevertheless, the Reformers’ heirs also tend to restrict the full biblical teachings about divine matters by their rich and necessary traditions. The boundaries of the orthodox confessions must be respected, but the confession should be used in the broader context that all truth is God’s truth. Moreover, they must not be allowed to distort or restrict or suppress the whole counsel of God. A suppression of the truths of some texts by an undue emphasis on the truths of others distorts truth. Truth is often paradoxical, as is well known from the biblical doctrines of the Trinity and of the hypostatic union of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. While I applaud the Westminster Confession of Faith and consider it one of the finest expressions of the Christian faith, I must always be ready to follow its own confession that its system of doctrine must itself be subject to the Bible.⁷⁸ Moreover, while the confession is justly praised for its contribution to systematic theology, it can become a blinder that prohibits the Christian from being edified by the various “theologies” of the biblical authors. When dogma rules, the church is in danger of ceasing to be self-critical: *ecclesiam semper reformandum*.

D. Fundamentalists Stand *on* the Bible

By “fundamentalists” I mean here those who presume the Bible does not stray from their standards of accuracy, especially in matters of science and historiography. They presume their interpretive horizon represents truth and that the biblical writers, though writing in an ancient environment, will not stray from the “accuracy” of their modern horizon. But the ancient standards do not necessarily conform to modern standards. The only legitimate human standard by which the Bible can be measured is the logic of noncontradiction. Paradox may be incomprehensible, but contradiction is “nonsense.” What I have in mind here is that fundamentalists do not “stand under” the Bible long enough to “understand” it. Sometimes they, though well-intentioned, advertise “the Bible as it is for men as they are,” but they neglect the prior question of whether “men as they are are fit for the Bible as it is.”

E. Evangelicals Stand *under* the Bible

I label my own position as “evangelical” for lack of a better term. I accept the inerrancy of Scripture as to its Source and its infallibility as to its authority. My spiritual conviction is intellectually defensible. The finite mind is incapable of coming to infinite truth and moreover is depraved. To live wisely I need the inspired revelation of the divine reality by which I can judge the wisdom or the folly, the right or the wrong, of my thoughts and actions. But I dare not presume to understand how or what this revelation means before coming to it on its own terms. I must allow the Bible to dictate how it seeks to reveal God’s truth. I study how it writes history; I examine and learn to recognize the different forms of literature: poetry, narrative, prophecy, and so on. I consider the Bible utterly trustworthy, and I commit my life to it, but I do not presume to know beforehand the exact nature of its parts. With this posture, I continue to learn and allow myself to be taught and corrected by the Bible.

In conclusion, biblical theology and exegesis are inseparable. Both the biblical theologian and the exegete seek to study by a text’s philological and literary aspects in connection with its historical background the narrator’s intellectual and cultural world image. They both seek to understand the biblical writer’s *realia*, values and inherited traditions from which the writer starts to write. The difference is that the exegete focuses on the “sequential following out of the individual text, e.g., Genesis or Luke.” By contrast, as we have already noted,

“theology is a reflective activity in which the content of religious expressions is to some extent abstracted, contemplated, subjected to reflection and discussion, and deliberately reformulated.”⁷⁹ To engage in this reflective activity, the biblical theologian, more so than the exegete, focuses not on the sequential flow of thought in a biblical book, but on the connections of its themes, ideas, and messages with other books.

THOUGHT QUESTION

What is your attitude toward the Old Testament? What are your views of the Bible's inerrancy and infallibility, of its dispensational connection to the New Testament, and of its sociological conditioning?

1. By "message," I mean an idea that demands a response. An idea consists of both a topic (e.g., God, Israel, sacrifice, etc.) and a predicate, a statement about the topic (e.g., "God is a merciful King," "Israel establishes God's kingdom on earth," "The sacrifice of Christ is the crimson thread that unites the Bible," etc.). It will not do to proclaim that the message of the Old Testament is "God." That undefined concept does not stimulate our thinking and has no effect on us. Rather, we need to ask, "Who is God? What does he do? How does he communicate?" Answers to those questions make a difference.

2. Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 36, his italics.

3. Robert Alter, *The Art of the Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 95.

4. D. G. Hart, "Systematic Theology at Old Princeton Seminary," in David VanDrunen, ed., *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2004), 8.

5. Ben C. Ollenburger, "From Timeless Ideas to the Essence of Religion: Method in Old Testament Theology before 1930," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930–1990*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 6.

6. Some theologians use the term *progressive revelation* to mean an evolutionary development of religion wherein the Old Testament is primitive and rudimentary and its teachings about divine reality and morals must be assessed and corrected by the standard of the gospel. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) places the Old Testament on the same level as heathenism (Greek and Roman thought): "The Old Testament Scriptures do not ... share the normative dignity or the inspiration of the New" (*The Christian Faith*, 1821, sec. 132).

[7.](#) For an excellent compilation of ancient Near Eastern texts that parallel the Old Testament, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

[8.](#) Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:25, italics mine.

[9.](#) For a recent and delightful visual look at Israel's history, see Kendell H. Easley, *The Illustrated Guide to Biblical History* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003).

[10.](#) Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (4th ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 28.

[11.](#) Ollenburger, "From Timeless Ideas," 12.

[12.](#) Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 475–76.

[13.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, "The Date of the Conquest," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 181–200.

[14.](#) In the nineteenth century, German critics referred to the alleged source as the "Book of J" because it uses the name *Jahweh*. Germans represent the y sound by *j*.

[15.](#) The Masoretic Text is the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Its name derives from the Masoretes, whose diligent scribal activities in the first millennium AD provided for the preservation of the Old Testament.

[16.](#) The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament dating from the third to first centuries BC.

[17.](#) The Greek text adds five sons and grandsons of Manasseh and Ephraim from Num. 26:29–37. In Acts 7:14, based on the Greek text, the sum is also seventy-five. The Masoretic Text represents the family ideally as consisting of seventy, the multiple of two numbers: seven, signifying perfection, and ten, signifying fullness.

[18.](#) These relationships between the books of the Deuteronomistic History will be more fully developed in connection with each of its books.

[19.](#) *Deuteronomist* is sometimes used for the author of Deuteronomy and Kings. I use it to refer to the editing of the material from Deuteronomy to Kings, apart from Ruth.

[20.](#) As represented by the author of the book of Job, the human characters in the story never use *I AM*, God's covenant name with Israel. But the editor uses the Name, presumably assuming his audience knows the name from the Primary History (Exod. 3:13–15; 6:2–8).

[21.](#) The New Testament canon shows a similar intention. It opens with four narratives about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and with an

extended history about the acts of the apostles after Christ's ascension and his gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them. The letters of the apostles, especially those of Paul, which begins the apostolic corpus, can be fitted into that narrative. The Apocalypse, which begins with the ascended Christ's letters to seven churches of Asia Minor while the aged John is in exile, ends with his vision of the new heaven and new earth, bringing the entire canon, both Old and New Testaments, to a fitting conclusion. The Old and New Testament together form one closed corpus of inspired, normative writings, not merely a closed corpus of traditions.

[22.](#) See Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 226.

[23.](#) John E. Goldingay, "Chronicler as a Theologian," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 5 (June 1975): 99–126.

[24.](#) See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 184–200.

[25.](#) "Blank" in rhetorical criticism means a non-meaningful omission of material (see [chap. 5](#).I.D.11).

[26.](#) Although one can speak of Moses as the real author of much of an earlier form of the Pentateuch, its final "author" (e.g., the one who wrote Moses' obituary in Deut. 34) is unknown. The books themselves do not disclose the first author or the identity of the other inspired writers who expanded and edited these books throughout Israel's history. What is important for our purposes is what we know about their theology from their writings. Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of the implied author of these historical books. In reference to this implied author, I use the third masculine singular pronoun, because it is probable that all the individuals who contributed to the formation of these books were male (see Bruce K. Waltke, "Harold Bloom and the Book of J: A Review Article," *JETS* 34, no. 4 [December 1991]).

[27.](#) Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues*, 112.

[28.](#) James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 7.

[29.](#) Ibid., 334.

[30.](#) Ibid., 335.

[31.](#) Matitiah Tsevat, "Theologie des Alten Testaments — eine jüdische Sicht" in M. Klopfenstein, ed., *Mitte der Schrift? Ein jüdisch-christliches Gespräch* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1987): quoted in Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 249.

[32.](#) Edwin S. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 16–41.

[33.](#) In Plato's *Republic* there is a tale, "The Ring of Gyges," told by a student named Glaucon in response to a lesson by Socrates. Glaucon tells of a shepherd named Gyges who stumbled on a secret cavern with a corpse inside, wearing a ring that made Gyges invisible. Gyges proceeded to do woeful things: seduce the queen, murder the king, and so on. Plato had a problem with this. Like Adam Smith in the eighteenth century, Plato argued that people are generally good even without law enforcement. He and Glaucon agreed, however, that not wronging a neighbor even without law enforcement is a virtue.

[34.](#) G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 34.

[35.](#) The *Religionsgeschichte Schule* ("the history of religion school") denotes those who use the material from Israel's surrounding cultures to illuminate both testaments of the Bible without particular regard to theology. Herman Gunkel is regarded as its most luminous Old Testament scholar, but Barr (*Concept of Biblical Theology*, 652n7) suggests "it may be too narrow to identify him with the *Religionsgeschichte Schule*."

[36.](#) Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 100–139.

[37.](#) *Ibid.*, 100–101.

[38.](#) Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 29.

[39.](#) Ollenburger, "From Timeless Ideas," 16.

[40.](#) Robert C. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1950), 61.

[41.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: [chapters 1](#) – [15](#)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 28–31.

[42.](#) R. J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism Since Graf* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 53–101.

[43.](#) Geerhardus Vos, *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuch Codes* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1886); Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 21–29.

[44.](#) Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 173, 198.

[45.](#) See these books by Henri Frankfort: *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1948); *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948); Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Early Man* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1946, rev. as *Before Philosophy* [Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1949]). And see G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1955).

[46.](#) The umbrella term *postmodernism* covers at least three philosophies: (1) the rejection of the possibility of an all-embracing metanarrative that provides a

comprehensive, rational account of reality; (2) the rejection of reading texts primarily for their authorial intention; and (3) a hermeneutics of suspicion of an author's motives that lies behind his text. These three philosophies demolish the foundation of orthodox theology, which is Holy Scripture.

[47.](#) Ollenburger *et al.* *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, is an excellent anthology of selected writings by theologians contributing to the discipline.

[48.](#) James Barr, "The Theological Case against Biblical Theology," in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of B. S. Childs* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 13–14.

[49.](#) Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 27.

[50.](#) Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:338.

[51.](#) Because they are more or less orthodox, I am not critiquing notable theologies such as Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); and works by R. Moberly.

[52.](#) Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

[53.](#) *Ibid.*, 163.

[54.](#) *Ibid.*, 10.

[55.](#) *Ibid.*, 86.

[56.](#) *Ibid.*, 631.

[57.](#) Robert W. L. Moberly, "Theology of the Old Testament," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, D. W. Baker and W. T. Arnold, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 476.

[58.](#) Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 63.

[59.](#) *Ibid.*, 118, italics his.

[60.](#) *Ibid.*, 66.

[61.](#) *Ibid.*, 83.

[62.](#) *Ibid.*, 64.

[63.](#) *Ibid.*, 371.

[64.](#) *Ibid.*, 303.

[65.](#) *Ibid.*, 308.

[66.](#) Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*.

[67.](#) *Ibid.*, 402.

[68.](#) *Ibid.*, 345.

[69.](#) See Westminster Confession of Faith, 5.2.

[70.](#) Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 8.

[71.](#) Allen D. Verhey, “The Use of Scripture in Moral Argument: A Case Study of Walter Rauschenbusch” (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ.; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1975), 221–22, cited by L. W. Bilkes, *Theological Ethics and Holy Scripture* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1997), 11.

[72.](#) Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 10.

[73.](#) Of course, epistemology (theory of knowledge) begins with human experience, but, as Christian apologists of all stripes recognize, it cannot proceed to true and certain knowledge apart from the divine gift of faith in God and in the Bible. See Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003).

[74.](#) Tsevat, “Theologie des Alten Testaments,” 338.

[75.](#) Ibid., 339.

[76.](#) Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 290.

[77.](#) “What the individual sage would eventually innovate, having the ancient epigram, was already taught to Moses as oral Torah at Sinai” (see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 5, esp. n. 11).

[78.](#) Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10.

[79.](#) Tsevat, “Theologie des Alten Testaments.”

Chapter 3

THE METHOD OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, PART 1: HERMENEUTICA SACRA

If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mystery and supernatural element. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous.

The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 4.273, 277

I. INTRODUCTION

In [chapter 1](#) we confessed the narrower canon of the synagogue and of the New Testament church as the basis of our Old Testament theology. In [chapter 2](#) we argued that the task of biblical theology is to analyze books and/or blocks of writings with the intention of extrapolating their major theme or themes within their historical contexts by heuristically anticipating their development within the historical contexts of other books. In effect we agreed with Chester K. Lehman's contention that the Old Testament be understood as a part of biblical theology that is built on "the fundamental idea of progressive revelation" and the "grand unity of the entire Bible."¹

One task yet remains before we can begin studying the message of the Old Testament and its relation to the new: determining an accredited hermeneutic, which is much taken up with the meaning of "interpretation."² Every exegesis requires an "inter," an entering in, a "going between" the old horizon of the text and the new horizon of the contemporary church. Pure objectivity is not a possibility, for the ancient text must be mediated by an interested and preconditioned interpreter who seeks to know the text's meaning. Establishing an accredited hermeneutic to understand the theology of the Bible is an essential aspect of doing biblical theology; it cannot be demoted to the status of a propaedeutic, an elementary instruction. Toward that aim, this chapter considers the integration of the Holy Spirit and the human spirit (i.e., understanding God and human author) and science (i.e., explaining the text). The conjoining of all three elements is required to understand and state the biblical message. Most students will have learned the importance of a grammaticohistorical method in determining the meaning of a particular text within its canonical context. But important and often overlooked aspects of that method are an understanding of form criticism, with a particular focus on narrative theology, and an understanding of rhetoric (i.e., poetics) and intertextuality. In the next two chapters we develop an accredited method of doing biblical theology by analyzing how to derive theology from narrative and from understanding the poetics and intertextuality of the Primary History, where the major themes and ideas of Scripture are established. Both this chapter and the next two are important for understanding how we are to arrive at a coherent and authoritative message from a given text.

II. HERMENEUTICA SACRA³

The inherent nature of any object to be studied dictates the best method for elucidating its properties. James Houston, the founder of Regent College, explains to his students, “To understand a matter, one must first stand under it.” To study the stars, one must first gaze up at them to recognize their nature before crafting a telescope, not a microscope, to see them better. And to understand a microscopic organism, one must first consider its nature before crafting a microscope, not a telescope, to observe it. If we reverse the instruments, we will not learn or understand our subject. Likewise, before designing an accredited hermeneutic to study and understand Scriptures, we must stand under them to determine their essential nature and let them dictate to us an accredited method for their study.

The well-known text “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16 KJV) implies that we recognize three inherent qualities of the biblical text. Each quality demands that we fashion a proper instrument (i.e., method) for understanding it. “Of God,” a genitive of authorship, names God as the Author; “inspiration” implies a human author; and “Scripture” denotes a text. All three demand an appropriate approach, and these three approaches must be practiced at one and the same time because the Bible is a unity that is formed by all three. The first two qualities demand a spiritual commitment on the part of the interpreter, and the third paradoxically calls for his or her approaching the text with the detached objectivity of a scientist.

Immanuel Kant and Paul Ricoeur make a fundamental distinction between “explanation” and “understanding.” In truth, however, one cannot understand without explanation, and our explanations depend on our prior understanding of reality. As Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the great poets of the Victorian era, expresses it: “our inscape determines the way we view the landscape.” Houston observes,

We are always experiencing two landscapes at the same time: the landscape before our eyes — the phenomenal world — and the landscape in our minds, what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has called ‘inscape’. The one is constantly interacting with the other. If, therefore, we conceive the

world be a desert, we also make it such.⁴

By *inscape* I mean the presuppositions we bring to the task. Our inscape determines the way we view the landscape. William Blake made the point tellingly: “We do not see with the eye, but through the eye.” E. Earle Ellis notes, “Method is inherently a limited instrumentality and, indeed, a secondary stage in the art of interpretation. More basic are the perspective and presuppositions with which the interpreter approaches the text.”⁵ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard advance the notion that “preunderstanding consists of the total framework of *being and understanding* that we bring to the task of living: our language, social conditioning, even our emotional state at a given time.”⁶ The sage says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning [i.e., the foundation] of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). Our explanation of the text depends on our prior understanding of its A/authors, and that understanding depends on a proper explanation of the text. The relationship of spirit and science is spiral-like, not merely circular, as each of these two modes refines the other. Spirit and science united are as two eyes making one in sight.

A. Understanding God

The confession that the interpreter needs spiritual illumination to understand the text differs radically from the confession—though usually not stated — of most biblical theologians and exegetes since the rise of the Enlightenment. In his still influential study, J. A. Ernesti pitted the scientific method against the spiritual method. He denied the proposition “that the Scriptures cannot be properly explained without prayer, and a pious simplicity of mind.” In Ernesti’s view, “pious simplicity of mind is useless in the investigation of Scriptural truth.”⁷ But the text’s divine Author and his meaning in the text cannot be truly known or understood without a spiritual commitment to him. Ours is a sacred hermeneutic because the Author is spirit and known in the human spirit through the medium of his Holy Spirit. “No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:11). Martin Luther taught, “If God does not open and explain Holy Writ, no one can understand it; it will remain a closed book, enveloped in darkness.”⁸ The Geneva Catechism (1541) put it this way: “Our mind is too weak to comprehend the spiritual wisdom of God which is revealed to us by faith, and our hearts are too prone either to defiance or to a perverse confidence in ourselves or creaturely things. But the Holy Spirit enlightens us to

make us capable of understanding what would otherwise be incomprehensible to us, and fortifies us in certitude, sealing and imprinting the promises of salvation in our hearts.”⁹ More recently, the Chicago Statement of Faith (1978) confessed, “The Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.”¹⁰ Plato noted, “We can forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”

The doctrine of illumination demands that Scripture be read in a spirit that is harmonious with God’s Spirit; it cannot be read and understood in the same way one relates to other purely human books. The Puritan theologian John Owen wrote a masterful treatise on the necessity of the Spirit for understanding Scripture, but the contemporary literature on hermeneutics does not deal seriously with this personal dimension, emphasizing instead reading the Bible as literature. Fred Klooster traces the causes of this imbalance, or even of neglect, to the Enlightenment, which held that truth can be arrived at by unaided human reason, and to Scottish Realism, informed as it was by Francis Bacon’s scientific approach.¹¹ Roger Lundin observes, “To get at the meaning of the Bible, they merely employed the inductive techniques exploited with considerable success by the natural sciences.”¹²

God has hidden himself in Scripture and must sovereignly reveal himself. We cannot make God talk through the scientific method (cf. Matt. 11:25–27; 16:13–17; Luke 24:27, 45; John 5:45–47). To correlate Word and Spirit with human spirit, we need humility, wholehearted devotion, prayer, meditation, and contemplation. David C. Steinmetz underscores the need for humility.

Scripture is not in our power. It is not at the disposal of our intellect and is not obliged to render up its secrets to those who have theological training, merely because they are learned. Scripture imposes its own meaning; it binds the soul to God through faith. Because the initiative in the interpretation of Scripture remains in the hands of God, we must humble ourselves in His presence and pray that He will give understanding and wisdom to us as we meditate on the sacred text. While we may take courage from the thought that God gives understanding of Scripture to the humble, we should also heed the warning that the truth of God can never coexist with human pride. Humility is the hermeneutical precondition for authentic exegesis.¹³

Klooster emphasizes wholehearted devotion to God.

Understanding the biblical message is not chiefly a matter of feelings as Schleiermacher's psychological hermeneutics maintained—although feeling or emotion is part of heart-understanding. Feeling, at the expense of intellect, often appears dominant also in pietistic interpretation of Scripture. Nor is understanding mainly a matter of the will as existential hermeneutics insights (Heidegger, Bultmann, Ebeling, Fuchs) — although the will is also part of the whole person's understanding.

Understanding rooted in the heart does include the intellect, will, and emotion; it concerns the whole person.... If Scripture is the reconciling love letter from the living God, then understanding God's message is more than a matter of the head; it concerns the heart, person to person!¹⁴

John Wesley emphasizes prayer, meditation, and contemplation.

Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: "Lord, is it not thy word? 'If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God'? Thou hast said, 'If any be willing to do Thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know Thy will." I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.¹⁵

John Calvin¹⁶ and Luther used a method of Bible reading very close to the meditative method of the Benedictines known as the *lectio divina*: *lectio* ("by reading"), *oratio* ("by prayer"), *meditatio* ("by prayer and contemplation"), and *tentatio* ("by personal experience"). Howard L. Rice comments, "From the time of the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s until very recently, the Westminster Directory for the Worship of God contained a listing of the four parts of secret or private worship: prayer, reading Scripture, holy meditation, and serious self-examination."¹⁷ Although the theologians we have quoted differ in their expressions, they all point to the need of the human spirit to resonate with the Holy Spirit. Our confession demands that we stand under the text to respond in service to its Author, not to stand in judgment above it in order to critique the text. However, this stance results in several tension points for those who confess this truth.

1. Many Christians subconsciously maintain a naivete that in fact is a studied neglect toward the Bible. They resist learning about critical issues, such as the existence of differing Hebrew texts and versions of the biblical text, the need for textual critics to choose among the variant forms, the uncertainty of the meaning of some Hebrew words in the Old Testament, and so on. These types of questions make us uncomfortable because answering them requires that we place ourselves above the text. It forces us to play the role of the critic, making judgments about history, social situations, and literary forms. This role is spiritually and psychologically difficult for the pious, but in the exegetical process, these and other types of judgments have to be made. To back away from these questions in the name of piety is to flee the responsibility God has given us. On the other hand, some sophomoric students, having cast off the original naivete, retain a suspicious stance toward the Bible. This is a spiritually impoverishing position because being above the text means that we cease to hear the text as speaking directly to us. Consequently, we are cut off from the life-giving power of the Word of God.

The correct balance is to first cast off our original naivete, prayerfully tackle difficult exegetical questions, and then reassume a stance in subjection to the text—what Paul Ricoeur calls a “second naivete,” a childlike acceptance in faith of the text’s message. In practice this means that having done our critical work on the text, we insist on submitting ourselves to it, accepting its truth and its authority in our lives. This is a difficult balance to achieve, but God’s grace through the Holy Spirit will generate this stance in those who pray for it.

2. To stand under the text is to hear faithfully the text as words spoken to us. This causes tension in our twenty-first-century minds that have been shaped by the Enlightenment. Rice notes, “Ever since the development, in the eighteenth century, of what has been called ‘the Enlightenment,’ we have held a faith in the power of the human mind. We have sought to understand and control nature and have believed, almost without question, that anything that could not be understood [by human reason] was not to be taken seriously.”¹⁸ Our dependence on the sufficiency of our reasoning militates against a spirit harmonious with faith.

3. Finally —and here I am indebted to Anthony Thiselton and his magisterial work on hermeneutics¹⁹ — the confessional reading creates tension in our lives as it is lived out in the world. It entails a decision on our part to discontinue our former community boundary wherein we once found meaning. Just as Abraham had to leave Ur and reject all that it stood for, including a devoted family, we have to leave the world and identify with our baptism, the mark of our entrance

into a covenant with God. We cannot hide in the anonymity of the crowd and shuffle along wherever the crowd leads; instead, we must consciously decide to be a part of the same spiritual community as that of the inspired writers.

Becoming a part of the spiritual community forces us beyond reflection to action. A new identity manifests itself in a new outlook on life. It requires both a rejection of the former boundaries and an active participation in the life of the new community. Far from a mere passive acceptance of the religious conventions of a particular subculture, we are ordered to commit ourselves to an obedient venture of a life-transforming reading that gives birth to raw, authentic faith.

Confessional reading, as Thiselton argues, never leaves the reader unchanged, uninvolved, untransformed. Therefore, biblical theology cannot be simply a historical, descriptive enterprise. If it were, it would be at the cost of sacrificing the very nature of the material we are studying. To study Scripture without submitting to its Author would be to do violence to the Word of God.

Although I have emphasized the need for an existential commitment of faith, note that I am not speaking of “a leap of faith.” True faith is not a leap by the human partner, but a gift of God, the divine partner, in our salvation. Paul House rightly says, “To Paul, it is impossible for anyone to have faith unless God graciously instills that faith.”²⁰ He cites Donald Bloesch: “It is the Holy Spirit who empowers man to lay hold of God’s grace; such a transforming event cannot be attributed to the natural free will of man.”²¹ And we have this classic statement of the apostle Paul: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). One cannot believe by sheer bent of human will. We become children of God, says the apostle John, not by human decision but by being born of God (John 1:13). The human means of mediating this faith is by preaching the biblical message: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:14–15).

B. Understanding the Human Author

Poetic literature typically identifies its authors, as can be observed, for example, in the superscriptions to the Psalms. But narrative prose conceals the author’s identity. Nevertheless, God mediated all of his message to us through

human personalities. This personal dimension of the human author demands a personal/spiritual approach on the part of the theologian. Superior intellectual talent and superb education, though not to be despised, cannot render one fit to interpret the Scriptures. To understand an author, a reader must encounter the author with spiritual sympathy, not merely with empathy. Patrick Fairbairn cogently argues the necessity of reading the text with a sympathetic spirit.

He [the interpreter] must endeavor to attain to a sympathy in thought and feeling with the sacred writers, whose meaning he seeks to unfold. Such a sympathy is not required for the interpretation alone of the inspired writings; it is equally necessary in respect to *any* ancient author. Language is but the utterance of thought and feeling of one person to another, and the more we can identify ourselves with the state of mind out of which that thought and feeling arose, the more manifestly shall we be qualified for appreciating the language in which they are embodied, and reproducing true and living impressions of it....

Not a few of them [interpreters] have given proof of superior talents, and have brought to the task also the requirements of a profound and varied scholarship. The lexicography and grammar, the philology and archaeology of Scripture, have been largely indebted to their inquiries and researches; but, from the grievous mental discrepancy existing between the commentator and his author, and the different points of view from which they respectively looked at Divine things, writers of this class necessarily failed to penetrate the depths of the subjects they had to handle, fell often into jejune and superficial representations on particular parts, and on entire books of Scripture never once succeeded in producing a really satisfactory exposition....

Hence it is laid down as a fundamental point by a distinguished German theologian—by Hagenbach in his Encyclopedia, that “an inward interest in the doctrine of theology” is needful for a Biblical interpreter. As we say, that a philosophical spirit is demanded for the study of Plato, a political taste for the reading of Homer or Pindar, a sensibility to wit and satire for the perusal of Lucian, a patriotic sentiment for the enjoyment of Sallust and Tacitus, equally certain is it, that the fitness to understand the profound truths of Scripture ... presupposes, as indispensable requisite, a sentiment of piety, an inward religious experience.^{[22](#)}

But here too we face a problem. Traditionally the grammatical approach demanded the identification of the original authors and their historical audiences.

However, the reality of the situation is that we cannot talk precisely about an original author of biblical narratives, for these books are mostly anonymous and underwent at least some editing over long periods of time, during which editors probably adjusted their inherited canonical texts to address particular contexts. All of this is a nightmare to a frustrated grammaticohistorical critic, but it may prove to be a blessing in disguise. Instead of dated narratives bound to their historical particularities, we have texts that have been written and to a certain extent transformed to meet the needs of multiple generations. Some were in Egypt and the wilderness following Moses; some were in Palestine under the rule of the Davidic dynasty; others were in Babylon tasting the bitterness of the exile; still others despaired at the decrepit condition of the rebuilt temple. While clarity increased, all waited, anticipating the coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness. Through changes in language, culture, and geopolitics, one thing remained constant: this collection of texts was written and sometimes transformatively rewritten for the community of faith, and each generation of the community heard the voice of God, accepted its authority, and assumed its relevance. The transformations, as we shall see in the next chapter, deepened and expanded the understanding of Scripture, and these transformations in turn became canonical for succeeding generations.

This truth argues that seeking to read these texts exclusively in a particular historical context violates their nature. Rather, these texts are for the people with whom God has bound himself in a continuous covenant relationship. As his covenant people in this generation, these texts are addressed to us, the Israel of God. In our spiritual response to the text, we participate in God's covenant as written in the text. "We become," as Thiselton says, "those empowered, authorized, forgiven, and loved in the Spirit-inspired text." This participation was understood in New Testament times. When New Testament writers referred to the Old Testament, they used the present tense and the first person pronoun: "the Scripture says to us" (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 12:5). The New Testament writers recognized that the Old Testament material is bounded *primarily* by covenant and faith, not by history and culture. This was how Jesus read the text, this was how the apostles read the text, and this is how we should read it.

C. Explaining the Text

1. A Reconstructionist Reading: The GrammaticoHistorical Method

The text, however, yields its meaning also through scientific exegesis. Biblical exegesis (i.e., reading out of the text) seeks to establish the right method and practice for discerning what the text meant to its inspired author and to set forth in an intelligent way the results of that enterprise. Obviously, if the Bible calls upon us to trust and obey God's word and not despise it, we first need to decide what its texts mean. If we eisegete (i.e., read into the text our thoughts), our behavior may displease God. God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8). Therefore we must design an instrument that enables us to read the text in such a way as to discern its authorial intention. That method is the commonly acknowledged grammaticohistorical method.

Since the biblical message is communicated through the impersonal semiotic signs that constitute human language, they are subject to a grammaticohistorical analysis. Words only have meaning within the code of their own language system and in their historical context. Exegesis assumes that the biblical writer is historically conditioned so that he is drawing on the same pool of words, idioms, motifs, and historical situations as his historical audience — a pool that is not shared by us today. Later audiences are historically conditioned by different environments from that of the original writer. "A human being," the novelist Thomas Mann observed, "lives out not only his personal life as an individual, but also, consciously or subconsciously, the lives of his epoch and his contemporaries."²³ But the ancient pool of the biblical writer's world can be reconstructed with reasonable certainty and completeness through the disciplines of grammar, history, and literature.

A confessional reading does not imply a rejection of grammaticohistorical or critical methods. Rather, it means that during and after doing critical work, we submit our lives to the Bible. Therefore we still need critical methods to arrive at the meaning of the text.

The process may be called reconstruction, because the Old Testament texts were written in a different world from ours. We not only need to be aware of, but we must expect and respect this historical distance. To bridge this historical distance, we use the grammatical-historical method that allows us to piece together words, phrases, and historical situations while seeking to uncover material assumed by the text; and, if possible, we use archaeological artifacts to help shed light on that world as well. Only after we have done this work can we confidently "rebuild" the meaning of the text. Most people do this intuitively, but it needs to be done with academic rigor.

The grammaticohistorical method is based in Scripture itself and thus is not foreign to biblical thought. Luther insists that the Bible itself must teach us how

to interpret the Bible. As Luther put it, in the words of A. Skevington Wood, “the true principles of biblical interpretation are themselves quarried from biblical resources.”²⁴ Biblical authors themselves employ the method of historical reconstruction to define words and events of their stories that have not been experienced by their audiences. For example, to clarify geographical information such as old locales whose names had changed, biblical writers commonly use formulae such as “it is” or “that is.” In Genesis 14:17 the toponym “Valley of *Shawe*(NIV, “Valley of Shaveh”) is clarified by “that is, the King’s Valley.” In Joshua 18:13 Luz is contemporized by “that is, Bethel.”

Biblical writers also defined terms as they thought it necessary, as in the case of the narrator of Samuel, who explains the change of words from *rō’eh* to *nâbî* to designate a prophet (1 Sam. 9:9). An ambiguous word like *anwtw* (“oppress him”) in 2 Samuel 7:10, an imprecise word like *hpsk* (“you want”) in 1 Kings 5:22 or an obscure nominal form like *mwpz* (“refines”) in 1 Kings 10:18 is substituted by *bltw* (“destroy him”), *hpsk* (“your requirements”; “your need,” TNIV), and *thwr* (“pure”) in the parallel interbiblical version: 1 Chron. 17:9; 2 Chron. 2:15; and 9:17, respectively.²⁵ The same is true of patronymics. Esau becomes “that is, Edom.” As for ancient customs, the narrator of Ruth explains that the nearest kinsman took off his sandal and gave it to Boaz to signify Boaz’s right to redeem Naomi’s property (Ruth 4:7). Presumably, at some point in the writing or in the transmission of the story that practice was no longer used or understood. The narrator thought it necessary to explain this practice in order to bridge the historical distance. In other words, biblical authors took note of the differences between the historical horizons of the story and their audience and bridged the gaps so that their message was understood.

An accredited hermeneutic resists *eisegesis*—that is, imposing on a text material that is alien to it. Eisegesis sometimes masquerades under the disguise of devotional reading and other response theories of interpretation. The practice occurs even at Christian colleges. In a chapel service I attended, the speaker read the text and then boldly proclaimed he had not exegeted the text but intended to speak from his heart. To their shame the students laughed when he debunked exegesis; they should have cried. An accredited hermeneutic demands a love for truth and a disinterested and objective cast of mind. Milton Terry notes that the scientific method operates best when it is free from “prejudice, preconceived opinions, engagements by secular advantage, false confidences, authority of men, influences from parties and societies.”²⁶ In this connection I am reminded of what I was taught in my first class on hermeneutics: “No matter how accurately a lens may be ground, unless the glass is crystal-pure, the image

passing through the lens will suffer distortion.”

Nevertheless, even though in our theological reflections we put revelation above experience, it must be admitted with Bultmann that we have access to the text only through our experience.²⁷ Everyone addresses the text with a preunderstanding. This reality *could* lead us to despair that we can ever see truth with sufficient clarity to attain certainty. Although we are at the mercy of a cultural framework that at present skews our understanding of the Bible, agnosticism is inappropriate because we can spiral out of our own historical conditioning by the grammaticohistorical method to sufficient certainty. As Thistleton notes in his justly famous *Two Horizons*, “There is an ongoing process of dialogue with the text in which the text itself progressively corrects and reshapes the interpreter’s own questions and assumptions.”²⁸ In conjunction with the Word, the Spirit enables certainty (see [chaps. 1](#) and [2](#)). We see truth through a glass darkly, but the Spirit through the Word corrects our pride in light of the cross.²⁹ The perspicuity of Scripture is not absolute but it is sufficient.³⁰

One more thing. Before we proceed with the argument in defense of a reconstructionist reading of the text, it should be emphasized that the original semiotic signs of the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic languages point to the message, and that inspired message — though it cannot in practice be separated from the inspired words — is the Word of God. This Word can be mediated through the medium of semiotic signs of other language systems and become relevant in different historical particularities.

2. Levels of Signification

J. P. Fokkelman implicitly analyzes the grammaticohistorical method as consisting of at least twelve levels of signification, moving from the smallest to the largest:³¹

book/composition

sections/cycles³²

episodes [plot]

9. scenes

8. scene parts

7. sequences/speeches

6. sentences

5. clauses

4. phrases

3. words

2. syllables

⊃⊃⊃⊃⊃1. sounds

Levels 1 and 2 involve sound and sense. The biblical writers are masters with words, especially their sound. To fully appreciate the text, we cannot ignore the playfulness of these writers in using consonance, assonance, alliteration, sequencing of consonants, broken sequences, and so on.³³ These patterns of sounds draw us into the text and engage us by their intricacies so that we not only understand but also experience the message. Unfortunately, two obstacles stand in the way of our appreciation of these sound patterns: First, these patterns cannot be translated into English. A proverb depends on sound and sense. “A stitch in time saves nine” works because of its alliteration as well as its uncommonly good sense. But the sounds and puns of the biblical proverbs cannot be caught in translation and so, unlike an English proverb, are not as memorable. Second, we no longer live in a word-based society. Only a few generations ago, the celebrities of our culture were writers and poets, but ours is an image-based society. Nevertheless, words are still an important component, and we must develop our ability to play with words.

Levels 3 through 6 are typically treated in Hebrew grammars and cannot be treated within the space constraints of this chapter.³⁴ Level 7, sequencing of speeches, takes us into discourse analysis and the disciplines generally known as literary criticism or poetics. Levels 8–9, scenes or scene parts, refer to a series of sentences that are topically related by time, geography, mode of narration, or some other connection. Episodes are composed of scenes that are related structurally. To observe the overall dynamic of the story, the scenes and/or episodes can be batched into acts (level 10). This relationship between the scenes and acts is the plot development of the narrative. Level 11 pertains to the recognition of broad cycles or sections in the text encompassing several acts. The cycles in the book of Judges — Ehud ([chap. 3](#)), Deborah and Barak ([chaps. 4–5](#)), Gideon ([chaps. 6–9](#)), Jephthah ([chaps. 10–12](#)), Samson ([chaps. 13–16](#)) — are one such example. Level 12 is the composition itself. Beyond level 12 are the blocks of writing we talked about earlier and finally the whole Bible. All of these levels of signification are a part of understanding the text and of the grammaticohistorical method of interpretation and are important for the task of biblical theology.

3. Abstract Themes, Ideas, and Messages

The ultimate aim of this analysis is to arrive at the composition's themes and/or message. The concept of themes — the idea to which a whole can be reduced and so grant coherence and simplicity to what might seem on the surface disparate and divided—plays a large role in our writing a biblical theology. On this subject, Shimon Bar-Efrat makes a helpful distinction between *theme* and *idea*:

Themes and ideas are closely related. But themes are usually formulated in the form of short phrases, ideas in the form of complete sentences. Themes define the central issues of the narrative. They are embodied in the various narrative elements ... and serve as their focal point and as a unifying and integrating principle. Ideas are the meanings and lessons contained in the narrative, their message of “philosophy.”³⁵

A short phrase such as “seed of Abraham” is a theme; a predicated statement, such as “God will bless the seed of Abraham that keeps covenant,” is an idea. *Themes* are short topics that wind their way through a work and are usually identifiable by key words and/or motifs; *ideas* are what is said about these topics, the predication. However, Bar-Efrat has a warning for those who would venture to determine the themes and ideas of a composition:

Since themes or ideas are not stated overtly, but have to be extracted by means of interpretation, one should exercise a good deal of self-restraint and self-criticism before proceeding to the delineation of thematic or ideational structure.... The subjective factor increases considerably when the ingredients of the structure are themselves the product of the rather subjective process of interpretation. So in order to steer clear of undue arbitrariness, themes and ideas should be borne out by the facts of the narrative as clearly and unambiguously as possible.³⁶

For the ethicist, these themes or ideas are principles, for as *torah* (“catechistic teaching”) they connote the potential of applicability—that is to say, they have a character that makes them suitable and able to provide direction to what the human mind brings into relationship with it. The notions of ideas and principles, however, though good, are inadequate: the Bible is not interested in impersonal “ideas” and constructing ethical principles. Moreover, the Bible does not define itself as “what Israel herself directly enunciated about Yahweh.”³⁷ The Bible is

more than concepts about God or theocentric principles or Israel's witness to God. It is God's address to his people and his encounter with them. His "ideas" and "principles" are true and call for a personal response to obey and participate in the truth, the divine reality. In short, an "idea" and/or "principle" in the case of the Bible is a *message* to be believed and acted upon, not merely a witness to a notion and/or a guide to proper behavior.

Bar-Efrat points to a daunting challenge for biblical readers: typically the text does not explicitly state the "theme" or "idea." Further complicating the issue is the biblical writers' tendencies to communicate on multiple levels of text. Biblical authors often intentionally avoid stating their theology in a clear and concise form and, instead, seek to evoke a visceral response from the readers. They employ rhetoric to communicate the message in order to effect behavior. Given the subtle and complex nature of the material, the interpretation of the text is often convoluted, and a number of themes and truths can be extracted from any given text.³⁸ However, such rich and evocative material with complex and varied meanings does not give us license to interpret the text in any way we see fit. Our interpretations still have to be validated; they must be guided by the text itself. Finally, the task of interpretation is made all the more difficult when we consider a text as part of a larger canon. Because of its inspired nature, these writings must be understood in the larger whole of the Author's work. This results in a new level of signification and an exponential increase in complexity. For example, the meaning of "son of man" in Psalm 8 changes as we interpret it either in light of its historical particularity or in conjunction with the book of Hebrews' historical particularity. In its original context the term "son of man" referred to humanity in general. But the writer of Hebrews tightly focuses the phrase on the God-man, Jesus Christ.³⁹ If those who accept that interpretation of Hebrews give priority to the historical context, they will use lowercase in their translation of "son of man"; but if they give priority to the canonical context, they may choose to use uppercase: "Son of Man."⁴⁰

Understanding the text also involves an understanding of form criticism (especially with a focus on narrative theology) and of poetics and intertextuality, but these topics demand separate chapters, and to these aspects of hermeneutics in determining an accredited method of doing biblical theology we turn in the next two chapters.

After the exegete has interpreted the text and mined its message, the theologian through critical reflection interprets that message from its old horizon to the new horizons of the canon and then of both to the contemporary church. In other words, the theologian builds his or her interpretation that unites the ancient

message with the contemporary world after the exegete has done his or her interpretive work. Orthodox theologians zealously aim to preserve the Bible's intention in the same ways that the exegetes mined the Bible's message: loving God, loving the Bible, and having an objective cast of mind about the message. To preserve that message the theologians repent of the philosophical or social prejudices that they brought to the text before their work. In this way godly theologians inform the conscience of the church.

THOUGHT QUESTION

What spiritual, psychological, and intellectual qualities will you bring to the Scriptures to hear God speak to you through them?

[1.](#) Chester K. Lehman, *Biblical Theology, Vol. 1: Old Testament* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971).

[2.](#) Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 556–619.

[3.](#) This discussion of sacred hermeneutics is based on Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 556–619.

[4.](#) James Houston, *I Believe in the Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 15.

[5.](#) E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (1978; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 163.

[6.](#) William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 100, *italics mine*.

[7.](#) J. A. Ernesti, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1882), 1:5.

[8.](#) Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American ed., ed. J. Pelican (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–86), 13:17.

[9.](#) John Calvin, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (Hartford: Sheldon & Goodwin, 1815), 113. The catechism is also found in Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London: J. Clarke, 1959), 23.

[10.](#) J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979), 143.

[11.](#) Fred H. Klooster, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutic Process: The Relationship of the Spirit’s Illumination to Biblical Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 462.

[12.](#) Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 22.

[13.](#) David C. Steinmetz, “Luther as an Interpreter of the Bible,” in *Archiv für*

Reformationsgeschichte 70 (Beiheft: Literaturbericht, 1973), 71.

[14.](#) Klooster, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutic Process,” 463.

[15.](#) John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (1896; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 5.3.

[16.](#) Cited by Morton Kelsey in foreword to Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

[17.](#) Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 81.

[18.](#) Ibid., 82.

[19.](#) Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*.

[20.](#) Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 106.

[21.](#) Ibid., quoting Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1, *God, Authority and Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 182.

[22.](#) Patrick Fairbairn, *Hermeneutical Manual: or, Introduction to the Exegetical Study of the Scriptures of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858), 64–66, author’s italics.

[23.](#) Cited by Doris Kearns Goodwin. *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 159.

[24.](#) A. Skevington Wood, *Luther’s Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), 12.

[25.](#) Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 57.

[26.](#) Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1895; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 23–30.

[27.](#) Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 289–96.

[28.](#) Anthony C. Thiselton, *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutical Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 439.

[29.](#) A student once asked me, “Did anyone understand the prophets?” I responded, “Well enough to kill them.”

[30.](#) Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

[31.](#) Adapted from J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Dover, N.J.: Van Gorcum, 1986), 2:4.

[32.](#) Fokkelman speaks of “Acts” and Richard Pratt of “Larger Units.” See Richard L. Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth &

Hyatt, 1990).

[33.](#) See T. P. McCreesh, *Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic Patterns in Proverbs 10–29*. JSOTSup 128 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 76.

[34.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke and M. P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

[35.](#) Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Bible and Literature Series, JSOTSup 70 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 108–9.

[36.](#) Ibid., 169–70.

[37.](#) Gerhard von Rad, cited by James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 47.

[38.](#) Therefore any theological doctrine or confession should be based on a number of clear scriptural statements. A problem in many churches today is that people debate issues that are inherently ambiguous or moot in the Bible and then dogmatize their interpretations. Unlike the Reformers, to them all Scriptures are alike certain. The founders of the Reformation, by contrast, appealed to the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Earlier, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine also recommended that the interpreter allow plainer texts to illuminate more difficult texts. Luther said, “If one set out to explain all passages by first comparing them with other passages, he would be reducing the whole of Scripture to a vast and uncertain chaos.” Therefore, he argued, “a doubtful and obscure passage must be explained by a clear and certain passage” (see Wood, *Luther’s Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 21). J. D. Wood explains, “The interpretation has to be congruent with the general norm of the Word” (*The Interpretation of the Bible* [London: Duckworth, 1958], 89).

[39.](#) Psalm 2:2 in the NIV reads in its text “Anointed One” and in a footnote “anointed one.” The TNIV uses only “anointed one.”

[40.](#) My preference is lowercase in the text with a textual note to Hebrew 2:6.

Chapter 4

THE METHOD OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, PART 2: NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

I always feel uncomfortable under such compliments as these: “I have given you a great deal of trouble,” “I am afraid I am boring you,” “I fear this is too long.” We either carry our audience with us, or irritate them.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 1.57

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding the text also entails an analysis of how to interpret the Bible's various literary forms, such as hymnic, prophetic, and sapiential literatures. Each form demands a unique reading strategy for its correct interpretation. This chapter considers narrative criticism (i.e., how to determine a narrator's evaluative point of view) and correlatively narrative theology (what the narrator communicates about God through his story). The importance of this chapter to the writing of this theology cannot be overstated, because the Primary History, the backbone of the Bible, comes to us in narrative form. Later chapters address the strategies for reading and deriving theology from Israel's hymns ([chap. 31](#)), prophets ([chap. 28](#)), and wisdom literature ([chaps. 31–33](#)).

Forty percent of the Old Testament is narrative, especially biographical narrative. The Pentateuch is a mixture of historical/biographical narrative and law. The Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy through Kings, excluding Ruth) continues the Primary History initiated in the Pentateuch to Israel's exile in Babylon. Chronicles is postexilic historical narrative, and Ezra-Nehemiah is a postexilic narrative memoir. In addition, narrative literature includes the books of Ruth, Esther, and Jonah.

A. Definition of Narrative Criticism

Narrative is a representational form of art. Narrative criticism observes, analyzes, and systematically classifies how narratives represent their object, how they tell their stories in order to communicate their meaning. A narrative communicates meaning through the mimesis of human life. This is accomplished by presenting *character* (s) and *event*(s) in distinct *setting*(s), whose developing interactions create tensions that constitute the *plot*. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn write, "Narrative communicates *meaning* through the imitation of human life, the temporal ordering of human speech and action. It constructs a verbal world that centers on human characters, their relations, desires, and actions in time."¹ Adele Berlin compares narrative to painting a picture:

Somehow we have no problem with paintings of apples. We know they represent apples even though they are two-dimensional, and not always true to life in size or color. Conversely, we know that the paintings of apples are not real; if we cut them no juice will run out, if we plant them they will not grow. We can make the transfer from a realistic painting to the object that it represents—i.e., we can “naturalize” the painting—because we know (either intuitively or from having learned them) the conventions of the medium.²

The narrative imitates and creatively represents real life in the same way a painting represents a real object. The “meaning” of the painting is derived from how the painter represents the real object. The “meaning” of the narrative is determined by how the narrator tells the story.³

B. Story and Plot

To think and talk more clearly about narrative, we need to make a prescriptive distinction between *story* and *plot*.⁴ Every narrative has these two components. A story consists of what is outside the text: the people, things, or events. Story refers to the content of the narrative; plot refers to the contour of its representation. Plot discerns how the narrator represents the events, characters, settings, and interactions of these elements in his plot. Werner Jaeger points out that artistic expression “alone possesses the two essentials of educational influence — universal significance and immediate appeal.”⁵

Mark Allan Powell says discourse (i.e., “plot”) “refers to the rhetoric of the narrative, its aesthetic by which its ideology/message is communicated. Stories concerning the same basic events, characters, and settings can be told in ways that produce very different narratives.”⁶ Plot, the rhetorical aspect of a narrative, communicates a point of view. For example, Joshua and Judges have two different evaluative viewpoints. The narrator in Joshua 15:63 faults Judah for failure to conquer Jerusalem, but the narrator in Judges (1:21), using almost the identical words as Joshua 15:63 faults Benjamin. The reality (i.e., the story) is that Jeru- salem lay on the border of both tribes. Historically, both can be faulted. But the authors of each book choose to color the story in a particular way to make certain theological points. They do not contradict each other as to the historical event, but they express different viewpoints in the interpretation of the event. The same historical event (story) is represented (plot) to reflect two

distinct theologies (i.e., messages). Narrative criticism aims to analyze a writer's rhetoric to communicate meaning. This sort of analysis allows us to talk about a theology of Joshua or a theology of Judges.

II. NARRATIVE CRITICISM, HISTORY, AND FICTION

Narrative criticism is usefully profiled against both fiction and history.

A. Story Is History, Not Fiction

Significantly, biblical theology is based on particular historical situations. Jonathan Hill writes, “The doctrine that God has become man — possibly the most central doctrine of the Christian faith—is a celebration of particularity: God became a particular man in a particular place in a particular time.”⁷ In this section, by “history” I mean what really happened, and by “fiction” I mean that which the writer imagines to have happened. In this chapter I aim both to distinguish and to correlate this real history (“world”) with the narrator’s creative representation of that world (“word”). The text’s combination of world and word cannot be separated; they are an inseparable unity.

Biblical narrators normally do not write fiction, aside from a few exceptions such as Jotham’s fable (Judg. 9) and perhaps some speeches such as those of Job and his friends, in which cases an author puts into his characters’ mouths what they would have said. Though the latter case would be a sort of “creative history,” the narrative is essentially not a figment of the narrator’s imagination.

My conservative understanding of the narrative’s historical credibility stands in opposition to that of historical criticism ([chap. 2.I.C.3](#)), whether formulated by classical higher critics such as Robert H. Pfeiffer, form critics such as Hermann Gunkel, or modern literary critics such as Robert Alter. Alter writes, “Prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative.”⁸ He argues that the text is fictitious because the narrators know things that a historian cannot know, such as the private thoughts of people and of God. His conclusion is inevitable if one denies the divine inspiration of the biblical text. But, as noted above, if inspired by God, their narratives are also prophetic messages from God. Of course, real prophecy could be ensconced in an author’s “fictional” dialogue.

My conviction obviously stands opposed to the development in recent decades

of the so-called minimalist view of biblical history. Minimalist historians push the view that the biblical narrative has little or no historical connection to the events it depicts.⁹ Provan, Long, and Longman defended the Bible's historical credibility essentially by defining the connection of history to tradition, by ancient Near Eastern artifacts (both literary and material), and by a judicious common sense.¹⁰ Kenneth Kitchen amasses the wealth of archaeological evidence that validates the Bible.¹¹

Both minimalists and maximalists defend an ideological partiality. However, to admit that historiography has an ideological intent does not warrant a hermeneutic of suspicion that aims to deconstruct the biblical tradition.¹² According to the late French intellectual tradition, history is a fiction of narrative order imposed on events in the interest of the exercise of power. If one interpretation of those events prevails over another, it is not because that interpretation conformed more closely to the evidence but because its exponents had more power among those who write history than their critics. According to these thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, histories are bids for power, attempts to legitimize particular groups under the guise of objective truth. But that position is hardly credible in the case of the histories of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. They represent the chosen people in the most unflattering terms — rebellious at the worst, dull at the best — and they themselves died because they believed what they wrote. Their histories are unlike the propaganda — today called “spin” — histories of other peoples.

Several lines of evidence show that biblical narrators intend to write real history: (1) they are obsessed with locating events in time and space; (2) they appeal to written records such as the Book of Yashar; and (3) they point to commemorative markers of the narrated events that are “there to this day,” such as the twelve stones to mark Israel's crossing the Jordan (Josh. 4:1–9). Meir Sternberg observes: “The historiographic function surfaces in the frequent dating, in the commentary on names and places, in the etiological-looking tales, in the genealogies and other items or even patterns, like chronology, that seem to resist assimilation to any higher order of coherence.”¹³ If the text is read or written as fiction, then, Sternberg continues, “God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of imagination, with the most disastrous consequences. The shape of time, the rationale of monotheism, the foundations of conduct ... all hang in the generic balance.”¹⁴

Bernard Baruch said, “Everyone is entitled to his opinion; no one has a right to be wrong about the facts.”¹⁵ Is it not incredible that the same holy Scripture which demands that a witness speak truthfully does not itself speak the truth

(Exod. 23:1–3, 7; John 21:24; 2 Peter 1:6)? When Enlightenment philosophers and their progeny reduced the content of the Bible to merely religious sentiments, they transformed God into a projection of human desires and kind thoughts. Without the doctrine of Scripture’s inspiration, we cannot write adequately or authoritatively about God. Without inspiration there is only religion — none of the branches of which is necessarily better than another—not theology.

B. Story Is in the Garb of ANE Literatures, But Not an Ancient Myth

The primeval history (Genesis 1–11) is widely recognized as having a Mesopotamian character. For example, the creation cosmogony of Genesis 1; the prominent focus on the creation of humanity, including being made out of the dust of the ground; the genealogy in Genesis 5; the flood and tower of Babel stories; and the personal and place names in Genesis 10 — all have strong analogies in Mesopotamian literature. Moreover, the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel are located in Mesopotamia. The historical and literary context of Mesopotamia best explains the style and content of Genesis 1–11.¹⁶

The biblical writers write real history in order to teach theology. Nevertheless, to speak of God they must use anthropomorphic language (see [chap. 7](#)). To represent the Creator’s relationship to his world and to people, the biblical narrators move beyond human metaphors common to the whole Bible to human professions that involve creativity. For example, Genesis 1 represents God as a king “speaking” the creation into existence with awesome authority (Gen. 1), though obviously he has no physical voice. When the “Gift of Adam” account says God “formed” (Heb. *yasar*, Gen. 2:7) Adam, the narrative pictures God as a potter carefully forming the man out of the earth’s clay upon a wheel.¹⁷ Job uses the same metaphor to describe

God’s forming him: “Your hands shaped me and made me.... Remember that you molded me like clay” (Job 10:8–9). In this way both Job and the narrator of Genesis communicate the reality that man has his ultimate origin in God and his immediate origin from the earth (see [chap. 8](#)). The “Gift of the Bride” account says God made (“built”: Heb. *bānâ* Gen. 2:22) the woman out of the man’s rib-cage. In this metaphor the woman’s exquisite design is traced back to God as an architect and her immediate origin to Adam’s flesh and bone, making her his equal (see [chap. 9](#)). These accounts represent theological truth in the language of

the ancient Near East; they do not aim to represent how it happened in the language of science. They teach truth to shape Israel's worldview in her covenant relationship with God.

In [chapter 7](#), "The Gift of the Cosmos," I argue that the creation narrative represents what God did (real history) in the garb of an ancient Near Eastern cosmogony, not in the garb of a scientific genre or the historical genre of the book of Kings with its constant appeal to the diaries of the kings of Israel and Judah. As we shall see in [chapter 18](#), "The Gift of Land," K. Lawson Younger argues that the book of Joshua wears the garb of ancient Near East military reports. In other words, biblical history is written in the garb of ancient Near Eastern literatures.

Some speak of the biblical stories, especially those in [chapters 1–11](#), as myth. If one defines myth as "a story that is told and retold because it expresses some deep truth about the world and about human nature," or, as I prefer, "a story with culturally formative power" (see [chap. 8](#)), then this classification of the literary genre of biblical narrative is helpful and true. But "myth" normally means either that it does not matter whether the events happened or not, or that they did not happen at all. This definition is not true or helpful. C. S. Lewis commented that the Christian stories are exactly like the myths of any other culture, with the added bonus that they happen to be true. Jonathan Hill corrects Lewis by noting they are more inspiring.¹⁸ Moreover, to what extent they happen to be true needs further explanation (see below, "Plot Is Similar to Fiction").

Genesis 1–11 may use the content of ancient Near Eastern myths, but if they did, in the process of adopting them it adapts them in such a way that it breaks their pagan worldview. Brevard Childs shows the difference between the pagan and biblical worldviews with regard to time and space. As for time in the pagan myths, it has two-stages: an initial period of non-being and a period of decisive acts that brought the world structure into being. The recitation of the myth in connection with ritual aimed to prevent the return to non-being. In their worldview, primeval time and eschatological time are the same. As for time in the Bible, it is linear, not circular. God is directing all of history to an eschaton where he annihilates evil to his glory.¹⁹ As for space in pagan myths, "that which is experienced as sacred is a manifestation of the primeval power filling the content of that particular space. Because of the permanence of this sacred content, the cult shares in the primeval power as it enacts its drama in the original space of the primeval acts." In this worldview, "nothing new can occur or be formed in space which differs essentially from the established structure."²⁰ By contrast, space in the biblical world view, is sanctified by the presence of

God who chooses the place where he dwells according to his own good pleasure. In sum, in the pagan worldview the structures of time and space are fixed according to the structure established by the myth. In the biblical worldview time and space are governed by a sovereign God who uses and directs them in accordance with the holy covenants he made with Israel.

C. Plot Is Similar to Fiction

Even so, the biblical narrator shares common ground with the novelist in that both generate a mood stance: reflection, exploration, edification, celebration (i.e., strengthening of community bonds), cathartic cleansing, and/or sheer delight. The biblical historical books are both history and literature (i.e., having a point of view, ordering of time, characterization, and organization). Any good historical writing is interpretive, not just reporting. “History writing is not a record of fact — of what ‘really happened’ — but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact.”²¹ It is a creative representation, an interpretative mimesis, of reality. Alter comments,

In Kings we are repeatedly told that details skimmed in the narrative at hand can be discovered by referring to the Chronicles of the Kings of Judea and the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. Those books, one may assume, were excluded from the authoritative national tradition and hence not preserved because they were court histories, probably partisan in character, and erred on the side of the cataloguing of historical events without an informing vision of God’s design working through history.²²

J. H. Dexter argues that any good historical writing must be selective to achieve its interpretive aim.

If a historian deals with men as persons, he must concern himself with human character. He must bring to play on the understanding of men of whom, in the nature of things historical, the record grants him only fragmentary glimpses, all the resources afforded him by his systematic knowledge, his experience of life, his introspection and such wisdom as God gave him. The historical record which is all too exiguous is also paradoxically all too full. In order to make human character stand clear of the clutter of routing action ... [the historian has to] practice the art of

discerning and reporting the telling detail, the illuminating incident, the revelatory remark.^{[23](#)}

History and fiction cannot necessarily be distinguished by form. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan tells David a parable, but David thinks it is a real event. This illustration suggests that the form critic's distinction between history and fiction depend more on historical criticism than on literary form. The author's intention plays a critical role in distinguishing history and fiction. The historian has a commitment to historical facts outside his story; the novelist creates the facts in his story. If a biblical writer signals in ways noted above that he is writing of historical facts when in truth he creates the facts, the audience will rightly feel duped and censor him. Nathan makes his intention to tell a fable clear to David.

Biblical narrators, however, are theologians as well as historians. To speak of divine matters and of events beyond human experience an author must be creative. Let us assume that an artist wants to draw a glass half full of water. His drawing can be straightforward to represent what he sees. But let us suppose he wants to show the glass as full: half visible H₂O and half invisible gases. How can he represent the invisible gases? Here he must be creative; for example, he could put the water in the top half of the glass, hoping his audience will understand his intention by this curious arrangement. Now let us further suppose that he wants to represent the abstract truth that both the visible gases and the invisible gases are essential to life. To communicate this truth, he must be even more creative. Perhaps he could put a goldfish in the upper half and a canary in the lower half. In this case the audience cannot distinguish between the external reality and the creative fiction to teach truth. The artist intends to teach, not to dupe, his audience.

In [chapter 7](#) I suggest that the narrative of Genesis 1 is like our glass full of visible and invisible gases. The sequence of days seems upside down. There are already three days before God makes the luminaries to mark the days. The narrator of the biblical cosmogony seems to use the *Enuma Elish* to teach, among other things, that I AM is the Creator, not Marduk, the patron deity of the Babylonians, and that only I AM, not matter, is deity. Moreover, possibly, he creatively represents eons of time by carefully structured "days." Like our creative artist, Moses teaches infallible and historical truths from an inerrant God through inspired, creative writing.

III. implied author versus real author

The real author is a historical person who composed the narrative. We constantly hear his almost inaudible voice in the background. He adds to his story “He said” to introduce quotes (cf. Exod. 16:32) and inserts expositions at the beginning of the story. He utilizes evaluative judgments, summaries, etiologies, and other historical notices (cf. Gen. 28:19; 1 Sam. 9:9). But since he is not identified as in the superscriptions to poetry such as the Psalms and Proverbs, in the case of narrative we must speak instead of an implied author.²⁴ The reader reconstructs this anonymous author and his theology solely from the narrative. Powell writes,

The goal of such a definition ... is not to arrive at a partial understanding of what the real author might have been like, but to elucidate the perspective from which the narrative must be interpreted. The implied author’s point of view can be determined without considering anything extrinsic to the narrative. The interpretive key no longer lies in background information, but within the text itself.²⁵

Powell argues that as long as we are concerned with real historical authors, we are seeking to interpret the text through external frameworks, such as the setting in life where the story circulated before its incorporation into the biblical book (*Sitz im Leben*) or its historical context. Once we understand the concept of an implied author, we find that the meaning of the text mostly lies within the text itself.

The distinction between real and implied author, however, does not exclude the accredited grammatical-historical method of interpretation. This method is still necessary because the implied author uses the conventions and language and idiom of a particular period in history. Rather, the distinction profiles that the interpretation depends *primarily* on its literary context, not on its precise historical context. This implied author controls the voice of the story’s characters.²⁶ The implied author, not the characters in the story, has the final say. For example, when the Amalekite claims to have killed Saul, presumably to win a reward from David (2 Sam. 1:1–16), we know he is lying because the narrator says that Saul took his own life (1 Sam. 31:1–6). The narrator always speaks

truthfully and authoritatively because he is a prophet, God's inspired spokesman.

The implied author's omniscience and omnipresence, apart from modern demands of documentation, are due to his heavenly inspiration, not his purely fictitious inventiveness. Nevertheless, the inspired author probably exercised his authorial right to represent what a character of the story, including God, said in his own terms, while being faithful to the historical reality. Sternberg writes, "As a rule of narrative communication, inspiration amounts to omniscience exercised on history: the tale's claim to truth rests on the teller's God-given knowledge. The prophet assumes this stance (or persona) explicitly, the storyteller implicitly but none the less authoritatively."²⁷ The implied author of biblical narrative does not say, "Thus says *I AM*" but writes instead, "*I AM* said," "*I AM* thought," or "*I AM* did." He knows the thoughts and actions of God. For example, implied authors know what God thinks and says in heaven, even before the existence of any human beings (Gen. 1) and that he sent from heaven an evil spirit into the spirit of Saul to hasten Saul on his damned course of action (1 Sam. 16:14). Our anonymous narrators also inform the reader about the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters in a story; for example, that Judah thought Tamar was a prostitute (Gen. 38:15) and that Saul was angry and envious at the women's ditty that he interpreted to celebrate David more than himself (1 Sam. 18:8).

IV. IMPLIED AUDIENCE VERSUS REAL AUDIENCE

A. Real Audience (the Narratee)

The real author undoubtedly wrote for a real audience, whom we may refer to as the “narratee.” But once again we are stymied: this time to identify their original audiences. Narrative literature does not particularize its audience. We may plausibly assume that before the retelling of the story in the canon’s final composition, the story circulated among the people of God to their edification. What God says and does presents timeless theology. In any case, the text’s real author wrote to spiritually energize a real audience. In the codas and sometimes interruptions to the flow of his discourse, he shifts his temporal perspective from the past to the present, from “that day” to “this day,” to address his contemporary audience. The Deuteronomist added fifty-six verses to the Law of Moses to bring that ancient book, which was composed from Moses’ three addresses to Israel in the wilderness, to make the book of Deuteronomy applicable to Israel in the exile.²⁸ But even his quotations from Moses are not *necessarily* the word-for-word quotes of modern journalism. Ancient writers, as noted above, did not document their sources as precisely as modern scholarship demands. Conceivably, the Deuteronomist quotes Moses the way that the four evangelists quote Jesus. When Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John, he sounds like John; when Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Luke, he sounds like Luke. Similarly, when Moses talks in Deuteronomy, he sounds like the Deuteronomist and so do some sections of Jeremiah.

Judging from the popularity of the red-letter editions of the Bible, evangelicals have not understood this aspect of inspiration. These theologically flawed editions of the Bible represent what Jesus said in red, as though they were his actual words. Actually, they are the gospel writers’ representation of his words and are no more authoritative than the rest of their books. The Jesus Seminar folk, who pride themselves on their scholarship, are just as misguided as the simple fundamentalists. Both fail to grasp that we only know what Jesus said and

did through the Spirit-inspired witness of Christ's apostles. It is wrongheaded and futile to seek Jesus in a different way than what God has seen fit to give to us. Similarly, we only know Moses through the prophet-historians and the way they chose to characterize him.^{[29](#)}

B. Implied Audience

Since the narrative does not identify the real audience, we are confined to speaking about the text's implied audience. More specifically, the implied audience is the universal covenant community that shares the narrator's evaluative point of view. The real hero of all the biblical stories is the eternal, unchanging God. Though he progressively reveals himself to a community of faith that is in the process of growing up to the full maturity of the stature of Jesus Christ, God's character never changes. The narrator's theology about the divine Reality is universal both in time and space. For example, this God is faithful to his covenants and to the gracious obligation he took upon himself to protect his people through whom he works to save the world. Since the narrative's theology is inspired and eternal, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the people of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The New Testament represents the Old Testament as that which God says (not *said*) to us (not *them*).

The audience who shares the narrator's evaluative framework is part of the implied audience. The anonymous author's stories pertain to the covenant community, the Israel of God, be it ancient Israel or the church and the flawed saints in each dispensation. In other words, these stories are about and for the believing community.^{[30](#)}

The apostle Paul's confession that God inspired all the Scriptures has two literary implications: First, unstable irony (i.e., a text with no stable evaluative framework so that even the narrator's voice is not trustworthy) is ruled out as a literary possibility. Some people have written commentaries suggesting that the book of Judges is an unstable irony. The book is undoubtedly full of dramatic irony and other such devices, but to suggest that the narrator is untrustworthy is to break faith within the community of faith. A narrator is inspired and does not mislead. Thus, unstable irony is not a possibility in the corpus of biblical narrative.

Second, deconstruction is also ruled out because it is a method that exploits

perceived internal inconsistencies within the narrative. These critics argue that the narrator is inconsistent; hence it is reasonable to ignore the narrator's evaluative point of view to reconstruct the text to reflect the reader's own self-empowering point of view. The result is deconstructionist readings that often focus on empowering minority groups. This method is illegitimate because it runs roughshod over the intention of the inspired implied author.

One example of such deconstructionist reading is the interpretation of the character of David. The text plainly accuses Saul of treachery, deviousness, and duplicity and always portrays David as innocent and loyal to his king. Yet many commentaries and theologians use the method of deconstruction and interpret David as an upstart adventurer, a cunning individual who utilizes Saul for his own benefits. For example, of Saul and David, Walter Brueggemann writes, "This skewedness in the direction of David can produce, as a downside, the sense of the tragic in the story of Saul, who never really had a chance in Israel's imagination."³¹ Such approaches, which are not faithful to the text, are excluded from the accredited hermeneutics of this book.

C. The A Priori of the Narrator

Our theology restricts our mode of interpretation. We can neither adopt literary frameworks in which the narrator deceives the reader nor accept methods by which the reader ignores the narrator's own viewpoint. Instead, the narrator's perspective always has priority in our interpretation. This is because the events and characters of the Bible come to us only as the inspired authors represent them. We do not have direct access through other means and are therefore unable to filter out what is "actual" (world) and what is "interpreted" (word). Even the characters' speeches are embedded in the narrator's voice through such phrases as "he said" and "she answered." We see and hear only through the narrator's eyes and ears. Thus, the narrator is in an a priori epistemological category, constituting the sole means by which we can understand the reality that exists within a narrative. The nature of this reality, the essence of the narrative world with its characters and events, and, above all, its significance, are entirely dependent on the narrator, through whom we receive the message.

V. EVALUATIVE POINT OF VIEW AND HERMENEUTICS

Elsewhere, following Meir Sternberg, I noted that the narrator has three concerns: history, aesthetics, and ideology.³² We now concentrate on the latter, the narrator's *evaluative point of view*, which governs the work as a whole. Powell gives the following definition: "Evaluative point of view may be defined as the standards of judgment by which readers are led to evaluate the events, characters, and settings that comprise the story."³³ Berlin adds,

Evaluation is that which indicates the point of the narrative—its *raison d'être*. No one wants to hear a pointless story, so the narrator must have ways of letting his audience know why he is telling the story. Evaluators may "stop the action" and focus attention on a particular facet of it in order to bring out the point(s) of the narrative, to give the narrative meaning and direction.³⁴

One may question why an author would "bury" his evaluative point of view in the layers of discourse and story. Why not just state the theology behind the narrative in a clear and concise fashion? The answer is that the inspired author desires to do more than communicate a theology. He seeks to lead the Israel of God to absorb the narrator's world and life views. Story engages our emotions in a way that a theological tome does not.

A story may subvert, entice, or create conditions for the possibility of a change in identity in the reader. A story invites the reader to surrender his or her own thought system and to enter the world of another and to be carried along by the flow of this other world. Through this, the reader becomes an insider, a part of the world of the narrative.

This is a most delightful way of learning theology because this mode of revelation engages a person's whole being, inviting the reader to fully identify with the material. We can see parallels in modern cinema, which entices the audience to identify with a different world and a different worldview in an entertaining and subtle way. Moviemakers are thoroughly aware of a story's power to draw the audience in to adopt an alien perspective and value system.

For the same reason, biblical authors make use of stories; their evocative nature makes them a most persuasive form of communication. The advantages of stories are numerous:

1. Stories teach implicitly rather than explicitly. Anthony Thistleton says, “They catch the reader off guard.”³⁵ The reader becomes unconsciously exposed to thoughts and life-forms that would otherwise be met with hostility (cf. Nathan’s parable to David and Jesus’ parables).

2. Personhood emerges within the unfolding of events and time. Thistleton observes: “The possibility of grasping personal identity arises in narrative more readily than in less temporally-oriented modes of understanding.”³⁶ In the Gospels we see the multifaceted life of Jesus unfolding before us. We see him grow and enter into his ministry, and we participate by identifying with his life. We see him in action in various situations and with various people, and we understand more of Jesus through seeing his life extended in time than we do through abstract theology. In truth, God is comprehended more readily through the life of Jesus than in systematic theological categories.

3. Thistleton, citing Paul Ricoeur, adds: “The narrative world stimulates the imagination and encourages exploration of possible worlds.”³⁷ The narrative world also offers infinite connecting points to the reader’s world. Through these connecting points, a narrative becomes an invitation for the reader to connect the two worlds and to transfer the worldview adopted in one to the actual living out of it in the other. One such example is Matthew 28:19–20, which functions as a direct invitation for the reader to carry the world of the gospel narrative into his or her own world and to enter the world where Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

4. Narratives may perform multiform tasks for different readers; they are not intentionally directed. They may offer pardon to the guilty, liberate the oppressed, comfort the sorrowing, warn the overconfident, or pledge promises to the trusting. They do all those things and more according to the reader’s response. This is the nature of story: it speaks to each individual uniquely. Psalm 49 helpfully illustrates how an author’s intended message may be read differently. The psalmist—in this case a sage — uses the proverb “[a rich man] is like the beasts that perish” (vv. 12, 20). That proverb warns the rich and comforts the poor, sobers the high and consoles the low (cf. v. 2).

5. Biographies are historical “metaphors” or “icons.” They are ideal portraits that inspire us and carry us along on a heavenly vision. By enabling the reader to see a life in a whole and clear manner, the biography functions as an illustration, an inspiring example, by which to compare and construct one’s own life. In his poem “Birches,” Robert Frost uses nature to explore life and longings. One

longing is to embark on life once again when it is over—but we cannot. Yet biblical biography enables us to live our lives beforehand. Identification with the biblical character reveals more comprehensively and so more clearly the full moral consequences of our choices and actions. The biography becomes teaching, a proverb for the wise (cf. Ps. 78).

VI. EVALUATIVE POINT OF VIEW AND THEOLOGY

Having briefly touched on some of the issues and implications of narrative theology, I offer the following brief survey of the narrative critic's discernment of the biblical narrator's techniques to communicate his evaluative point of view. These are features in the text that allow us to draw his theology, his message, from the text. Familiarity with the following will give us a solid foundation for interpreting narratives.

A. Multiple Points of View

The distinction between the story world and the narrator's literary imitation of that world in his words enable us to distinguish between multiple points of view in the narrative and in his plot and to distinguish between those that are authoritative, ambiguous, or downright wrong. On the story level we find both God's point of view and that of the characters within the story. In the narrator's literary imitation of the story, he presents his own point of view to the implied audience. As noted, the inspired narrator ultimately controls all that is said and done so that what the inspired narrator says is no less authoritative than what God says.

1. God's Point of View

God's words are always truthful and reliable, and his actions are always just. His words come from his sublime character, which is without sin. "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie" (1 Sam. 15:29). God's voice is unequivocally authoritative for *theologoumena*. There is no shadow of turning in him. He may change his mind to do good or evil when characters change their ways respectively from bad to good or from good to bad, but paradoxically, this is so precisely because he himself is unchangeable (cf. 1 Sam. 15:26–28; Jer. 18:1–10; see p. 484). Because he is true, faithful, and just, God always rewards virtue and punishes vice, though often not immediately (see pp. 510, 923). Then too he may deceive a duplicitous character such as Satan or Balaam, but his response is

entirely consistent with his person to outwit the proud and catch them in their own schemes.

Remember the story of King Balak, who sought Balaam to curse Israel? Balaam inquired of *I AM*, who told him not to go, but Balaam, greedy both for a huge sum of money and for prestige, would not accept God's answer. He came back to *I AM* again, asking once more if he could go to Balak. This time God said, "Go ahead," but Balaam was under God's judgment. The narrator's point: if we are not willing to obey God, he may allow us to hear what we want to hear. This is a profound insight that if we want God to change his mind about what is clear in Scripture, he will appear to change his mind, but we will be under judgment.

This truth is evident also in the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22. The king wondered if he should go to war, so he sought the counsel of false prophets, who encouraged him to do battle. Then the king asked Micaiah ben Imlah, who surprisingly also encouraged the king to go to war because that was what the king's messenger who was sent to him had told him to say. But when King Ahab insisted on the truth, Micaiah said, "You really want to hear the truth? That's different. I saw all Israel slain." If we do not want the truth in Scripture, we will not get it. This is not because God is fickle, unreliable, or arbitrary, but because he will not be mocked by the proud.

The narrative theologian pays attention to the mode in which God speaks: in theophany, visions, or providence. At the beginning of the book of Genesis, God communicates to people mainly in theophany. Later, during the time of the patriarchs, he speaks in visions and dreams. By the end of the book, in the Joseph narratives, God speaks mainly through providence. The theological intention of theophany is unambiguous. God's clear speech is the authoritative evaluative viewpoint of a narrative. However, his speech in dreams and visions is less clear, and its dreamlike symbolic quality must be interpreted. Providence is even more ambiguous. Dreams and visions must be interpreted in light of God's direct speech; and providence, like the other forms, conforms to Israel's covenants, which are clear. This diminishing clarity of revelation in Genesis resembles the decreasing clarity of the Hebrew canon. In the Pentateuch God speaks to Moses in theophany; in the Prophets, in more ambiguous story telling and in visions; and in the Writings, mostly through Providence. This dwindling clarity occurs in connection with a maturing audience.

In addition to these literary genres, the narrator expresses God's point of view in a variety of ways with reference to mediators:

1. By direct quote. See Genesis 2:18; 7:1; 22:15–18.
2. By quoting a prophet or a messenger. See Judges 2:1–5.

d. By direct statement of the narrator: God is angered, God saw that it was good, and so on. See Genesis 6:6, 8; Exodus 2:25; 4:14; Numbers 12:3; 2 Samuel 11:27; 17:14.

4. Providence is more ambiguous. The narrator conveys God's perspective through providential circumstances, but the narrative contains degrees of ambiguity. As for the narrative of Abraham and Sarah, the narrator plainly states that *I AM* inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of tyranny against the holy couple. But Pharaoh did not have that revelation and had to interpret the plagues on his house as an act of providence against him (Gen. 12:17–20). He rightly interpreted the ambiguous plagues, and ejected Abraham and his household from him.

As for the narrative of Isaac and Rebekah, the narrator gives us no clear statement whether Rebekah did what was right or wrong when she deceived her husband. He allows his reader to tease out of his narrative its moral ambiguity. In this narrative he intentionally omits the death of Rebekah, rather than supplying a burial notice as he does for the other matriarchs: Sarah's tomb (Gen. 23), Rachel's memorial (35:19–20). He strengthens his implied censure by noting the death of Deborah, Rebekah's lifelong nurse (Gen. 24:59; 35:8). Nevertheless, he redeems her in the Jacob narrative by putting her burial notice in Jacob's mouth (Gen. 49:31). Providence shows up in poetic justice and irony: Jacob, who deceives his father, is deceived by Laban. The narrative recounting the competition between Rachel and Leah records that the one who sells the aphrodisiac bears children while the purchaser remains barren. God's providence provides insight into his evaluative point of view, but not certainty.

2. Human Characters' Points of View

We now turn to the characters' points of view within the story. The narrator uses both heroes and agents to express his point of view. Shimon Bar-Efrat writes,

Many of the views embodied in the narrative are expressed through the characters, and more specifically, through their speech and fate. Not only do the characters serve as the narrator's mouthpiece, but also what is and is not related about them, which of their characteristics are emphasized and which are not, which of their conversations and actions in the past are recorded and which are not, all reveal the values and norms within the narrative.^{[38](#)}

These characters are usually the heroes or prophets in the narrative. A true prophet's words are always authoritative, but those of the heroes must be tested by God's or the narrator's evaluative point of view. For example, Jacob, who rarely speaks of God, says, "The God of my father has been with me" (Gen. 31:5), a statement consistent with God's promise twenty years earlier to be with him in his exile in Paddan Aram (Gen. 28:15). Joseph, the charismatic hero in the narrative, says to his conspiring brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph's interpretation of his life at the end of the narrative is authoritative because it is consistent with his inspired dreams at the narrative's beginning (Gen. 37:5–10) and his inspired interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams (Gen. 41).

Even the heroes, however, have feet of clay and occasionally succumb to fear, not believing God's promise to be with them. For example, out of fear the patriarchs lie about their wives (Gen. 12:10–18; 26:7–10); Moses feared going before Pharaoh (Exod. 3–4); Gideon feared his family (Judg. 6:27); even the mighty Samuel cowered before the tyrant Saul (1 Sam. 16:1–2). In cases such as these, the heroes teach theology by serving as bad examples. God consistently calls his people to count him as trustworthy even in the most untoward situations, and the biblical writers consistently present the theology that whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). The heroes are not to be emulated when they patently disobey God, including even the spiritual giant Moses who disobeyed God on one occasion (Num. 20:1–13). In other words, a character's words and actions must be evaluated in the light of God's covenants with Israel. Do they conform to a life of faith in God's promises and/or to obedience to his law?

Sometimes the narrator employs an agent's words. In Genesis 21:22, Abimelech says to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do." Though Abimelech is not the hero of the narrative, the narrator uses him as an agent to confirm what is known about Abraham. Agents' words are usually confirmed by the words of God or the narrator. Without confirmation, it is difficult to decide whether or not the agent is reflecting the narrator's viewpoint.

3. Narrator's Point of View

We now turn to the imitative literary level (sometimes referred to as a *similicrum*). The narrator's point of view is also reliable. It is expressed in the following ways:

1 *By direct statement.* Genesis 16:6 records that "Sarai mistreated Hagar."

Such a statement reflects the narrator's perspective that Sarah overreacted. In Genesis 25:34 the narrator summarizes the life of Esau, "So Esau despised his birthright." The point is that Esau had no faith, for he did not see his status as firstborn as playing an important role for the continuation of the promised covenant.

2. *By hints of style.* The reader must pay close attention to the narrator's vocabulary. The key to the Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4:3–4) is found in the narrator's choice of *minḥâ* to designate the kind of sacrifice they offered. *Minḥâ* means tribute, and to a king, and even more so to God, one offers the best — of domesticated animals the firstborn and of cultivated grain the firstfruits. Abel brought the best, "fat portions from some of the firstborn," but Cain brought "some of the fruits," not the firstfruits. By his choice of words, the narrator indicts Cain of tokenism.

Because the narrator's techniques of embedding his meaning in the text are so rich and subtle, we have reserved a separate chapter especially for the discussion of them (see [chap. 6](#)).

B. Characterization

Narrators employ a variety of other methods to let the reader know how to view and evaluate a character. Some of this analysis of character repeats what we have already said about multiple viewpoints and/or will be taken up again in the chapter on poetics ([chap. 5](#)).

1. Outer Description

Biblical narrators give us a portrait of a person's soul, not his or her body, unless it serves a theological purpose. Berlin notes, "What is lacking in the Bible is the kind of detailed physical or physiological description of characters that creates a visual image for the reader."³⁹ When the narrator gives his readers a physical description, he does so for a purpose. Esau is described as "hairy" while Jacob is "smooth." This description makes it clear why Jacob's wearing of the goatskin is necessary in deceiving his father. Second Samuel 14:25 describes Absalom as a Hollywood movie star, the perfect specimen of a man from a human viewpoint. His hair is his glory. The narrator's description invites the reader to imagine the annual ritual that surrounds Absalom's haircut. How much will the hair weigh this year? The narrator's faint praise of his physical perfection, however, in fact aims to damn the crown prince, who is a twit, having

neither faith nor integrity. He becomes a rebel who violates his own father's concubine. In the end, his hair, which has been his glory, becomes his doom when he is left hanging in midair on a tree, having never realized his potential destiny on earth or in heaven.

2. Direct Characterization

"The serpent was more crafty," "Noah was a righteous man" — these direct statements by the narrator help the reader make unambiguous interpretations.

3. Revelation of the Character's Thoughts, Calculations, and Intentions

The narrator also communicates his meaning through the words of his characters: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" asks Abraham (Gen. 18:25). Allowing no ambiguity, *I AM* responds that he will spare the wicked if a quorum of righteous are with them. (See also Gen. 27:41; 37:34; Exod. 32:19; 1 Sam. 18:17; 25:21–22; 27:1; 1 Kings 1:50.)

4. Direct Speech/Quotations

The only words of Adam prior to the Fall are the words about his wife: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (i.e., we are one and equals). His speech indicates the close solidarity he felt toward his wife. This helps to explain his willingness to follow his wife's example to succumb to temptation. (See also Gen. 17:17; 30:2; 31:31; Exod. 3:11; 1 Sam. 1:8; 2 Sam. 13:4.)

5. Quotations of Another's View of a Character

The good conduct of David's men in the wilderness of Judah is corroborated by the servants of Nabal and Abigail: "These men [David and his men] were very good to us. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing" (1 Sam. 25:15; see also 1 Sam. 16:18; 25:17, 25; 2 Sam. 3:29; 13:13; 17:8, 10; 1 Kings 2:9).

6. Action

The narrator uses the action of the character to illustrate the person. In the flood narrative, where days and years pass in the span of a verse, the narrator slows down the action to show the picture of Noah reaching out his hand to take the dove as it hovered over the water (Gen. 8:9). This verse depicts Noah as an environmentalist who has deep concerns for God's creation.⁴⁰ (See also Gen.

30:37–43.)

7. Speech and Actions

In Genesis 25, when Esau comes in from the field, he says “Red stuff, red stuff!” Then the text says, “He ate and drank, and then got up and left.” In other words, Esau is characterized by reflex rather than reflection. His philosophy is, “If it feels good, do it.”⁴¹

8. Contrast

Jacob is contrasted with Esau: Jacob, in spite of all his flaws, valued the birthright. David’s treachery is contrasted with Uriah’s loyalty. The second hero of the Joseph story is Judah, whose complex character develops from one who sells his brother to the first voluntary self-sacrifice recorded in the Bible. Judah volunteers to be slave instead of Benjamin because he cannot stand to see his father’s misery. Joseph’s character, in contrast, is rather flat and two-dimensional. There is little character development. Judah gets the kingship because he offered himself as a sacrifice for the sake of his father.

9. Naming

The narrator also tips his hand by the epithets he gives his character.⁴² The sequential namings of Ruth indicate her escalating social status. She names herself as a *šipḥâ* (“a slave girl not eligible for marriage,” 2:13) but with Naomi’s encouragement names herself an *ʿāṁâ* (“a maidservant eligible for marriage,” 3:9), and Boaz elevates her to the status of an *ʿēšet ḥayil* (“a noble and competent woman,” 3:11), making her his equal as *gibbôr ḥayil* (2:1). Finally, the town elders number Ruth among the matriarchs of Israel (4:11). And I love the way Naomi asks Ruth, “Who are you?”⁴³ after her return from the threshing floor (3:16). It is a profound question; she is asking Ruth, “What is your self-identification? How do you name or see yourself now?”

The naming of David changes according to the events in the narrative. Bar-Efrat makes the point:

When David crosses the Jordan eastward in his flight, he is referred to as “David”; while when he crosses the river westward on his return, he is called “the king,” and this is not without significance either.... During his flight he is merely David, barefoot, tired, destitute, accompanied by only a

handful of loyal subjects; on his return he is the king once more, and is recognized as such by both Judah and Israel.⁴⁴

In Genesis 34:1–4, Avigdor Bonchek points out the shifting names for Dinah.⁴⁵ In verse 1, when she goes out to visit the women of the land, she is called “daughter of Leah.” In verse 2, when she is raped and used as a sex object, the text just uses the pronoun “her,” “her,” “her.” In verse 3, when Shechem wants Dinah in marriage, she is called “daughter of Jacob.” Again in verse 3, when Shechem speaks to Dinah to woo her, she is called *na^câ râhl*, “a young woman” (NIV “girl”). In verse 4, when Shechem speaks to his father about Dinah, he refers to her as a *yaldâh* “a child” (NIV “this girl”).

The next chapter, “Poetics and Intertextuality,” discusses subtle techniques used by narrators. They not only cite God and characters within the world of the story or state their own point of view in the words of the text; they also use all sorts of repetitions to give a rich depth of meaning to their narratives.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do you determine what is normative in Old Testament narrative for your faith and practice? Is the Old Testament addressed to you? If so, how do you know what God is saying to you?

1. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Narrative, Hebrew,” in *ABD*, 4:1023, italics mine.

2. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series, JSOTSup 9 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 13.

3. For a more thorough discussion of the relationship of history and theology, see Eugene Merrill, “History, Theology and Hermeneutics” in *NIDOTTE* 1:71–75; on the relationship of history and literature, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 149–54; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 75–97.

4. Some literary critics refer to “plot” as “discourse” (cf. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 23).

5. Cited by James M. Houston, *Joyful Exiles: Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 25.

6. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* 23.

7. Jonathan Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us: How It Shaped the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 24.

8. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 24. Herbert Schenida, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977), speaks of “historicized prose fiction.”

9. Representative publications of the minimalist approach include Philip R. Davies, *In Search of “Ancient Israel,”* JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1992); Niels Peter Lemche, “Is It Still Possible to Write a History of Ancient Israel?” *SJOT* 8 (1994): 156–90; Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); idem, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*

(New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[10.](#) Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*.

[11.](#) Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Walter C. Kaiser, in addition to arguing for the reliability of the history of the Old Testament, also seeks to establish the reliability of its canon and text, of its message, and of its relevance (*The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001]).

[12.](#) See Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), and Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997).

[13.](#) Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 23. K. L. Noll (*The Faces of David*, JSOTSup 242 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 29) also notes the narrator's boundedness to the story world. But according to him, the narrator is only reliable to the point that his claims remain unchallenged by the implied author (p. 36). This is true in some literature, but that construct is not applicable to the Bible, where no narrator competes with the implied author.

[14.](#) Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 32.

[15.](#) Quoted by Millard J. Erickson, "Evangelical Theological Scholarship in the Twenty-first Century," *JETS* 46/1 (2003): 11.

[16.](#) John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

[17.](#) Many ancient Near Eastern stories of the creation of man recount his being formed from clay.

[18.](#) Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us*, 19.

[19.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 72–82.

[20.](#) *Ibid.*, 83–93. Childs, however, also points out important parallels between mythical space and biblical space.

[21.](#) *Ibid.*, 25.

[22.](#) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 34–35.

[23.](#) J. H. Dexter, *Doing History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), 167–68.

[24.](#) Mesopotamian documents tend to identify scribes who copied traditional and economic text but not their authors. See W. G. Lambert, "Ancestors, Authors, and Canonicity," *JCS* 11 (1957): 1; "A Catalog of Texts and Authors," *JCS* 16 (1962): 59–77. The prophetic literature names the prophet, but not the writer of the books in hand. The same is true of Deuteronomy.

[25.](#) Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* 5.

[26.](#) The terms *implied author* and *narrator* are interchangeable in this discussion of biblical narratives. However, in modern literature a sharper distinction is made between the narrator and the author, whether named or implied. A good example of such a distinction is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the narrator — as one of the characters in the story — has a different evaluative framework than that of the author. As we shall see, the implied author of Ecclesiastes represents his point of view through his speaker: Qoheleth (see [chap. 33](#)).

[27.](#) Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 34.

[28.](#) See 1:1–5; 2:10–12, 20–23; 3:9, 11, 13b – 14; 4:41–5:1a; 10:6–7, 9; 27:1a, 9a, 11; 28:68 [69]; 29:1a; 31:1, 7a, 9–10a, 14a, 14c – 16a, 22–23a, 24–25, 30; 32:44–45, 48; 33:1; 34:1–4a, 5–12. See also Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 29.

[29.](#) I am not denying that the Pentateuch contains a Mosaic core (see Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 22–29).

[30.](#) See the preface for my use of the terms *Jew*, *Israel*, *church*, and *Israel of God*.

[31.](#) Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 367.

[32.](#) Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 44.

[33.](#) Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* 24.

[34.](#) Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 106.

[35.](#) A. C. Thistleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 567.

[36.](#) Ibid.

[37.](#) Ibid.

[38.](#) Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Bible and Literature Series, JSOTSup 70 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 47.

[39.](#) Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 34.

[40.](#) The imagery of a dove descending on an individual surrounded by water is repeated after the baptism of Jesus.

[41.](#) Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 39.

[42.](#) Cf. Richard L. Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Nashville: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), 257: “Michal daughter of Saul.”

[43.](#) NIV glosses the question by “How did it go?”

[44.](#) Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 40.

[45.](#) Avigdor Bonchek, *Studying the Torah: A Guide to In-Depth Interpretation* (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1997).

Chapter 5

THE METHOD OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, PART 3: POETICS AND INTERTEXTUALITY

The reason of types: ... God chose this [Jewish] carnal people, to whom he entrusted the prophecies which foretell the Messiah as a deliverer, and as a dispenser of those carnal good which this people loved. And thus they have had an extraordinary passion for their prophets, and, in sight of the whole world, have had charge of these books which foretell their Messiah, assuring all nations that he should come, and in the way foretold in the books, which they help open to the whole world. Yet this people, deceived by the poor and ignominious advent of the Messiah, have been his most cruel enemies. So that they, the people least open to suspicion in the world of favoring us, the most strict and most zealous that can be named for their law and their prophets, have kept the books incorrupt.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 8.187

I. POETICS

This chapter considers respectively poetics and intertextuality. Understanding poetics enables a theologian to establish the theology of an author, and understanding intertextuality helps the theologian trace the trajectory of a doctrine's development within the Bible. Curiously, these techniques are often overlooked in writing a theology. Yet, obviously, knowledge of the techniques that enable theologians to analyze a writer's rhetoric that points to his message and that enable them to trace the trajectory of a theme is essential to writing a biblical theology (see [chap. 2](#)).

A. Definition

Poetics is the study of the literary devices an author uses to construct his composition. According to Adele Berlin, poetics is “an inductive science that seeks to abstract the general principles of literature from many different manifestations of those principles as they occur in actual literary texts.” Its essential aim is not “to elicit meaning of any given text,” but rather “to find the building blocks of literature and the rules by which they are assembled.” Thus, “poetics is to literature as linguistics is to language.”¹

If linguistics is the science of language — a study of the meaning of words and the rules that govern their interrelationship — then poetics is the science of literature — a study of how basic components of writing interrelate to create meaning. In other words, poetics is a grammar of literature; just as we need grammar to make sense of a language, we need poetics to make sense of a body of literature. Berlin coined a memorable dictum: “We don't know *what* a text means until we know *how* it means.”² Moreover, just as the rules of grammar change from era to era and language to language, literary methods also change. Modern writers generally use linear thought patterns; biblical writers tend to use more circular thought patterns. For that reason, English readers sometimes find it difficult to follow the biblical writer's arrangement of thoughts.

A primary task of the theologian is to induce the “rules” employed in a biblical text from a cache of similar texts. This task, like all aspects of exegesis,

involves a heuristic spiral. We begin our dialogue with the text with guesses as to how particular devices function in a given text. Then we find textual evidence that confirms or denies the hypothesis. This process, based on the continued study of many texts, allows us to become more and more certain in abstracting rules and principles that govern literature.

Poetics enables a skillful author to embed meaning in his text without explicit articulation. A skilled author is subtle, not pounding the reader with the message. A glaring exception to this generalization is the book of Kings. In his cartouche-like frame of Israel's kings, the Deuteronomist evaluates whether the king did "evil" or "good." The narrative hammers home the point like blows on an anvil. Although most biblical narrative is far more evocative and subtle, the book of Kings also contains poetic subtleties beyond the surface meaning.

B. Authors, Not Redactors

In the study of poetics, in contrast to source criticism, we talk about authors, not redactors. Source critics aim to extract from a text its original sources by looking for signs in the text to show that it has been stitched together. These signs include duplications, changing of style (e.g., vocabulary), and varying theologies. Source critics speak of "the redactor," who stitched the sources together; literary critics are more apt to speak about "an author," who made every word count and who was in full control of his material. Source critics, whose approach is diachronic, assume a bungling redactor whose work is so imperfect that we can still see the "seams" in the text. A literary critic, whose approach is synchronic, sees an author in full command of his material, using each word and device to his or her desire. Robert Polzin writes, "Diachronic literary critics regard the text as crudely pieced together; synchronic literary critics regard it as artistic with careful attention to detail.... Is the narrative hand 'crude' — what critics usually mean when they write *redactional*— or 'careful'—what I mean when I write *authorial*?"³ The difference has profound significance for how one determines a text's message.

Literary critics do not deny that there are sources, but they do deny that the author was not in full control of his sources. Poetics, as understood in this book, may and will lead to radically different results than the majority of theologies that were written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those theologies regarded the isolated sources within the text as more important than the allegedly crudely pieced together text in hand.

To illustrate, a notable example of the existence of two or more sources is the two introductions of David into Saul's service (1 Sam. 16:14–23, and 1 Sam. 17:55–58). In interpreting these two passages, source critics pit the two accounts against one another; in contrast, new literary critics consider these two accounts as woven artistically into a unified whole. Robert Alter, representing the latter approach, comments:

With [only one of] these versions of David's beginnings and his claim to legitimacy as monarch, the Hebrew writer would have conveyed less than what he conceived to be the full truth about his subject.... The joining of the two accounts leaves us swaying in the dynamic interplay between two theologies, two conceptions of kingship and history, two views of David the man. In one [1 Sam. 16], the king is imagined as God's instrument, elected through God's own initiative, manifesting his authority by commanding the realm of spirits good and evil, a figure who brings healing and inspires love. In the other account [1 Sam. 17], the king's election is, one might say, ratified rather than initiated by God; instead of the spirit descending, we have a young man ascending through his own resourcefulness, cool courage, and quick reflexes, and also through his rhetorical skill.⁴

In sum, "the writer offers a binocular vision by montage," says J. P. Fokkelman.⁵

C. Implications

Poetics produces certain implications and changes our expectations. Modern literary critics assume biblical authors use words sparingly, making each word count. These critics assume that nothing is in the text for naught,⁶ and every feature in the text is there for a reason and needs to be explained. Conversely, the absence of something expected may also be meaningful, leading to the distinction between a "blank" and a "gap," which we will discuss later in the chapter.

Genesis 1 and 2 may indeed reflect different sources at the preliterate level. The change of divine names from "God" in the first account (Gen. 1:1–2:3) to "I AM God" in the second (Gen. 2:4–4:26) is a textbook example of showing different sources. The change of names, however, is not a product of a redactor

who is sloppy or one who felt bound by tradition not to tamper with the text. Instead, he allowed the discontinuity to remain, because in [chapter 1](#), *ʾēlōhîm* refers to God's transcendence, while in [chapters 2 and 3](#) YHWH ("He Is") speaks to God's immanence. The different names of God express different aspects of his divine attributes. In fact, the author put both names together, YHWHH *ʾēlōhîm*, to give the message that the God (*ʾēlōhîm*) who made the majestic cosmos is the same God (YHWH) who initiates and rules over human history. This juxtaposition asserts that history is under God's sovereign command and that history will not end in a cul-de-sac or return to chaos. The same God who gave order to creation is the same God who will give order to history. The discontinuity between the two divine names, though perhaps attesting to different sources, significantly elevates both God and humankind.

D. Poetic Techniques

The following analysis of poetics pertains to both prose and poetry. Poetic techniques that are specific for narrative are discussed in the next chapter. This section is best approached with a Bible in hand in order to understand the examples. By these techniques the "theme," an idea that is part of the value system of the narrative (it may be moral, moral-psychological, legal, political, historiosophical, or theological) is made manifest.

1. Leitwort

Martin Buber (1927) coined the term *Leitwort* ("lead word"): "a word or a word-root [and its synonyms] that is meaningfully repeated within a text, or a sequence of text, or a complex of text; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate, made more emphatic."⁷ Robert Alter demonstrated that the repeated word *qôl* ("voice") serves as the chief means of thematic exposition in 1 Samuel 15.⁸ Michael Fishbane argued that the entire cycle of Jacob is structured through the reiteration of a pun on *b^erākâ* ("blessing") and *b^erākâ* ("birthright").⁹ The account of Isaac employs "taste" in connection with "wild game" to give focus to that narrative. "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau" (Gen. 25:28) foreshadows Isaac's defining moment of failure when he seeks to bless profane Esau, not elect Jacob, because his moral taste has become jaded by his sensual appetite ([chap. 27](#)). The words that occur over and over again are *sayid*

(“game”), ten times, and *mat^ṣām* (“tasty food”), six times. Isaac is said to “love tasty food” by Rebekah, Isaac himself, and the narrator. This repetition makes clear the story’s message: Isaac’s cupidity has distorted his spiritual taste. He has given himself over to an indulgent sensuality.¹⁰

2. Motif

Alter defines *motif* as “a concrete image, sensory quality, action, or object [that] recurs through a particular narrative.... It has no meaning in itself without the defining context of the narrative.” He cites as examples stones and the colors white and red in the Jacob story; water in the Moses cycle; and dreams, prisons, pits, and silver in the Joseph story.¹¹

3. Sequence of Action

Sometimes an action is repeated three times or three plus one, “with some intensification or increment from one occurrence to the next, usually concluding either in a climax or a reversal. For example, the three captains and their companies threatened with fiery destruction in 2 Kings 1; the three catastrophes that destroy Job’s possessions, followed by a fourth in which his children are killed.”¹²

4. Refrain

Refrain means a repetition of a phrase or sentence. In addition to emphasizing a point, it also helps to divide material. The exploits of Samson are recounted in Judges 14–16. [Chapter 15](#) ends with “Samson led [*wayyīšpōt*, “judged”] Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.” This sentence is repeated with minor alterations at the end of [chapter 16](#): “He had led [*šâpat* “judged”] Israel twenty years.” For a source critic, this repetition at the end of [chapters 15](#) and [16](#) is a telltale sign of different sources. For a literary critic, the repetition forces the reader to examine the chapters as cycles with the refrains serving as dividing points. With this in mind, we see Samson’s exploits in the form of two parallel cycles of A-B-C and A’-B’-C’. Each cycle contains two episodes and a climactic conclusion in which Samson prays. At the end of the first cycle, he prays for life because of his thirst, and God miraculously brings forth water. In the second cycle, Samson prays for death. The refrain leads us to draw out the message in the two parallel cycles: In spite of Samson’s superlative giftedness, his spiritual deterioration led to only a small beginning of Israel’s deliverance, but

nevertheless, God rewarded his small faith by answering his prayers.

5. Contrast

Writers use contrast when they associate or juxtapose things that are dissimilar or opposite. Avigdor Bonchek writes, “It has been said that a sign of the creative individual is his ability to perceive the differences in similar things and the similarities in different things.”¹³

Biblical literature is dotted with similar episodes and scenes. Alter uses the term “type scene” to refer to a frequently repeated scene. The similarities in these repeated scenes serve as a backdrop for the author to highlight the differences. A contrast can be discerned in the type scenes involving meeting a bride at the well in Haran. In one scene, Abraham’s servant meets Rebekah at the well when he is in prayer, trusting God to lead him to the right bride for Isaac. In a second story, Abraham’s grandson Jacob is at the well in his flight from his murderous brother, Esau. This story relates that there is a huge rock over the well, such that three shepherds cannot move it, but Jacob moves it single-handedly. The “bride at the well” narratives contrast a servant who is strong in prayer with Jacob, who is strong in brute strength; they contrast a happy wedding with an unhappy wedding. The former is rewarded with a beautiful and virtuous bride whose faith in *I AM* outstrips that of her husband; the latter gains a beautiful bride who clings to her old family idols. The message, though not initially perceptible, becomes clear: Power in prayer is greater than power in human strength in establishing God’s kingdom, but nowhere does the narrator of Genesis command his audience to pray.

When we take poetics of narrative seriously, the messages subtly convince us of their truth. Again, taking an episode out of the Jacob narrative, we see that Jacob’s name was changed to Israel because he struggled and prevailed with God and men. In the wrestling match, Jacob used his own strength to strive against the God-man, but when his hip was broken, he clung and prayed. Significantly, only after he was broken and could no longer rely on his own strength was his name changed. In his brokenness he prevailed by prayerful words, not by brute strength. The scene concludes with a focus on a lonely, limping Jacob on his way to prevail over mighty Esau, who is accompanied by four hundred armed men. The message resounds that through prayer Israel prevails over its foes, and through its brokenness its enemies become reconciled to it. In this Israel is like God, who through his humility in death moved his enemies to be reconciled to him.

6. Comparison

Comparison is an association or juxtaposition of things that are alike or similar. Once again we examine a favorite duplicate of the source critics: the jeopardy of the matriarchs in a pagan king's harem. Twice Sarah, Abraham's wife, is taken into the harem of a foreign king because of Abraham's duplicity, and twice she is rescued by God's intervention. Then the same thing happens to Rebekah, Isaac's wife. Source critics argue that these repeated stories are but one story with varying details. By contrast, literary critics look at the repetition and see a comparison between Isaac and Abraham, demonstrating that Isaac has the same blessing as his father. God protects Sarah in Abimelech's harem; he also protects Rebekah in Abimelech's harem. The Philistine king makes a treaty with Abraham at Beersheba; the Philistine king also makes a treaty with Isaac at Beersheba. The comparison affirms that Isaac is under God's blessing in the same way as his father Abraham. The message: Isaac fails in his later years because he becomes sensual, not because he lacks Abraham's blessing.

7. Logic: Causation and Substantiation

The writer brings order to the text by connecting events through cause and effect. Jacob deceives Isaac through the blindness of sight (Gen. 27:18–24); Laban deceives Jacob through the “blindness” of night (29:15–25). Similarly, Judah deceives Jacob by telling him to recognize Joseph's bloody tunic (37:32–33); Tamar deceives Judah and tells him to recognize his staff as proof of his incest (38:25). The same language in both these narratives is intellectually satisfying and aesthetically pleasing. The message: reciprocity through self-victimization. Do not be deceived. God is not mocked; a person reaps what he sows.

8. Climax/Intensification

Normally there is escalation in the text, a sense of movement from the lesser to the greater, as in the seven days of creation in Genesis 1. In this text there are two triads of three days. The first triad ends with earth bringing forth vegetation. The second triad concludes with the creation of humanity. In the ancient Near East, the climactic moments are the creation of vegetation and humanity. Vegetation is critical for sustaining the lives of animals and people. The message is that God creates humankind and prepares beforehand its sustenance.

9. Patterns of Structure

Biblical writers use many patterns. Jerome T. Walsh, in his commentary on

Kings, has provided the most detailed articulations of the various patterns. I list here the two most important ones.

a. *Symmetrical* (A-B-C/A'-B'-C'). Walsh writes, "Parallel patterns tend to invite comparison of the parallel sequences and of individual parallel elements. Comparison often reveals progression, but not necessarily opposition or contrast, between the parallel components."¹⁴ This structure can be likened to one wave being followed by a larger wave. The following is an example of a symmetrical pattern. It gives structure to and elucidates the message of Elijah in the cave at Horeb narrative (1 Kings 19:9b –18):

- A Setting: at the cave, "And the word of the LORD came" (19:9a)
- B Lord's question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:9b)
- C Answer: "I have been very zealous.... they are trying to kill me too." (19:10)
- D "The LORD said" (19:11a)
- E "Wind ... not in the wind" (19:11b)
- F "Earthquake ... not in the earthquake" (19:11c)
- G "Fire ... not in the fire" (19:12a)
- H Sound of sheer silence (19:13a)
- A' Setting: at the cave a voice came (19:13b)
- B' Question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:9b)
- C' Answer: "I have been very zealous ... they are trying to kill me too" (19:14)
- D'"The LORD said" (19:15a)
- E' "Anoint Hazael" (19:15)
- F' "Anoint Jehu" (19:16a)
- G' "Anoint Elisha" (19:16b)
- E" Hazael kills (19:17a)
- F" Jehu kills (19:17b)
- G" Elisha kills (19:17c)
- H' 7,000 have not bowed to Baal (19:18)

This narrative about the theophany of *I AM* to Elijah is divided into two halves in an alternating pattern. Their A-B-C-D and A'-B'-C'-D' repetitions are nearly identical, asking the reader to compare their E-F-G elements. E-F-G presents destructive wind, earthquake and fire, but God is not in any of them. Their parallels, E'-F'-G' and E"-F"-G" refer to anointing Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, all of whom engage in violent killing. The theophany occurs in climactic H and H'. H mentions a whisper, without saying God was not in it, and H' presents the

7,000 who have not bowed to Baal. The parallels between the two halves of the narrative link H and H'. If so, the message is that God's presence is to be found not in politics, warfare, and violence, but in the preservation of the godly remnant. In other words, God is present in this world in those who keep covenant without fanfare or notice from the world.

b. *Chiastic* (A-B-C-X-C'-B'-A'). This pattern, characterized by balance and inversion, is the most common pattern.¹⁵ This extended form of chiasm systematically serves to focus the audience's interest on the pivot.¹⁶ In other words, the pivot is the key to meaning (i.e., to the message). Moreover the pivot often also functions as the peripeteia ("turning point") of the narrative. This structure can be likened to throwing a stone in a lake and watching its ripples expand outward. This pattern is attested generally in the prose and poetry of ancient literatures, documented in Sumero-Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Aramaic prose and poetry, Talmudic-Aggadic narrative, the New Testament, and ancient Greek and Latin literatures.¹⁷ John Welch says, "One of the most salient developments in the study of ancient literature over the past few decades is the growing awareness of the presence of chiasmus in the composition of ancient writings."¹⁸ Yehuda Radday claims the chiasm was *de rigueur* in those times.¹⁹ His claim that it is mandatory to write proper literature is extreme; his hyperbole suggests the frequency of chiasmus. The following analysis of 1 Kings 1–11 is adapted from Walsh:²⁰

- A Prophet intervenes in the royal succession (1:1–2:12)
- B Solomon eliminates threats to his security (2:13–46)
- C The early promise of Solomon's reign (3:1–15)
- D Solomon uses his gift for the people (3:16–4:34)
- E Preparations for building temple (5:1–18)
- F Solomon builds the temple (6:1–37)
- X Solomon builds "rival" buildings (7:1–12)
- F' Solomon furnishes the temple (7:13–51)
- E' Solomon dedicates the temple, warned by God (8:1–9:9)
- D' Solomon uses his gifts for himself (9:10–10:29)
- C' Tragic failure of Solomon's reign (11:1–13)
- B' *I AM* raises up threats to Solomon's security (11:14–25)
- A' A prophet determines the royal succession (11:26–43)

The pivot functions as a peripeteia in Solomon's career. The writer, while detailing Solomon's effort to build the temple, interrupts that account by

inserting twelve verses about Solomon's other building projects: his own palace, the armory or treasury, a colonnade, a hall of justice, and then two more palaces, one where Solomon was to live and one for his Egyptian wife. These buildings rivaled the temple and, worse, Solomon gave them priority over completing the temple. The writer pointedly juxtaposes 6:38, which says that Solomon took seven years to build the temple, with 7:1, which says that Solomon spent thirteen years to build his own palace. While the temple had a lot of precious cedar, the treasury or armory had so much that it was called "The Palace of the Forest of Lebanon." Just as important, 7:1 reads, "Solomon completed his *whole* house" (translation mine). "The implication," says Iain Provan, "is that Solomon not only spent more time on the palace project, but also pushed it through to completion before fully finishing his work on the temple."²¹ This explains why the account of the palace building has been inserted between 6:38 and 7:13. Solomon gave priority to building projects that rivaled the temple, whereupon his kingdom began to unravel. The pivot puts a sharp point to this passage's abstract message: a kingdom fails when leaders put their own interests before God's.

10. Janus

Janus refers to a literary unit that looks back and forth to unite the units before and after. This term comes from the Roman god of doorways, a god with one head and two faces looking both ways. It finds its way into our vocabulary in the word *January*, the month that looks back on the past year and forward to the new year.

Janus passages are used as part of the overall structure in Genesis, which is divided into sections by the refrain "These are the accounts of the line of" (*tôlê dôt*). Between each of these sections is a short pericope that connects the *tôlê dôt* (cf. Gen. 4:25–26; 6:1–8; 9:18–27, etc.). Many interpreters fail to understand the function of these janus passages and so fail to relate the material to both the preceding and following texts.

11. Gap and Blank

A *gap* is an intentional omission whereas a *blank* is an inconsequential omission. The narrator blanks Isaac's reaction when his father offered to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah, because his reaction is irrelevant to this story about the test of Abraham's faith (Gen. 22:1–18). Some omissions, however, are clearly gaps. The Chronicler, in contrast to the Deuteronomist, omits the David

and Bathsheba adultery episode because he wants to idealize Israel's greatest king. Likewise, the ten *tôlê dôl* of Genesis mention, among others, the nonelect descendants of Ishmael (25:12) and of Esau (36:1). However, there is no *tôlê dôl* of Abraham (i.e., a narrative about his descendant Isaac). This omission of such magnitude can hardly be considered inconsequential. This silence shouts its message: Isaac, the miracle baby, by his putting his sensuality before God, miscarries in life (see [chap. 12.III. C](#)). Sometimes, however, the line between blanks and gaps is less clear-cut, and a doctrine should never be based on an argument from silence.^{[22](#)}

12. Anachrony

Anachrony is a textual feature whereby the narrator tells the story out of order or withholds information and reveals it later for dramatic effect. The temple scene at Bethel in Genesis 28 is a case in point. The narrator uses this story to give insight into what a temple is about. The setting of the scene is critical: Jacob uses a rock as a pillow at a "certain place" as night is fast approaching—in other words, at an unpromising, barren no-place. But what appears to be no-place becomes in Jacob's dream the axis between heaven and earth. In his dream Jacob's eyes are opened, and he sees angels ascending and descending on a stairway. Upon awaking, Jacob exclaims, "Surely *I AM* is in this place, and I was not aware of it," and then cries out, "How awesome is this place!" The message: in the eyes of the world God's temple may seem to be a no-place, but the eye of faith sees it for what it really is: the axis between heaven and earth.^{[23](#)}

The anachrony, however, occurs in verse 19: "He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz." What had been labeled at the beginning of the narrative as "a certain place" is identified at the end as the significant Canaanite city of Luz. This anachrony expresses a correlative message: a place cannot become significant to the covenant partners until it loses its "Canaanite" (i.e., worldly) significance and becomes a no-place where God can manifest his glory. Fokkelman writes,

By the theophany, Canaanite Luz has been exposed, leached, purged to the zero-state of "a place." God does not want to appear to Jacob in a Canaanite town, but he wants to appear in a nothing which only his appearing will turn into a something, but then no less than a House of God. Where the history of the covenant between YHWH and his people begins, all preceding things grow pale. Canaan loses its face, Luz is deprived of its identity paper.^{[24](#)}

Another example: by putting the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 before the division of languages in [chapter 11](#), the narrator places the nations under Noah's prophecies, not under Babel's curse.

13. Generalization and Particularization

In the telling of a story, the focus of the text moves either toward becoming more specific or more comprehensive. In the prologue to Genesis (1:1–2:3), the focus of the text is on the cosmic level. But in the first *tôlê dôl* the text focuses on the first humans, a movement from the cosmic level to the human level. The first creation account features the ontological equality of the man and the woman: both are in the image of God and together are to subdue the earth. The second creation narrative features their governmental relationship: God gave the husband his bride to help him in their common task. Judges 2 is a generalized description of cycles of Judges. From there it moves toward the particular narratives of individual Judges. Proverbs 1:10 warns against the seduction of sin; verses 11–14 explicate the seduction; verses 15–18 explicate the danger of yielding to temptation.

14. Scenic Depiction

The depiction of the environments in which the narrative takes place enriches the text's meaning. Second Samuel 15:30–16:9 charts David's ascent up the Mount of Olives and then his descent into the rift of Jordan as he flees Jerusalem. At the summit his loyal friend Hushai is there to meet him. A short distance beyond the summit, Ziba, who is ambiguous in his allegiances (loyal to David the king, but disloyal to Mephibosheth, his master) waits for him. As he approaches Bahurim, which was farther down the slope, the despicable Shimei, a member of Saul's clan, comes out to curse David. The relationship of these three who meet the fleeing David corresponds to his geography, assuming the summit is best and the lowest point the worst. This is reversed later when David goes back up the mountain on his return to Jerusalem.

15. Preparation/Foreshadow

A foreshadow refers to an element in the story that hints at a later development in the plot. In the account of Isaac (i.e., the narrative about Jacob and Esau) the narrator hints, in his introduction of the twins, of the full-blown conflict in Genesis 26:34–28:9 between Jacob and Rebekah in their rival loves

for Esau and Jacob: “Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a complete [*tam*] man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:27–28, translation mine).

A species of this genus is the introduction to the plot. A narrator typically prepares his audience with a few set-up sentences for the plot, called the “exposition.” Shimon Bar-Efrat explains their function:

The situation existing at the beginning of the action is presented in what is usually called the exposition. This serves as an introduction to the action described in the narrative, supplying the background information, introducing the characters, informing us of their names, traits, physical appearance, state in life, and the relations obtaining among them, and providing the other details needed for understanding the story.^{[25](#)}

For example, Genesis 22:1 reads, “Some time later God tested Abraham.” This introduction prepares the reader to understand that what follows is a test of faith, not an actual call by God for child sacrifice. The verse should have prevented those schooled in the history of religions from interpreting the story as a rejection of child sacrifice in the evolution of Israel’s religion. The text is clear: God’s command to Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice aims to test his faith, not to repudiate child sacrifice. Nevertheless, for the test to have meaning, child sacrifice had to be a possibility.^{[26](#)}

Another species of foreshadow is typology (see below).

16. Inclusio

Inclusio refers to a repetition of features at the beginning and end of a unit. An inclusio may function to frame a unit, to stabilize the enclosed material, to emphasize by repetition, and/or to establish a nexus with the intervening material for rhetorical effect. The inclusio “*I AM*, our *I AM*, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1, 9) surprisingly frames a psalm that celebrates human beings’ dominion over the creation. The unexpected juxtaposition points to the psalm’s message: God manifests his greatness when mortals by their childlike dependence upon him put all things under their feet (see below: 3. Allusion).

17. Summarization

In a summarization the author offers a synopsis or abridgment of material that is treated more fully elsewhere. For example, Genesis 2:1, “Thus the heavens

and the earth were complete in all their vast array,” is a summarization of the entire preceding chapter. The message: God created a perfect and full cosmos and overcame the primeval cosmos. The inclusio of Genesis 1:1 and 2:1 are also a summarization of the process of creation detailed in 1:2–31. Both point to God as the Creator and Ruler of all.

18. Interrogation

The author may raise a question or a problem to give his message in the answer that follows. The prologue to the book of Job raises the question among others as to why the righteous suffer. God answers the question by his own set of questions. To these, Job has no answer, and in that lies the message of the book: the faithful must accept the mystery that God allows chaotic energy, such as “proud” seas, darkness that hides evil, destructive hail, predators devouring prey, and so on, to exist within the structured cosmos. Though the chaos is bounded, restrained, and controlled, it is not eliminated.

19. Intercalation

Intercalation is the insertion of one literary unit in the midst of another. For example, the appendix of Judges 17–21 breaks the chronological flow of the Primary History from the generation of Samson to that of Samuel. By clearly marking off the intercalation by its own inclusios and by its distinct structure and subject matter that stand apart from the main narrative scheme, the author makes the telling point that Israel failed in the dark days of the war because the Levites and priests failed (see [chap. 21](#).I.A and VI.B).

II. INTERTEXTUALITY

A. Definition

Intertextuality is the phenomenon whereby one passage of Scripture refers to another.²⁷ Instances of intertextuality that involve an inner biblical exegesis, wherein later texts transform earlier ones by deepening, expanding, or revising them, best serve the task of biblical theology.²⁸ Later texts by charismatic figures — be they prophets (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), prophet historians (e.g., the Deuteronomist and Chronicler), or an authorized exegete (such as Ezra) — occasionally transform the teachings of earlier texts of charismatic figures (such as Moses).²⁹ In no case, however, do later Old Testament writers reverse Moses' teaching (cf. Deut. 13; 18), although the prophets do anticipate a new age in which reversals will come. Jesus Christ, in conjunction with his apostles, as the Son of God and by being so much greater than Moses, reverses some earlier teachings in fulfillment of this prophetic expectation. He does so in order to do away with the shadows of ceremonies and allow their true significance to shine forth, to elevate ethical standards of the civil laws, or to extend salvation history beyond Israel to all humanity.

Subtle repetitions that infer some thematic or ideational connection provide a complex structure showing that the Bible, including both testaments, is a unity, and by their rhetorical suppleness and subtlety propound a message that evokes conviction and agreement to the Bible's truth.³⁰ In any case, in this section we seek to discern and describe an accredited method for determining the phenomena of intertextuality or inner biblical exegesis that enables us to write our vision of tracing transcendent themes and ideas through the Bible in order to expound the message of the Old Testament and to the extent possible the message of the whole Bible.

B. Transformative versus Nontransformative

Intertextuality

Our purpose is not served by noting texts that are nontransformative. When later writers merely use earlier ones to fortify or explain their message and/or to embellish their rhetoric, they do not advance or deepen theology. In other cases, however, later writers interpret earlier writings to meet new historical situations and so advance our understanding.

For example, Fishbane notes the use of Deuteronomy 7:1 and 23:7 in Ezra 9:1–2, 11–12. The leaders of the returning exiles to the land complained that the “people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites” (Ezra 9:1–2). Ezra interprets this as a disregarding of God’s earlier commands: “The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time” (Ezra 9:11–12).

Actually, Ezra, “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6), combines into one command three earlier divine commands that are found in Exodus 34:15; Deuteronomy 7:3; and 23:6 (cf. Deut. 11:8; Lev. 18:25–28; Deut. 9:4). Instructively, the leaders add to the old Pentateuchal list of condemned nations the names of the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Egyptians.³¹ But precisely these three are added to the list of the population groups explicitly prohibited from entering the “congregation of the *I AM*” in Deuteronomy 23:3–8 [4–9].³² Probably the leaders added these three to extend the older Pentateuchal provisions to the new times, and Ezra, along with the Deuteronomist (1 Kings 11:1–2), combined Deuteronomy 7:3 with 23:4–9. “Accordingly, the mechanism for prohibiting intermarriage with the Ammonites, Moabites, and other peoples is an exegetical extension of the law in Deuteronomy 7:1–3 effected by means of an adaptation and interpolation of features from Deuteronomy 23:4–9 [Eng. 23:3–8].”³³

Turning from legal literature to the prophetic contrasts a possible nontransformative use of Zephaniah (3:3) by Ezekiel (22:27) with a transformative use of Genesis 1 in Isaiah’s messages to the exiles.³⁴ The additions in Ezekiel are indicated by italics.

Her princes in her midst are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves,

who leave nothing for the morning. (Zeph. 3:3)

... her princes³⁵ within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her. (Ezek. 22:25)

Ezekiel's expansion merely explains Zephaniah's tropes and do not advance theology.

Now consider the transformative use of Genesis 1 in Isaiah. My exegesis of Genesis 1 leads me to draw the conclusion that God steps creatively into the primordial abyss and darkness to transform it into the magnificent, ordered, and balanced universe we know. In other words, the *tōhû wābōhû* ("formless and empty") state of darkness that covered the watery abyss is ambiguously represented in Genesis 1:1–3 as already in existence at the time the Creator transformed it into our cosmos. My exegesis also leads me to draw the conclusion that the ambiguous "us/our" in God's statement "let us make *ʾādām* in our image, in our likeness" (1:26) refers to God and his angelic court. But the interpretation of Genesis 1:1–3 leaves unanswered where the primordial abyss originated. Are we to imagine an eternal dualism between God and inert matter? And our interpretation of "us" as a reference to the heavenly court raises the questions of how the angelic court was involved in the making of *ʾādām* and in what sense *ʾādām* is like God.

Later biblical thinkers apparently raised similar questions. The exiles in Babylon had to contend against the indigenous national religion of Babylon that held that their patron deity Marduk consulted wise Ea in his pantheon of deities to counsel him vis-à-vis the creation.³⁶ Exiles in Persia confronted the cosmological dualism of Zoroastrianism, which envisioned an eternal battle between light and darkness. Isaiah provides answers. To answer the question of where the primordial abyss originated, Isaiah quotes God as saying, "I form the light and create darkness" (Isa. 45:7). To the two questions relating to the angelic court and *adam*, the prophet emphatically denies that the Creator consulted with anyone (40:13–14) or that any creature compares to him or is his equal (40:25).³⁷

Often the line between transformative and nontransformative intertextuality becomes attenuated. For example, David says, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have dug out.... Then I said, 'Here I am ...'" (Ps. 40:6–7, translation mine). The writer of Hebrews cites these verses according to the Septuagint: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.... Then I said, 'Here I am'" (10:5, 7). Superficially, the

difference between “my ears you dug out” and “a body you prepared for me” seem inexplicably different until one realizes that the Septuagint, like modern translations, sometimes explains tropes in the Hebrew text. The psalmist’s ear is a synecdoche, a *pars pro toto*, for his whole body. If God has David’s obedient ear to do his will, then in effect he also has his body. On the one hand, then, the Septuagint merely explains the trope. On the other hand, the clarification deepens the meaning, for it is now clear that the psalmist’s obedience entails offering his whole body as a sacrifice in place of animal sacrifices, as the writer of Hebrews argues.

We now turn to analyze various kinds of transformative inner exegesis. Although we schematize these techniques for clarity of understanding, in practice they often occur in conjunction with one another.

C. Kinds of Intertextuality

1. Citation

A clearly marked path along which the biblical witnesses move is their citing of earlier passages.³⁸ The other methods to discover a nexus between an earlier text and later ones, such as by allusion and typology, are less certain. Svend Holm-Nielsen remarked: “Often what looks like a quotation may be due to a coincidence.... It must in part be a matter of opinion whether in a context it may be supposed that there is a use of the *O.T.* or an accidental agreement in diction.”³⁹

We already noted both how the repetition of verses binds the books of the Primary History into a unified block of writing and an example of Ezra’s transformative use of three Mosaic laws to meet the restored community’s problem of mixed marriage. Another possible transformation can be seen in the extension of the law in Leviticus 21:5–6 prohibiting the priests from making their heads bald to a proscription in Deuteronomy 14:1–2 prohibiting Israelites from making themselves bald in mourning their dead (cf. Isa. 22:12; Jer. 41:5; 47:5; 48:37; Mic. 1:14), probably because all Israel is a kingdom of priests and a holy people to *I AM* (Exod. 19:6).⁴⁰

2. Key Words and Motifs

Just as the repetition of a key word gives coherence and focus to an individual

text, so also the repetition of abstract words in numerous texts may signal their intertextual connections and biblical themes. For example, “sin,” “fear,” “righteousness,” “unfailing love,” and “law”⁴¹ often become part of themes that transcend many texts, such as “sin and Satan,” “sin of man,” “fear of *I AM*” “righteousness of God,” and so on. Motifs, metaphorical words and phrases, also bind biblical books and the two testaments together; they too signify themes: “seed,” “land,” “covenant,” “circumcision,” “temple,” “stone,” “vine,” and “light” connote a whole complex of biblical concepts. These too may become incorporated into “seed of the woman,” “land of Canaan,” “Mosaic covenant,” and “new covenant.”

Developments in the use of key words and motifs assist biblical theologians in the quest for the history of doctrine within the Bible. For example, *drš*, with the sense of “to inquire” in the preexilic period refers to oracular inquiry through the priest (Exod. 18:15) or through a prophet (1 Kings 22:8). Sometimes the inquirer probably went (*halak*) to a cultic site (Gen. 25:22; 2 Chron. 16:12; Ps. 34:4 [5]), but not necessarily (1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kings 14:5; 2 Kings 1:16; 3:11; 8:8; 22:13, 18; 2 Chron. 34:21, 26; Jer. 21:2; 37:7; Ezek. 14:7, 10; 20:1, 3). Many preexilic texts forbid inquiry of other gods, the dead, and the spirits of the dead (Deut. 12:30; 18:10–11; 1 Sam. 28:7). But in Ezra 7:10, *drš* significantly refers to “inquire [*drš*] of the Torah of *I AM*.” “Here,” says Fishbane, “the text of the divine words serves, as it were, as an *oraculum* for rational-exegetical inquiry,” a use already found in Deuteronomy 13:14; 17:4, 9; and 19:18.⁴²

In postbiblical Judaism, “midrash” means approximately the same thing as “exposition,” “explanation,” or “commentary” of/on a scriptural passage. “In a comparable manner,” Fishbane adds, “the verb *prsh* is first found in connection with the oracular inquiries of Leviticus 24:12 and Numbers 15:34, but is used in postexilic sources as an entirely rational mode of explanation or exposition of the Torah of Moses” (Neh. 8:8). This transformation suggests a development from faithful inquiring of charismatic figures before the completion of the canon to the study of the Scriptures after its completion. In the old dispensation the trajectory moved from inquiring of prophets to inquiring of scribes toward the completion of the Old Testament canon, and in the New Testament from the apostles to faithful teachers in conjunction with the completion of the New Testament canon (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:14–4:2).

In the New Testament, Christ and his church bring the Old Testament motifs and themes to fulfillment. Christ is the true “seed” of Abraham; in him the “land” becomes Christified;⁴³ he mediates and effects the “new covenant”; his Spirit “circumcises” the heart; he is the true “temple,” “light of the world,” and

“vine”; he is the “stone” the builders rejected, and the individuals who form the church are the stones forming a temple that is built on him and his apostles.

3. Allusion

Closely related to citations and key words/motifs are allusions, which employ a lexical field in conjunction with semantics. To spot an allusion is more an intuitive art than a scientific demonstration. Dale C. Allison Jr. argues that Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I have a dream” speech enlarges its meaning through tacit references to famous predecessors. It opens with “Five score years ago,” a manifest allusion to Abraham Lincoln’s first words in his Gettysburg Address (“Four score and seven years ago”). Other allusions: “This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality” echoes “Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by the son of York,” the opening line from Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (I.i – iii); “No, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” draws upon Amos 5:24. “So let freedom ring” takes up the language of the old Protestant hymn composed by Samuel Francis Smith, “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.” Allison then argues,

King’s transformation of traditional texts was much more than ornamentation; it was rather a studied means of persuading hearts and minds. His echo of the Gettysburg Address was a way of claiming that his cause was the completion of what Lincoln had begun. When King alluded to Shakespeare, he was telling the whites in his audience: You cannot ignore me, I know your European tradition as well as you do. When he quoted from the Bible, an authority for both the white and African American communities, he was in effect asserting: God is on my side. And King’s embedded quotation from the Declaration of Independence and from Smith’s nationalistic hymn announced that he was a patriot.... All this he was saying indirectly, through allusion.⁴⁴

The New Testament writers similarly cite the Old Testament sources in part as a polemic against the Jewish scribes who prided themselves upon their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and to refute the Jewish midrashic interpretations of the Old Testament. The index of *The Greek New Testament*, edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black et al., cites more than two thousand quotations and allusions from the Old Testament in the New Testament!⁴⁵ By

these citations and allusions, the apostles, in addition to enlarging their messages, implicitly are telling the Jewish teachers of the Law, “We know the Scriptures as well as you.”

Let us return to Psalm 8 as an instructive example of David’s inspired allusion to Genesis 1:26–28 to advance the theme of human superiority over the rest of the creation, and Job’s and Eliphaz’s uninspired inversion of David’s allusion.⁴⁶ David transforms the creation account into a paean of praise to Israel’s God:

I AM, our I AM,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory
⊃⊃⊃⊃ upon the heavens.
From the lips of children and infants
⊃⊃⊃⊃ you have laid the foundations [*ysd*] of a strong [bulwark]⁴⁷
⊃⊃⊃⊃ to silence the foe and the one who avenges himself.

When I consider your heavens,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ which you have set in place, what [*mh*] is man [*ʔenôš*] that [*kî*] you
are mindful of him,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ the son of man that you care for him [*tpqdnw*]?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
⊃⊃⊃⊃ and crowned him with glory and honor.

You made him ruler over the works of your hands;
⊃⊃⊃⊃ you put everything under his feet:
all flocks and herds,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ and the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ and the fish of the sea,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ all that swim in the paths of the seas.

I AM, our I AM,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ how majestic is your name in all the earth! (translation mine)

The lexical parallels of verses 6–8 with “let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth” (Gen. 1:26) puts

beyond reasonable doubt the poet's transformation of the creation narrative into a hymn.

However, Job, who represents a viewpoint other than that of the narrator of the book of Job, inverts David's rhetorical question of praise, "What is man?" into a satirical sneer vis-à-vis his personal misfortunes: "What [mh] is man [^enôš] that [kî] you raise him up, and that you put [*tāšîṭ*] your mind on him? You take account of him (*tpqdnw*) every morning, and test him continuously" (Job 7:17–18, translation mine). In other words, God's exaltation of humankind results in a scrupulous divine presence holding him accountable for every offense.

Eliphaz, whose viewpoint differs from both Job's and the narrator's, plays upon the rhetorical question to redirect the argument against Job: "What is man, that he could be pure?" He also plays with David's testimony "You have made him a little lower than the angels": "If God places no trust in his holy ones ... how much less man, who is vile and corrupt" (Job 15:14–16). According to Eliphaz, what Job is saying of himself is the just fate of all mortals. Although intending to debunk Job's self-pity, Eliphaz actually compounds the discrepancy between the divine intention for humanity and the historical reality of its fate because of sin. In Eliphaz's theology, mortals do not fulfill their destiny but suffer instead because they are guilty before God and deserve his judgment.

Although the theologies of Job and his friend are seriously flawed, by noting the harsh reality that humankind's destiny and standing before God have been reversed by the Fall, they strip humans of an unthinking piety that God is majestic and of pretense to an exalted status. In fact, however, Job and Eliphaz, along with many modern commentators, miss David's resolution to the tension between the Creator's intention for man's glorious status as the pinnacle of all creation and the obvious reality that human beings, instead of subduing all, are defeated by death and return to dust. For David, the resolution lies in childlike faith to enable the faithful to reign over all their enemies, including death itself. God's intention for mortals is realized in a fallen world "from the mouths [a metonymy in the Psalter for petitions and praises] of children and infants [a metaphor for God's dependent people] who lay the foundations of a strong bulwark [in their struggle] to silence the enemy and the one who avenges himself [rather than trusting God]" (v. 2).⁴⁸ For this reason the psalmist praises *I AM*, not man. The inclusio, "I AM, our *I AM*, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" sets the psalm's boundaries and sounds its theme (vv. 1, 9). In sum, David's allusion to Genesis 1:26–28 develops the theme of humankind's mandated dominion over creation to its fulfillment after the Fall by asserting that

mortals triumph in achieving their destiny through childlike trust in God.

The writer of Hebrews transforms the theme still further. He develops his treatise on the superiority of Jesus Christ with amazing transformations of several psalms (e.g., Pss. 8, 40, 95, 110). In Psalm 8:4 “son of man” refers to a common person as the parallel ^[*ʔe*nôš] (“man in his weakness”) shows. David expresses his amazement that God made such persons only a little lower than the angels by placing them as rulers over the whole creation. But the writer of Hebrews narrows “son of man” to the apocalyptic “son of man” of Daniel 7 and of First Enoch, whom he equates with Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:7). Moreover, he gives a new twist on the basis of the Septuagint to the meaning of “a little lower.” In Greek “a little lower” (*braxu ti*) signifies “for a little time,” in contrast to the Hebrew *m^{ec}at*, which is usually regarded as referring to rank.⁴⁹ Thus, according to Hebrews, the Son of Man, who represents his people, is made for a little while lower than the angels. But through Christ’s humiliating death and victorious resurrection, the Son of Man pioneered the way for the faithful from their humiliating sufferings to their final exaltation when they will achieve their intended destiny. In sum, by allusions we can trace the trajectory of the important theme of humankind’s dominion from their creation to the eschaton.

Allusions commonly merge with typology. For example, by employing lexical and semantic correspondences between the Gibeahites and the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18–19, the charismatic author of Judges subtly indicts the tribe of Benjamin for having become like the Sodomites whom *I AM* utterly destroyed. But unlike his treatment of Sodom, *I AM* spares a remnant of Benjamin (Judg. 20–21). In the New Testament the Sodomites become a type, a paradigm, of the total destruction of all godless people whom *I AM* hands over to sex and violence (2 Peter 2:6; cf. Matt. 11:23–24; Rom. 1:18–32; 9:29).

4. Salvation History

As noted earlier, *Heilsgeschichte* refers to the biblical texts propounding a glorious progressive history of redemption that runs through the entire biblical corpus, from the creation of the world to its fulfillment in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and finally his second coming, which introduces the eschaton. The Israel of God establishes and advances the kingdom of God against the gates of hell itself. Their progressive redemption transcends the generations and gives a grand unity to the Bible. Intertextuality is largely based on this Old Testament’s “openness to the future” in this progressive redemption of the people of God. David L. Baker comments, “A significant aspect of Old Testament faith and religion is its expectation of the future, as has

been widely recognized in modern scholarship.”⁵⁰

5. Prophecy

Prophecy is a specific kind of citation. God’s rule over history and his “openness to the future” found concrete expression in his covenants with his faithful servants Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and above all Jesus Christ (Gen. 9:1–17; 15–17; Exod. 19; 2 Sam. 7; Jer. 31:31–34; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8). These covenants inform the prophetic vision of “Israel’s” future. Prophets envisioned its future in terms of the fulfillment of the covenant’s threatened curses and promised blessings. Their prophecies can be roughly classified as proclamations of reproach and/or doom and of salvation beyond judgment. Ernst Würthwein⁵¹ and Robert Bach⁵² show that Amos, Israel’s earliest writing prophet (ca. 850 BC), based his doom oracles on the Pentateuchal legislation. Fishbane agrees:

Amos’s critique of oppression in 4:1 and 8:4 recalls Deuteronomy 24:14; his critique of extortion through liens and loans recalls Deuteronomy 23:20; his critique of the perversions of justice and the taking of bribes in 2:7 and 5:7, 10, 12 recalls Deuteronomy 16:19; his critique of manipulating weights and measures in 8:5 recalls Deuteronomy 25:13–14; and his critique of the misuse of security deposits in 2:8 recalls Deuteronomy 24:17.⁵³

Fishbane concludes that there is “a strong impression made by the sources that Amos was aware of ancient Israelite legal traditions, and that he made use of them in the course of his diatribes and forecasts of doom.”⁵⁴

Micah, who wrote in the generation after Amos, draws his writing to conclusion with a salvation oracle in direct address to God: “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago” (Mic. 7:19–20). Note Micah’s allusion to the Exodus and its spiritual transformation: hurling Pharaoh and his army into the depths of the sea now becomes a metaphor of a future hurling of all Israel’s iniquities into the depths of the sea (v. 19). In that connection God will fulfill his promise to the patriarchs to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and to bless the earth (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 28:14). That promise is fulfilled in the church (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:6–29; Heb. 11:12). Salvation history validates these covenants and the prophecies based on

them. This palpable prophetic intertextuality also enables the theologian to uncover and trace the development of themes and ideas through the Bible that proclaim its message “Thy kingdom come.”

Of striking importance for biblical theology are prophecies that foresee in Israel’s golden age remarkable expansions or even reversals of the Mosaic law. Recall that the restored exiles faced a serious problem of mixed marriages between themselves and the indigenous occupants of Canaan. The reformers Ezra and Nehemiah met the threat by systematically excluding the autochthonous population from any part in restored Israel, including a share in its temple (Ezra 9–10). In fact, Nehemiah, though a layman and not a priest, entered the temple courts and threw Tobiah, an Ammonite official, and all his household goods out of his temple room. But Isaiah, addressing the same restored community, predicted that when God’s full glory appears over Zion, nations will come to Zion’s light, their sacrifices will be accepted on his altar, and foreigners will rebuild Zion’s walls. The light of God’s presence will transform the cosmos itself:

The sun will no more be your light by day,
☺☺☺☺nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for *I AM* will be your everlasting light
☺☺☺☺and your God will be your glory. (Isa. 60:19)

The ancient law excluding the eunuch from the assembly of *I AM* will be repealed (Deut. 23:1; Isa. 56:4–5). The burnt offerings and sacrifices of those with maimed genitalia will be accepted on my altar (Isa. 56:4–7), a very different tone from the old priestly regulations (Lev. 21:16–23). Similarly, the reformers reconstructed the second Jewish commonwealth according to the restrictions of the Mosaic law so that only proven descendants of Aaron could serve as priests (Ezra 2). But Isaiah, also addressing the returnees, predicts that in the new day, all Israelites will serve as priests:

And you will be called priests of *I AM*,
☺☺☺☺you will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of nations
☺☺☺☺and in their riches you will boast. (61:6)

In a nutshell, Moses and the reformers kept Israel pure by laws separating them from the impure, but Isaiah envisions the day when the hearts of misfits will be purified, making them fit to join Israel in its covenant privileges.

Jesus Christ and his apostles frequently cite the Old Testament to confirm the Christian testimony that Jesus is the Christ who inaugurates the glorious new day that Isaiah envisioned. He is the light that shines in the darkness; his Father glorified him, and his apostles saw the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1–4), symbolized by his transfiguration when his clothes became dazzling white (Mark 9:1–4). He is the Light of the World whose followers never walk in darkness (John 8:12) and whom the Greeks seek (12:20–21). By his sacrifice he tore the temple curtain (Matt. 27:51), signifying that by faith in Christ’s death for their sins, all may enter God’s presence as intercessory priests (Heb. 4:16; 9:3, 8). His cross smashed the walls separating Jews and Gentiles; now all believers are “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:19–22).

The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized into the Son of God and went away rejoicing (Acts 8:36–39). Christ signified the new age administered by the Spirit in regenerated humanity by declaring all foods that enter the stomach are clean—what matters is a pure heart (Mark 7:19), whereupon he healed a faithful Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30). He rejected the blood bonds that united his family in favor of spiritual bonds that united him with his disciples (Mark 3:31–35). By commanding Peter to eat unclean food, he symbolized that today none is unclean by blood or history, but that all who fear God are clean (Acts 10:9–16, 28, 34–35).

Christ and his disciples cite Psalm 110 more than any other text. And no wonder, for David, Israel’s greatest king, in an inspired oracle addresses his son as his lord and master. *I AM* himself swears that David’s lord belongs to the order of Melchizedek, who, unlike Aaron, is a king-priest (i.e., a warrior-priest) who conquers and rules the world. The prophecy and its fulfillment significantly advance the theology. The Messiah transcends the greatest king, and the division between Aaronic priests and Davidic kings is replaced by an Anointed One who combines in himself both offices.

C. H. Dodd argues convincingly that the apostolic community selected certain large sections of the Old Testament and understood them as testimonies to Jesus Christ. He further argued that, although the early Christian scholars quoted only particular verses or sentences, these citations were understood as pointers to the whole context: “In the fundamental passages it is the *total context* that is in view.”⁵⁵ For example, the cry of Jesus Christ on the cross, “My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46), a citation from David’s cry in Psalm 22:1, resonates also with David’s praise at the end of that psalm: “[God] has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help” (v. 24; cf. Heb. 5:7). That Matthew thinks of the entire psalm as a reference to Christ’s crucifixion finds confirmation in his other citations from the psalm (Matt. 27:35 and Ps. 22:18; Matt. 27:39 and Ps. 22:7; Matt. 27:43 and Ps. 22:8; cf. John 19:23–24, 28). In other words, Jesus’ passionate cry on the cross also entails his victorious resurrection from the dead (cf. Heb. 2:12).

6. Typology

Typology is a unique specie of promise and fulfillment. Whereas prophecy is concerned with prospective words and their fulfillment, typology is concerned with comparative historical events, persons, and institutions recorded in the Bible. Types are recognized by contradictions and retrospect.

Pascal rightly reasons: “Every author has a meaning in which all the contradictory passages agree, or he has no meaning at all. We cannot affirm the latter of Scripture and the prophets.”⁵⁶ In the case of Scripture we find that most of its apparent contradictions can be explained by recognizing the literal as a type of the spiritual. For example, it is said that circumcision in the flesh is “an everlasting [*’ôlām*] covenant” (Gen. 17:13), that the land is an everlasting [*’ôlām*] gift (Gen. 48:4), that the Passover ritual is a lasting [*’ôlām*] ordinance, that the priesthood is Aaron’s by a “lasting [*’ôlām*] ordinance” and that the priests’ sacrifices are “an everlasting covenant of salt” (Num. 18:19), and that David’s throne is established forever (Ps. 89:3–4). Nevertheless, it is well known that circumcision in the flesh has no value (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15), that the sacrifices have been done away (Heb. 8–10), and that Israel has had no land for two millennia and has had no throne for two and a half millennia. Indeed, Hosea predicted that Israel would be without a king or prince (3:4), and Micah predicted that God would abandon Israel (5:3 [2]). These contradictions are readily reconciled when it is understood that the carnal form is a type of the eternal spiritual reality. Sacrifices are either pleasing or displeasing according to the spiritual state of the worshiper. This is not an ad hoc harmonization: this is what Moses (cf. Deut. 30:6), the prophets (Jer. 31:31–34), and Jesus and his disciples taught.

Types are also recognized in retrospect as prototypes, patterns, or figures of later historical persons, events, or places. G. W. Lampe defines a type as “primarily a method of *historical* interpretation, based upon the continuity of God’s purpose through the history of his covenant. It seeks to demonstrate the

correspondence between the various stages in the fulfillment of that purpose.”⁵⁷ A “type” is also a species of the poetic techniques. All poetics and intertextuality depend on repetitions of some sort, but more specifically type entails “foreshadow,” “comparison,” “contrast,” “climax.” Typology pertains to the study of comparative events, not just words, that bind texts together and to the study of the contrast between the earlier and inferior type and its fulfillment in the later superior antitype. Typology does not pertain merely to a repeated pattern, like a refrain, but to a superior fulfillment that advances salvation history. The Bible’s unique Authorship and unity (see [chap. 2](#)) lays the basis for this eschatological typology — that is to say, God intended earlier persons, acts, and institutions to present a type or shadow or pattern of future greater fulfillment. Frances Foulkes regarded the earlier acts of God as paradigmatic for Israel’s subsequent comprehension of their history and structure of their future expectation.⁵⁸

Robert Alter gives a striking example in the obviously unified narrative of Balaam and his donkey (Num. 22:2–24:25).

Balaam goes riding off on his ass to answer Balak’s invitation. In the typical folktale pattern, there are three occurrences of the same incident, the ass shying away from the sword-brandishing angel Balaam cannot see, each time with a more discomfiting effect on her rider: first he is carried into a field, then he is squeezed against a fence, and finally the ass simply lies down under him. When he begins to beat her furiously for the third time, the Lord “opens up her mouth” (elsewhere Balaam repeatedly insists that he can speak only “what the Lord puts in my mouth”), and she complains, “What have I done to you that you should have beaten me these three times?” (Nu. 22:28). The author, one notes, makes a point of calling our attention to the three times, for the number will be important in the second half of the story. Balaam in his wrath hardly seems to notice the miraculous gift of speech but responds as though he were accustomed to having daily domestic wrangles with his asses (Nu. 22:29) Meanwhile, of course, the unseen angel has been standing by, sword in hand. Only when God chooses finally to reveal to Balaam the armed angel standing in the way does the irate seer repent for ill-treating the innocent creature.

It seems fairly clear that the ass in this episode plays the role of Balaam — beholding divine visions with eyes unveiled — to Balaam’s Balak. The parallel between the two halves of the story is emphasized by the fact that in Balaam’s prophecies there are again three symmetrically arranged occurrences of the same incident, each time with greater discomfit to Balak.

In Balaam's prophetic imagery, first Israel is spread out like dust, then crouched like a lion, and finally rises like a star, so that the Moabite king, waiting for a first-class imprecation, is progressively reduced to impotent fury, quite in the manner of Balaam's blind rage against the wayward ass.⁵⁹

Instructively, Balaam is said to have become angry only after the ass had made a fool of the prophet three times (Num. 22:23, 25, 27, 32–33), and Balak is said to be angry with Balaam only after the prophet had made a fool of the king three times (Num. 24:10). The repetition and escalation of the events provoke wonder in Providence and proclaim the message that *I AM* unveils the eyes of a prophet to see the otherwise invisible divine Sovereign who rules history.

The Old Testament is full of types of people and historical events, but none surpasses Moses and Israel's exodus from Egypt. This should not be surprising. Jacques Ellul⁶⁰ and Paul Ricoeur⁶¹ both stress the formative influence of a group's founding moment on its self-understanding. This is effected particularly through the group's revivification of its founding moment, such as in Israel's Passover elevated to the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. Israel celebrated annually in song and ritual this formative epoch in their history: Moses mediated God's deliverance by destroying their oppressors with signs and wonders. He mediated their salvation and sanctification by the Passover. With a mighty wind from heaven, *I AM* delivered them through the Red Sea. *I AM*'s presence preserved them with food and water in a barren wilderness. Moses mediated God's law on Mount Zion, to which the elect people had come to worship. Finally, he brought the founding generation through great affliction to the Sworn Land.

The exodus of Moses and of the first generation became a type of Joshua's and the second generation's conquest of the land. *I AM* assured Joshua that he would exalt him and be with him, "as I was with Moses" (Josh. 3:7). *I AM* dried up the Jordan waters, "just what he had done to the Red Sea" (4:23). He instructed Joshua, as he had Moses (Exod. 3:5), to take off his sandals so that he would not defile with their dirt the "holy" ground on which he was standing (Josh. 5:13–15). Israel crossed the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month (4:19), the time enjoined by Exodus 12:3 as the beginning of Passover, which they celebrated as soon as they came into Canaan, on the fourteen day of the month (Josh. 5:10–12). The Passover began the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod. 12:17–18), and the river crossers ate unleavened bread on the morrow of the Passover according to the regulations of Leviticus 23:5–6.

It also became a type of Israel's deliverance from Israel's exile from Assyria and especially from Babylon. This deliverance, often called "the second exodus"

in truth is a third exodus. Abraham's exodus from Egypt foreshadowed Israel's exodus from Egypt four centuries later: God sends a famine (Gen. 12:10; 47:4); the Egyptians afflict them (12:12–15; Exod. 1:11–14); God plagues the Egyptians (Gen. 12:17; Exod. 7:14–12:30); the Egyptians let them go with great wealth (Gen. 12:16, 20; Exod. 12:33–36); they return to the land by stages through the wilderness, or desert (Gen. 13:3; Exod. 17:1); and they finally arrive back in the land where they worship *I AM* (Gen. 13:3–4; Exod. 15:13–17; see also Ps. 105:14–15; 1 Cor. 10:1–4).⁶² The repetition typifies the situation and projects it into a greater future.

Returning to the exodus after the Assyrian and Babylonian exile, Isaiah describes this new and even greater exodus in language and imagery drawn from the great exodus from Egypt.

I AM will dry up
⊃⊃⊃⊃the gulf of the Egyptian Sea;
with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand
⊃⊃⊃⊃over the Euphrates River.
He will break it up into seven streams
⊃⊃⊃⊃so that men can cross over in sandals. (Isa. 11:15–16)

His reference to seven streams draws its imagery, not its theology, from theomachies, pagan myths that describe a creator deity in battle with chaos deities to effect the creation.

Klaus Koch argues that “Ezra’s march from Babylonia to Jerusalem was a cultic process which Ezra understood as a new exodus from exile. He departs Babylon during the first month, just when the Exodus from Egypt occurred (cf. Exod. 12:2; Num. 33:3). The delay at the river Ahawa because no Levite had arrived, seems ... conceivable only against the background of the order of the march through the desert after the original Exodus.”⁶³ Fishbane continues his analogies: When the returnees “went up” from their captivity, “they took with them silver and gold to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:4–6; cf. Exod 12:35) Just as the exodus generation and its descendants were warned not to intermarry with the Canaanites and to preserve their holy status (cf. Ex 34:15–16; Deut 7:1–6; cf. Judg 3:3–6), so was the postexilic concern with intermarriage defined in the light of these prohibitions (Ezra 9:1–2). The resettlement was then, typologically, a new conquest.”⁶⁴

EXCURSUS: THE MYTH AND THE PROPHECY

Mary Wakeman, while writing a Ph.D. dissertation,^{*} discovered that although details vary in the twelve theomachies from different ancient cultures that she analyzed, the crucial action that informed the myth remains the same: (1) a repressive monster restraining creation, (2) the defeat of the monster by the heroic god who thereby releases the forces essential for life, and (3) the hero's final control over these forces.

The *Enuma Elish* gives the Chaldean mythical cosmogony: Tiamat leads a formidable host of demons against her children. The young god Marduk comes to their defense. "When Tiamat open[s] her mouth to devour Marduk, he [drives] in the evil wind, in order that she should not be able to close her lips," and while her mouth is open, he throws his magical lance into her inward parts. After chasing and capturing the entire demonic army, Marduk returns to the huge corpse of Tiamat to establish order, the cosmos. By contrast, in a Ugaritic mythical cosmology, Baal destroys his archenemy, "Sir Sea," the "seven-headed monster," with his magical staff. (Recall that in a polemic against this Baal myth, Elisha smote the Jordan with Elijah's cloak (2 Kings 2)).

The Canaanite counterpart to Tiamat is Rahab, the seven-headed Leviathan. By borrowing images from the Canaanite cosmology myths, the prophets transform the emergence of the cosmos from chaotic waters depicted in Gen. 1:2 to a type of Israel's coming into existence at the waters of the Nile (Ps. 74:13, 14; 87:4; Isa. 27:1; 51:9; cf. Job 3:8; 26:12, 13). Indeed, they effectively blend these two types into one to describe Israel's new exodus from the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles. For example, Isaiah 51:9–10 draws together the language of Exod. 14–15 with another pagan theomachy (e.g., "Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?").

By using pagan mythological imagery, the prophets infer that behind Israel's political oppressors stand demonic forces. Finally, by the use of such imagery they infer a typology between God's primordial acts at the beginning and his future ones at the end of time, which has a breadth to include within it the process of time before its full end, "between the *Urzeit*

of origin and the *Endzeit* of hope."⁶⁵

The returnees from the Babylonian exile, however, did not fulfill Isaiah's robust expectations of Israel's transcendent glory vis-à-vis the new exodus. Isaiah 40–55, addressed to the exiles at the end of their captivity, and Haggai and Zechariah, who prophesied at the end of the first generation of returnees, fueled expectations with glorious pictures of Israel's redemption. Malachi, writing somewhat later, gives an insider's look at their frustration and disappointment. Far from the nations flocking to Jerusalem, the returnees were still subject to Persian rule (1:8).⁶⁵ Instead of being a paradise, locusts and drought ruined the crops (3:11). Malachi neutralized their crisis of doubt by reproving them of still not keeping covenant and predicted that in the future God would send a messenger to purify them at the coming of the new age.

Four centuries later, the purifying messenger, John the Baptist, announced the inauguration of that new age. Austin Farrer notes that "like all Christians [Mark] sees our salvation through Jesus as a spiritual exodus and a conquest of the Sworn Land."⁶⁶ Rikki Watts advances this conviction significantly. He argues convincingly that in Mark's gospel Jesus Christ unexpectedly fulfills the hope of Isaiah's long-delayed "new exodus," but that hope is united with Malachi's threat of purifying fire. He finds the combined themes in Mark's prologue: "In line with ancient literary convention, Mark 1:1–3, Mark's only editorial OT citation and opening sentence [from Isa. 40:3 and Mal. 3:1] conveys the conceptual framework for his story. Isaiah 40:3 presages the inauguration of the long-awaited Isaianic new exodus while the Malachi 3:1/Exodus 23:20 conflation ominously highlights the threat inherent in Yahweh's new exodus coming." Watts advances his argument:

Mark's threefold structure comprising Jesus' powerful ministry in Galilee and beyond (Mark 1–9), his leading his "blind" disciples along the "Way" (Mark 10:32–52) and their arrival in Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–22) reprises the Isaianic new exodus schema: the Lord powerfully delivers his people from bondage, leads the "blind" along the new exodus way of deliverance, and arrives triumphantly at Jerusalem. While Jesus' "triumphal entry" is consonant with the Lord's glorious arrival depicted in Isaiah, his cursing of the fig tree and Temple cleansing reprise the threat implied in the opening Malachi citation. At the same time, Jesus' rejection and death fulfill Isaiah's enigmatic "suffering servant."⁶⁷

In brief, Mark structures his gospel in part on the new exodus themes in

Isaiah 40–55 to show that Jesus Christ fulfills the Isaianic new exodus vision.

R. T. France notes that Jesus Christ used the Old Testament in two principal ways: predictions and types.⁶⁸ These evidences of Christ's unity with the Old Testament promises proclaim him Messiah. Leonhard Goppelt draws the conclusion that typology is the dominant and characteristic method of interpretation for the New Testament use of the Old Testament. One thinks here, for example, of the earthly tabernacle, its Aaronic priests and animal sacrifices and the heavenly reality to which Christ entered as king-priest after the order of Melchizedek after he offered himself as the real sacrifice for sin (Heb. 8–10). Hans Walter Wollf says, "The Church of Jesus Christ can understand itself aright only as the eschatological Israel of God."⁶⁹ Baker draws the conclusion that this method of interpreting the Old Testament is not limited to when the New Testament cites the Old Testament; rather, many New Testament allusions to the Old do not refer to specific texts.⁷⁰ There may be validity to interpreters applying the method of typology and of seeing correspondences between an Old Testament event, person, or institution and Jesus Christ and his church where there is no explicit indication of that correspondence, such as in the case of Joseph and Jesus.⁷¹ But they should realize and acknowledge that though their interpretations may be spiritually evoked, they should not invest their interpretation with the authority of a canonical text or demean those who question the correspondence.

7. Conceptualization

Texts may also be connected by conceptualization. For example, as will be shown (see p. 150), themes such as people, land, law, rebellion, exile, and restoration that can be extrapolated from the Garden of Eden narrative can be connected with those same semantic themes in the rest of Scripture only by those conceptions, apart from citations, key words, or obvious allusions in the text.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do poetics and intertextuality enrich your understanding of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12? Can you identify some of the poetic techniques the poet employs in the composition of this oracle? What intertextual technique identifies the Anonymous Servant with Jesus Christ?

[1.](#) Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series, JSOTSup 9 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 15.

[2.](#) Ibid., 20. Berlin's exact statement is: "And we must look not only for *what* the text says, but also *how* it says it."

[3.](#) Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), 57.

[4.](#) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 153.

[5.](#) J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 2:203.

[6.](#) Avigdor Bonchek, *Studying the Torah: A Guide to In-Depth Interpretation* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1997), 15.

[7.](#) Martin Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, trans. L. Rosenwald and E. Fox (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), 114.

[8.](#) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 93.

[9.](#) Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 40–62.

[10.](#) These key words may not always be apparent in the English versions. Good English style requires that the translator use different English words to render the same Hebrew word. Other than reading the text in Hebrew, a reader must rely on a more word-for-word translation than the NIV/TNIV.

[11.](#) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95.

[12.](#) Ibid., 96.

[13.](#) Bonchek, *Studying the Torah*, 59.

[14.](#) Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, in *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* series, ed. D. W. Cotter (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996),

xiv.

[15.](#) The term *chiasm* or *chiastic* is derived from the form of the Greek letter *chi* (X, i.e., a cross or cross-over). Other terms and patterns include “ring patterns,” “mirror patterns,” “concentric pattern,” “chiastic patterns,” or “inclusion.” See Timothy A. Lenchak, “*Choose Life!*”: A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of Deuteronomy 28:69–30:20 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 175n17.

[16.](#) David Noel Freedman, “Preface” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, Ger.: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 7.

[17.](#) See essays on each literature in Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*.

[18.](#) Welch, “Introduction,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 9.

[19.](#) Yehuda Thomas Radday, “Chiasmus in Hebrew Narrative,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 51.

[20.](#) Walsh (1 Kings, 151), in his otherwise brilliant analysis, unfortunately misses the pivot. By including “Solomon Builds Rival Buildings” as part of F (“Solomon Builds the Temple,” 6:1–7:51), he obscures the peripeteia and the message.

[21.](#) Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 70.

[22.](#) Mary Baker Eddy noticed that God put Adam to sleep but does not say he woke him up. On that basis she founded the Christian Science movement. She said that since we are living in Adam’s dream, our illnesses are merely illusions and as soon as we realize the truth, those illnesses and other problems will evaporate.

[23.](#) I feel this way about our seminaries. Compared to the universities, seminaries often appear small and insignificant, until one hears of the awesome deeds that God is doing in the lives of the seminarians. In their testimonies one experiences the grace of God and his presence.

[24.](#) J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 69.

[25.](#) Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTSup 70 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 111.

[26.](#) Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 111.

[27.](#) Richard L. Pratt Jr. defines “allusion” this way in *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student’s Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), 246.

[28.](#) John Sailhamer uses the terms “in-textuality” and “inner textuality” in *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 207–13. By the former he means the strategies by which the books of the Old Testament are built up, and by the latter he means the strategy by which the whole fabric of the biblical books is built up. These strategies, he cogently argues, give insight into the theme and/or basic message of the literary units.

[29.](#) Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989); cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993).

[30.](#) David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: A Study of the Theological Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

[31.](#) Solomon intermarried with these three groups along with others (1 Kings 11:1–2).

[32.](#) The numbers in brackets here and elsewhere refer to the numbering in the Masoretic Text [MT], the Hebrew text of the Scriptures compiled during the latter part of the first millennium AD and generally accepted as the standard text in Judaism.

[33.](#) Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 116–17.

[34.](#) Cf. *ibid.*, 462.

[35.](#) Reading with NIV *nēšîʾēhā*, not *nēšîʾēhā* (MT), on the basis of the LXX, the parallel schemata of “her prophets” in Zeph. 2:4 and Ezek. 22:28, and the exact imagery in Ezek. 19:1 used — as in Zeph. 3:3 — with princes (*nesîʾē yisrāʾēl*).

[36.](#) See R. N. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counselor in Isaiah xl.13–14*, SOTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), 73–76.

[37.](#) See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 411.

[38.](#) Christopher Stanley, to better locate Paul’s citational method in its first-century context, surveyed citational techniques and tendencies in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman authors and concluded that Paul generally adhered to the accepted practices of his day: (1) Joining of two originally discrete verses or even commingling the language of such verses into a single “quotation” to address a special literary or rhetorical concern. (2) Quoting texts verbatim or adapting them according to “how well the original wording coincided with the point the later author wanted to make in adducing the passage.” (3) Altering the text to help the reader/hearer apprehend the point of the original text as the later author understood it. (4) “The most noteworthy point about the adaptations ... is

the sheer obviousness and even naivete with which many of them are carried out,” suggesting the social acceptability of such practices. Stanley proposes that “interpretive renderings are an integral part of every public presentation of a written text, a reality well understood and perhaps even anticipated by ancient audiences” (*Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature*, SNTSMS 74 [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992], 342–47).

[39.](#) Svend Holm-Nielsen, “The Importance of Late Jewish Psalmody for the Understanding of Old Testament Psalmic Tradition,” *St Theol* 14 (1960): 17.

[40.](#) Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 122.

[41.](#) In 1968 James Barr, in his *Semantics of Biblical Language*, convincingly showed the weaknesses of Kittel and Friedrich’s *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, which tried to expound the theological concepts of individual words without grounding the study within its own linguistic structures. In 1999, however, Barr said of the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* by Botterweck-Ringgren-Fabry and of the *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Jenni-Westermann that they “have produced many researches that are linguistically powerful as well as being theologically significant” because they had taken his criticisms into consideration (James Barr, *The Concepts of Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 54).

[42.](#) Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 245, who cites F. Hossfeld and I. Meyer, “Der Prophet vor dem Tribunal: Neuer Auslegungsversuch von Jer 26,” *ZAW* 86 (1974): 350; A. Rofé, “Studies in the Composition of the Book of Jeremiah,” *Tarbiz* 44 (1975): 15–19.

[43.](#) As seen in the next chapter and [chapter 20](#), through Christ the land becomes a place of life and rest that is not bounded by geography and is available to the heretofore disenfranchised.

[44.](#) Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 1.

[45.](#) *The Greek New Testament*, ed. Kurt Aland et al., 4th ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 887–901.

[46.](#) By “uninspired” I mean that these characters within the story are not inspired by God, though what they say is incorporated within the editor’s inspired text.

[47.](#) Literally, “lay the foundation [ysd] of strength [*ysd*].” The verb *ʿoz* (“lay the foundation”) demands a concrete object, such as building: “Most frequently, ysd and derived expressions as used of actual building activity, as with the building of the first and second temples in Jerusalem.... References of establishing the foundations of cities imply the construction of defensive walls

as well as monumental buildings such as palaces and temples with the walls” (Keith N. Schoville, *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “ysd”). Ysd means “ordain” only in postexilic Hebrew. “Strength” (*ysd*) then must be a metonymy or adjunct for a “strong construction such as a bulwark,” “a solid wall-like structure raised for defense.”

[48.](#) The NIV, along with other translations, substitutes “ordained praise” to clarify the metaphor of “lay the foundation of strength” in v. 2.

[49.](#) BAGD, s.v., “braxus,” 147.

[50.](#) Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, 22.

[51.](#) E. Würthwein, “Amos-Studien,” *ZAW* 62 (1950): 44–47.

[52.](#) Robert Bach, “Gottesrecht und weltliches Recht in der Verkündigung des Propheten Amos,” *Festschrift für Gunther Dehn*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Neukirchen: Kreis Moers, 1957), 23.

[53.](#) Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 295.

[54.](#) Ibid.

[55.](#) C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953), 126.

[56.](#) Pascal, *Pensées*, 10.685.

[57.](#) G. W. H. Lampe, “Typological Exegesis,” *Theology* 56 (1953): 202.

[58.](#) Francis Foulkes, *The Acts of God* (London: Tyndale, 1958), 19–21.

[59.](#) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 105–6.

[60.](#) Jacques Ellul, “Le rôle médiateur de l’idéologie,” in *Demythisation et idéologie*, ed. E. Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1983), 335–54.

[61.](#) Paul Ricoeur, “The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality,” *Man and World* 12 (1979): 123–41; idem, “Science and Technology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. J. B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 225.

[62.](#) For more detailed striking parallels, see Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 142.

[63.](#) Klaus Koch, “Ezra and the Origins of Judaism,” *JSS* 19 (1974): 184–87, italics deleted.

[64.](#) Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 363.

[65.](#) Malachi’s reference to “governor” fits the Persian administrative context.

[66.](#) Austin M. Farrer, *Study in St. Mark* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), 55–56.

[67.](#) Rikki Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 5–6.

[68.](#) R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (1971; repr., Grand Rapids:

Baker, 1982).

[69.](#) Hans Walter Wolff, “The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament,” in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Claus Westermann, The Preacher’s Library (London: SCM Press, 1963), 174.

[70.](#) Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, 261.

[71.](#) “Jesus Christ typified by Joseph, the loved of the father, sent by his father to see his brethren, etc., innocent, sold by his brethren for twenty pieces of silver, and thereby becoming their lord, their savior, the savior of strangers, and the savior of the world; which had not been but for their plot to destroy him, their sale and their rejection of him. In prison Joseph innocent between two criminals; Jesus Christ on the cross between two thieves. Joseph foretells freedom to the one, and death to the other, from the same omens. Jesus Christ saves the elect, and condemns the outcast for the same sins. Joseph foretells only; Jesus Christ acts. Joseph asks him who will be saved to remember him, when he comes into his glory; and he whom Jesus Christ saves asks that He will remember him, when He comes into His kingdom” (Pascal, *Pensées*, 11.768). For Jesus as the personification of Israel in Matthew, see Frank Thielman, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 95–97.

[*](#)Mary Wakeman, *God’s Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1973): based on her dissertation at Brandeis University.

[**](#)Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 356.

Chapter 6

THE BIBLE'S CENTER: AN OVERVIEW OF AN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

For the Christian faith goes mainly to establish these two facts, the corruption of nature, and redemption by Jesus Christ.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 3.194

I. INTRODUCTION

Before representing the opalescent theological details of the blocks of writing in the Old Testament that overlap and mingle together without sharp lines like the iridescent hues of a pearl, this chapter presents its central message to circumscribe its iridescent colors within a unified whole.

The human mind by nature synthesizes particulars into abstract universals. My two-year-old son vividly dramatized this reality. At first, when he prayed at breakfast, he thanked God for each particular item on the table: the eggs, toast, juice, and so on for each of the five family members, concluding fifteen minutes later with the saltshaker and the peppershaker. Three weeks later, to the family's relief, he thanked God for "the food." Theologians, among their other functions, take the particulars of the Bible's revelation and group them into abstract universals. People intuitively ask, "Is there one universal that can synthesize all the biblical themes?" To continue the analogy from my two-year-old, is there a universal that accommodates "food," "utensils," "furniture," and so on, such as "breakfast table"?

In [chapter 2](#) the argument was made that "the task of biblical theology is to provide summary explanations and interpretation to the final form of these blocks of writing, with a view to letting their various themes emerge, to indicate their dynamic interrelationship, including their continuities and discontinuities with one another, and to expose the progressive revelation of divine matters."¹ The argument was narrowed to "Biblical theology is concerned with the vital central 'message' of biblical texts" so that the Bible's diverse themes and convictions can be organized into "a composite and yet unitary 'witness' to ultimate theological truth."² The argument was then rephrased to speak of the Bible's system or structure, "an inner grid which could be placed within the material and could be seen to provide some degree of ordering and coherence." [Chapter 2](#) also contended that certain books share commonalities with other books, such as vocabulary, literary genre, thematic continuities, and other intertextual evidences. These textual "boundaries" reflect differing authorial intentions, allowing the theologian to organize the various books of the Old Testament into "blocks of writing." Finally, the argument came down to asserting that the concept of the irruption (breaking in from without), not eruption (breaking out from within), of the kingship of the holy, merciful, and

only God best accommodates all of the blocks of writing in the Old Testament.

In [chapters 3–5](#) an accredited method for achieving the identification and development of biblical themes was advanced, arguing that the biblical blocks of writings, such as the Primary History, with their diverse and conflicting themes, can be unified through such methods as noting key words, motifs, concepts, and so on.

This chapter aims to substantiate the claim that the center of the Old Testament, the message that accommodates all its themes, is that Israel's sublime God, whose attributes hold in tension his holiness and mercy, glorifies himself by establishing his universal rule over his volitional creatures on earth through Jesus Christ and his covenant people. This in-breaking of God's rule involves battling against spiritual adversaries in heavenly places and political, social, and religious powers on earth and destroying them in his righteous judgment while saving his elect. George Ladd says, "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus."³ Walther Eichrodt expands that center to the entire Bible: "That which binds together indivisibly the two realms of the Old and New Testament—different in externals though they may be — is the irruption of the Kingship of God into this world and its establishment here."⁴ To put it another way, the Bible is about God bringing glory upon himself by restoring Paradise after humanity lost it through a loss of faith in God that led to rebellion against his rule. To systematize, however, all the biblical materials to the procrustean bed of this message, would falsify their intention. The proposed center accommodates the whole, but the whole is not systematically structured according to it. A cross-section approach to develop that message through various stages in Israel's history would not do justice to the rich biblical material.

I suggest that our Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come," encapsulates this center (see below). But what does that petition mean? The Westminster Shorter catechism asks and answers: "In the second petition (which is, 'Thy kingdom come') we pray: That Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it and kept in it; and the kingdom of God may be hastened."⁵ That's a good start, but by the nature of a short catechism deficient. The rest of this theology will fill in what is meant by the petition "Your kingdom come." As we shall see, it entails that God establishes his rule over his elect covenant people through the kingship of Jesus Christ, who by the Holy Spirit places God's imperative rule upon the hearts of those whom Christ has freed from the slavery of Satan, sin, and death.

This center entails that the God of the Old Testament is the Father of Jesus Christ in the New Testament; that the world is in rebellion against him; and that to fulfill his purposes he acts in history according to his inscrutable elective purposes, choosing when, where, how, and with whom he breaks in, without necessarily explaining why. He is the ruler of creation and of history, the two themes that dominate the praise psalms in Israel's psalter.

On the one hand, the Merciful One shows mercy to whomever he wills. He voluntarily humbles himself to become involved in the muck of this world and even dies for sinners! He elects from his free acts of love and mercy former sinners who prove to be his people by their faith in him. Unlike any other deity, he enters into a covenant with his elect people. In Pascal's well-known words: "Dieu! Dieu d'Abraham, d'Isaac et de Jacob! Dieu de Jésus Christ, non des philosophes et des savants."⁶ The faith of his covenant people expresses itself in their obedience to him: to love him with all their hearts and to love one another as themselves.

On the other hand, the Holy One irrupts in wrath against his opponents. Those who dispute with him are ultimately silenced and condemned. He uniquely establishes his rule over his people through the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, Davidic, and New covenants. God's kingdom of eternal life and salvation from the penalty, power, and presence of sin broke into the world in such a radical way in the coming of Jesus Christ that it could be said with his appearing that "the Kingdom of God has come." All the previous irruptions of the kingdom of God were but a shadow of its appearing in Jesus Christ.

The promise of all of Israel's covenants are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. His miracles — above all his resurrection from the dead — demonstrated the eternal nature and power of that kingdom, and his teachings, works, and sacrifice demonstrated its nature of pure love for God and correlatively of love for his image. He broke into the world ruled by Satan, "the prince of darkness grim," and demonstrated his authority over hostile cosmic powers, restrictive religion, sin, sickness, and death. He is Lord of all. Jesus Christ so embodied the kingdom that to enter it, one must break through and seize the kingdom by trusting one's entire life to him, a trust so radical that it entails becoming his disciple.

Above all, his spiritual light broke into the world's darkness through Jesus Christ, who demonstrated his authority over hostile cosmic powers, Satan and his demonic horde, restrictive religion, sin, sickness, and death. He is Lord of all. As a result of God's breaking into history, people come to know him, commune with him, and experience peace as they submit to his rule and count him trustworthy to keep his covenants.

"The kingdom of God" is a central tenet in the teachings of the Lord Jesus and

plays an important role in Paul's teaching. Although the expression "kingdom of God" never occurs in the Old Testament and its equivalents are relatively rare and late,⁷ the concept informs the whole.

Paul Drake draws two conclusions about Jesus' use of the phrase "the kingdom of God." First, it has a historical dimension: "The kingdom comes at the end of time as the culmination of everything that has happened from the creation until now."⁸ Second, this eschatological reality has a legal dimension. God exercises the authority of a sovereign in a realm where his subjects obey his commands. Citing the Lord's Prayer, Drake defends the conclusion "that the synoptic tradition understands the kingdom of God as the establishment of God's sovereignty over the human race."⁹ The Matthean version reads,

Your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread. (Matt. 6:10–11)

The Lukan version, however, reads, "your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread" (Luke 11:2), lacking the petition "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Matthew probably added "your will be done ..." to explicate the petition for the coming of the kingdom.¹⁰ In other words, as Robert Henry Charles says, "the Kingdom of God is defined as the regenerated community, in which the divine will should be realized."¹¹

Drake, however, fails to differentiate adequately between God's universal kingdom and the particular kingdom that is in view in the Lord's Prayer. By the former, theologians mean God's activity in exercising his sovereignty over all things, even giving the nations their pagan deities (cf. Deut. 4:19). By the latter, they mean God's activity in establishing a realm in which his subjects obey *ex animo* his law. In the Old Testament there is a twofold emphasis on God's kingship: he is King of all the earth (2 Kings 19:15; Isa. 6:5; Jer. 46:18; Pss. 29:10; 99:1–4) and of Israel in particular (Exod. 15:18; Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; Isa. 43:15). The irruption of his mediatory kingdom has as its aim making his particular kingship of Israel his kingship of all the earth. As Ladd says, "While God is King, he must also *become* King."¹² At the center of the biblical message is the good news that God is breaking into his corrupted creation to destroy the gates of Hades and deliver its captives into the realm of his blessed rule.

Let us now turn to the blocks of writing to validate that a universal that embraces all the biblical text is the irruption of the holy God's merciful kingship.

II. THE PRIMARY HISTORY

A. Preliminaries: Founding Moments, Fathers and Covenants

1. Founding Moments and Fathers

In [chapter 2](#) the argument was also made that the Primary History is unified both textually and historically, tracing the history of God's faithful people from the Creation to the Babylonian Exile. In broad strokes, Israel's self-understanding of her history and identity — the lenses through which the people of God understand themselves—are structured around several major events and founding moments: Creation, Fall, Flood, Patriarchs, Exodus-Conquest, Monarchy, Prophecy, Exile, Return. Epochal moments normally occur in connection with crises of faith, historical moments when realities encountered by the covenant people conflict with their ideology. When confronted with a crisis of faith, a group may either deny the present and retreat to the past, as fundamentalists tend to do; repudiate the past with its interpretive ideology, as liberals and postmodernists tend to do;^{[13](#)} or reconfigure and/or reinterpret the ideological schema in order to demonstrate that the group's ideology can account for the present. The third resolution to explain the previously unexplainable crisis moments opens the way to the group's advancing its understanding and interpreting its ideology.^{[14](#)}

In Israel's sacred history, *I AM*, not earthlings, takes the initiative to open the way to advance his kingdom through those who respond to his initiatives by faith in his refreshing promises. In other words, these founding moments are related to key personalities of faith: Adam-Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses-Joshua, David, Elijah and Elisha followed by the writing prophets, and Ezra-Nehemiah respectively. They are the founding fathers of Israel's faith.

The same phenomenon holds true in the New Testament. Jesus Christ magnificently refreshed the kingdom of God by inaugurating the covenant through his death as the mode of administering the Israel of God. He so

transformed Israel's expectations to the reality of a transcendental spiritual kingdom, which ruled by his administration of the Holy Spirit that theologians, reflecting upon this transformation, divide the Scriptures into the Old Testament and the New Testament. Moreover, the Israel of God now becomes the church. The founders of the new age are Jesus Christ (the cornerstone) and his apostles — especially Peter and Paul — who give us the New Testament.

2. Founding Covenants

Moreover, *I AM*'s refreshing initiatives and these faithful leaders are usually associated with *I AM*'s epoch-shaping covenants, wherein he obligates himself, sometimes unconditionally and at other times conditionally, to his people's keeping the ethical obligations he imposes upon them. Moshe Weinfeld affirms that "the idea of a covenant between a deity and a people is unknown to us from other religions and cultures" and "the covenantal idea was a special feature of the religion of Israel."¹⁵ To Eve he unconditionally obligated himself to give her an offspring who would crush humankind's Adversary. To Noah, because he proved himself faithful, he promised unconditionally never again to destroy the earth. To Abraham, because he too obeyed God, he promised unconditionally to give him an eternal seed and land. Through the mediation of Moses, God obligated himself conditionally to bless Israel. To David, also because of his prior demonstration of faith, he unconditionally covenanted to give an eternal house, kingdom, and throne. Ezra and Nehemiah built the restored Jewish commonwealth on these covenants.

As for the prophets, Israel's memory of these epochs, personalities, and covenants lay the foundation for the prophetic expectation that Israel's history will culminate in a greater epoch, which they often referred to as "in that day." In that day, *I AM*, Israel's covenant-keeping King, promises to restore his universal rule through his covenant people. Through Jeremiah and other prophets, God indebted himself unconditionally to make a new covenant whereby Israel would obey God from their hearts and so meet the obligations of the Mosaic covenant and be blessed. Isaiah foretold that an anonymous, obedient servant, whom the New Testament identifies with Jesus the Messiah, would effect this New covenant by his life, death, and resurrection. In that day, the prophets announced, all people will worship God on Mount Zion, learn his law, and beat their swords into plow tips.

God accompanied his foundational covenants with icons or symbols that revive the past event into the present and that serve as short, memorable symbols of the Bible's message pertaining to the making of God's kingdom. The seed

promised to Eve forms the foundation of all the other covenants and needs no other icon than the birth of covenant sons. The rainbow icon commemorates the Noahic; circumcision, the Abrahamic; Sabbath, the Mosaic; the cup, the New. The Davidic covenant also needed no iconic augmentation, for David's continuing seed validated and sustained that covenant.¹⁶

The covenants attached to these epochal events (see above) are described in ways that bring out their continuity with the concerns, themes, and trajectories of the founding moment. As noted, the seed promised to Eve is foundational to all the covenants in making God's kingdom. The Noahic covenant guarantees a firm stage on which God can build his kingdom. The Abrahamic covenant identifies the covenant people and the land that will sustain them. The Mosaic covenant articulates the teachings or law that will bind the nation together under God's rule. The Davidic covenant provides the nation with the unchanging political leadership necessary for God's theocracy to be firmly established. Eichrodt believed that the concept of covenant expresses the basic tendency and tenet of Israel's religion: "It enshrines Israel's most fundamental conviction, namely its sense of a unique relationship with God."¹⁷ The Sovereign, however, first broke into history to elect Israel to its unique covenant relationship with him.

B. The Call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3): The Key to the Primary History

The call of Abraham merits special reflection in order to understand the central message of the Bible. David Clines demonstrated that the episode recounting God's call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) expresses tersely and succinctly the idea of the Pentateuch that accommodates all its data. In truth, it also presents the scheme of understanding the Primary History. God makes seven promises to Abraham pertaining to the irruption of his kingdom: (1) make him into a great nation, (2) bless him, (3) make his name great, (4) make him a blessing, (5) bless those who bless him, (6) curse those who curse him, and (7) bless all the families of the earth through him.

These seven promises pertain to three expanding horizons, from God's call to Abraham to disassociate himself from his family (12:1), to God's making him into a nation of blessing (12:2), to God's blessing the whole earth through him (12:3). These promised blessings repristinate God's earlier blessings at the creation and after the Flood. However, on the part of Abraham and the nation he fathers, they bless the earth in connection with their submitting themselves to

God's moral law (cf. Gen. 18:19). The nations, on their part, qualify themselves for this blessing by recognizing that Abraham and his obedient nation are possessed of God's power to mediate abundant and effective living and then by praying for God's blessing on Abraham and his faithful nation.

To unpack the idea that God is establishing his moral rule over the earth through national Israel, it is helpful to analyze the concept of nationhood into its four constituent elements, or motifs. A nation consists of a common people, normally sharing a common land, submissive to a common law, and led by a common ruler. Israel, however, differs from other nations by enjoying a personal relationship with God (i.e., the Creator of all things and ruler of history). The book of Genesis is concerned with identifying God, his elect people, and the land that sustains them. The rest of the Pentateuch focuses largely on God's law, which is given to his people in their journey to their land, and the Deuteronomic history develops the concept of the nation's leader, who will uphold their law, retain their land, and defeat their adversaries.

These themes of "people," "land," "law," and "king" — essential concepts of "the irruption of the kingdom of God" — will be developed especially in [chapters 12, 16, 19 – 20](#), and [22](#) respectively. In short, the irruption of God's kingdom to his glory as developed in the Bible entails God's people in God's place under God's rule to bless the earth. Commenting on Genesis 12:1–3, Graeme Goldsworthy says it "is paradigmatic of salvation history that is to come. It promises a people, a land for them to live in, a blessed relationship with God, and through this elect people a blessing that will spread to all the peoples of the earth."¹⁸

C. Garden of Eden: An Instructive Type of the Primary History

In brief, the Primary History presents God as creating a *people*, citizens for the kingdom. To them he gives his *law* —that is, their constitution that reflects their distinctive values and beliefs. He provides them with a *land*, a special place for their sustenance, rest, and security. And he gifts them with a *king*, a leader who will enforce the constitution and protect the land from invasion. But this kingdom does not prosper. Israel *rebels* against God's law, and her kings have regard for themselves, not for God. As punishment for their *sin*, God banishes the people from their land and drives them and their king into *exile*. But the story does not end there. The people of God are left with a future *hope* — one day,

someone will come to restore the kingdom.

The Garden of Eden story typifies this conspicuous metanarrative of the Primary History (see also [chap. 10.II.A.3](#)).¹⁹ In that type of the greater antitype, God also creates a *people* (Adam and Eve), gives them a garden as the *land* to sustain and refresh them, hands down the *law* not to eat the forbidden fruit, and makes them *kings* to keep his garden. But they *rebel* against God and disobey him, and as a result, they are banished from the garden, *exiled* from their home. Yet in the punishment comes a promise and a *hope*; a “seed of the woman” will triumph over the Serpent on humanity’s behalf.

These narratives are related by concepts, not by key terms such as *law*, *covenant*, *exile*, and *king*, and there are no citations linking the two accounts. This lack of explicit connection should keep an exegete from being dogmatic. But even with this in mind, one cannot help but be struck by the placement and the conceptual similarities of the two narratives. In musical terms, the Adam and Eve narrative is the opening violin solo. Through a single instrument, the virtuoso deftly touches upon the musical refrains, previewing what is ahead. With the narrative of the full Primary History, Israel joins the soloist as the full orchestra. With the full force of a multitude of strings, the dark tones of the woodwinds, the shrill of the brass, the beat of the percussion instruments, and the clash of the cymbals, the harmonies, the undertones, and the dissonances expound and interpret the major refrains previewed by the solo. In other words, the opening scene is the introduction of the fugal subject, which will be put in counterpoint with other melodies and fully restated.

The Adam and Eve narrative not only foreshadows Israel’s history, but also creates the world in which the narrative of Israel takes place. Because of Adam and Eve, original sin mars humanity. Because of Adam and Eve, humankind lives banished from its true home and is afflicted with conflict, sickness, and death. Thus, the characters in the narrative of Israel live with the consequences effected by their parents. Furthermore, not only does the Adam and Eve narrative create the world for the second narrative, it also implies its outcome. If Adam and Eve, created in the image of God, do not keep the single command in a paradise, how can the Israelites, marred by original sin, expect to keep a host of commandments in the moral cesspool of Canaan? The answer should be obvious: “Apart from reliance upon a trustworthy God, they cannot!” The enterprise of creating the physical kingdom of Israel is doomed from the beginning because people, apart from reliance upon God’s empowering, cannot keep covenant with God. In other words, the Old Testament is a masterpiece of indirection.

Thus, the two stories overlap. As the Old Testament concludes, judgment of

sin and exile become the signature dilemma for both narratives, and both stories await resolution. Who will crush the serpent, the embodiment of Satan, and restore humanity to its true home, the Garden of Eden? Who will cleanse the heart of God's people and restore the kingdom of Israel? The "way of Judaism" piled on more laws; "the Way of the New Testament" provides the empowering presence of God in Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

D. The Pentateuch

As argued, textual citations in connection with a continuous history unify the Primary History. Its first five books are known today as the "Torah" ("catechetical teaching") in the Jewish tradition and mostly as the "Pentateuch" ("five books") elsewhere.²⁰ In the postexilic period they were called "the Book of Moses" (2 Chron. 25:4, citing Deut. 24:16; 2 Chron. 35:12–13, conflating Exod. 12:2–11 and Deut. 16:1–8; Ezra 6:18, probably referring to Exod. 29; Lev. 8; Num. 3; 8:5–26; 18; and Neh. 13:1, citing Deut. 23:3).²¹ The Letter of Aristeas (15) also refers to it in this way, and Mark 12:26 (Exod. 3:6) refers to "the Law of the Book of Moses."

The division of the Pentateuch into five parts occurred at least as early as the New Testament era. By the nature of the scrolls, this unified account had to be distributed among five scrolls. In any case, a Pentateuch was known as early as the first century, by Philo (20 BC – AD 50), Josephus (ca. AD 37–100), and presumably by Jesus Christ and his apostles. The Septuagint also attests five books, but its earliest extant manuscripts come from the fourth and fifth centuries AD. Conceivably the unified document originally had a different division, but there is no compelling reason to overthrow the tradition.

This textual and traditional unity of the Pentateuch implies that we are dealing with an "author," and his book's content shows that he is concerned with history and aesthetics (poetics) so as to impress upon Israel his ideology about its identity and meaning as the kingdom of God. He is not merely a redactor, an editor who compiled sources in an unformed way. In other words, the literary genre of the Pentateuch is *Torah*, catechetical instruction through Israel's history. Indeed, as we shall see, this is true of the Primary History as a whole. Within that broad genre are more specific literary forms: "cosmogony," "genealogy," and more.

According to the Pentateuch's traditional ascription, Moses wrote the Ur-Pentateuch (i.e., its original form) for Israel in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 24:12;

34:27–28; Matt. 8:4; Luke 16:31; 24:27, 44; John 1:17; 7:22; Acts 3:22). Moses’ superb training, exceptional spiritual gifts, and divine call uniquely qualified him to compose its essential content. Eichrodt, who wrote a classic theology of the Old Testament, contends that Moses is best described as founder of this theocracy to bring in a new world order.²² As such, Moses of necessity would have given Israel its prior history that defined its meaning, identity, and destiny as God’s elect people. Every political and/or religious community must have a memory of its history that defines and distinguishes it. The founder of Israel is the most probable person to transpose its national repository of ancient traditions into a coherent history in order to define the nation and its mission. His noble vision stirs the imagination and calls upon its audience to order itself according to that memory.²³ As implied, Moses depended on earlier sources (cf. Num. 21:14). Perhaps in the Tetrateuch (Genesis — Numbers) Moses authored what most source critics call the “J[ahwistic] document,” using sources that they refer to as the “P[riestly] document.” To these a later editor, dated in the exile, added post-Mosaic materials (e.g., Gen. 36:9–29). Elsewhere we argue that the extant book of Deuteronomy was written during the exile and recounts how Moses wrote the Book of the Law, which can be reckoned as Ur-Deuteronomy. In any case, the overall artistry of the whole and its parts, in spite of few apparent contradictions, show that the author carefully used his sources in an integrated and sustained literary imagination, not as a redactor who crudely patched his material together.

In other words, Moses recorded for the twelve tribes of Israel the foundational promissory covenants with Adam, Noah, and Abraham that determined the elect nation’s beliefs and value structures, namely, the promise of a champion who would vanquish Satan. To these Moses mediated the Sinaitic covenant consisting of Israel’s ten foundational teachings (Exod. 20) and the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22–23:19). To these he mediated legislation regarding God’s royal tent (Exod. 25–31, 35–40) and other liturgical regulations (Lev. 1–16), a holiness code (Lev. 24–26), and a variety of other commands. In short, the Sinaitic covenant governed Israel’s whole life in the political, religious, social, and economic spheres.

Time and again *I AM* broke into Israel’s history to establish his kingdom. After the exodus

Moses and the Israelites sang this song to *I AM*:

“I will sing to *I AM*,
for he is highly exalted.

The horse and its rider
he has hurled into the sea....
I AM is a warrior;
I AM is his name....
“Y our right hand, *I AM*,
was majestic in power.
Your right hand, *I AM*,
shattered the enemy.” (Exod. 15:1–6)

Three months later—to the very day — God descended in smoke and fire and thick darkness to deliver his Ten Commandments to Moses (Exod. 19).

David Clines defines the message—what he calls the “theme” — of the Pentateuch as this: “the partial fulfillment—which implies also the partial non-fulfillment — of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and a reaffirmation of the primal divine intentions for man.”²⁴ He defines the blessing as pertaining to the land and seed in Genesis and in the rest of the Pentateuch as establishing a divine-human relationship. The message Cline discerns is clearly compatible with the message of the Bible: God is breaking into human history to establish his kingdom on earth. The Bible is a story of universal salvation history. God formed Israel as his servant to bring salvation to all nations. That story of God’s in-breaking has an already-not-yet character; the seed and land are always “becoming.”

These fulfillments of *I AM*’s promise to establish his ethical rule are well known. Less well known are the Pentateuch’s prophecies that *I AM* will establish his universal rule in a future that outlasts Israel’s failure. In addition to promising Israel a future king (Gen. 17:6, 16; 49:8–12; Num. 22–24) and establishing foundational rules for his governance (Deut. 17:14–20), Moses anticipated Israel’s failure under the conditional Sinaitic covenant (Deut. 31:14–32:43). He could have inferred this failure from the Garden of Eden story, but he credits his pessimism to *I AM*’s words to him and to his experiences with Israel as stiff-necked rebels in their rebellion vis-à-vis the golden calf, and at Taberah, at Massah, and at Kibroth Hattaavah (Exod. 32–34; Deut. 9:7–24). But beyond Israel’s cataclysmic failure, Moses prophesied that God would give Israel a new covenant and an ideal king guaranteeing Israel *I AM*’s blessings, not curses (Deut. 30:1–10).

John Sailhamer astutely argues that the Pentateuch’s prophecies of God’s ultimate triumph is a central tenet. He begins his argument by noting that the early chapters of Genesis (more specifically its first account of the descendants

of the heavens and the earth, Gen. 2:4–4:26) exhibit a pattern of narrative-poetry-epilogue. That creation narrative (2:1–22) concludes with a short poem by Adam (2:23) and an epilogue (2:24). The Fall narrative (3:1–13) is drawn to a conclusion with *I AM*'s poem (3:14–19) and an epilogue (3:20–24), and the Cain narrative follows the same pattern: narrative (4:1–22), poem (4:23–24), and epilogue (4:25–26).²⁵

Sailhamer continues his argument by noting that this pattern recurs at a much higher level within the Pentateuch's composition, suggesting the pattern of the first account is a clue to the whole. The patriarchal narratives (Gen. 12–48) are drawn to a conclusion with Jacob's poem (Gen. 49) and an epilogue regarding Jacob's death (Gen. 50). The first two elements of the pattern are discernible in the Exodus narrative (Exod. 1–14) followed by Moses' "Song of the Sea" (Exod. 15); and the wilderness narrative (Num. 1–21) draws to a conclusion with Balaam's oracles (Num. 22–24). Finally, the full pattern embraces the entire Pentateuch, for it is drawn to conclusion with the "Song of Moses" and "Blessings of Moses" (Deut. 31:24–32:43; 33) and an epilogue recounting Moses' death (Deut. 34).²⁶

Sailhamer thereupon looks for clues regarding the meaning of this apparent structure. He focuses his attention on the three macrostructural poems at the end of the Pentateuch's large narrative units (Gen. 49; Num. 23–24; and Deut. 31:24–32:43). In these poems he also finds a homogeneous structural pattern: "The central figure (Jacob, Balaam, Moses) calls an audience together (imperative) and proclaims (cohortative) what will happen 'in the end of days' (*b'ahrit hayyāmim*)" (NIV "days to come," Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Deut. 31:28–29). Sailhamer writes, "Such convergence of macrostructure, narrative motifs; and terminology among these three strategically important poems of the Pentateuch can hardly be accidental. That the only other occurrence of the terms in the Pentateuch is also within a macrostructural seam (Dt 4) argues strongly for our taking these connecting segments to be part of the final work on the Pentateuch."²⁷

"In the latter day""in the last days""days to come" (*b'ahrit hayyāmim*), a common term in prophetic literature, "refers to a future that paradoxically reverses the present situation and at the same time brings to a fitting outcome that toward which it is striving."²⁸ The phrase has a certain thickness. In Daniel 10:14 it includes the activities of three kings of Persia. In Micah 4–5 it embraces the remnant's restoration from Babylon (4:9–

10), the birth of the Messiah (5:1 [2]), and his universal rule and everlasting peace (4:1–4, 5:3 [4]). This crucial phrase in the Pentateuch shows that an important element of the Pentateuch's theology is an expectation that after Israel's tragic failure to keep covenant with God, *I AM* will rule the nations through Messiah. In that future,

“the scepter will not depart from Judah, ...
until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his.” (Gen. 49:10)²⁹

In those days,

“A star will come out of Jacob;
⊃⊃⊃⊃a scepter will rise out of Israel.
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,
⊃⊃⊃⊃the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.
Edom will be conquered;
⊃⊃⊃⊃Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,
⊃⊃⊃⊃but Israel will grow strong.
A ruler will come out of Jacob
⊃⊃⊃⊃and destroy the survivors of the city.” (Num. 24:17–19)

In days to come,

Rejoice, Nations, with his people,
⊃⊃⊃⊃for he will avenge the blood of his servants;
he will take vengeance on his enemies
⊃⊃⊃⊃and make atonement for his land and people. (Deut. 32:43)

In sum, a central tenet of the Pentateuch is the irruption of the kingship of God.

E. The Deuteronomistic History

Elsewhere I argue that Deuteronomy, the capstone of the Pentateuch and the foundation stone of the textually and historically unified Deuteronomistic history, is the linchpin of the Primary History. Deuteronomy essentially contains a series of addresses by Moses urging the generation who survived the

wilderness to covenant fidelity in order to enjoy God's blessings. That generation, led by Joshua, remained faithful and so conquered the land (see Joshua). But the generations between them and Samuel (ca. 1400–1100 BC) time and again failed to keep covenant fidelity. Unless Israel's holy and merciful God had raised up deliverers — Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, and finally Samuel — they would have lost their land (see Judges). Finally, the Sovereign raised up David, to whom he covenanted to give an eternal kingdom (see 1 and 2 Samuel). His successors, however, largely failed to keep the covenant God mediated through Moses, leading to their exile. Nevertheless, his unconditional covenants to bless Abraham and David will never fail (see 1 and 2 Kings). In other words, the Deuteronomistic history is all about the irruption of God's kingdom: its success and failures, its heroes and antiheroes.

III. CHRONICLES, EZRA-NEHEMIAH

The Chronicles narrative and the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah are also concerned with the irruption of the kingdom of God. According to Richard Pratt, the major themes of the Chronicler are the people of God, king and temple, and divine blessing and judgment depending on Israel's meeting her covenant obligations.³⁰ The notion of God's establishing his righteous rule accommodates these three major themes.

Ezra and Nehemiah wrote their memoirs with the concern to legitimate the restored community's political form at Jerusalem and its religious expression at the temple in the face of rival claims, especially against the Samaritans. These founding fathers of the Judean commonwealth established it on seven fundamental theological reflections: (1) the restored exiles at Jerusalem were in the line of true continuity in their ethnic and political identity as a national state with preexilic Israel and authorized by the Persian rulers; (2) the restoration of the temple and its priesthood at Jerusalem are in the true line of continuity with the first temple and was sanctioned by the Persian rulers; (3) the restored community continued Israel's historic covenant relationship with God. As such, its people inherited Israel's covenant blessings and obligations. Mark Thronveit says,

Though the Israel that emerged from the crucible of exile was not the same as the nation that had gone before, the institutions that were slowly developing sought to mediate the same promise and heritage that nurtured Israel of old. The validity of those institutions as vehicles for transmitting the promise, and above all the assurance of continuity with the past and sense of identity that their legitimacy provided, were what these people most needed to hear. That need was met by retelling the story of the return.³¹

(4) the postexilic Judean commonwealth, like preexilic Israel, continues to be founded on the Law of Moses, which is to be obeyed from the heart; (5) the priests and scribes at the temple now became the authoritative teachers of the Law who stood behind the magistrates and judges (see Ezra 7–8) and whom the people spiritually embraced (see Neh. 7:73b –10:39); (6) the Judean

commonwealth must be both inclusive for all Israel and exclusive from false worshipers. The inclusive aspect is highlighted by the use of the number twelve for the two tribes of Israel. The opposition to Ezra and Nehemiah both from within and without underscores their desire for the purity of the community; (7) to survive, the restored community had to maintain (a) integrity in its relationship to the gentile king while they prayed for relief and restoration of the consummate kingdom (see Neh. 9), (b) covenant loyalty to God and prayer for his good hand to be upon them in their relationship to the king; and (c) solidarity among all its members, who from the highest to the lowest shouldered the work of building the kingdom of God.

The restored community, begun in about 538 BC, was brought to closure in 430 BC, within the walls of what had now become the holy Jerusalem (see Neh. 11:1). Here they were a worshiping community full of joy, and their holiness spilled over all the way to Beersheba and into Bethlehem (11:25–36; 12:43). However, the best was yet to come (cf. Neh. 9:32–37).

In sum, the postexilic narratives also pertain to the making of the kingdom of God.

IV PROPHETIC LITERATURE

God also breaks into history by sharing his Word through his Spirit with elect prophets. That Word and Spirit interpreted Israel's history in light of the holy and merciful *I AM*'s covenants with Israel. On the one hand, because the nation had egregiously failed to keep *I AM*'s obligations imposed upon them in his Sinaitic covenant, the curses the Holy One threatened were about to be enacted against them. The prophets' many doom oracles typically address the nation's leadership, accuse them of immorality, and thereupon sentence them to destruction. Micah 3:1–5 illustrates the pattern:

“Listen, you leaders of Jacob,
⊗⊗⊗⊗you rulers of the house of Israel.
Should you not know justice,
⊗⊗⊗⊗you who hate good and love evil....

Then they will cry out to *I AM*,
⊗⊗⊗⊗but he will not answer them.
At that time he will hide his face from them
⊗⊗⊗⊗because of the evil they have done.” (Mic. 3:1–4)

On the other hand, because of the merciful God's unconditional covenant to bless Abraham, including triumph over other nations, the prophets prophesy Israel's golden age under the Messiah that outlasts God's judgments. Micah 7:18–20 illustrates a typical salvation oracle:

Who is a God like you,
⊗⊗⊗⊗who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
⊗⊗⊗⊗of the remnant of his inheritance?
You do not stay angry forever
⊗⊗⊗⊗but delight to show mercy.
You will again have compassion on us;
⊗⊗⊗⊗you will tread our sins underfoot
⊗⊗⊗⊗and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

You will be true to Jacob,
☺☺☺☺and show mercy to Abraham,
as you pledged on oath to our fathers
☺☺☺☺in days long ago.

The famous salvation oracle of Isaiah 2:2–4 (= Mic. 4:1–4) clearly illustrates the thesis of this chapter:

In the last days

the mountain of *I AM*'s temple will be established
☺☺☺☺as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
☺☺☺☺and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of *I AM*,
☺☺☺☺to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
☺☺☺☺so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
☺☺☺☺the word of *I AM* from Jerusalem.
He will judge between the nations
☺☺☺☺and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
☺☺☺☺and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
☺☺☺☺nor will they train for war anymore.”

In sum, by interpreting Israel's dark present and bright future due to *I AM*'s intervention in upholding his covenants, one can safely say that the prophets also have as their central concern the irruption of the holy and merciful God's kingship. In other words, in their timeline of salvation history there are two stages in the breaking in of the kingdom of God: a failed form in the present age and a triumphant form in the age to come. In that age, distinction between the King who exercises his sovereignty over all things and the King who exercises his sovereignty over the wills of his subjects will disappear. His mediatorial kingdom will become a universal kingdom involving all nations.

V. APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE (DANIEL)

Whereas in the prophetic literature the eschatological kingdom of God arises out of history through a son of David, in apocalyptic literature it comes in an apocalyptic, transcendent breaking in from heaven. Whereas the prophets looked for a son of David to rule Israel in the eschatological kingdom, the apocalyptic thinkers looked for a Son of Man who rides the clouds to bring in the eschatological kingdom. Jesus identified himself as both the son of David and as the Son of Man, especially the latter.

The book of Daniel obviously validates the thesis. Its six historical narratives ([chaps. 1–6](#)) emphasize how the absolute sovereignty of God operates in the affairs of all nations (2:47; 3:17–18; 4:28–37; 5:13–31; 6:25–28). In these narratives God intrudes to save Daniel and his three friends, such as from the infamous fiery furnace and the lion's den. These faithful Israelites are exalted by God's blessings upon them and through their refusal to compromise their loyalty to him. The four visions in the second half of the book ([chaps. 7–12](#)) enlarge these to Israel's eschatological future history. This book aims to nerve the faithful to fidelity in Israel's coming persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who will attempt to eradicate them and their faith, because the Holy One has poured out his decree to destroy him. The book also looks beyond that to the coming of Jesus Christ, who will destroy all human kingdoms and establish his eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace.

Although prophetic and apocalyptic vision represent the coming of the eschatological kingdom differently, they both share the view that salvation history has two aspects: the present age and the age to come when God will exercise his sovereignty perfectly so that his universal reign becomes coincidental with his particular reign in an indeterminate future.

VI. HYMNIC LITERATURE

The book of Psalms consists of five books of psalms (1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–50). Psalms 1–2 are its introduction, and 146–50 its climactic finale of praise. Psalm 1 pronounces the individual who submits to God’s rule a blessed person, and Psalm 2 introduces the principal subject of the Psalter, the king in prayer. At his coronation the king recites this poetic variation of the decree of the Davidic covenant that declares him to be a son of God (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7). As such, *I AM* asserts to the king,

“Ask of me,
⊗⊗⊗⊗and I will make the nations your inheritance,
⊗⊗⊗⊗the ends of the earth your possession.
You will rule them with an iron scepter;
⊗⊗⊗⊗you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” (Ps. 2:8–9)

In the rest of the Psalter the reader hears the petitions and praises of David and his heirs.

The Messiah (“anointed one”) plays a prominent role at the seams between Books I and II (Psalms 72) and Books III and IV (Psalms 89). Books I – III are clearly royal. Gerald H. Wilson says, “The presence in 72:20 of the postscript announcing the conclusion of ‘the prayers of David, son of Jesse’ suggests Books One and Two may well justify the description ‘prayers of David.’”³² Within these books Wilson notes a progression of thought. Psalm 2 introduces the idea of the Davidic covenant. Psalms 3 and 41 speak of the king’s assurance of *I AM*’s protection and security in the face of his enemies, and Psalm 72 contains multiple petitions for the king’s son: May he rule justly; may his domain be secure from his enemies; may he live long and be blessed.

With Book III and its concluding hymn, Psalm 89, a new perspective is achieved. This is the dark book of the Psalter. The Davidic covenant is considered broken. Wilson says, “The Davidic covenant introduced in Psalm 2 has come to nothing and the book concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.”³³

With Book IV, yet another perspective is achieved. Without a king, Israel falls back upon its heritage. They look back to Moses, who is now mentioned seven

times (90 [cf. the superscription and Heb. 1:1]; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32), whereas heretofore he was mentioned only once (77:20), and whose only song in the Psalter introduces Book IV. Israel now looks back to her eternal King: “God, our help in ages past, our hope in years to come” (cf. 90:1–2). In Psalms 93–99 one finds the so-called Enthronement Psalms: *I AM* is king! He has been Israel’s refuge in the past, long before monarchy existed; he will continue to be Israel’s refuge now that monarchy is gone; and blessed are they that trust in him.

Book V is clearly linked with Book IV. Psalm 106:47 concludes Book IV with the prayer, “Save us, *I AM* our God, and gather us from the nations.” Book V begins by viewing this act of gathering as an established fact: “He gathered [us] from the lands” (107:3). The troubles of the exile have been overcome. Moreover, there is a prominent messianic hope in some of these Davidic psalms. In Psalm 110:1, David, using distinctively prophetic language, “*I AM* says,” foresees a king greater than himself, “*I AM* says to my Lord.” This king will be a warrior king-priest after the order of Melchizedek. With God at his right hand (v. 5), he and his army will crush rebellious kings and rule the earth (vv. 6–7).

In sum, the Psalter’s content and editing is primarily concerned with the notion of God establishing his rule through the anointed David and his successors, expressing the confidence and praise that in spite of the king’s present sufferings, God’s purposes for him and the elect nation will triumph.

VII. WISDOM LITERATURE

As is well known, the crucial phrase “the fear of I AM” functions as the key to the wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. In Proverbs “the fear of I AM” is wisdom’s foundation (1:7). What notes are to music and the alphabet is to reading, the fear of *I AM* is to attaining wisdom.

The author of Job, reflecting on the heated exchanges between Job and his friends about why one should be righteous, draws the conclusion that mortals have neither the taste nor the ability to buy wisdom. True wisdom is found in a dimension other than earthbound activities. God reserves to himself the finding and assessing of wisdom, and the revelation of it to his people, who apprehend it by the divine gift of faith (Job 28:1–28; see Prov. 30:1–6).

The narrator of Ecclesiastes, who collected the proverbs of a preacher-teacher (*Qohelet* 1:2–12:8) whom he represents as Israel’s king (1:1), draws the conclusion that the essence of Qoheleth’s teaching comes down to fearing God and keeping his commandments:

Now all has been heard;
⊗⊗⊗⊗ here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
⊗⊗⊗⊗ for this is the duty of every human being.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
⊗⊗⊗⊗ including every hidden thing,
⊗⊗⊗⊗ whether it is good or evil. (12:13–14 TNIV)

Fear of *I AM* (*yirat YHWH*), the jewel of wisdom literature, involves both rational and nonrational aspects at one and the same time.³⁴ Its rational aspect entails an objective revelation that can be taught (cf. Ps. 34:11–13 [12–14]) and memorized. In Psalm 19:7–9 [8–10] “fear of *I AM*” is a coreferential term to “law,” “statutes,” “commands,” and “ordinances” of *I AM*. “Fear of God” refers “to a standard of moral conduct known and accepted by men in general”³⁵ and motivates people to right behavior even when a state does not enforce moral sanctions (cf. Gen. 20:10–11; Exod. 1:17). “Fear of *I AM*,” by comparison and contrast, refers to *I AM*’s special revelation, whether through Moses or Solomon. By this term the sage traces his wisdom back to *I AM*’s inspiration.

“Fear of *I AM*” also entails a nonrational aspect, an emotional response of fear, love, and trust. The unified psychological poles of fear and love come prominently to the fore in a surprisingly uniform way. Deuteronomy treats “love of *I AM*” and “fear of *I AM*” as synonyms (cp. 5:29 with 6:2, and 6:5 with Josh. 24:14; cf. 10:12, 20; 13:5). In Isaiah 29:13 Israel’s distorted “fear of me” is rejected precisely because it is made up only of rules taught by men. According to Proverbs 2:1–5, “the fear of *I AM*” is found through heartfelt prayer and diligent seeking for the sage’s words. In Proverbs 15:33 “humility” and “fear of *I AM*” are parallel terms, and in 22:4 “humility” is defined as “the fear of *I AM*” sort.

The wise accept the inspired revelation because they fear and stand in awe of *I AM* who upholds the teaching that promises life to the obedient and threatens death to the disobedient. As people in general are motivated to obey their consciences out of fear of God, so the wise and righteous respond to the moral imperative of Scripture, including the sayings of the inspired sages, apart from either legal or ecclesiastical sanctions. For them, the fear of *I AM* is just as real as their love for him (see Prov. 14:26–27). Both psyches are rooted in their faith: they believe his promises and love him; they believe his threats and fear him. In sum, Charles Bridges says, “[The fear of *I AM* is] that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law.”³⁶

In other words, the holy and merciful King stoops to bring his subjects life by giving them his rule through his inspired sages.

VIII. OTHER LITERATURE

Three more books remain to be considered: Lamentations, Esther, and Song of Songs. Lamentations is considered again in [chapter 19](#).IX, and Esther in [chapter 27](#), part II. Song of Songs is treated more at length here because it is not dealt with elsewhere in this theology.

A. Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is composed by an eyewitness who survived the horror of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. He pours out his grief, disbelief, and anger in an anthology of five lament psalms³⁷ ([chaps. 1–5](#))—the first four in the form of an acrostic (that is, the first letter of each stanza is a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet).³⁸ The acrostic form provides an emotional catharsis for the purging of emotions by allowing the writer to express his feelings from A to Z. Although probably written by Jeremiah,³⁹ the book is very likely intentionally anonymous in order to allow anyone to identify with the grief of the “I am the man who has seen affliction” (3:1).

Lamentations is written as a voicing of grief and therefore does not express its theological reflections in a systematized way. Like all sufferers, the psalmist’s moods vacillate between despair and hope, anger and solace. *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* succinctly notes the three harmonious perspectives of Lamentations:⁴⁰ (1) the destruction and exile were deserved consequences for Israel’s sin: “*I AM* is in the right, for I have transgressed his word” (1:18); (2) the author expresses strong emotional resistance of the Holy One’s judgment on Judah: “You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity” (3:43); (3) but he also expresses the sincere faith that the exile will end and that there will be judgment on Judah’s enemies for their crimes against her: “Because of *I AM*’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (3:22–23). This hope reflects an understanding of the sovereignty of God over all the nations, a sovereignty that ensured the fulfillment of his covenant promises (see 3:37–39). The destruction of Jerusalem is not the action of a capricious god — which is the

way the Mesopotamian city laments would see it — but the action of a sovereign active in establishing his rule on earth through Israel.

B. Esther

As will be seen in [chapter 27](#), the story of Esther pertains to God's establishing his kingdom even during the vagaries of the Persian Empire. By a mysterious and inscrutable providence he reverses the fortunes of his covenant people, from annihilation at the hands of her enemies to triumph over them. In that reversal he also blots out the memory of Amalek, which was God's intention for Israel from the beginning of her history.

C. Song of Songs

The most difficult book to accommodate into this thesis is Solomon's Song of Songs (i.e., Solomon's "Best Song"). The speeches between an unnamed woman and an unnamed man express their love for one another in the most sensuous terms and occasionally describe their love to an anonymous group of women, often referred to as the chorus. The song explicitly speaks only of the love and intimacy between a man and a woman, with no reference to salvation history. Yet Rabbi Aqiba in the late first century AD famously stated, "Whoever sings the Song of songs with a tremulous voice in a banquet hall and treats it as a sort of ditty has no share in the world to come" (Tosefta, Sanhedrin 12:10).

This love poem may be analyzed as having four parts: I. Desire for Love (1:1–2:17); II. The Bride's Reverie (3:1–6:3); III. Mutual Love and Longing (6:4–8:4); IV. Value of Love in Union (8:5–14).

Traditionally the song has been interpreted as an allegory. The Targum, in the first unit (1:2–4), understands the woman as Israel. She begs the man (i.e., God) to take her into his chamber (the Sworn Land). Christian theologians likewise interpreted the book allegorically: the man is Jesus, and the bride is the church or an individual Christian. Yet true allegories, such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, do not hide their allegorical intention. Accredited exegetes dismiss this method of exegesis as arbitrary.

The ancient Near Eastern literature exhibits a number of love poems similar in themes, poetic devices, and metaphors of the Song of Song. This leads many moderns to regard it as only human love poetry. This interpretation has the virtue

of debunking the traditional Neoplatonic philosophy that created a contrast between spirituality and sexuality.

Franz Delitzsch regarded the story as a love story about Solomon and a Shulamite: through true love, the Shulamite stole Solomon away from the wantonness of polygamy. This is commonly called “the two-character dramatic approach.”

The song is best interpreted with Iain Provan and others as a poetic drama celebrating the triumph of a maiden’s pure, spontaneous love for her rustic shepherd lover over the courtly blandishment of Solomon who seeks to win her for his royal harem.⁴¹ The representations of Solomon in the three references to him in this book are all negative: “dark ... like the tent curtains of Solomon” (1:5, black associated with exploitation); “who is this coming up from the desert ...? Look! It is Solomon’s carriage” (3:6–7, a desert scene where nothing flourishes); and finally the virtuous maiden apparently rejecting Solomon’s bride price of 200 shekels, reserving the right to give her vineyard (i.e., her body) to the one she loves (8:11–12). In other words, Solomon represents his ideal of love and intimacy — perhaps a love he experienced in his early years — as that of the love shown by a rustic shepherd, in contrast to his later life when he became a powerful king who assembled a harem but lost humanity’s choicest possession.

The story is best interpreted as a type of the true love between God and his people. In the Old Testament the metaphor of God as a husband and Israel as his bride is commonplace. Within the canon that included the New Testament, the expression of true love between a rustic shepherd and his beloved functions as a type of Christ and his church. The apostle Paul says that the union between a husband and his wife is a “mystery” (a profound, hidden truth) about the relationship between Christ and his church. Citing Genesis 2:24 in the creation account, Paul comments,

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery [that is, a hidden meaning until Paul’s time] —but I am talking about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31).

Paul is not denying the literal sense of the Gift of the Bride story (see [chap. 10](#)), but he is investing it with spiritual significance. He infers that we should also interpret the Song of Songs typologically as a profound hidden truth about Christ and the church. If so, then the book also pertains both to the merciful God’s breaking into history with a true love for his people (not for his own self-regard) and to his people’s reserving their bodies for him.

IX. NEW TESTAMENT

John the Baptist's announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand anticipates the fulfillment of the Old Testament apocalyptic expectation of "the age to come" in contrast to "this age" (cf. Matt. 12:32; 24:3; Mark 10:30; Luke 20:34–36; Rom. 8:18). In the age to come, God is expected through Messiah to exercise his kingly power for the salvation of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked, as prophesied in the Old Testament. In this twofold way the mediatory kingdom and the universal kingdom become coextensive. The kingdom of God and the age to come are co-relative terms in the sense that they refer to the same eschatological situation from different perspectives. To prepare the people for this apocalyptic event, John the Baptist called on them to submit to baptism in order to express their repentance (*metanoia*, "change of mind") — that is to say, to return (Heb. *šhûb* in a moral-religious way to Israel's God.⁴²

Jesus Christ's appearing brought "this age" to its close, and his resurrection from the dead inaugurated "the age to come." Jesus Christ embodies the kingdom of God, which is also called in Matthew "the kingdom of heaven" — a kingdom of eternal life and perfected fellowship with God. Jesus brings the kingdom of God to earth in his person in such a radical way that it can be said that his *presence* is the kingdom of God. When asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God will come, Jesus replied, "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21 TNIV). Prior to his appearing, the kingdom of God was experienced through the Law, and because Israel was the custodian of the Law, it can be said that the kingdom manifest itself in Israel. This previous in-breaking of the kingdom of God in national Israel, however, is only a shadow of the reality as manifested in the appearing in Jesus Christ. He uniquely fulfilled the expectations of the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, Davidic, and New covenants. His miracles — above all, his resurrection from the dead — demonstrate the eternal nature and power of God's reign; Christ's teachings, works, and sacrifice demonstrate the nature of pure love for God and correlatively of love for his image.

Jesus Christ so embodies the kingdom that to enter it, one must break through and seize him — a trust so radical that, if necessary, a disciple must hate his or her family to follow him (Luke 14:26). He brought a sword that divided people with respect to their responses to him, rather than bringing the peace Israel

expected (Matt. 10:32–39). To be his disciple one must accept the invitation to enter the kingdom of God by being willing to die for their faith in him.

The hostile nations that oppose God's kingdom are now exposed as expressions of spiritual powers under Satan's rule (see [chap. 8](#)). Jesus Christ breaks into Satan's world and demonstrates his authority over hostile cosmic powers of restrictive religion, sin, sickness, and death. He is Lord of all.

But whereas Israel expected that at his appearing Messiah would shatter her political enemies and terminate evil, Jesus demanded that Israel herself repent of the corrupt priesthood and religious leaders that they were following, repent of their traditions that in fact negated the Law, and repent of their restrictive and outward religion. He demanded that Israel turn to him in faith and embrace his heavenly teaching before the eschatological kingdom would come in its fullness. Only a handful of disciples, however, repented of their vain Judaism and committed themselves to him.

As we read in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus taught to his small circle of disciples by parables the “mystery” (i.e., the secret) of the kingdom (Mark 4; Matt. 13). Ladd says, “The mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation. It is, in short, ‘fulfillment without consummation.’”⁴³ In this advance manifestation of the kingdom, people respond differently to Christ and his preaching, according to the nature of the “soil” on which the “seed” of his word is cast. It is not thrust powerfully upon people; it must be received willingly by faith. This kingdom grows silently like a “mustard seed” into a great tree. His disciples are the “wheat” God is sowing in the world; the unbelievers are the “tares” Satan is sowing. In the end, a net is dragged through the sea, catching the “good fish” of his disciples and the “bad fish” of his enemies—who will be thrown into a blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

After this mystery kingdom reaches full maturity, Messiah will appear in the eschatological power that Israel had expected. At that appearing, only the righteous will inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, through parables Jesus taught his disciples about a realized kingdom and an eschatological kingdom. In the realized kingdom, God reigns through his Son with spiritual power, inviting men and women to enter it; in the eschatological kingdom, at the resurrection of the dead, he reigns with irresistible power, saving his elect and damning Satan's realm. In that end, the mediatory kingdom of God becomes the universal kingdom of God; the King will manifest himself as the King that he is. This eschatological salvation entails in Ladd's summarization of the data a “deliverance from mortality, and *perfected* fellowship with God.”⁴⁴

In place of Israel's old-time line that envisioned "this age" and "the age to come," Jesus divided the age to come into "the age to come realized now in spiritual power and fellowship with God" and "the age to come realized in salvation from the presence of sin and deliverance from death." As God brings the kingdom to people and they enter it by faith, they experience God (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 5:4; 21:43; Luke 12:32; *passim*). God can give the kingdom to his faithful followers or take it away from his unfaithful people (Matt. 21:43). The kingdom of God with its blessings presently comes to earth in Jesus Christ's disciples, who by faith commit themselves to him who brought the spiritual blessings of heaven to earth, and in the future the heavenly city itself will descend to earth. Christ's salvation has both a present and future dimension: from the power and presence of sin respectively. The New Testament does not teach an intermediate kingdom between two *future* comings of Jesus (see [chap. 20](#)).

In John's gospel, Jesus mediates both God (1:18; 14:6–7) and eternal life to those who have faith in him (i.e., who accept Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God). In the end, God will resurrect their bodies to eternal life (6:40, 54) and unbelievers will be condemned (5:28–29). In other words, the Fourth Gospel also teaches a realized and future eschatology. John's emphasis, however, is on enjoying *now* the life that is eternal. This is realized by receiving the words of Jesus (6:63; 12:49–50). In this way the faithful know (i.e., have fellowship with) God (17:3). After his death and resurrection Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to be his Surrogate with his disciples (John 14–17).

In Acts, the circle of Jesus' disciples becomes his church at Pentecost when the Spirit of God is poured out upon them. After that outpouring, the church—the visible expression of the invisible kingdom of God—grows by its preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem (which will shortly be destroyed in 70 AD) to Samaria, to Antioch, and to Rome (Acts, especially 1:7). In its growth the church becomes predominantly gentile. The church is not the kingdom but, as Ladd puts it, "bears witness to the Kingdom—to God's redeeming acts in Christ both past and future."⁴⁵

Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, teaches that the baptism of the Holy Spirit baptizes the church into the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ, who is seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:33–35; Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1). Accordingly, the church is now seated in heavenly places with him. In his earthly ministry Christ brought the kingdom of heaven to earth; by his resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit he brings the church to heaven. They are in the world, but not of it. In other words, the blessings of the kingdom are presently being realized by God's people being baptized into the heavenly realms with Jesus Christ, with its spiritual power, as they have the blessed hope of his glorious appearing in "the

End,” when he will destroy his enemies in temporal power (Titus 2:13; 2 Thess. 1:7–10). That hope strengthens them to suffer presently for the kingdom of God (1:5). In sum, as Ladd expresses it:

The church has a dual character, belongs to two ages. It is the people of the Age to Come, but it still lives in this age, being constituted of sinful mortal men. This means that while the church in this age will never attain perfection, it must nevertheless display the life of the perfect order, the eschatological Kingdom of God.^{[46](#)}

X. CONCLUSION

This analysis of the Old Testament's natural boundaries of writing blocks broadly sustains the message that the holy and merciful God continually irrupts into history to establish his kingdom for the hallowing of his name. The New Testament continues this history of God's saving work for humanity. In this he will not fail because of the faithful, unsullied obedience of Jesus Christ, to whom every knee will one day bow.

This summary also shows that there has always been an already-and-not-yet aspect of the kingdom. The portrait of God's kingdom on the broad canvas of the Bible depicts the realization of Israel's physical kingdom in the Old Testament as a picture of the true kingdom to come. The prophets and the psalm writers proclaim the hope of this new kingdom:

Waiting in the wings is a greater *seed*— not the physical people of Abraham, but a spiritual people, true inheritors of his faith.

There is a greater *law*, a new covenant that Christ writes on the heart of his people through the Holy Spirit and that supersedes the covenant mediated by Moses.

There is a greater *land*, which is both present and not-yet. On the one hand, the land is presently “Christified,” for in Jesus Christ his people find the place of life and rest that is not bounded by geography and is available to the heretofore disenfranchised. On the other hand, the land promises will be consummated in the future new heaven and new earth.

And there is a greater *king* —a King who rules from a heavenly, transcendent throne and establishes his reign, not through military conquest over foreign powers but through his defeat of Satan through suffering for his people.

Ultimately, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provide the full resolution to the questions posed by the two narratives. In Paul's theology according to Colossians, Jesus Christ unites the universe — heaven and earth— by his death, resurrection, and heavenly session.^{[47](#)}

Should the subtitle of the book be changed to something like “The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of God”? No, the “coming” is principally not a reference to the historical process, but a reference to God's intent. That intent has not changed and does not change. God seeks to make a kingdom; that will is the sustaining drive of the Bible and of history itself. The obstacles also have not

changed — namely, the hearts of mankind and the works of Satan. Knowing God, *I AM* will win.⁴⁸

Finally, the following chart, comparing and contrasting the first chapters of Genesis with the last chapters of Revelation, dramatically unifies the Bible and dramatizes God’s progressive irruption from the time humanity lost paradise in the first heaven and earth to its more than regaining of it in the new heaven and earth.

But why does God do all this? According to Isaiah, God chose his people, formed them for himself, and remained committed to them despite their sin so that “they may proclaim my praise” (Isa. 43:20–21). Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, draws his conclusion of salvation history with a doxology: “To him be the glory for ever!” (Rom. 11:33–36). Peter, the apostle to the Jews, says to those who formerly were not God’s people but now are his people: “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

	First Creation <i>Genesis 1 – 3</i>	Final Creation <i>Revelation 21 – 22</i>
Chaos	Abyss	No sea
Source of light	Luminaries (sun, etc.)	God
Division of light	Day and night	No night
Creation	Under a curse	Curse lifted
Human moral state	Capable of sin	Sinless
Human physical state	Mortal and painful	Immortal and painless
Human political state	Divided in allegiance to God	Universal allegiance to God
Human spiritual state	Banished from God	God with humans
Sanctification	Seventh day	Universal
God	Invisible	Visible
Son of God	Concealed	Revealed
Water	Provides physical life	Provides spiritual life

THOUGHT QUESTION

What do you mean when you pray the Lord's Prayer — "Your kingdom come" — and how does that prayer relate you to *Heilsgeschichte*?

[1.](#) Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (4th ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 112.

[2.](#) James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 7.

[3.](#) George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 57.

[4.](#) Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:25–33.

[5.](#) The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question #102.

[6.](#) "God! God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob! God of Jesus Christ, not of the philosophers and scholars": a note, dated 23 November 1654, found after Pascal's death.

[7.](#) 1 Chron. 17:14; 28:5; 29:11; 2 Chron. 13:8; Pss. 22:29 [Eng. 28]; 103:19; 145:11–13 [4x]; Dan. 2:44; 3:33 [Eng. 4:3]; 4:31 [Eng. 34]; 6:27 [Eng. 26]; 7:14, 18, 27; Obad. 21.

[8.](#) Paul Drake, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," in *The Kingdom of God in 20th Century Interpretation*, ed. Wendell Willis (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987), 67–79.

[9.](#) Ibid., 71.

[10.](#) Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 73–74.

[11.](#) Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, in Judaism, and in Christianity: or Hebrew, Jewish, and Christian Eschatology from Pre-Prophetic Times Till the Close of the New Testament Canon* (1899; repr., Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2003), 84.

[12.](#) Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 61.

[13.](#) Cf. R. W. I. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 26–37.

[14.](#) Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker

Books, 2000), 45–47.

[15.](#) Moshe Weinfeld, “berith,” *JAOS* 90 (1970): 278. For the decline, rise, and decline of covenant centrality in the history of Israel’s religion studies, see Robert A. Oden Jr., “The Place of Covenant in the Religion of Israel,” in Patrick D. Miller Jr. et al., eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 421–47.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, 40–45.

[17.](#) Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:17.

[18.](#) Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 36; cf. William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

[19.](#) I am indebted to Charles Yu for this astute reflection.

[20.](#) For an excellent primer on the Pentateuch, see Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[21.](#) First use of the Greek term *he (ho) pentateuchos* is found in an epistle (to Flora) by the Valentinian Ptolemaeus (ca. AD 160). “Pentateuch” (Lat., *pentateuchus*) means “the [book] consisting of five parts” (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 1).

[22.](#) Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:290–91.

[23.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 22–29.

[24.](#) David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOTSup 10 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978): 29; quoted in an excellent primer on the Pentateuch: Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[25.](#) Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 35.

[26.](#) *Ibid.*, 36.

[27.](#) *Ibid.*, 37.

[28.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “Micah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary; Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 677.

[29.](#) Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 608.

[30.](#) Richard L. Pratt Jr., *1 and 2 Chronicles*, Mentor Commentaries (Faverdale North, UK: Evangelical Press, 1996).

[31.](#) Mark A. Thronveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 11.

[32.](#) G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars

Press, 1985), 211.

[33.](#) Ibid.

[34.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “Fear of the Lord: The Foundation for a Relationship with God,” in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality Presented to James Houston*, ed. J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 17–33.

[35.](#) R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 96.

[36.](#) Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs* (Evansville, Ind.: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1959), 3–4.

[37.](#) More specifically, it has strong parallels to the citylament genre widely attested in Mesopotamian literature (see S. Kramer, trans. “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur,” *ANET*, 455–63).

[38.](#) The third lament repeats each letter three times; the fourth has two couplets per stanza; and the fifth does not have an acrostic but consists of twenty-two verses, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

[39.](#) Traditionally Jeremiah has been identified as the author because 2 Chron. 3:25 refers to Jeremiah’s having composed laments for the death of Josiah and because of the similarities in message and vocabulary between Lamentations and portions of Jeremiah.

[40.](#) Richard L. Pratt, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

[41.](#) Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). Richard Hesse, in his otherwise superb commentary, unnecessarily pits a dramatic approach against a unified collection of love poems. (See Hesse, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 22–29.)

[42.](#) For the background of baptism see Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 41.

[43.](#) Ibid., 93.

[44.](#) Ibid., 73–74, italics mine.

[45.](#) Ibid., 113.

[46.](#) Ibid., 115.

[47.](#) Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2005), 394–400.

[48.](#) Thielman, having addressed the coherence of Paul’s theology, contends Paul’s center is “*God’s graciousness toward his weak and sinful creatures*” (ibid., 233, italics his; cf. 230–33, 479–80). To be sure, the doctrine of grace is crucial to Paul’s theology but is not broad enough to encompass the Pauline corpus. My proposed center entails God’s grace to sinners but also encompasses

Paul's other doctrines, such as the unification of heaven and earth in Christ, holiness of God's people, and more (see Thielman, 438–79).

Part Two

PRIMARY HISTORY

Chapter 7

THE GIFT OF THE COSMOS

There is sufficient clearness to enlighten the elect, and sufficient obscurity to humble them. There is sufficient obscurity to blind the reprobate, and sufficient clearness to condemn them, and make them inexcusable. — Saint Augustine

Pascal, *Pensées*, 8.578

I. INTRODUCTION

Darkness. Water. Wind. The curtain goes up on a darkened stage. A voice is heard. Then a brilliant light blankets the landscape and dazzles the eyes. The cosmic drama of salvation history opens with an awe-inspiring display of theatrics. The palpable excitement and anticipation is pregnant in the text, available to all. Unfortunately, many readers today do not sense the drama nor understand these pivotal words, rich with meaning. This narrative of origins not only opens the cosmic drama of the Bible's theme — God irrupting into chaos to establish his rule over everything—it also lays the foundation for the biblical worldview of ethical monotheism. God takes his rightful place on his throne in the heavens with the earth as his footstool, appoints human beings as his regents to rule his earth, and establishes laws for Israel in the order of creation.

Cultural anthropologists commonly assume that a culture's cosmology will permeate a people's patterns of perception and thought.¹ The Bible's creation cosmogonies permeate the world and life views of those who believe in the God of the Bible. For most moderns, however, the biblical narrative has been replaced by evolutionism, a philosophy that regards the process of things changing from a simple or lower to a higher or more complex state as ultimately due to chance, not to intelligent design. Since the biblical narrative does not describe the process of creation from a scientific viewpoint, the origin of species by evolutionary processes cannot be ruled out automatically, but evolutionism's worldview that only matter exists and that it is ruled by chance must be rejected as unreasonable and, more important, as antithetical to the biblical worldview. The replacement of biblical theism with materialistic evolutionism lays the foundation for trade in aborted body parts, genocide, and eugenic engineering. The resulting ethical consequences of the biblical versus modern worldviews cannot be overemphasized. Because the social stakes are so high, Christians must understand the content and literary form of Genesis 1 so that they can take a firm stand in this clash of viewpoints.

Unfortunately, in the aftermath of Charles Darwin, the scientific debates between evolutionists and creationists have thoroughly obscured the real message of the creation narrative.² Instead of metaphysical questions that shape culture, questions about dinosaurs, a young earth theory, and such dominate the evangelical landscape. This is unfortunate. The creation account presents God

transforming chaos into cosmos by his word. The account assumes that God is an aseity (Lat. *a* “from” and *se* “self”). Unlike his creation, which, though independent from him, depends on him for its original and sustained existence, God’s existence is from himself— *HE IS*. Therefore, no account of his origin is possible. Whereas the biblical cosmogony *gaps* his origin³ — there is none — it *blanks* the physical processes about how his word effected the cosmos, apart from saying that the ground produced vegetation according to its kind (Gen. 1:11–12) and the land produced living creatures according to their kinds (1:24). Whether by fiat (*ex nihilo*), such as light, or by processes within matter, such as forming flora and fauna from the ground, according to the biblical cosmogony, God made it by his design. The biblical creation account represents God as a sovereign savior who irrupts into a given darkness and abyss to transform it into a good creation that produces and sustains life.

II. AUDIENCE/PURPOSE OF THE NARRATIVE

Why and to whom was this narrative written?

A. Israel in the Wilderness

After the exodus, the people of Israel travel in the wilderness. They leave Egypt, a place saturated with pagan mythology, and head for Canaan, another place saturated with pagan mythology. The pagan myths of that day, to a large extent, involve rituals and rites that serve as annual reenactments of an original creation to guarantee its stability and the continuance of life within it. In these annual rites, the practitioners tell their pagan creation myths, and by the use of magical words and recitation and voodoo ritual, they hope to re-create the earth in order to make the land fertile for agriculture and the wombs fruitful for the next year. Two beliefs underlie these pagan rituals: First, there is a pantheon of pagan gods and goddesses who emanate from the primordial matter as it is being differentiated and, as such, are devoid of morals — they commit crimes of sex and violence — and demand no moral rectitude from their worshipers. Second, their divine sphere is subject to human manipulation. These notions undermine the biblical understanding of covenant relationship between God and his people, a relationship founded on his election of them to be holy like himself (Lev. 19:1–2) and their acceptance of that election (Exod. 24:7). Faced with this threat of paganism, politically redeemed Israel needed a creation narrative because they were in need of spiritual redemption. They not only needed political redemption from slavery under Pharaoh; they needed to be cleansed from their pagan contamination. Joshua exhorted: “Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt” (Josh. 24:14). His command infers that his generation of Israelites had adopted Egyptian myths and pagan practices. Similarly Ezekiel 20:16 and 23:1–4 imply that Israel adopted pagan beliefs and rituals during their sojourn in Egypt. The creation narrative aims to debunk these myths.

EXCURSUS: A FINE-TUNED UNIVERSE

On the basis of the hypotheses of the Big Bang and of evolution, some scientists have hypothesized the anthropic cosmological principle. According to this principle, physical qualities such as a strong nuclear force constant, a gravitational force constant, the expansion rate of the universe, the average distance between stars, and the values of other physical quantities had to be so precise to effect thinking creatures who could reflect upon their origins, that the best hypothesis is that there was this intent and design from the beginning.

Roger Penrose, professor of mathematics at Oxford University and Wolf Prize winner for his analytic description of the Big Bang, finds the laws of nature so fine-tuned for life that an intelligent “Creator” must have chosen them (*The Emperor’s New Mind* [New York: Penguin, 1991]). Nobel laureate professor Steven Weinberg (“Life in the Universe,” *Scientific American* [October 1994], though a skeptic, notes, “Life as we know it would be impossible if any one of several physical quantities had slightly different values.”

One constant that requires incredible fine-tuning has to do with the energy of the Big Bang. Weinberg quantifies the tuning as one part in 10^{120} . Michael Turner, a widely quoted astrophysicist from the University of Chicago, describes that tuning with a simile: “The precision is as if one could throw a dart across the entire universe and hit a bull’s-eye one millimeter in diameter on the other side.” In his popularization of the principle, Gerald L. Schroeder (*The Science of God: The Convergence of Scientific and Biblical Wisdom* [New York: Free Press, 1997]) makes a convincing case that twentieth-century science (physics and biology) opens wide the door to the interpretation that the origin of the universe with all its complexity is due to divine direction (“God”), not just random chance (“Mother Nature”). (But Schroeder’s convergence of science with the Bible by the esoteric hermeneutics of the kabbalah and of Nahmanides is quirky.)

If matter and chance, not a personal God, is the ultimate source of origin, then logically one must draw the conclusion that human existence is without purpose and meaning (i.e., nihilism), which is contrary to human experience.⁴

Confronted by the ubiquitous presence of pagan beliefs, Moses, founder of Israel's theocracy, is not a fool; he does not leave the new nation without a creation narrative, a cosmology designed to counteract the mythic way of looking at the world. There is no surefire way to date this material, but there is no reason to assume that it is not part of an original Mosaic corpus of literature.⁵ "Moses's superb training, exceptional spiritual gifts, and divine call uniquely qualify him to compose Israel's cosmologies. The founder of Israel is the most probable person to transpose its national repository of ancient traditions into a coherent history in order to define the nation and its mission. His noble vision stirs the imagination and calls upon its audience to order itself according to that memory."⁶

At the heart of Moses' creation theology lies this revolutionary message: One personal, benevolent God overcomes a primordial chaos of an abyss blanketed in darkness to create a habitable world and its inhabitants. He stands apart from his creation as its creator and ruler; he is not a part of a pantheon of deities or a pantheistic force inseparably bound up with matter. God is personal and unique (Deut. 4:39; John 1:1; Col. 1:17). He is a unique person who freely chooses to create the cosmos by triumphantly transforming the chaos, sometimes in connection with *ex nihilo* creations such as light, to overcome the primordial darkness through his divine word (Ps. 33:6, 9; cf. John 1:1–3). His act of creation signifies that the whole universe is not an emanation or a part of the divine being. He creates and sustains it all by the power of his own being. This assertion that God is the Creator of all that is good and Ruler of the universe is the ultimate statement of the creation narrative. He is just, righteous, and faithful on behalf of what is good.

The second narrative of creation (Gen. 2:4–25) identifies this God as *I AM*, Israel's God, a god with moral requirements who shapes the future based on human behavior. This "ethical monotheism," directed by God's designation of what is "good," is the foundation of Israel's faith. Every action (good or bad) of an individual has a reciprocal consequence that is guaranteed by the Sovereign's dominion over his cosmos. This too sets the Bible apart from all ancient Near Eastern mythologies.

Paganism has always been a threat to the faith and witness of the people of God. Today many Western people no longer believe that one God controls destiny by his righteous rule. Rather, they turn to chance and/or to impersonal spiritual forces, to crystal balls, to extraterrestrial life-forms — anything to get away from a God with ethical requirements informed by his unchanging holy

character.⁷

B. Israel in Exile: Paganism in Babylon

The creation narrative, though part of the original Mosaic core of material, likely reached its final form during Israel's exile in Babylon. At that time, Babylon dominated the known civilized world, and Marduk was their preeminent god. In addition, Babylonians worshiped many nature deities; every gate in the city of Babylon was named after a god: Adad, the storm god; Ishtar, the fertility god; and many more. But Marduk, their patron deity, was the creator. According to the Babylonian creation myth, Marduk, in a war with the ancient goddess Tiamat, destroyed her and divided her carcass to create heaven and earth (see p. 140). The biblical creation narrative serves the exiles as a polemic against Marduk.

C. Purpose of the Narrative

All of the above argues for a theological interpretation of Genesis 1. The narrative is designed to counter ancient and modern pagan ideas that are noxious to biblical faith. The intense debate between creationists and other scientists — between “zappers” and “oozers” — over this text results from a misreading, an attempt to read the narrative through a lens not intended by the implied author. H. Conrad Hyer writes,

What Genesis 1 is undertaking and accomplishing [is] a radical and sweeping affirmation of monotheism vis-à-vis polytheism, syncretism, and idolatry. Each day of creation ... dismisses an additional cluster of deities.... On the first day, the gods of light and darkness are dismissed. On the second day, the gods of sky and sea. On the third day, earth gods and gods of vegetation. On the fourth day, sun, moon, and star gods. The fifth and sixth days take away any associations with divinity from the animal kingdom. And finally human existence, too, is emptied of any intrinsic divinity—while at the same time *all* human beings, from the greatest to the least, and not just pharaohs, kings, and heroes, are granted a divine likeness and mediation.⁸

Christians now live on a mission field with worldviews that besiege the message of ethical monotheism. The new paganism has six faces:

1. A common worldview of the Western world since the Enlightenment is *materialism*, the philosophical theory that regards matter and its motions as constituting the entire universe; all phenomena, including those of the mind, are regarded as due to material causes.

2. By implication, since everything is material, theoretically and ideally everything is subject to *empiricism*. In other words, as Alan Reynolds notes, “empiricism, which insists that all knowledge is based on observation, experimentation, and verification, has led to belief in a self-sufficient universe that can be understood on its own terms, without any need of the transcendent or of God.”⁹ Alan Reynolds cites Lesslie Newbigin: “The most obvious fact that distinguishes our culture from all that have preceded it is that it is — in its public philosophy at least — atheist. The famous reply of Laplace to the complaint that he had omitted God from his system — ‘I have no need of that hypothesis’ — might stand as a motto for our culture as a whole.”¹⁰

2. Materialism and empiricism entail a belief in an inherent *coherence* within nature between cause and effect. This belief has led to *determinism*, an understanding of reality as mechanical and valueless. Moderns view the origin of life and the nature of our humanity as determined by natural causation.

4. *Secularism* is a system of political or social philosophy that embraces materialism, empiricism, and natural causation and rejects all forms of religious faith and worship in the public sphere. It relegates nature, society, and government to the status of instruments dedicated only to the fulfillment of our material desires masquerading as “rights.” Secularism is fast becoming the worldview of Western intellectual elites: the academy.

5. *Secular humanism* is defined as any system or mode of thought or action in which human interests, values, and dignity predominate. This type of thinking expresses itself in an intense pragmatism that calculates everything in terms of its benefit for humanity. Secular humanists do not acknowledge God and God’s ownership of the created order.

6. *Postmodernism* or New Ageism marks a return to old-fashioned paganism, but with a modern twist. New ageism appropriates Eastern religions (Taoism, Buddhism, and to a degree Hinduism) but distorts these Eastern religions by investing their terms, such as *karma* (= merit) with Western concepts. Postmodernism replaces the objective God who has revealed himself in special revelation with a deification of one’s “spirituality.” It rejects the notion of a revealed moral code and instead tests truth by its therapeutic value. The

popularity of Star Wars and its accompanying paganism (“May the Force be with you!”), mainstream acceptance of forms of transcendental meditation, which disregard the strictures of the biblical covenants for communion with Reality, and the widespread use of astrology even by world leaders, reflect the degree to which North America has returned to the pagan roots of early humanity. In this worldview one culture is only different, not better, than another.

III. STRUCTURE AND TEXT OF THE NARRATIVE (GEN. 1:1–2:3)

The following is an outline of the narrative, followed by a brief discussion on the text of each section.^{[11](#)}

- A. Summary statement (v. 1)
- B. Negative state of earth before creation (v. 2)
- c. Creation by word (vv. 3–21)
- D. Summary statement (2:1)
- E. Epilogue: Sabbath rest (2:2–3)

The inclusio, or summary statement, frames the main narrative and separates it from the epilogue: “Sabbath rest.”

A. Summary Statement (1:1)

Verse 1 is the prologue to the entire narrative.^{[12](#)} This understanding becomes apparent with a proper understanding of the expression “heaven and earth.” Linguists refer to such a construction as a collocation or a syntagm: two or more words that when combined yield a tertiary meaning. Two parts hydrogen combined with one part oxygen produce “water,” a very different substance than gases in isolation. *Butterfly* is quite different from *butter* and *fly*, and the “free and easy” (i.e., marked by informality and without restraint) is not the same as either word in isolation. Moreover, the frequently used biblical compound phrase “heaven and earth” is a merism, a statement of opposites, that elsewhere indicates the totality of the organized universe (i.e., “the cosmos”). Similarly, the merism “day and night” means “all the time,” and “summer and winter” means “year round.” The English word *cosmos* is derived from the Greek word *kosmeo* (“to put in order/arrange,” as in *cosmetics*), and this is always the meaning of “heaven and earth” elsewhere. The biblical compound that draws Genesis 1:1 to a conclusion never denotes unorganized matter. Verses 1 and 2 cannot mean respectively that God created the organized universe (v. 1) and at that time the

earth was disorganized (v. 2), without arousing rational “no-sense” (i.e., “nonsense”). Brevard S. Childs says, “It is rather generally acknowledged that the suggestion of God’s creating a chaos is a logical contradiction and must be rejected.”¹³

On the second day, God calls the firmament “heaven”; on the third day, he calls the dry ground “earth” (“land”). Thereafter “the earth” refers to the land, the dry ground in contrast to the primeval waters. These two components, which are created on the second and third days, comprise the spatial limits of the cosmos in the ancient Near Eastern phenomenal view of the universe. If verse 1 is a summary, then “in the beginning” must refer to the first six days of creation, not time prior to creation. The six days constitute “the beginning.”¹⁴ The operative word, however, is “created” (*bārā’*), which distinguishes itself from other verbs for “making” by being used exclusively of God. The finite mortal, whose understanding of the cosmos and history is like a thimble of water before the ocean, has no right to challenge the Creator’s sovereignty; God fashions the creation, including earthly mortals, according to his wisdom and good pleasure, even as a potter fashions clay vessels (Job 10:9; Isa. 45:9; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:20–21 et al.). In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:24–28).

B. Negative State of Earth before Creation (1:2)

The summary statement entails that the chaos of verse 2 does not exist independently from God, but the text does not explain the connection between God and chaos. Rather, verse 2 supplies the context in order to interpret the significance of the creation — namely, Israel’s covenant-keeping God overcomes the chaos to bring about his good pleasure. The chaos “is a reality rejected by God.”¹⁵ Like other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies and Homer’s *Iliad*, the Genesis account assumes the existence of primordial water — there is no word of God that commands its existence. Although the origin of the primordial water is unknown, the summary in verse 1, along with other biblical texts, represents it as a temporal reality; only God is eternal (see [chap. 4.IV.B](#); Deut. 32:40; 33:27; Ps. 90:2; Isa. 40:28). Moreover, since the darkness and abyss will be eliminated in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21–22), they are not eternal. Although their beginnings are cloaked in mystery, the absence of data is not an argument for an eternal dualism. The inchoate dark abyss is not good because it resists life. It is a surd (i.e., irrational, such as wind or floods that destroy crops), not a teleological good (such as a windmill that pumps water to

nurture crops). The origin of the surd (i.e., God does not call the earth good until it is restrained by light and by land that foster human life) is as mysterious as the diabolical lying and murdering Serpent who incarnates moral evil in Genesis 3:1–5. When the writer of Hebrews says, “The universe was formed at God’s command” (11:3), he must have excluded the dark abyss, for it existed apart from and before God’s commands. John says, “Through [the Word (Jesus Christ)] all things were made” (John 1:3), but are darkness and the abyss ever conceptualized as “made” in the Bible? The inspired author of Job represents the primeval sea as bursting forth from the womb of the earth and God as wrapping the sea in thick darkness (Job 38:8–9), but no clear biblical text testifies to the origins of chaos or of the Serpent, nor to the reason for their existence.

To answer the whence and why of both surd and social evils, appeal has been made to highly figurative texts such as Ezekiel 28 and Revelation 13, but these highly figurative texts do not provide a firm foundation for dogma. On the other hand, neither surd nor moral evil are represented as eternal, unlike God. Since the darkness and abyss will be eliminated in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21–22), they are not eternal; their beginnings are cloaked in mystery. The absence of data is not an argument for an eternal dualism. “Formless and empty” (*tōhū wābōhū*) indicate this negative, “not good,” state of the earth.¹⁶ Accordingly, the creation narrative is a story of redemption, of the triumph of light over darkness, of land and sky over water, both of which are essential for life.

Borrowing imagery, not theology, from pagan myths, Israel’s poets depict *I AM* as ascending to cosmic mastery by his victory over the primordial waters. In the polytheistic religions of the nations surrounding Israel, the sea is deified as a chaotic entity and set over against the gods of order. Israel’s poets pick up this imagery and use the names of various mythical deities who oppose creation — Leviathan, Yamm (Sea), and Rahab (Proud) — to depict the gods’ triumph over the primordial chaos. In a Canaanite myth (ca. fourteenth century BC), the god Baal defeated the ocean, whom the Canaanites conceived of as a deity resisting creation, variously named as Prince Yamm (Sea); Judge River; Lotan (= Heb. Leviathan), the twisting seven-headed dragon; and other forms of sea monsters. The author of Job borrowed this imagery to depict the Creator as the powerful Savior: “He quieted the S/sea [*Yamm*] with his power, and by his understanding he shattered Rahab [Proud]” (Job 26:12–13, translation mine; see also NRSV). So did the psalmist:

You, O God, are my king from of old;
 ☉☉☉☉you bring salvation upon the earth.

It was you who split open the sea [*Yamm*] by your power;
 ☩☩☩☩you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
 It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan ...
 It was you who opened up springs and streams....
 The day is yours, and yours also the night....
 It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth.
 ☩☩☩☩(Ps. 74:12–17; cf. Job 3:8; Ps. 77:17–20; Isa. 51:9)

John L. McKenzie underscores that though the Hebrew poets assimilated mythopoeic imagery and language (that is, the poet is using metaphor drawn from mythological language), “in no sense can it be said that the Hebrews incorporated ‘mythopoeic thought.’”¹⁷ Nevertheless, by this imagery the poets give a deeper insight into the creation as a salvific event. Frank Moore Cross rightly speaks of “the tendency to mythologize historical episodes to reveal their transcendent meaning.”¹⁸ The narrator blanks, not gaps,¹⁹ the origins of the surd and of moral evil, for the point of his narrative is that the God of light triumphs over the darkness and chaos, which is hostile to life, to make it habitable and inhabited by living species. In sum, the prologue to the Bible recounts that God irrupts into the surd and establishes his rule over it, laying the foundation for the Bible’s theme (see [chap. 5.II.C.6](#)).

The Hebrew phrase *rûah ʿēlōhîm* grammatically can mean “spirit of God,”²⁰ “wind from God,”²¹ or “mighty wind,”²² but contextually it probably means “wind from God” (see NRSV). The juxtaposition of the “spirit of God” (a nonphysical entity) sweeping/hovering²³ over the waters (a physical reality) seems incongruent, and *rûah* in the homological (i.e., similarly structured) narrative of the re-creation after the Flood clearly means “wind” (Gen. 8:1). A writer probably would not use *ʿēlōhîm* in its purely superlative sense in this chapter that consistently uses the term in its normal referential sense. The phrase elsewhere never means “a tempestuous wind.” Since the wind is from God, it is not part of the primordial chaos, but a dynamic, creative presence. Indeed, it is this sense that gave rise to the superlative. With regard to that sense, A. B. Davidson notes: “Probably the idea was that God *originated* the thing ... or that it belonged to Him, and was therefore extraordinary.”²⁴ The Hebrew participle rendered “was hovering” denotes the continuous activity of God over against the chaos.

Ancient Near Eastern parallels and early Judaic sources suggest the building of the tabernacle reprises the creation of the cosmos.²⁵ In that reprise Bezalel is filled with the “spirit of God” (*rûah ʿēlōhîm*) for the purpose of endowing him

with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge for his constructive work (Exod. 31:3). In other words, *rûah^{ʿe}lōhîm* has a positive theological significance over against the primordial darkness and abyss. The psalmist in a hymn that closely resembles the content of the Genesis cosmogony put it this way:

You covered it [the earth] with the deep as with a garment....
But at your rebuke [i.e., blast] the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. (Ps. 104:6–7)

C. Creation by Word (1:3–31)

The main narrative consists of two alternating patterns involving the process of creation—ABCDE/A'B'C'D'E' (repeated six times) —and the progress of creation—ABC/A'B'C'.

1. Process of Creation

The six days of creation comprise eight scenes that conform to a single sequential structure of five or six parts: *announcement*, *command*, *report*, *evaluation*, and *temporal framework*; *naming* is found with the first three days.

a. The *announcement*, “And God said” (vv. 3, 6, 9 + 11; vv. 14, 20, 24 + 26), by placing word before event, implies that the cosmos is created according to the plan of one God, a God who thinks and who organizes freely according to his own sovereign pleasure. It rejects the idea that God is an impersonal force without rational cogitation and debunks the mythic idea that the different parts of the world are emanations of deities. Though creation is not part of the deity, it depends on him and is bound to him by his word.²⁶ Werner Foster writes, “Thus in becoming, being, and perishing, all creation is wholly dependent on the will of the Creator”²⁷ (cf. Neh. 9:6; Acts 17:25, 28). Gerhard von Rad observes: “The world and its fullness do not find their unity and inner coherence in a cosmological first principle, such as the Ionian natural philosophers tried to discover, but in the completely personal will of Yahweh their creator.”²⁸

b. The *command* “Let there be” or its equivalent asserts the cosmos comes into existence by God’s will and word, which, operating without restraint, overcomes the negative state of the earth. The power of words depends on the speaker, not in the words themselves. For example, an authority within an institution can pronounce a man and a woman to be husband and wife, and it is

so; a minister can baptize a person in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it is so. The omnipotent God speaks creations into existence, and it is so.

c. The *report* “And so God made” or its equivalent shows God’s transcendence and his sovereignty over everything, including both the gathered sea and the dry land.

d. God *names* the cosmic elements, calling light *yôm*, “day,” and darkness *lāylâ* “night.” He names the gathered water *yammîm*, “seas,” and the resultant dry ground *’eres*, “land.” The power to name shows dominion. In the ancient Near East, when a king conquered another people, he changed its name to show his sovereignty. When Pharaoh Neco had effective control of Judah, he changed the name of the king of Judah from Eliakim to Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34; cf. 24:17; Num. 32:38).²⁹ By naming the primordial elements, God asserts that nothing is outside of God’s dominion, even the forces in nature hostile to life. Humanity need not be anxious of them; the most chaotic elements are under God’s thumb.

e. God *evaluates* his creation by his standards and declares, “It is good.” Everything he creates functions as he intended. Brought within constraints of light and land, even the darkness and the watery deep become part of what is “good” because the bringing of darkness each evening is part of the rhythm of life and of marking time (Ps. 104:19–26).³⁰ Inferentially, however, the elimination of sea and darkness from the perfected eschatological cosmos shows that the duality with land and light in the present cosmos is not the ideal (Rev. 21:1). Elsewhere, light is often an image for divine blessing in the midst of darkness, which is often an image of mourning and calamity. God’s estimation that it is “good” does not mean that it is consummately perfect: both surd and moral evil are already in existence. One can infer that prior to the Fall, decay existed in the flora because humans and animals were to eat it (Gen. 1:29–30), and wild animals (carnivores) that kill prey were also present among the species of fauna (1:30; 2:19). The biblical text represents the human, not the animal, realm as punished with death through Adam’s fall (Gen. 3:19; Rom. 5:12–19). The analogy between Adam and Christ also pertains to the human, not the animal, realm: as Adam brought death to all humanity, Christ brings life to all believers, not to animals.

f. The structure concludes with the chronological *framework*: “And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.”³¹ The chronological framework demonstrates logic and order to God’s creation. It also indicates progression. With space comes time marked off by the solar spheres.³² Without space and its

objects and their progression to be marked off, there is no time. God did not create *in* time but created *with* time as a convenient means of measuring progression in connection with space.³³

2. Progress of Creation

Day	Form (<i>tōhû</i>)	Day	Fill (<i>bōhû</i>)
1	Light (vv. 3–5)	4	Lights (vv. 14–19)
2	Firmament (vv. 6–8)	5	Inhabitants (vv. 20–23)
	—Sky		—Fish
	—Seas		—Birds
3	Dry land (vv. 9–10)	6	Land animals (vv. 24–26)
	Vegetation (vv. 11–12)		Humanity (vv. 27–31)

This well-known analysis of the eight scenes divides the two triads of six days into an alternating pattern involving “form” and “fill.”³⁴ The first days of the two triads (A/A’) both deal with light *ʾôr* and luminaries (*m’ôrôt*, plural of *māʾôr*). The sky and seas are in parallel with fish and birds (B/B’). Dry land and vegetation are paired with land animals and humanity (C/C’). Several observations on this alternating pattern are noteworthy:

a. *The first triad involves the separation of formless, desolate mass into three static spheres.* The second triad fills up these respective spheres that house and shelter life with moving forms. The sphere of light established in the first triad is filled with the sun; the sphere of darkness with the moon and the stars; the firmament with moving birds; the seas with fish; and the dry land with vegetation, animals, creeping things, and finally, humanity.

b. *The elements of each triad progress from heaven to earth.* The first triad begins with the creation of light and ends climactically with the bringing forth of vegetation. The second triad begins with the creation of luminaries and ends climactically with *ʾādām* in God’s image.

c. *Both triads have the same structure.* The first day in each triad contains a single creative act: “Let there be light” and “Let there be lights [luminaries].” The second day contains one creative act with two aspects: the creation of a firmament that divides the sea and sky and the creation of birds and fish. The third day of each triad holds two separate creative acts: dry land and vegetation in the first triad; animals and humanity in the second triad.

d. *The inhabitants in the second triad rule over the corresponding spheres.* The luminaries master the day and the night: the sun is lord over the day, and the

moon is lord over the night. This passage also teaches that humanity is made to rule over the earth and its inhabitants. This is confirmed in Genesis 2: God refrains from naming the land animals, birds, and fish, but confers that authority on man.

e. *The triads are distinguished by degrees of movement?*³⁵ The first triad is static— nothing moves; in contrast, the second triad is full of movement. Furthermore, within the second triad there is a progressive development from minimal freedom of movement to maximum freedom of movement. The luminaries change their places, but they cannot deviate from their definite course. Birds and fish have more movement than the luminaries, but they too are confined to migratory patterns. Humanity has the greatest freedom, for humans choose where they will go. They are able to make 180-degree turns. This understanding of human freedom is a profound concept embedded in the text.

D. Summary Statement (2:1)

The summary statement in 2:1 is a janus, functioning both as an inclusio (an envelope) with verse 1:1 and introducing the epilogue. Here “the heavens and the earth” refers to the first three days of creation that feature the essential spheres of the cosmos. “All their vast array” refers to the manifold forms of creation housed in these spheres, such as luminaries in the heavens, birds in the sky, fish in the sea, and “creepy-crawlies,” animals, and human beings on the land.

E. Epilogue: Sabbath Rest (2:2–3)

The narrative regarding the seventh day of creation stands apart from “the creation by word” as an epilogue. It follows the summary statement, does not conform to the patterned structure of the first six days, and gives a new perspective on the creation.

The sequence of days, climaxing with the seventh, is the dominant structure of the cosmogony. In addition to this primary heptad, Umberto Cassuto has shown that a heptadic structure (i.e., groups or multiples of seven) is woven into the Genesis cosmogony.³⁶ This heptadic structure throughout the cosmogony suggests the importance of the climactic seventh day in the dominant heptadic structure of seven sequential days. That it is the only day God blessed and

sanctified and the only day that has no evening to end it also suggests its theological importance. The theological significance of Sabbath lies in the explanation why God blessed it and made it holy: twice it is said he rested (Heb. *sabat*, “ceased”) from his work. God’s attainment of enduring rest marks completion of the act of creation. Earlier we noted that by creating the world the Creator triumphed over chaos and effected life. His enduring rest signifies that he succeeded; his victory and work are complete and final.

The rationale of Exodus to remember the Sabbath in the Decalogue as a mimetic reenactment of God’s rest after his work of creation (Exod. 20:8–11) and the rationale of Deuteronomy to observe the Sabbath as a reminder of release from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15) are not unrelated. God’s two great works, creation of land out of water in connection with wind and Israel’s exodus through the sea in the same connection (Exod. 15:10) are God’s two great works of creation and liberation. The Sabbath commemorates both the liberation of the cosmos from lifeless chaos to ordered life and the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage to worship *I AM*. The Creator and Liberator from oppression instructs his covenant people to enter mimetically this final and perfect salvific rest with him by observing the Sabbath. On this day his treasured people commemorate their liberation from Egypt, and on this day the poor, the alien, and the slave find their refreshing rest (Exod. 23:9–12). In other words, the Sabbath commemorates that the irruption of God’s rule over oppression has a liberating, philanthropic dimension. The cosmos bears witness to *I AM*’s *hesed* to deliver the needy from darkness to light, from death to life (Ps. 33).³⁷

Instructively, this day is represented — surely intentionally—as having no evening/night. God’s rest is conceptualized as having no darkness, a negative theological symbol for oppression and death. On that day the horrific primordial chaos is banished forever. In other words, by resting on the Sabbath, Israel experiences the world to come, a world of untarnished blessing that they are destined to inherit in the eschaton.

Moreover, as human beings exert sovereignty over space and matter, which they build with and possess, the sanctification of time reminds them that there is something transcendent beyond matter and space. The critical moments are not the ones spent building, possessing, and controlling, but the times set apart for quiet, reflection, meditation, and worship.³⁸

Religious people who see Sabbath rest as a religious obligation miss its meaning (see [chap. 15.III.C.2](#)).

IV. LITERARY FORM OF GENESIS 1:1–2:4A

The identification of the literary form of the Genesis prologue enables us to approach the text with an appropriate reading strategy for understanding its theology and its theological intention and to evaluate its compatibility with scientific cosmogonies. C. S. Lewis shrewdly observed, “The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.”³⁹ We will identify its form by critically appraising some proposed theories.

A. Is It a Hymn?

Some suggest that the creation account is a hymn, a form of Hebrew poetry. This is true of the *Enuma Elish*, for the author of that myth defines his entire composition as a hymn or song in praise of Marduk. But the two accounts differ in both form and substance. As for form, the pagan myths have parallel lines, the essential feature of Semitic poetry (see [chap. 5.I.D.9](#)), but Genesis 1 does not. Note the striking contrast in the recounting of creation in the lyrical hymns of Psalms 8 and 104 and in the prose narrative of Genesis 1. As for subject matter, Genesis 1 is about the creation, while *Enuma Elish* is about the creator. In the Babylonian myth, the gods bless Marduk, hero of the story, but in the Genesis account, God, also hero of the story, blesses his creation and sanctifies the Sabbath. In *Enuma Elish* the gods approve what Marduk has done, while in Genesis 1 God approves what he has created.

B. Is It Myth?

Many contend that the Genesis prologue is myth. *Myth*, however, is an ambiguous term (see D below). J. W. Rogerson⁴⁰ describes twelve definitions of the term, some of which are appropriate for Genesis 1, but most of which are not. For example, the creation account is a “myth” in that the narrative has at least one superhuman agent and recounts “what seems to be perceived as

fundamental events or a decisive pattern” (see [chap. 4.II.A](#)). Identification of Genesis 1 as myth, however, must be rejected because “myth” more commonly connotes a fictitious story.⁴¹ As we have seen, Israel’s evocative poets use mythic imagery to depict the salvific theological dimension of the creation, and, as we shall see, Genesis 1 assumes the phenomenal worldview of the ancient Near East—a flat earth canopied by an ocean and undergirded by water that breaks out from below — and employs the literary form of ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, but biblical literature never conceptualizes God in the theological notions of pantheism and polytheism, which inform ancient Near Eastern myths.

C. Is It Theology?

The narrative contains theological substance but not in the form of a theological treatise. It has a theological point, but it represents its theology through plot structure, not through logic and philosophy.

D. Is It History?

1. History, Not Myth

The creation narrative functions as a prologue to the ten historical accounts that comprise Genesis. The refrain “these are the descendants of” (*tôlê dôt*) marks the boundary of these accounts. The first account begins in Genesis 2:4b, making Genesis 1:1–2:4a function as a prologue to the accounts. The narrator, however, binds the prologue to the first *tôlê dôt* by the catch words “heaven and earth” and by the synonyms “created” and “made” (see 1:1; 2:1; 2:4b). This intentional binding suggests that the narrator intends for the prologue to be understood as historical just as the ten *tôlê dôt* that follow. Moreover, since in the prologue the man and the woman were created on the sixth day and the first *tôlê dôt* details their creation, the narrator intends no chronological gap between the prologue and the first account.

I will argue below that Genesis 1 is an ancient Near Eastern cosmogony, but let me emphasize here that its content is essentially historical, not mythological. Rudolf Bultmann claimed, “The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives.... Myth is an expression of man’s

conviction that the origin and purpose of the world in which he lives are to be sought not within but beyond it....”⁴² Bultmann illustrates that the biblical writers do not represent the world as it actually is in their holding the mythological view that the universe is a three-tiered view: water above, a flat earth, and water below the earth. Is it not, however, just as plausible that the biblical writers invoked a three-tiered vision of the world because that is the way it objectively appears, not because of mythological thinking?

Phenomenally we still invoke a vision of the stars as in the sky, of the sun as rising and setting, and the sky as blue. From a scientific perspective the sky is violet, not blue; it appears as blue because in the daytime, human vision is eight times less sensitive to violet than to blue light. Peter Pesic reflects on this fact: “Does that mean it is ‘incorrect’ to call the sky blue? Not really. Our names for colors reflect our common perception, whatever a mechanical instrument [i.e., a spectrophotometer] might say.”⁴³ Biblical writers, based on the appearances, objectively envisioned the earth as flat, the water as below the land, and the blue sky as water above the land. Consider this analogy: When someone said that other stories tell of God’s voice coming from heaven, and so does the scene of Christ’s baptism, and therefore his story must be just like the other ones, G. K. Chesterton asked, “From what place could a voice of God come, from the coal cellar?” In short, biblical writers speak of an objectively phenomenal world from their nonscientific, non-mythological perspective. Modern writers speak in the same way, though tempered by the scientific perspective.

Moreover, even if the three-tiered view of the universe is drawn from pagan myths, biblical writers may be using a figurative way of describing the universe from the common language pool of their world. When they speak of a sacrifice offered to God as being a “sweet savor” or as being “food,” they are borrowing pagan imagery, not pagan mythology. In any case, though they borrow pagan imagery, they invest it with a very different theology.

Irving Hexham of the University of Calgary informs me that Bultman’s definition of myth has been widely abandoned by sociologists. A better definition, Hexham argues, is “*a story with culturally formative power*” (italics his). This definition intuitively strikes me as true and helpful to understand the function of Genesis 1 in the Torah (see below, V.B). Our Western secular society believes the myth of *evolutionism* and believes that story of origins by Chance shapes its unethical behavior. Nevertheless, I would not use the term *myth* for the early chapters of Genesis for the same reason I use it for evolutionism. In common speech, to call a story “a myth” is to say that it is untrue.

The sober representation of the creation in Genesis 1, as occurring without theomachy, makes its essential historicity much more probable than the ANE myths. To be sure, Israel's later historical writings with documented sources, as in the book of Kings, is more compatible with modern standards of historiography, but the biblical account of creation is also much more compatible with sober historiography than the ANE myths. The Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish* gives a ribald account of its rakish hero, Marduk, bending over backward and passing a hard wind of gas into Tiamat's mouth to extend her inward parts. Marduk thereupon shoots arrows into Tiamat to kill her and from her carcass makes the heavens above and the earth below. Henri Frankfort in his classic work *Before Philosophy* notes parallels between ANE myths but emphasizes that there is no theological umbilical cord connecting Genesis to those myths. The theological superiority and the sobriety of the Genesis account are much closer to modern historiography than to the pagan myths of the world in which it was originally recorded.

2. Not Straightforward History

Nevertheless, although it is essentially history, the plot does not attempt to represent the story in a straightforward way. Some think otherwise. Henry Morris writes, "The creation account is clear, definite, sequential, and matter-of-fact, giving every appearance of straightforward historical narrative."⁴⁴ But the nature of the narrative genre, temporal incoherence within and between the accounts, and anthropopathisms call this identification into question.

a. Narrative Genre

Most agree with Morris that Genesis 1:1–2:4a is narrative, but not everyone recognizes the implications of that identification. As noted in [chapter 4](#), narrative is literature, consisting of both story (i.e., event) and plot (i.e., a creative representation of the event).⁴⁵ Recall that Meir Sternberg validated that three kinds of interrelated principles are at work in all biblical narrative (plot): historiographic, ideological, and aesthetic.⁴⁶ The first and last must be held in tension. Northrop Frye, a world-renowned literary critic, asserts, "Symmetry, in any narrative, always means that historical content is being subordinated to the mythical demands of design and form."⁴⁷ Plot involves temporality, but, as we have seen, the narrator is not necessarily constrained by the sequence of events in the story, and, as we shall see, such seems to be the case in his retelling of the

events of creation. Recall also that a narrative's plot blanks some events, and that too is the reality of the Genesis representation of the creation (see below). Recall too that plot involves patterns of structure such as the alternating triads of days, as noted in the above exegesis.⁴⁸

b. Temporal Incoherence

The apparent temporal incoherence of the two representations of the creation account, both within themselves and with one another, calls into question that these plots are straightforward representations of the events. On the fourth day, God creates the sun and the moon to mark off the days, yet there were three days prior to their creation, each with an “evening” and a “morning,” terms that elsewhere signify a sunset and sunrise. Moreover, day 1 and day 4 represent the function of the light and of the luminaries in precisely the same way. On the first day, God creates the light to “separate the light from the darkness,” and on the fourth day, he creates the sun and the moon to “separate light from darkness.” To be sure, light can exist apart from luminaries, but the refrain elsewhere does not mean “it was ‘lightset’ and it was ‘lightrise.’”

Which is more probable? That there were three “light sets” and three “light rises” without a source of light before there were sunsets and sunrises? Or, in view of what we know about Hebrew literature, that the narrator anachronistically structures his plot in an alternating pattern to teach that the ultimate Source of light is not dependent on luminaries, and that the Creator of light should be worshiped and not the luminaries whom the pagans worshiped? Is it a fair analogy to liken the sequential relationship in the events of day 1 and day 4 as well as in the plot to the notion that God creates a breathing human being and then three days later gives him a nose? In other words, is it likely that God first created the effect (i.e., the separation between light and darkness) and then three days later created the cause (i.e., the luminaries to separate the day from the night)?

If there is a tension between day 1 and day 4 in the first creation account, there is an even greater tension in the temporal connections of the second creation account (2:4–25) with the first (1:1–2:3).⁴⁹ The second account, as presented in the KJV, gives the following sequence of events: God fashions Adam, God plants the Garden of Eden and causes the plants to grow, God forms the animals, Adam names the animals, and God “builds” Eve. The NIV partially relieves the temporal tension by rendering the ambiguous narrative *waw* in 2:8 and 19 by pluperfects, “God had planted a garden” (2:8) and “had formed all the

animals” (2:19), allowing the sequence: planting the garden, forming the animals, naming the animals, and building Eve, a temporal sequence more harmonious with the first account. Nevertheless, even if one accepts this harmonizing rendering, the temporal burden involved in a straightforward reading of the two accounts is still unbearable. According to the first account, God made the man and the woman on the sixth day, and according to the second account, he made the woman in the garden. Then, assuming the temporal harmony of the two accounts, God planted the garden before making Eve, and presumably he planted the garden on the third day along with other vegetation. But a straightforward reading of the second account envisions the trees as having sprouted and matured to the point of bearing fruit in three days. To be sure, creation may assume apparent age (“mature universe”), as when Christ turned water into wine as a sign and wonder that the new age had begun, but the text recounts that *I AM* “made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground” (*wayyasmah*, Hiphil, 2:9) as a natural process with no indication that he intended it to create wonder.⁵⁰

There is also a temporal incongruity between the two accounts with regard to all that is said to have occurred on the sixth day. It strains the reader’s credulity to believe that Adam is formed and placed in the garden, receives instructions from God regarding the trees, names all the animals — both domestic and wild — according to their nature, falls into a coma, undergoes an operation that involves removing his rib cage, wakes up, has time to reflect upon his wife’s being, and composes a poem celebrating his wife’s equality with him all within the daylight hours of the sixth day. The narrative suggests a less than literal plot and a longer period of time in the story being represented.

The temporal incoherence and infelicity evaporate if we do not interpret in a wooden way the days of Genesis 1. It is not the canons of positivistic historiography that guide the author’s plot. Rather, he exercises creativity to convey his divinely revealed narrative.

c. Anthropopathy

Finally, the text’s anthropopathic language shows that this is not a straightforward history. Human beings are theomorphic, that is, made in God’s image, so that they might understand and commune with God. However, paradoxically the theomorphic human must turn around and describe the eternal and spiritual God in anthropomorphisms (i.e., physical form) and in anthropopathisms (i.e., feelings and — if one will allow it — activities), that is,

in terms drawn from his or her temporal and corporeal existence on earth. For example, Psalm 33:6 celebrates the creation thus: “By the word of *I AM* were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.” Does God, who is spirit, have a mouth and breath? Obviously the biblical narrator is using anthropomorphic language.

The biblical creation accounts are unrelentingly anthropomorphic/anthropopathic. The terms God “said,” “commanded,” “saw,” and “called” prompt us to envision vocal cords and eyes. Even the very conservative theologian E. J. Young explains, “It is certainly true that God did not speak with physical organs of speech nor did he utter words in the Hebrew language.”⁵¹ Also, does God not work between evening and morning because it is dark and he needs a rest or because the expression “there was evening, and there was morning” frames the nighttime and is part of the text’s unrelenting anthropomorphic texture representing God as a diligent workman? Moreover, like a potter God “forms” (*ysr*) the man and animals from the ground (2:7, 19), and like a temple builder he “builds” (*bnh*) Adam’s rib into a woman (2:22). When we talk about God, we enter into a different realm of discourse, using figurative language with words and images that are neither scientific nor straightforward history.

The same may be true of the account’s temporality in terms of days. The *Geneva Study Bible* explains the anthropomorphic “day” as an “accommodation to the limitations of human knowledge—an expression of the infinitive Creator’s work in terms understandable to finite and frail human beings.”⁵² In light of the anthropomorphic/ anthropopathic texture of the text, C. John Collins draws the conclusion: “The simplest explanation for these six days is that they are anthropomorphisms: that is, they are “God’s days.”⁵³ The implicit reference to God, for whom darkness is as light (Ps. 139:12), as a workman, laboring only during the daylight hours, supports the anthropomorphic understanding of “day” in Genesis 1. Moreover, God is still resting on his seventh day, which, as Augustine observed, is not terminated by “it was evening.”⁵⁴ Presumably he is still at rest (cf. Heb. 4:3–5). According to Exodus 31:17, God, who never grows weary, refreshes himself (*yinnapas*) on the seventh day.⁵⁵ Mark Futato, to whom I am indebted for this observation, asks, “If his refreshing himself as a workman on the seventh day is an obvious anthropopathism, is it not probable that his working as a laborer on the other six days is also an anthropopathism?”⁵⁶

The anthropopathic interpretation of “day” is also the view of William Shedd: “Respecting the length of the six creative days, speaking generally, for there was some difference of views, the patristic and medieval exegesis makes

them to be long periods, not days of twenty-four hours. The latter interpretation has prevailed only in the modern church.”⁵⁷ In other words, the narrative represents the *kairos* events that marked new beginnings in this creative activity by the anthropomorphic term “day.” By this metaphor our literate theologian lays the foundation for Israel to keep the Sabbaths. Israel bore witness to their neighbors of their covenant relationship with the Creator by analogously mimicking his creative activity over seven divine days by the human seven-day week.

E. Is It Science?

Some educators push to have Genesis 1 taught in science classes. To be sure, Genesis 1 is scientific to the extent that both it and science are concerned with the origins of matter and of species, but the well-intentioned endeavor is in my opinion misguided and misleading for several reasons.

First, as noted in the discussion of the narrative’s purpose, the writer’s aim is exclusively religious, not scientific. J. I. Packer writes,

Genesis 1 and 2, however, tell us *who* without giving many answers about *how*. Some today may think this is a defect; but in the long perspective of history our present-day “scientific” preoccupation with *how* rather than *who* looks very odd in itself. Rather than criticize these chapters for not feeding our secular interest, we should take from them a needed rebuke for our perverse passion for knowing Nature without regard for what matters most; namely, know Nature’s creator.

The message of these two chapters is this: “You have seen the sea? the sky? sun, moon, and stars? You have watched the birds and the fish? You have observed the landscape, the vegetation, the animals, the insects, all the big things and little things together? You have marveled at the wonderful complexity of human beings, with all their powers and skills, and the deep feelings of fascination, attraction and affection that men and women arouse in each other? Fantastic, isn’t it? Well now, meet the one who is behind it all!” As if to say: now that you have enjoyed these works of art, you must shake hands with the artist; since you were thrilled by the music, we will introduce you to the composer. It was to show us the Creator rather than the creation and to teach us knowledge of God rather than physical science, that Genesis 1 and 2, along with such celebrations as Psalm 104 and Job 38–41,

were written.⁵⁸

Second, an orthodox doctrine of inspiration confesses that the Old Testament incarnates divine truth in the human form of its time and place (see [chap. 1](#)). The creed that the Bible is scientifically accurate denies an orthodox doctrine of incarnation. The Bible did not drop down out of heaven with the worldview of the twenty-first century any more than it originally came to us wearing the heavenly garb of the King James Version. The Bible originates not only in an ancient Near Eastern language but also in the garb of ancient Near Eastern literature. In contrast to scientific literature, ancient Near Eastern literature cosmologies describe the universe according to phenomenal language from a geocentric viewpoint, not with mathematical precision from a detached point of view from outside the cosmos.

Although the biblical account may be considered inaccurate from the viewpoint of modern science, its phenomenal viewpoint is not wrong. A writing's function must dictate the proper perspective of description. Most readers have no problem when a writer uses phenomenological language that comports with their own experience, such as the sun "rises" and "sets." As noted above, the sky is blue phenomenally, not scientifically. But biblical writers also use phenomenological language that no longer comports with the experience of a modern man or woman. To the biblical writers the earth appeared flat, having four edges (Heb. *kāmāp*, see Job 37:3; 38:13; Isa. 11:12; Ezek. 7:2), a cosmology no modern person shares with the ancients. They also regarded the blue sky above as a supernal ocean separated from the terrestrial water by a "vault"/"firmament" (*rāqîaʿ*): "And God said, 'Let there be a *raqia* *rāqîaʿ* to separate water from water.' So God made the *raqia* *rāqîaʿ* and separated the water under the *raqia* *rāqîaʿ* from the water above it" (Gen. 1:6–7; *raqia* *rāqîaʿ* does not mean "expanse," contra NIV; cf. Job 37:18; Isa. 40:22). Likewise, the stars are represented "in the dome" — not in the clouds — because that is how people experience them.⁵⁹ Othmar Keel says, "The idea of a heavenly ocean probably had its origin in the observation that sky and water have the same color (in Egyptian iconography it is usually blue-green), and that water falls from above."⁶⁰ The concept of a supernal sea (Heb. *mabbûl*, "flood") is found elsewhere in the Old Testament: "I AM sits enthroned over the flood" (Ps. 29:10; cf. 148:4).⁶¹ The representation of I AM sitting on the *mabbûl* is probably mythopoeic.

In other words, the creed that the Bible is scientifically accurate in a modern sense ultimately denies the orthodox doctrine of inspiration.

Third, we noted above that biblical narrative is creative literature, employing patterns of structure that differ from a linear pattern of thought. Scientific literature, to the extent I am familiar with it, presents its experiments in a logically linear pattern to establish a coherent cause-effect relationship.⁶²

Fourth, scientific literature avoids rhetoric, but the biblical narrator uses the full range of figures of speech in his rhetoric to win his audience to his point of view. In addition to figures of speech and patterns of structure for rhetorical effect, he employs key words, refrain, intensification, scenic depictions, naming, and so on.

Fifth, the Bible, unlike science, is mostly concerned with ultimate origins, not proximate origins. Psalm 139:13 declares, “You knit me together in my mother’s womb.” David was not ignorant of sex as the means for procreation, but his point is that God is the ultimate origin of his life. It would be highly mischievous to pit his theological statement about his origin against a scientific statement of his origin. In short, his praise celebrates God as the first cause of his origin and ignores the secondary processes that are involved. Similarly, it is mischievous to pit the biblical cosmogony, which emphasizes God as creator, against a scientific explanation of origins. Langdon Gilkey complains: “They [i.e., who mix the categories of ultimate and proximate origins] ignore the (scholastic) distinction between *primary* causality of a First Cause, with which philosophy or theology might deal, and *second* causality, which is causality confined to the finite factors.”⁶³

Sixth, whereas science endeavors to give a total and coherent explanation of phenomena, Genesis is not concerned to give a total explanation of origins. The biblical account does not explain the origin of the primordial matter that became differentiated into sky, land, and sea; nor does it explain how the earth and sea “brought forth” the species that inhabit them. A scientific description of the process of creation may be able to fill in blanks that are of no interest to the theologian. In other words, the biblical account is answering the primary questions of who the agent is and why he created. By contrast, science is asking the secondary questions of how and when the cosmos originated. Science cannot answer the former set of questions, and Genesis does not aim to answer the latter.

Seventh, those who want to use Genesis as a scientific textbook normally contend for a young earth because of the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 10. But these genealogies have an unknown number of gaps. They function to show either that the last named person is a descendent of the first named person or to show the relationships of people, not to compute the age of the earth.⁶⁴

Eighth, and finally, the narrative does not fit the genre of scientific literature writing because its method of validation lies outside the realm of scientific investigation. The ultimate validation of Scripture comes from the witness of the Spirit who leads us into all truth. The conviction of the Holy Spirit generates faith in us. Our beliefs are not founded on scientific sorts of verification.

F. Ancient Near Eastern Cosmogony

Probably the Bible's artistic, literary representation of creation, as Henri Blocher calls it,⁶⁵ fits none of these literary forms because it is an ancient Near Eastern cosmogony.⁶⁶ But while the biblical narrative wears a garb that resembles other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, its theology—and in some ways its form—stands radically apart from them. With regard to theology, all other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies are polytheistic and pantheistic, but Israel's cosmogony represents God as an implied aseity, radically differentiated from the impersonal matter he creates. With regard to form, the frivolity of the *Enuma Elish* ("the Babylonian Genesis") contrasts sharply with the stately, dignified narrative style of Genesis 1.⁶⁷ In his classic work on comparing and contrasting Genesis with the Babylonian parallel, Alexander Heidel declares, "In the light of the differences, the resemblances fade away almost like the stars before the sun."⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the biblical cosmogony shares some striking similarities in both form and content with the cosmogonies of its world.

To clarify its form as an ancient Near Eastern cosmogony, I will compare the biblical cosmogony with those of the ancient Near East, noting their similarities. Second, I will attempt to explain this similarity in the light of the Bible's inspiration. Third, I will draw a contrast between the ancient cosmogonies and the cosmogonies of modern science. Fourth, I will compare and contrast the biblical cosmogony with the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies and with the scientific cosmogonies. And finally, I will draw a conclusion.

1. Comparisons between Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Cosmogonies

Regarding the similarity in content between the Bible and the ancient cosmogonies, comparison with the famous Mesopotamian theomachy (i.e., battle of the gods), the *Enuma Elish*, is a useful starting point. A. Heidel⁶⁹ is unimpressed by the similarities of their content (e.g., both assume primeval chaos and primeval darkness), but is impressed by "an identical sequence of

events as far as the points of contact are concerned,” which he conveniently charts essentially as follows:

<i>Enuma Elish</i>	Genesis
Divine spirit and cosmic matter are coexistent and coeternal	Divine Spirit and cosmic matter coexist
Primeval chaos; <i>Tiamat</i> enveloped in darkness	The earth a desolate waste with darkness covering the deep (<i>t'êôm</i>)
Light emanating from the gods	Light created
Creation of the firmament ⁷⁰	Creation of the firmament
Creation of dry land	Creation of dry land
Creation of luminaries	Creation of luminaries
Creation of man	Creation of man
The gods rest and celebrate	God rests and sanctifies the seventh day 70

Less well known are the parallels with diverse and developing Egyptian cosmogonies.⁷¹ In the Egyptian view the void is created within the substance of a primordial monad, a single lifeless source from which all existence derives, floating inert in the primeval waters. Creation is described as “out of the Flood, out of the Waters, out of Darkness, out of Chaos.” The world developed from the monad as a plant develops from a seed. As in Genesis 1, the primordial matter is the given milieu within which creation unfolds. The begetting of other elements of creation—sun, moon and stars, vegetation, fruit trees, fish, and so on—shows no unique relationship to Genesis, for any cosmogony would take these into consideration. In Egyptian cosmology, earth is the domain of the mortal: man, animals, plants, fish, and crawling things.

In the Egyptian Coffin Texts, Atum’s means of creation is “Magic,” whom “the Sole Lord made before two things had developed.” Atum “surveyed in his heart,” “took Annunciation in his mouth [i.e., the actualization of his concept by means of a command that is inherently compelling],” and “created the identities of his parts.” In the later Memphis Theology (1250 BC), magic is not mentioned. Ptah makes all things “according as he governs that which the heart thinks, which emerges through the tongue, and which facilitates everything.”⁷² In other words, in this later Egyptian cosmogony the ordered structure of the cosmos came into being by the deity’s effective word — a notion similar to Genesis 1.

2. Explanation of Similarities

How do we explain the similarities in content between the biblical cosmogony and the pagan cosmogonies? The key similarities as summarized by Heidel are:

(1) the conception of an immense primeval body of water as already in existence,

(2) the idea that the creation of the firmament involved the separation of the water,

(3) the existence of light before luminaries, and (4) the partial similarities of a structural outline.⁷³ In addition to these similarities in content, they both represent the creation in a plot structure. Both represent a protagonist who achieves his goal, which peaks with the creation of human beings, followed by the denouement of the protagonist resting.

Since the *Enuma Elish* antedates Moses, as do some Egyptian texts, these myths cannot be dependent on Genesis 1. Perhaps the similarities suggest that the pagans distorted the original creation story, which is preserved in Genesis 1. This explanation is certainly possible, but it is entirely theoretical and without historical evidence.

More plausibly, in light of other parallels between the Bible and the ancient Near Eastern literatures, the ancient cosmogonies influenced the highly literate biblical authors. Israel was in Egypt four hundred years prior to Moses. More important, having been highly educated in Pharaoh's court as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses had unique access to the ancient Near Eastern myths and almost certainly was acquainted with them, for the archaeological evidence shows they were widely circulated. Akkadian was the lingua franca in his time. Also, almost all other forms of biblical literature conform in form — emphatically not in their theology! — with corresponding forms of other ancient literatures of the biblical world. For example, the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 21–23), which is attributed to *I AM* speaking to Moses (Exod. 20:22; 21:1), shows striking similarities to the Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1700 BC) in sequence, content, and expansions.⁷⁴ In outward forms Israel's cultus, history writing, and prophets fit nicely into the ancient Near Eastern world.

This explanation conforms to a sound theology (see [chap. 1.II.A.2](#)). Inspiration does not bypass the personality of the human author but utilizes his experiences, style, culture, and research. Inspiration includes direct revelation (1 Cor. 2:7–13; 11:23; Gal. 1:11–12), experience (Acts 17:28; Gal. 2:11–14), and historical investigation (Luke 1:1). “In the treatment of the doctrine of divine inspiration, the question is not: ‘How did the holy writers obtain the truths which they wrote?’ but rather: ‘Did the Holy Ghost prompt the sacred writers to write down certain words and thoughts which God wanted men to know [cf. 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21]?’”⁷⁵ Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the biblical authors stripped the ancient pagan literatures of their mythological elements, infused them with

the sublimities of their God, and refuted the pagan myths by identifying the holy Lord as the true Creator and Ruler of the cosmos and of history. Israel's God stands apart from his creation, transcends matter, lacks sexuality, engages in no combat with other gods, for there are none, and establishes humane laws.

Finally, it was common belief in the ancient Near East that a high god defeated the primeval sea and created the world. But the God of Israel, instead of vanquishing monsters spawned by the primordial abyss, created everything simply by his word, without sexual intercourse, rivalry, battles, murder, and the like and thereby showed his moral and spiritual supremacy to the pagan deities. Indeed, the Genesis account is imbued with an entirely different theological worldview. In the pagan myths the primeval waters are deities, but in the monotheistic, nonmythical Genesis account, they are just water.

3. Contrasts between Ancient Cosmogonies and Those of Science

The Bible is obviously not a scientific document. However, many in the Israel of God have not reflected critically on this fact. Thus it seems prudent in this biblical theology to do so. Richard J. Clifford has identified four significant differences between the ancient West Semitic cosmogonies and modern conceptions of origins, which are usually colored by naturalistic and evolutionary thought.^{[76](#)}

First, they differ in their conceptualization of the process. Ancient Semites, albeit not the Egyptians, generally imagined cosmogony as a conflict of wills connected with the elements in which one party is victorious. Science, on the other hand, sees the process as the impersonal interaction of physical forces within nature itself extending over eons. Scientists tend to see nature, not God, as an aseity.^{[77](#)}

Second, they differ in what emerges from the process. For the ancients, an ordered human society was the emergent. The *Enuma Elish* reaches its climax with Marduk enthroned as king over the world of gods and human beings. For many moderns — certainly not all — the physical world is the emergent. “Community and culture do not come into consideration.”^{[78](#)}

Third, the ancients conceptualized the process as drama involving plot development. Moderns conceptualize the process as evolutionary and impersonal, moving according to physical laws.

Fourth, unlike science, which requires a successful hypothesis to explain all the data, the ancients had no concern for totality and for coherence according to a straightforward reading of the accounts. Rather, the storyteller chose to concentrate on some aspect of the creation, for example, divine kingship.

4. Comparison of Genesis 1 with Ancient Near Eastern Cosmogonies and Science

We are now in a position to compare and contrast the biblical cosmogony with the cosmogonies of the ancient Near East and modern science. We will discover that the form of the biblical account stands closer to the former than to the latter. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the biblical account differs radically from pagan myths in its *theological substance*. Pagan cosmogonies take for granted that the origin of the world involved both the activity of already-existent divine beings and the bringing into existence of divine beings as emanations of differentiated primordial matter. Moreover, the *Enuma Elish* peaks with Marduk becoming chief god, and the creation of humanity is incidental. The Genesis account peaks when humanity is invested with dominion over the earth. In the ancient myths, the sun, moon, and stars are deities that rule the earth (cf. 2 Kings 23:5); Genesis does not even name them — they merely serve God’s purpose to give light upon the earth and to mark out time. Rather, the Genesis account is similar to the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies in its *literary form*.

First, the dramatic manner of reporting the creation in Genesis 1 more closely resembles the ancient cosmogonies than scientific reporting. In its exposition, the eternal God stands over against impersonal chaos (1:2). In the dramatic plot development of Genesis 1, God first transforms the primordial chaos into differentiated spheres and then calls into existence the creatures over which humans are to have dominion. The story peaks when God creates human beings, whom he places over his creation to procreate and rule and whom he blesses to guarantee their success. In the denouement God rests. Science does not explain origins by drama.

Second, in this plot development, Genesis portrays God as a protagonist, the chief actor in the drama of creation, who issues royal fiats in the company of angels. Addressing the angels in his heavenly court, he says, “Let us make man in our image.” This representation of the creation involving a protagonist in a dramatic setting stands much closer to the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies than to scientific cosmogonies, which rule out any psychologizing of what it thinks are impersonal forces. However, there is no conflict between God and other gods because, for the inspired author, there are no other gods, and matter stands apart from God. Elsewhere poets borrow the imagery of theomachy, not its theology, to describe the creation of the world out of chaos and of Israel out of Egypt and of Babylon (Job 3:8; Ps. 77:16–20; Isa. 27:1; 44:27; 51:9–10). But Genesis does not even hint at a clash of wills between God and matter. Its cosmogony presents the creation as the product of God’s will and command.⁷⁹

Third, as noted above, like the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies and unlike

science, the biblical narratives do not aim for a total or coherent explanation of the data.

G. Conclusion

Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies are a very different literary genre from the genre of scientific writings. These ancient cosmogonies — including that of Genesis 1 — do not ask or attempt to answer scientific questions of origins: the material, manner, or date of the origin of the world and of its species. The biblical account represents God as creating the cosmological spheres that house and preserve life in six days, each presumably consisting of twenty-four hours. But how closely this cosmology coincides with the material reality cannot be known from the genre of an ancient Near Eastern cosmology, which does not attempt to answer that question.⁸⁰

Recall that biblical narrators *creatively* and *rhetorically* represent raw historical data to teach theology.

The best harmonious synthesis of the special revelation of the Bible, of the general revelation of human nature that distinguishes between right and wrong and consciously or unconsciously craves God, and of science is the theory of theistic evolution.⁸¹ By “theory,” I mean here “a coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for the origin of species, especially *ʾādām*,” not “a proposed explanation whose status is still conjectural.”⁸² By “theistic evolution” I mean that the God of Israel, to bring glory to himself, (1) created all the things that are out of nothing and sustains them; (2) incredibly, against the laws of probability, finely tuned the essential properties of the universe to produce *ʾādām*, who is capable of reflecting upon their origins; (3) within his providence allowed the process of natural selection and of cataclysmic interventions—such as the meteor that extinguished the dinosaurs, enabling mammals to dominate the earth—to produce awe-inspiring creatures, especially *ʾādām*; (4) by direct creation made *ʾādām* a spiritual being, an image of divine beings, for fellowship with himself by faith; (5) allowed *ʾādām* to freely choose to follow their primitive animal nature and to usurp the rule of God instead of living by faith in God, losing fellowship with their physical and spiritual Creator; (6) and in his mercy chose from fallen *ʾādām* the Israel of God, whom he regenerated by the Holy Spirit, in connection with their faith in Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, for fellowship with himself.

There is a synergetic *modus vivendi* in recognizing that both science and theology have a contribution to make to our understanding of the origins of the creation. A scientific cosmogony contributes to answering the questions of how and when, and the rhetorical biblical cosmogony answers the more important questions of who and why. Science points to a Creator but not necessarily the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Science seeks to explain the origin and fate of dinosaurs (Gk., “terrible lizards”); the biblical writers seek to establish a just and moral society under *I AM*’s rule to his glory. Knowledge about biology including dinosaurs, about physics including the relativity of time, space and energy, and about myriad other scientific facts and laws in our possession would not improve the biblical writers’ aim.⁸³ The Bible’s message is that the God of Israel created all things and blesses his creatures to procreate and to produce a culture under his rule. This is the saving alternative to the nihilistic message of our age of secularism and its promethean and narcissistic psychological tendencies. In short, render to Einstein what is Einstein’s and to the Bible what is the Bible’s.

V. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CREATION THEME IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The theme of God as Creator so pervades the biblical text that the references to this doctrine are more than can be numbered here.⁸⁴ This section sounds only some dominant chords. As the Creator of the cosmos, he triumphed in the past, as Creator of history he triumphs in the present, and as Creator of the new heavens and new earth, when the creation theme peaks, he will be triumphant in the future (Isa. 65:17; 66:12; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

A. In Doxological Literature

The biblical poets as rational beings sing their inspired praises to the Maker and Sustainer of the cosmos: “You alone are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Rev. 4:11).⁸⁵

The narrator allows his audience to infer God’s sublimities — for example, his uncompromised mastery over the cosmos — from his dramatic visualization of the process of creation. Moreover, the creation itself universally proclaims — though without words — God’s immeasurable power and might, his bewildering imagination and infinite wisdom, and his immortality and transcendence; ultimately, his creation leaves the finite mortal mind mystified. By contrast, Israel’s poets, both from Israel’s depiction of the process of creation (Gen. 1:1–2:3) and/or from the resulting panorama (Ps. 104), explicitly praise his sublimities. Jeremiah celebrates *I AM*’s power on the basis of both the historical act and present thunderstorm: “God made the earth by his power.... When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar” (Jer. 10:12–13). His firmament displays his glory (Ps. 19:1–6). The earth’s solid foundations and secure boundaries, though pillared on water (Ps. 24:1–2), its orderly cycles of life governed by sun and moon, and its luxuriant growth, each species reproducing after its kind and maintaining the original creation through all generations (Ps. 104), universally disclose that God is upright in his order, trustworthy in his goodness, and decisive in his faithfulness (Ps. 33).

I AM is the supreme king who rules over all, including the primordial sea, and is totally trustworthy in the use of his power (Ps. 89). “Mightier than the breakers of the sea—*I AM* on high is mighty” (Ps. 93:4). Even the huge, dreaded sea monsters (*tanninim*, Gen. 1:21) that God created are to him nothing more than rubber duckies in a bathtub (Ps. 104:26). The majestic King demonstrated his power, glory, wisdom, and strength when he triumphed over the unruly sea (Job 26:10; 28:25–26; 38:8–11; Ps. 93; Prov. 8:29; Jer. 5:22; 31:35), and he will demonstrate those virtues both on Israel’s behalf in its conflict with enemies (Pss. 46, 124) and on suffering individuals such as Job (Job 26:10–13). The psalmists always praise the Ruler of the cosmos in connection with his just and righteous rule over people (cf. Ps. 19). Even the exuberant Psalm 104 concludes: “May sinners vanish from the earth” (v. 35).

Because Israel’s God begot a world that displays his sublimities that existed from everlasting, from long before Israel even came into existence as a nation, Israel has reason to trust their King even when their human king is dethroned (cf. Ps. 89 with Pss. 90–100, esp. 90:1–2). His creative work terminates in a cosmos, not chaos, and so will his creation of Israel after their captivity (Isa. 45:18) and so will the earth in its regeneration after its meltdown in fire (2 Peter 3:12). Blessed is he who makes this God his trust (Ps. 145:6–7). The God who rules creation and who rules history according to his sovereign pleasure condemns all other pretensions to deity and alone is worthy of human trust (Isa. 40:12–31). A person who worships these pretenders is despicable (Isa. 41:24), and whoever trusts in money or anything else for security and significance is a fool (Ps. 49).

Although the Scriptures primarily refer to the original creation as recorded in Genesis 1, some teach that God continues to create:

When you send your spirit,
☺☺☺☺they are created,
☺☺☺☺and you renew the face of the earth. (Ps. 104:30)

Job likens his own creation to that of Adam:

“Your hands shaped me and made me....
Remember that you molded me like clay....
Did you not pour me out like milk
☺☺☺☺and curdle me like cheese,
clothe me with skin and flesh
☺☺☺☺and knit me together with bones and sinews?
You gave me life and showed me kindness,

☺☺☺☺and in your providence watched over my spirit.” (Job 10:8–12)

The psalmist put it this way:

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Ps. 139:13–14)

Apart from *I AM*’s faithfulness to his irrevocable covenant to maintain the day and night, the cosmos would revert to chaos (Jer. 33:9–16). His faithfulness to the creation undergirds scientific research and western civilization that depends upon it. Unfortunately, its people praise its researchers and not the Creator who makes their research possible.

Finally, Israel’s poets picture the cosmos as God’s dwelling (i.e., his temple). Isaiah depicts the heavens as a lordly sheik’s tent that God stretched out to live in (Job 9:8; Ps. 104:1–3; Isa. 40:22; cf. 42:5; 51:13). *I AM* makes the clouds his chariots, and he rides on the wings of the wind (Ps. 104:3). In other words, nature is his slave. Elsewhere, his throne in the heavens, which is replicated by his throne in the temple on Zion, is the place from which he keeps an eye on the earth and takes appropriate action (Pss. 2:4; 11:4; 14:2). That is, God did not create the cosmos and then walk away from it without further involving himself in it. He dwells in the cosmos with us, but he distances himself from us; he dwells in the heavens above, and we dwell on the earth below (Pss. 29; 115:16).

B. In Legal Literature

Implicitly, the Pentateuch unites creation and ethics; the order of creation supports the order of redemption. Moderns are accustomed to considering the “laws” in creation (i.e., the consistent natural phenomenon they observe) as inviolable. For example, the law of gravity is part of the way things are. But moderns consider a system of ethics as *evaluations*—what people at a given time and place may think to be right—or as sort of a rule of thumb, not absolute *laws* given by an unchanging God. This artificial distinction between the laws of creation and the laws of ethics allows them to ignore ethical imperatives that are inconvenient. The biblical narrative forbids this type of dualistic thinking; the ethical and the natural realms are united. The same God who gives order to his creation is the one who establishes what is “good” in both the material sphere

and the moral sphere. Thus the two are merged under the sovereign reign of one God: what should be will finally be, and what should not be will not endure. This union of the created sphere and the ethical sphere fundamentally distinguishes Old Testament theology from pagan worldviews.

As we saw above, Genesis 1 functions as a myth, as defined by contemporary sociologists: “a story with culturally formative power.” More specifically, the creation narratives undergird the Ten Commandments, which epitomize the ethics of Israel’s faith and mold the judicial system of Judeo-Christian nations. The narrative affirms the priority of the one true God demanded by the first commandment. It also affirms that he exists apart from and sovereign over all creation; thus, to reimage him in the form of an idol or as the goddess Sophia, as prohibited by the second commandment, is a detestable distortion of his glorious person. This sublime God will not tolerate the attaching of his glorious name to anything false; this truth supports the third commandment. The stipulation of Sabbath in the fourth commandment is predicated on the day of rest in the climax of creation. Murder is prohibited because humans are made in the image of God, which gives them dignity. The ban on adultery is based on the moral order established by God, who gave Adam only one wife. The Creator gave the arable soil to all humanity to provide them with food and wealth (Gen. 1:29). To steal from the community what rightfully belongs to all or to steal from an individual what that person has lawfully earned as his or her wage from working the creation must not be tolerated. One must also protect the reputation of every human being, for all are made in God’s image.

When one rebels against the rules and regulations revealed by God in the Torah, which means “catechetical teaching,” he or she rebels against the order of creation and will suffer the consequences. Adopting a system of ethics contrary to the revealed will of the Creator cuts against the grain; it is painful and frustrating; worst of all, it is deadly.

C. In Wisdom Literature

Israel’s poets present scenes of the creation prior to or at the time of creation. The creation motif threads through Proverbs: it is mentioned in two poems of the prologue (3:19–20; 8:22–31), seven times in its proverbs (14:31; 16:4, 11; 17:5; 20:12; 22:2; 29:13), and once in Agur’s autobiographical poem (30:2–4), for a total of ten times. The poems deal with the *creation of the world* and the proverbs with the *creation of human beings*. These references to the creation are

totally consistent with the teachings elsewhere in the Bible about creation. The poems also depict creation in imagery and expressions drawn from pagan myths without borrowing their theology (cf. 3:20; 8:29; 30:4). All these texts refer to *I AM* as the Creator—none speaks of creation apart from his activity—and all assume that he is sole and sovereign Creator.

Apart from this faith, the sage's arguments based on creation lose much of their cogency. The first poem, 3:19–20, points to the *creation of the world* as firmly established (3:19) and as being both protected from and provided by the depths below (3:20a) and refreshed by life-giving water from the clouds above (3:20b). The theological focus of the passage, however, is not on God as creator (3:19) and sustainer of the creation (3:20) —that is assumed— but rather on his enduring creation, which he effected by wisdom. The second poem, 8:22–31, also presents wisdom in connection with *I AM* as creator and sustainer of the world, but here Solomon's wisdom is personified as *I AM*'s begotten companion throughout his creating process.⁸⁶ The divine wisdom that observed the creation of everything now informs the inspired sages who composed Israel's holy wisdom literature.

The proverbs about *I AM* as the Creator of *human beings* represent *I AM* as both transcendent and immanent, as both Sovereign in heaven and present on earth to experience human misery. *I AM* creates hearing ears and seeing eyes among other things so his “son” can hear and study wisdom (20:12). The other proverbs serve a social-ethical function, a chief concern of wisdom literature. They represent God as sovereign in heaven and/or as present on earth so that he can effect justice. As sovereign in heaven, *I AM* made the scales that the king uses to administer fair weights and measures (16:11), and under God's sovereignty and the ideal king's administration, no cheat escapes judgment (16:4, 14). Moreover, the Sovereign creates all, rich and poor alike, investing both with dignity and with responsibilities, especially with responsibility to give the poor dignity (22:2; 29:13); whoever mocks them reviles *I AM*, because he created them (17:5). As present on earth, *I AM* experiences the misery of the oppressed and will punish the oppressor just as certainly as he will honor those who take compassion on them (14:31). In short, “creation functions as the philosophical basis for social ethics.”⁸⁷

Job also pictures wisdom as present when *I AM* created the world (Job 28:12–28) and *I AM* as a master builder with the heavenly hosts celebrating his marvelous workmanship (Job 38:4–7).

D. In the New Testament

The New Testament uses the doctrine of creation to identify Jesus as part of the Godhead. God is marked out by his ability to create and to rule his creation. Likewise, the ability to create and to rule the creation identifies Jesus of Nazareth as his one-of-a-kind Son.⁸⁸ When he stills the wind and the chaotic sea, his terrified disciples exclaim, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41). When he walks on water, his disciples quake (Mark 6:45–56). Herod “feeds” his guests the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Mark 6:14–29), but Jesus feeds five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish (6:30–44) and later feeds four thousand men with seven loaves (8:1–13). To indicate the coming of the new age, he turns the water of the former dispensation’s law into the wine of the new dispensation’s grace and truth (John 2:1–11). He is Lord over all, including the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). This son of Adam (Luke 3:23–38) and of Abraham (Matt. 1:1–17) traces his genealogy back to the beginning when he who is God was with God (John 1:1–2). Paul also identifies the Son’s involvement in the original creation (1 Cor. 8:6) and as the sustainer of the creation (Col. 1:16–17). As the firstborn, he is in the process of bringing everything back under human rule (1 Cor. 15:24–28; Eph. 1:10; Heb. 2:9).

E. In Biblical Typology

Israel’s poet-theologians reflected on the salvific aspect of *I AM*’s creation of the cosmos from primordial chaos as a type of Israel’s creation from chaotic oppression, first through the waters of the Nile at the beginning of their history and then through the drying up of the Euphrates in the so-called “Second Exodus” at the end of Old Testament history, again enriching the doctrine by imagery drawn from the pagan myths (Ps. 74:13–14; Isa. 51:9–11; cf. Job 3:3–10 [esp. v. 8]; 7:12; Ezek. 29:3–5; 32:2–6).

Moreover, the Sabbath, having no night, points to its greater antitype: the new heaven and the new earth, where there will be no darkness at sea.

“The sun will no more be your light by day,
☉☉☉nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
☉☉☉and your God will be your glory.” (Isa. 60:19; cf. Rev. 21:11, 23;

22:5)

In this span between Ur-time and end-time, God restrains and rules over what is hostile to life. The Sabbath, however, points to his goal: the banishment of “evil.” The New Testament also uses the concept of creation for its new creation typology. The salvation of a sinner and his transformation in Christ are so radical that they too merit being compared to God’s bringing order out of chaos and light out of darkness (2 Cor. 4:6; 5:17; Eph. 2:10; 4:23–24; 5:8; Col. 1:12–13; 2:13; 1 Peter 2:9).

THOUGHT QUESTION

Evaluate this statement by Billy Graham: “I don’t think there’s any conflict at all between science today and the Scriptures. The Bible is not a book of science. The Bible is a book of redemption.... I believe that God created man, and whether it came by an evolutionary process and at a certain point He took this person or being and made him a living soul or not, does not change the fact that God did create man. Whichever way God did it makes no difference as to what man is and man’s relationship to God” (Billy Graham, “Doubts and Certainties: David Frost Interview,” BBC-2, 1964: quoted in David Frost, *Billy Graham: Personal Thoughts of a Public Man* [Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997], 72–74).

1. For bibliography see T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden* (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2000), 28n36.

2. In the closing lines of the *Origin of Species*, Darwin attributes the entire evolutionary flow of life to “its several powers having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few [life] forms or into one.” The eight verses of Genesis 1 pertaining to the origin of animal life do not contradict him when properly interpreted (see below).

3. For the distinction between intentional “gaps” and unintentional “blanks,” see [chap. 5](#).I.D.11.

4. For a fuller bibliography, see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 223nn32–34.

5. Ps. 8, which was composed by David (ca. 1000 BC), recasts the Genesis 1 account of creation into poetry (see Bruce K. Waltke, “Superscripts, Postscripts or Both,” *JBL* 110 [1991]: 583–96). If the creation account of Genesis 1 is as old as David, why not allow it to be as old as Moses?

6. Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 22–23.

7. For the Christian, paradoxically and mysteriously, random chance is a part of the Creator’s design. For example, behind what appears to be chance are *laws* of probability.

8. H. Conrad Hyer, “Biblical Literalism: Constricting the Cosmic Dance,” in *Is God a Creationist? The Religious Case against Creation Science*, ed. Roland Mushat Frye (New York: Scribner, 1983), 101.

9. Alan Reynolds, *Reading the Bible for the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 26–27.

10. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 65, quoting the astronomer-mathematician Pierre Simon Laplace.

11. For a detailed exegesis of Gen. 1:1–3, see Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account 1:1–3,” four articles in *BSac* 132 (1975): 25–36, 136–44, 216–28; and 133 (1976): 28–41.

12. For a more detailed exegesis of the Genesis prologue, see Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 58–68.

13. Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, SBT 27 (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960), 30; see also Karlheinz Rabast, *Die Genesis* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1951), 43.

14. “In the beginning” in John 1:1 may be a reference to Gen. 1:1. It may be that book’s way of saying that the *Logos* (i.e., Jesus Christ) existed with the Father already at the time of the creation of the universe.

15. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 42.

16. *Tōhû* by itself or in the collocation *tōhû wābōhû* is used of a ruined city that is desolate (*tōhû*, Isa. 24:10), of Edom reduced to chaotic desolation (*tōhû wābōhû*, Isa. 34:10), of howling desert that is barren (*tōhû*, Deut. 32:10) and trackless (Job 6:18; Ps 107:40); of a state of being worthless or reduced to nothing: idols (1 Sam. 12:21), idol makers (Isa. 44:9), nations (40:17), rulers (40:23), pursuits (45:19), arguments (59:4), and testimony (29:21); and of emptiness (Job 26:7) and nothingness (Isa. 41:29; 49:4). It functions as an antonym to “create” (Isa. 45:18; cf. Jer. 4:23). David Toshio Tsumura says, “The phrase [*tōhû wābōhû*] in Gen. 1:2 has nothing to do with chaos and simply means ‘emptiness,’ “ which he defines as “an unproductive and uninhabited place.” But he fails to note adequately that *tōhû*, always connotes something terrible, eerie. Even in Job 26:7 it connotes a state that effects awe. To capture both the negative denotation and connotation of *tōhû*, “chaos” is more apt than “emptiness” (*The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation*, JSOTSup 83 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], 43).

17. John L. McKenzie, “A Note on Psalm 73 [74]:13–15,” *Theological Studies* 2 (1950): 281.

18. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge:

Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 144.

[19.](#) Since the text gives no clue as to what meaning the author might have intended by the omission, and since the other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies assume the same omission, I draw the conclusion that this is a blank, not a gap.

[20.](#) Genitive of inalienable possession (*IBHS*, 145, §9.5.1g).

[21.](#) Genitive of authorship (*IBHS*, 145, §9.5.1c).

[22.](#) Attributive genitive used as a superlative (*IBHS*, 148–49, §9.5.3a; 268, §14.5b).

[23.](#) The meaning of *rāḥap* is somewhat uncertain because it occurs in Piel only here and at Deut. 32:11; in Jer. 23:9 [*Qal*] it means “to tremble.” *HALOT* (s.v. “*rḥp*,” 3:1219–20) gives the meaning “to hover and tremble,” adding “to hover with fluttering wings, characteristic flying behavior of birds of prey.”

[24.](#) For bibliography see *IBHS*, 268n26.

[25.](#) Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 82–90.

[26.](#) In New Testament theology, God is revealed as a triunity. In that light Jesus Christ, as part of the Trinity, created all things and sustains them (John 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–17).

[27.](#) *TDNT*, s.v. “*ktizo*” 3:1011.

[28.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:141.

[29.](#) Similarly, when the Bolsheviks took over Russia, they changed the name of St. Petersburg to Leningrad, and after the Russians ousted the Communist regime, they renamed the city St. Petersburg.

[30.](#) The book of Job, especially chapters 38–41, represents the chaotic forces — sea, darkness, *etc.* — as a mystery to human beings. Nevertheless, although these forces seem for the moment to be hostile to life, human beings can still trust the benevolence of the Creator, because the malevolent forces of creation operate only within constraints. The sea is always bounded by the land and the darkness of night by the light of the morning. To be sure, there are local floods and fire, but they are confined within the good earth that sustains life.

[31.](#) Some interpret “day” to refer to an extended period of time. Their only lexical argument is the use of “day” in such expressions as “in the day,” or in construct with another noun that qualifies it, such as “day of wrath.” However, “in the day” is also a syntagm, a compound, a frozen semiprepositional phrase both in Hebrew and in English that is equivalent to “when.” Apart from such compounds and constructions, “day” has its normal senses of daylight or a twenty-four-hour period of time. One would not argue that “butter” may refer to

an insect species simply because it has that meaning in “butterfly.” The linguistic law of *usus loquendi* disallows the proposed linguistic argument. “Day” in Genesis 1:14 refers to the “daylight” in contrast to the “night,” as well as to twenty-four hours in contrast to years. Since the six days of creation are qualified by “there was evening, and there was morning,” “day” has its normal sense of a twenty-four-hour period. (On a side note, the only day that did not receive a positive evaluation is the second day. This could be the jester’s theological foundation for “blue Monday” — even God did not call Monday good. In Orthodox Judaism couples marry on Tuesday because that is the only day of which God said “it was good” twice. Probably God did not evaluate the vault [traditionally, “firmament”] as good because on the third day the cosmic elements are complete: there are air, water, land, and vegetation — all the ingredients required to support life.)

[32.](#) Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2*.

[33.](#) Peter Louis Galison, *Einstein’s Clocks and Poincaré’s Maps: Empires of Time* (New York: Norton, 2003).

[34.](#) Wayne Grudem rejects this structural analysis because the luminaries created in the sky on day 1 match the making of the sky on day 2, and the space for the fish and birds on day 5 matches the gathering of the seas and the forming of land over which the birds fly on day 3. But he overly minimizes the obvious connections between ^{אוֹר} (“light”) with ^{שָׁמַיִם} (“luminary”) on days 1 and 4 and between God’s making of the ^{רָקִיעַ הַשְּׁמַיִם} (“firmament,” “vault”), called ^{שָׁמַיִם} of day 2 with the birds flying in the ^{רָקִיעַ הַשְּׁמַיִם} of day 5. However, his observations support the interpretation that the days are chronologically successive (*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 302–4).

[35.](#) Leo Strauss, *Reason and Revelation in the Worlds of Leo Strauss* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 1995).

[36.](#) The first verse consists of seven words; the second, of fourteen. Of the key words “God,” “heaven,” and “earth,” the first occurs 35 times and the other two, 21 each. “Living things” occurs 7 times, and so does the expression “it was good.” The summary statement and epilogue consist of thirty-five words, twenty-one of which occur in three sentences of seven words, each of which includes the expression “the seventh day.” Less convincing: “light” is mentioned 5 times and “day” 2 times (Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part 1: From Adam to Noah*, trans. I. Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961], 13–14). Aryeh Toeg noted that the first sentence of that paragraph consists of five words — a deficiency of two words — and the last sentence,

after the three heptad sentences, of nine words — a surplus of two (Aryeh Toeg, “Genesis 1 and the Sabbath,” *Beth Miqra*, 50 [1972]: 16).

[37.](#) See Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 100–120.

[38.](#) Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 3–6.

[39.](#) C. S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), 1.

[40.](#) J. W. Rogerson, “Slippery Words: V. Myth,” *ExpTim* 90 (1978): 10–14; and G. J. Brooke, “Creation in the Biblical Tradition,” *Zygon* 22 (1987): 233.

[41.](#) Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*.

[42.](#) Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SCM, 1953), 10–11.

[43.](#) Peter Pesic, “Yes, It’s Bluer But Why?” *National Post* (20 July 2006): A14.

[44.](#) Henry Morris, *The Remarkable Birth of Planet Earth* (Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1972), iv, 84.

[45.](#) Since many readers may read only this chapter and not the whole theology, I thought it prudent to present a digest of [chap. 4](#) here.

[46.](#) Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 41.

[47.](#) Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Penguin, 1987), 43.

[48.](#) The plot structure in the ancient Near Eastern myths involves a tension between the gods that peaks again and again in the emergence of the victor, but in Genesis there is no tension between God and his creation apart from humankind, because matter has no volition.

[49.](#) The tension between vegetation being made on day 3 and the note there was “no shrub of the field” (*šīaḥ haśśādeḥ*) and “no plant of the field” (*‘ēseḥ haśśādeḥ*) before Adam was formed may be caused by the English versions. *Šīaḥ haśśādeḥ* refers to wild plants (cf. *HALOT*, 1321), probably the “thorns and thistles” of the cursed earth in Gen. 3:18, and *šīaḥ haśśādeḥ* refers to the edible growth won from the ground by man’s toil (3:17–19). These did not exist, because it had not yet rained and there was no man as yet to cultivate the ground. The depiction of this negative state in the introduction to the story is necessary to explain the curse at the end of the story.

[50.](#) Hebrew *šāmāḥ* is a constative (or durative), not telic, verb that describes the sprouting of plants out of the ground, that is, the way they grow, produce leaves, and bear fruit. Amsler says, “The expression does not specifically concern the germ of the seed kernel ... or the bloom ... but the entire dynamic

phenomenon of the development and unfolding of the plant” (S. Amsler, *TLOT*, s.v. “s.mh.,” 3:1085).

[51.](#) E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis 1* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), 55–56.

[52.](#) *Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 7.

[53.](#) C. John Collins, “How Old Is the Earth? Anthropomorphic Days in Genesis 1:1–2:3,” *Presbyterion* 20 (1994): 109–30.

[54.](#) Augustine, *Confessions* (13.35–37) (50–52), trans. With introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), 304.

[55.](#) The verb *nāpāš* occurs elsewhere only in Exod. 23:12 (“refreshed,” NIV) and in 2 Sam. 16:14: “The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed himself (*yinnāpēš*).”

[56.](#) Mark Futato, professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, in a personal communication.

[57.](#) William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969): 1:474–76. Collins, “How Old Is the Earth?” also documents that Augustine and Anselm did not regard the days of Genesis 1 as ordinary days, that Rashi and Maimonides cautioned against being overly literal in their interpretation, and that the Puritan William Ames held there were indefinite periods of times between the days.

[58.](#) J. I. Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1977), 42.

[59.](#) This depiction conforms to some ancient Near Eastern cosmologies. For example, T. N. D. Mettinger (“YHWH SABAOTH — the Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne,” in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, T. Ishida, ed. [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1982], 119, drawing on 120) describes a scene dating to the ninth century: “We see the solar deity Shamash sitting on his throne, which is placed on a stylized cosmic mountain. Beneath the canopy we see the symbols of the three celestial deities, Sin, Shamash, and Ishtar. Under the throne are a number of wavy lines, at the bottom of which we see a base. Clearly the wavy lines [of the canopy] represent the celestial ocean. Indeed, an inscription above the canopy states explicitly that Sin, Shamash, and Ishtar are situated ‘above the ocean.’ Beneath the heavenly ocean is a slab which, like the biblical *raqiya*, the ‘firmament,’ divides the waters above from those beneath (Gen. 1:7). Four stars have been placed upon this ‘firmament’ (cf. Gen. 1:14–19).” For studies of the heavenly ocean in the Old Testament, see Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, trans. R. Graeme Dunphy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 182–83; and Luis I. J. Stadelmann,

The Hebrew Conception of the World (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970), 46–48. In some Egyptian iconography, the sky goddess Nut, whose body is facing downward and studded with stars, straddles the earth with her outstretched legs and arms touching the eastern and western horizons respectively. Above the back of her body is a sea traversed by the sun god in a boat.

[60.](#) Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 36.

[61.](#) Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1995), s.v. “*mabbûl*,” 2:541.

[62.](#) See Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 74–75.

[63.](#) Langdon Gilkey, “Creationism: The Roots of the Conflict,” in Frye, *Is God a Creationist?* 56–67.

[64.](#) See W. H. Green, “Primitive Chronology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 47 (1890): 285–303. The most quoted of estimated dates, based on summing the generations listed in the Bible and estimating the reigns of rulers is the much maligned calculation made by James Ussher, archbishop of Armagh, Ireland (1581–1656): high noon, October 23, 4004 BC. The famous astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), the astronomer who discovered that the planets revolve around the sun in elliptical, not circular, orbits, disagreed: the creation occurred in the spring!

[65.](#) “The theological treasures of the framework of the Genesis days come most clearly to light by means of the ‘literary’ interpretation. The writer has given us a masterly elaboration of a fitting, restrained anthropomorphic vision, in order to convey a whole complex of deeply meditated ideas” (Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987], 59).

[66.](#) As I use the terms, *cosmology* refers to views of how the world came to be and presently works, and *cosmogony* refers to a particular account representing a worldview.

[67.](#) For example, Marduk probably is represented as breaking wind in Tiamat’s face, and she opens her mouth wide to swallow the wind dispatched from his rear, whereupon he shoots arrows at her and deflates her (see Victor Hurowitz, “The Genesis of Genesis: Is the Creation Story Babylonian?” *Bible Review* 21, no. 1 [January 2005]: 38–48, 52, esp. 41).

[68.](#) Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:139; cf. A. R. Millard, “A New Babylonian ‘Genesis’ Story,” *TynBul* 18 (1967): 3–18.

[69.](#) Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 1:129.

[70.](#) The splitting of the waters in Genesis is uniquely parallel to the splitting of aqueous Tiamat.

[71.](#) James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*. Yale Egyptological Studies 2 (San Antonio: Van Siclen, 1988/1995), 20.

[72.](#) Ibid., 44.

[73.](#) Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 1:135.

[74.](#) G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Babylonian Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952); H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (New York: New American Library, 1968); Donald J. Wiseman, "The Laws of Hammurabi Again," *JSS* 7 (1962): 161–71.

[75.](#) John T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), 110.

[76.](#) Richard J. Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," *Orientalia* 53 (1984): 183–204.

[77.](#) Ibid., 184.

[78.](#) Ibid., 185. Clifford's second criterion is invalid. There is, however, a long tradition of those who have attempted to apply the theory of evolution to human culture, including Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century and Donald T. Campbell, Edward O. Wilson, and Richard Dawkins in the twentieth century (see Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005], 119–38).

[79.](#) Unlike science, which may divorce social life from the creative process, but like the ancient cosmogonies, Genesis 1 reaches its climax in an emergent society. "The man and the woman with their constitutive social orientations (expressed by the imperatives to procreate and possess land) are society *in nuce*. Genesis 2:4–3:24, too, is obviously concerned with the establishment of humans and their society" (Clifford, "Cosmogonies," 185). Jon D. Levenson (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 12) notes, "Through the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order." Psalm 104 also reaches its climax in a universe supportive of human community.

[80.](#) The renowned theologian B. B. Warfield supported the concept of biological evolution (see David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll, "B. B. Warfield (1851–1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist," *Isis* 91 [2000], 283–304). James Orr in one of the essays on *The Fundamentals* (1912–17) argued that "evolution is coming to be recognized as but a new name for 'creation,' only that the creative power now works from *within*, instead of, as in

the old conception, in an *external*, plastic fashion” (see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980].

[81.](#) I have been helped in reaching this conclusion by Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006). Collins was director of the Human Genome Project and is a devout Christian.

[82.](#) *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House/Value, 1989), s.v. “theory.”

[83.](#) “The great creatures of the sea” (*hattannînim hagg’dōlîm*, Gen. 1:21) are probably not reptiles such as dinosaurs. The list of unclean foods in Lev. 11:18 and 30 possibly refers to a lizardbird, like archaeopteryx, for the same Hebrew word (*tinšemet*) is used for both a bird and a reptile.

[84.](#) In socalled Second Isaiah alone: Isa. 40:12–31; 41:17–20; 42:5–9; 43:1–2, 14–15, 19–21; 44:24–45:7; 45:8–13, 18–19; 48:6b – 8; 51:9–10; 54:5.

[85.](#) In this section I am helped by John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42–98.

[86.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 83–87.

[87.](#) Lennart Boström, *God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs*. ConBOT 29 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 60.

[88.](#) For Christ’s priority over the universe, see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 378–79. But see Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 417–30, regarding Prov. 8:30.

Chapter 8

THE GIFT OF ^{ʾā}dām

Man is obviously made to think. It is his whole dignity and his whole merit; and his whole duty is to think as he ought. Now, the order of thought is to begin with self, and with its Author and its end. Now, of what does the world think? Never of this, but of dancing, playing the lute, singing, making verses, running at the ring, etc., fighting, making oneself king, without thinking what it is to be a king and what to be a man.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 2.146

I. INTRODUCTION

If the center of the Bible is the in-breaking of God's rule, entailing both his acts of judgment and of salvation, we must ask and answer who is the chief actor or actors in the drama of salvation history. In this chapter I argue that adam (i.e., humankind) is created to establish God's kingdom.

Helmut Thielicke¹ once asked how we make decisions when we go to the theater. He suggested that before going, we ask certain questions. Unless we are "hopeless blockheads," Thielicke said, we want to know something about what is playing, who wrote it, who the main actors are, and who the director is. Ironically, most people who go to the trouble of gathering such information for a couple of hours of entertainment do not ask similar questions before stepping out onto the stage of life. "But," asks Thielicke, "does not everything depend upon knowing these things?" Unless such questions are asked and answered, a person risks embarrassment and bewilderment when the curtain rises. Not knowing the Director's intention or one's proper role in life's play, a person wanders about babbling out whatever comes to mind, waiting for the prompting of the moment to dictate what he or she will say and do. And when the curtain falls, such a "blockhead" has the gnawing feeling that it has all been one terrible mistake. In retrospect, he or she has engaged in some quarrelsome dialogue, lounged on a comfortable sofa in front of the TV, rummaged through boxes and filing cabinets, and played a love scene or two. But all of it would be as a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. Worse than that, the "actor" would be under the Director's wrath for wasting the role.

This is why, at the very beginning, the Bible informs us of our role and introduces us to the Director. How we understand ourselves dictates how we behave (see [chap. 1](#)). Emil Brunner may have overstated the case, but he put his finger on the importance of this concept: "The most powerful of all spiritual forces is man's view of himself, the way in which he understands his nature and his destiny; indeed, it is the one force which determines all the others which influence human life."² Plato pictures Socrates as a man obsessed in his quest for wisdom—namely, to know himself. The author of the creation narrative understood the necessity of self-understanding. The dignity of being human is one pillar of the Christian faith. Human beings are not slaves to capricious gods, nor are they victims of cataclysmic forces beyond their control. Rather, they are

called by God to exercise authority on this earth in relationship with him.

Tragically, however, this present post-Christian age rejects this biblical dignity. With the growth of atheism, a new humanism is emerging; but paradoxically, with this loss of faith in God, human dignity has been lost. Paul Tillich said, “God died in the nineteenth century and man died in the twentieth.” Like manic-depressives, moderns both esteem themselves as animals and usurp the place of God.

Evolutionism (i.e., evolution without divine direction) contends that humankind is only on a continuum with animals; the only issue is what kind of animal. The concept of human beings as animals is reflected in the writings of earlier non-Christian intellectuals as well. Aristotle defined man as a political animal, while Edmund Burke defined him as a religious animal and Benjamin Franklin, as a tool-producing animal. Thomas Carlyle refined Franklin’s definition, calling man a tool-using animal. For others we are less than animals. Robert Lewis Stevenson considered man as but a devil weakly fettered by some generous beliefs. For Gilbert, doubtless with Sullivan’s approval, we are nature’s sole mistake. B. F. Skinner said that because humans are entirely shaped by forces outside their will, they have no will, no freedom, and thus no dignity.³ In this view evolutionism is too optimistic. Humans are things made of chemicals, no different from plants and rocks and so nothing more than objects subject to the same physical laws as other objects and without moral accountability.

On the other hand, some philosophers proclaim the “imperial self.” This view is based on natural theology, not on science, and constitutes the foundational notion of postmodernism. The sovereign self decides truth by itself for itself, not by a source of authority outside of itself. Its credo is “Believe in yourself.” Both the “diminished self” and the “imperial self” reject external authority, be it the Bible and/or the institutional church. Postmodernism loves self as god, not a God external to self. As we shall see, this is the essence of sin. Without God, *ʿādām* knows neither his or her identity nor his or her rightful place in the scheme of things.

An arrogant humankind began to lose their footing during the Copernican revolution when they lost their address in the universe. They lost dignity when Sigmund Freud contended that humankind is motivated by collective ancestral impulses, when Karl Marx claimed they are ruled by economic necessity, and when Freud said they are ruled by their libido. As individuals, many lost their last claim to dignity when IBM’s Deep Blue beat Gary Kasparov, the human chess champion. Actually, humanity has been under the threat of forces of their own making for some time. The much-vaunted victory of Deep Blue over

Kasparov is merely part of a long-term trend in which an “intelligent” machine supersedes the individual person, doing the work better and cheaper. Ironically, those who define and measure themselves by their abilities to analyze and produce may wake up one morning to find that computers have taken over their jobs, analyzing better and producing more. When a park attendant found the pessimistic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer sitting on a park bench, his hair all disheveled, he asked him who he was. Schopenhauer replied, “I wish to God I knew.”⁴

Unaided by revelation, the depraved human mind creates understandings of the identity of humankind that kill society as surely as diseases kill the body. Their depraved notions of what it means to be human have led to unrealistic Marxist social programs, to Lenin’s bloody revolutions, to fascism, to abortion and euthanasia, to individualism and sexual license, to the denial of the biblical doctrines of the husband-wife relationship. In short, human misconceptions about what it means to be human have had catastrophic, deadly social consequences.

God created adam, and therefore only God can reveal to us our identity and function. Without the biblical revelation, we are lost in a maze of confusion. Werner Foerster says, “Thus in becoming, being, and perishing, all creation is *wholly dependent on the will of the Creator*.”⁵ To lay a solid biblical foundation for understanding what it means to be human, Genesis 1:26–28 must be exegeted with care.⁶

II. EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 1:26–28

Genesis 1:26–28 is found in the sixth and longest scene of the creation narrative. The scene contains the first poem in the Bible as seen in its stichometric (i.e., measured, matching lines) arrangement of three cola (i.e., roughly a line of poetry) with four Hebrew words in each:

God created humankind [adam] in his image.
In the image of God he created it [*adam*].
Male and female he created them (translation mine).

Arguably, the author switches to a poetic style to match the grandeur of the subject matter. Other features in the narrative style, however, clearly underscore the significance and dignity of humanity in contrast to other creations. Only the command to create humanity is expressed as God’s deliberation in counsel with the heavenly court: “Let us make man in our image.” In the report, “create” (Heb. *bārā*⁷) — a term reserved uniquely for God’s making (see [chap. 7](#)) — occurs three times. Whereas the plot represents God as commanding the earth to produce plant life and animal life, it represents God as creating humanity *ex nihilo*, like the light. The second plot, however, qualifies the story. In that representation of the event, God uses the ground to make the human body, but human life comes directly from God, and so does his nature and function as the image of God. In sum, the narrator’s style matches the grandeur of the subject matter: God creates *ex nihilo* humankind as his vice-regents to rule all the earth.

A. Identification of “Us”

Who is God addressing in his deliberation?⁸ Obviously, the plural “us” is numerically incongruent with the singular God ^ʔ*lōhîm*, an honorific, not countable plural, for a person or thing; see below). Several options have been proposed to explain the first plural pronoun, “us.”

1. Some curiously argue that “us” is a piece of an unassimilated fragment of myth referring to the various gods of the ancient Near East. According to them,

the author did not purge his narrative of its mythological origins. The biblical cosmology of Genesis 1, however, aims to counter a polytheistic view of reality, as argued in [chapter 7](#). The idea that the author of such a polemic would leave an irritating eggshell of pagan mythic language in his text is implausible.

2. Others suggest that “us” looks back to the hosts of previous creations and/or creatures. This interpretation implicitly gives life and personal reality to the elements of creation such as the stars and so is subject to the same criticisms as the preceding view.

3. Still others suggest the “us” is an honorific plural, like “God” (*ʾēlōhîm*), and so refers to the singular God. The honorific plural, however, is attested only with nouns, not pronouns.⁹

4. Some appeal to the classic Hebrew grammar *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*,³⁸⁵ which says it is best explained “as a plural of *self-deliberation*” within God himself. But Gesenius cites no other instances of such a plural, and indeed, no clear text supports his grammar.

5. Traditionally, Christians interpret the “us” as pregnant with the doctrine of the Trinity. Several strong arguments favor this view. (a) This view satisfies the canonical context superbly, for the doctrine of the Trinity is established on many New Testament texts; more specifically, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all are identified as Creator. (b) The interpretation may find support in *rûah ʾēlōhîm* (“spirit of God,” v. 2), which in the canonical context becomes “Spirit of God” (NIV). In other words, in this very context there is an indication of plurality in the Godhead. (c) Since *ʾādām* in this text is treated as a collective singular, including male and female, we should infer that God is also a collective singular, involving more than one person.

On closer scrutiny, however, some of these arguments for a Trinitarian interpretation are invalid. The canonical argument is true but violates the accredited grammaticohistorical rules of interpretation (see [chap. 3.II.C.1](#)). The Old Testament never clearly uses *rûah ʾēlōhîm* (“spirit of God”) with reference to a personal hypostasis of God. On the trajectory of revelation from “spirit of God” in the Old Testament to “Spirit of God” in the New Testament, the original author would not have had that much later sense in mind. Moreover, *rûah ʾēlōhîm* in Genesis 1 more probably means “wind of/from God” (see [chap. 7.III.B](#)), making a personal sense of the phrase even more unlikely. Because humanity is a collective singular, it does not of necessity follow that the same is true of God. A better explanation is possible.

6. Most scholars rightly interpret the “us” as a reference to the heavenly court that surrounds God’s throne. This view has linguistic,¹⁰ contextual, and

theological support. As for its linguistic support, *ʿēlōhîm* means “divine beings” in 1 Samuel 28:13, though the TNIV renders it “a ghostly figure.” The point, however, is not whether it means “divine beings” or “a ghostly figure”; rather, that it does not refer to God, or “gods” in a polytheistic sense.¹¹

As for the contextual support of the primary interpretation of “us,” a reference to the angelic realm is the most likely meaning of “us” in connection with God in Genesis 3:22 and 11:7. Before looking at Genesis 3:22, however, one must take Genesis 3:5 into consideration. The Serpent, who becomes identified as Satan in later revelation, tempts the man and woman to eat forbidden fruit to gratify their pride: “You [plural] will be like divine beings (*ʿēlōhîm*) knowing good and evil” (translation mine). Conceivably, here is another honorific plural for God, but its attributive modifier, “knowing” (*yōdēaʿ*, literally “knowers of”), is plural. Normally translators decide whether *ʿēlōhîm* is a grammatical plural (“divine beings”) or an honorific plural (“God”) by its accompanying modifiers. For example, at the beginning of verse 5, *ʿēlōhîm* takes a singular attributive, the participle *yōdēaʿ* (“knows”). In this case, the plural is honorific. But at the end of the verse, by contrast, the construction *ʿēlōhîmyōdēaʿ* involves a plural participle of the same word, showing that, *ʿēlōhîm* should now be rendered by “divine beings” and *yōdēaʿ* by “knowers of.” In Genesis 3:22 *I AM* confirms the Serpent’s statement, saying, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil,” which is a reference to the Serpent’s temptation in 3:5. Accordingly, the “us” in 3:22 refers to divine beings, and since the Serpent knows of the divine counsel, he belongs to that realm and in this case knows what he is talking about.

In Genesis 11:7 God speaks in response to the rebellion at the Tower of Babel when a crowd of people developed a scheme to escape their earthbound status and ascend into the realm of divine beings. The heavenly rallying cry, “Come, let us go down and confuse their language,” matches the mortals’ cry, “let us make bricks.” The heavenly “us” most probably refers to the angels who superintend the nations (cf. Deut. 32:8; Dan. 10:13) and accompany the Lord in judgment (Gen. 19:1–29; Matt. 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7).

The contextual argument finds support also in its only other use with reference to God in Isaiah 6:8. In his temple vision, Isaiah is caught up into the heavenly court to join the seraphim that surround God’s throne, and he hears God asking them: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (6:8). Other passages also envision God as surrounded by a heavenly host (see 1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Jer. 23:18; cf. Ps. 82). In God’s second call to Isaiah (40:1–11) — this time to announce Israel’s salvation rather than judgment, unlike Isaiah’s first call

(6:12–13) — Isaiah again finds himself in the heavenly court. We know that “Comfort, comfort my people” is God’s addressing the heavenly court, not just Isaiah, because “comfort” is a numerical plural. In sum, all four uses of “us” with reference to *ʿēlōhîm* support only the interpretation that “us” refers to heavenly divine beings.

As to the theological argument, significantly all four uses of “us” involve the impingement of mortals into the realm of divine beings. Though God involves the divine court in these four passages, he is the Commander, as can be seen in his two questions, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” In embarking upon the grand adventure of making creatures, who like divine beings can and do cast off their role as God’s servants to vie with God himself for dominion, the narrator represents God as the sole actor: “So God created [singular verb] *ʾādām*.” He involves his council in his undertaking but does not need their advice (see Isa. 40:14).¹² The Genesis cosmology portrays God as supreme. He is totally in charge and is so secure in his authority that he involves the heavenly council in his plans and projects and even bestows part of his authority to mortals. In the broader context of Genesis and the Bible, this interpretation lays down the theological basis for the social intercourse between the divine beings and earthbound mortals (cf. Gen. 19:1; 28:12; 32:1; Matt. 4:11 et al.). The “us” foreshadows the introduction of the Serpent, who is, of course, a spiritual being with the knowledge of the divine realm.

Keil and Delitzsch justly urge that in the report humanity is represented as in God’s image, not in the image of divine beings.¹³ However, although the command assumes humanity’s correspondence to divine beings, the report emphasizes its correspondence to God, the greater entailing the latter. Also in Isaiah 6:8, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” God is represented as *primus inter pares*; God sends Isaiah on behalf of the heavenly court. Similarly, God makes humanity in his image to establish its connection with the divine realm. In his commentary on the Psalms, Franz Delitzsch rightly says, “But when God says: ‘Let us make man in our image after our likeness,’ He then connects Himself with the angels.”¹⁴

B. “Image” and “Likeness”

A human being is not said *to have* or *to bear* the image of God, such as God’s immaterial essence, but each is said *to be* in his or her entirety be the image of God.

1. “Image”

“Image of God” is used uniquely with reference to human beings and so sets them apart from the other creatures.¹⁵ Whereas all the other creatures are created “according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:21, 24, 25), humanity’s self-identity is defined by this disputed phrase. A lexical study of the phrase within the ancient Near Eastern context enables the interpreter to draw four theologoumena about its entailments.

a. A Psychosomatic Unity

Ṣelem (“image”) is used seventeen times in the Old Testament.¹⁶ In Genesis it is used four times in the phrase “image of God” (Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6) without contexts to define it more precisely.¹⁷ Of the other thirteen instances, six refer to idols (i.e., physical representations of other gods [Num. 33:52; 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron. 23:17; Ezek. 7:20; 16:17; Amos 5:26]); three refer to the physical representation of tumors and rats (1 Sam. 6:5, 11); two refer figuratively to a transitory image (Pss. 39:6; 73:20), though possibly these are renditions of root II *Ṣelem*, meaning “silhouette, fleeting shadow”; one refers to a painting (Ezek. 23:14), and another to Seth as Adam’s image (Gen. 5:3).

In sum, aside from its two possibly figurative uses, *Ṣelem* always refers to a physical image, having a formed body. This firm, linguistic data calls into serious question the traditional Christian interpretation of “image of God” by reading back into the disputed term the dualism of human nature as taught in the New Testament. According to the New Testament, humanity is both material (body) and immaterial (soul¹⁸/ spirit) (cf. Matt. 16:26). Some Christian theologians prefer to think of humanity as a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23). Within this frame of thought, Christian philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas confine the “image of God” to the immaterial component of humanity (man’s intellect and mind) or at best to the immaterial component residing in the physical. Without philological warrant, John Calvin taught that “the chief seat of the Divine image was in his mind and heart.” His initial error led him to wrongly argue that the image of God was destroyed in the Fall.¹⁹ *Usus loquendi* (i.e., deciding the meaning of words by the way they are used) of *Ṣelem*, however, refutes Calvin’s interpretation. While the Christian doctrine that humanity is both material and immaterial is compatible with the Old Testament notion of “image,” to define “image” as a dualism blurs the fact that *Ṣelem*

defines humanity as a psychosomatic *unity*, a view that is consistent with the rest of the Old Testament.²⁰

b. A Faithful and Adequate Representation

Nevertheless, from this meaning one should not infer with Gerhard von Rad that God has a corporeal form.²¹ The fact that man and woman are individually and collectively in God's image yet differ in their sexual structure shows that this notion about God must be screened out of the intended meaning. "In the image of God" implies that *ʾādām* (male and female) is theomorphic (i.e., having the form of God), but since God is spirit, not flesh and blood, "in the image of God" entails that the human species in his or her entire being faithfully and adequately represents God. To emphasize the distance and difference between God and mortals, "according to his likeness" is added (see below).

We must employ two metaphorical mirrors to understand this imaging of God. On the one hand, when we look at ourselves in a mirror, we see the image of God. Anthony Hoekema puts it this way: "Man[kind] as ... created was to *mirror* God and to *represent* God."²² On the other hand, since we are only God's likeness and not identical to him, we need to validate our analogies between ourselves and God by considering his reflection in Scripture to see to what extent the images comport with one another. The following critical reflection on *ʾādām* uses both mirrors.

First, the human physical form reflects God. "Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?" (Ps. 94:9). When we look into a mirror, we see a certain reflection of God: eyes to see, ears to hear, a mouth to communicate. The biblical mirror of God validates this inference by using such anthropomorphisms (i.e., having the form of *ʾādām*) as "the eyes of God" and "the ears of God." Yet God is spirit, not corporeal, and so in his substance he differs from us. In sum, our human structure faithfully and adequately shows that God, though spirit, sees the needy and hears the cry of the suffering.

Second, human beings reflect God's being as a person, for like God, we have intellect, sensibility, volition, a sense of a moral law and a sense of self-identity. Our ability to make decisions according to our intellect and sensibilities and to execute them reflects God's person as seen in the pattern of creation that finds its center in his commands (see [chap. 7](#)). Yet God's comprehensive knowledge is radically different from human partial knowledge.

Third, since the image is represented as male and female and God is asexual, we can infer that as God chooses his friends and speaks to his people, his image

includes social aspects such as relating to others in speech and friendships. The scriptural mirror of God validates this inference; prophets exploited this correspondence by likening *I AM*'s relationship to Israel as that of a husband to his wife. In short, generic *ʾādām*, like God, is a social being. God underscores this aspect of the image by connecting it with the heavenly "us." God himself does not exist in isolation but in relationships. As we learn from New Testament theology, even before the creation of angels, God existed in the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–17; 15:26; 16:7–11).

Karl Barth rightly argued from Genesis 1:26–27 that God endowed humanity with the ability to have social interaction with him and each other as male and female,²³ but he went too far when he argued that the image of God is a matter of relationship. The meaning of the phrase elsewhere does not support this notion. Genesis 5:1–3 and 9:6 pertain to the individual, apart from their social relationships, calling Barth's dogma into question. Each man and woman bears the image of God apart from his or her counterpart.

Since God is without sin and called his image good, the image does not pertain to humankind's spiritual status as innocent or sinful. The continued use of the expression in Genesis even after the Fall confirms this interpretation.

c. A Living Being

In the biblical world, the "image of god" possesses the god's life. According to Karl-Heinz Bernhardt,²⁴ the image functioned as the dwelling place of the represented deity's life. Likewise, the life of God indwells his image. The second creation account (Gen. 2:4–24) represents the truth by portraying God as breathing into the man's nostrils the breath of his life (v. 7). Most scholars see this simply as a sign of life, but the Targums understand it to include human capacity to speak and give names, which distinguishes them from animals. Their interpretation finds support in comparative historical material and in the semantic field of *nšmh* ("breath"). Life is passed on seminally, but the Spirit of God gives each creature its breath: "When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:29–30; Eccl. 12:7).²⁵ Michelangelo captured this in his timeless work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In its centerpiece the artist captures the lifeless form of Adam awaiting the immanent touch of God to give him life; until that living touch, Adam is a mere candidate to humanity.

d. A Representative Authority

God's resolve in Genesis 1:26, "let them rule," infers that he conferred to this image the capacity to exercise dominion. "Image" entails more than human form and the capability of social relationships; it confers the functional notion of duty and authority. The ancient Near Eastern literature validates this inference. For example, in Assyria only kings were thought to be in the image of god.

To Esarhaddon: "A (free) man is as the shadow of god, the slave as the shadow of a (free) man; but the king, he is like unto the (very) image of god."²⁶

Ian Hart summarizes this connection:

In the ANE [Ancient Near East], it was widely believed that a god's spirit lived in any statue or image of that god, with the result that the image could function as a surrogate for the god's dominion wherever it was placed. It was also customary in the ANE to think of a king as a representative of a god. Since in that world the king rules under the ultimate rule of his god, the king must be ruling on his god's behalf. Not surprisingly, therefore, these two distinct surrogates for the god, his idol and his king became connected and a king came to be described as an image of a god.²⁷

In contrast, however, to the ancient Near Eastern political theory, Genesis 1 confers this authoritative status of God's image to all human beings, so that we are all kings, given the responsibility to rule as God's vice-regents over the earth. God has called humanity to be his vice-regents and high priests on earth. Middleton draws the conclusion that this conception of all humanity having a royal function as God's image is articulated in conscious opposition to the social structures of Mesopotamia.

As we step out onto the stage of life, we are to understand that the blessed God crowned all of us, not just the kings and priests who rule us, to reign with glory and honor and dignity. C. S. Lewis remarked at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 that "the pressing of that huge, heavy crown on that small, young head was a symbol of the situation of all men." God has called humanity to be his vice-regents and high priests on earth. Elmer Martens rightly thinks that "on a line with one being the brutish animal and ten being God, humanity is an

eight or a nine.”²⁸ Presumably, Martens was reflecting on the proclamation in Psalm 8:5 “You made him [a weak human] a little lower than the heavenly beings.” After the Fall, however, without God and his wisdom, generic *ʾādām* is brutish, a tyrant (Prov. 30:2–3; cf. Ps. 73:22); with God and his revelation, *ʾādām* is humane, crowned with dignity and honor. In other words, humankind is created to establish the rule of God on earth.

2. “Likeness”

“Likeness” *dēmūt* distinguishes the image from its Creator or begetter (cf. Gen. 5:3), underscores the notion that the image is only a faithful and adequate representation of God, and safeguards against any pagan notion that equates the image as deity and worthy of worship.²⁹ In short, contrary to New Age Thinking, human beings are not gods and are not to be confounded with God in heaven. “Likeness” defines and limits the meaning of *ʾēlem* (Paul Humbert, James Barr),³⁰ and one must look into the mirror of Scripture to determine those boundaries. For example, God is a spirit, transcendent over time and space; humans are composed of matter, restricted within time and space. God is heavenly; humans are earthly. God is eternal; humans are mortal. God is all-powerful; humans are impotent by comparison. But for all that, we are faithful and adequate, sufficient to be in relationship with God.

Hoekema rightly draws the conclusion that “the image of God” pertains to both humanity’s being and function.³¹ It involves both what *acldm* is and what the man and woman do. As a statue mirroring God and breathing God’s life, *ʾādām* lives in relationship with God and exercises dominion over all the earth. Without this structure, *ʾādām* cannot function, and a human’s marvelous structure would be less relevant without this function.

John Barton reflects, “It would be surprising if such a radically fresh appreciation of human dignity did not have consequences for understanding the moral life of human beings.” He thereupon cites Rudolf Otto, who illustrated these consequences by comparing the moral teachings of the Old Testament in law and wisdom against their ancient Near Eastern background. This comparison shows that “laws which threaten human dignity are modified,” “class distinctions are largely removed,” and “what makes for true human community is fostered and protected.”³²

C. Rule and Subdue

The definition of “image of God” including notions of being physical and ruling as God’s vice-regents coheres with God’s intention for humanity to master/rule *rādā* all creatures in the earth’s three cosmic spheres of heaven, land, and sea (Gen. 1:26, 28). David Clines rightly understands “to rule” as the “permanent implication” of image.³³ To that mandate the account adds that God blessed humanity to subdue (*kābaš*) the earth. The Hebrew verbs *rādā* and *kābaš* entail respectively repressing and subduing/subjugating someone or something who/that resists and opposes as an enemy the exercise of authority.

The psalmist’s acknowledgment of *ādām*’s rule (*māšal*) over all that God made, “You put everything under his feet” (Ps. 8:6), pictures a victor over opponents. Fallen humans would have victory over the cursed earth. They would till the ground, clear stones from the fields, build terraces, prune trees and vines, and mine gold and ore deposits. They would catch fish, train oxen, hunt wild game, and so forth. Work is not a curse. God set the example by working for six days and refreshing himself on the seventh. The curse would involve, however, overcoming inedible growth and having to endure frustrated, unrewarded work due to droughts and floods and other natural disasters.

By themselves the commands to “rule” and “subdue” do not protect the earth and its creatures from human abuse, but the mandate was given before the Fall when humans were in submission to a benevolent God who opposes and subdues evil. Since the Fall, humankind has abused the mandate; in their greed and fear, pride and hubris, they rape the creation and fight to subdue one another. This violation of the cultural mandate would lead God to write laws to protect his creation and his image and to judge humankind for their sin against his rule and his good character. God would form a new race of people in Jesus Christ to make a culture that would bring him glory.

Theologians refer to the command to subdue the earth and to have dominion over it as the *cultural mandate* (our blessing and responsibility to develop culture under the lordship of Christ). All human beings are—by nature in their reproducing of themselves and in the shape of what they are—culture makers. The role of Adam and Eve is inescapable. Before the Fall, Adam named all the animals and composed a poem for his wife. After the Fall, Cain and his descendants began the arts (music, poetry) and science; they became cattlemen, musicians, tool producers, city builders. University researchers develop civilization by their jargon as their doctoral dissertations exhibit, and authorized pedagogues teach the new speech to the next generation and thereby shape our understanding of reality.

The issue is not whether human beings will develop culture; the only issue is

what kind? Will it be godly or ungodly? Will it be motivated by *agape* (God's love) or *eros* (self-love)? Cain became a farmer and Abel a shepherd, but Cain developed a religion that asserted his love for self, and Abel practiced a religion that expressed his love for God. Because Cain failed at the altar of his relationship with God, he failed in the field in his relationship to his brother and others. The murderer and polygamist composed a poem to celebrate his ability to more than avenge himself. The rebels at Babel built a skyscraper to challenge God's right to reign. In contrast to *eros* culture makers, Noah, an *agape* culture maker, built a ship that saved God's creation, and David and the early Solomon built a city, designed architecture, composed music, and wrote poetry that glorified God.

The great commission to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the cultural mandate complement, not compete against, each other. God's irrupting kingdom in a world that needs taming entails a people who purpose to develop a culture that pleases him. The Westminster Catechism teaches that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever," but it needs to be clarified that humanity glorifies God by subduing the earth by words and by work. Tragically, the pietists abandon culture to the nonpious. They foolishly argue: "Why polish brass on a sinking ship?" One polishes brass to glorify the ship's Maker, who will not allow his ship to sink. In other words, the "purpose-driven life" aims among other things to produce a godly culture.

D. Male and Female

The terms "male" (*zākār*) and "female" (*nēqēbā*) refer to the man and the woman as sexual beings, not to their social relationships. The second account refers to them as "man" and "woman," terms that refer more to their social dimensions. Each individual, whether male or female, is in the image of God, but humanity cannot bear its image to the next generation apart from the contribution of the male and the female. The text bears witness to the equal dignity of the man and the woman as God's vice-regents to subdue the earth and to rule the creation. Neither the male nor the female on their own can fulfill this mandate; they depend on each other, certainly to reproduce and probably in connection with complementary physical and psychological strengths. Neither sex is ontologically (i.e., in their essential being) superior to the other (see [chap. 9](#)). "Fill the earth" implies that the topos of "Adam" (generic) is not restricted to the garden. He tends the garden but subdues the earth, mining its treasures

outside the garden (2:12).

The two other uses of “image of God” in Genesis (5:1 and 9:6) bear out this interpretation. The parallels between God’s creating his image and naming him and the man’s begetting of his image and naming him shows that Adam as the image-bearer passed on that image to Seth (5:3) and, by inference, to every child. Seth as an individual is derivatively the image of God. Genesis 9:6 validates this conclusion:

“Whoever sheds the blood of *ʾādām*,
by *ʾādām* shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made *ʾādām*.”

Generic *ʾādām* refers to every human being, male or female, not a duality of male and female. The “image” is found in the psychosomatic wholeness of each individual, who cannot come into being apart from the male-female relationship.

Genesis 9:6 indicates that the image of God is passed on after and in spite of *ʾādām*’s rebellion. The senses entailed in the image of God were not lost or effaced through sin. “Even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Gen. 8:21), *ʾādām* still is in God’s image, and to murder that image is an attack upon God himself (cf. James 3:9). The corruption of human nature as Genesis 8:21 states and as Genesis 4 illustrates all too vividly, is passed on seminally outside of the garden. This depraved nature of humanity cannot be identified with the image of God.

E. Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2:5–10: Theological Reflections on Genesis 1:26–28

Humanity’s rule over the physical creation has continued unabated from the creation until the present. But when the creation is empowered by hostile spiritual powers, such as Satan, humanity’s rule proves no match. In Genesis 3:1 the Serpent—with a capital S to represent its uniqueness³⁴—brings unaided humanity under its rule. Humankind’s mastery of the earth, with their technical, scientific, and artistic abilities, has proved to be a mixed blessing. Nuclear power lights up our cities but threatens the extinction of all life; flight conquers space but opens new frontiers for terrorists; beauty in art ennoble humanity and

pornography degrades it. Since the Fall humanity's dominion extends to sin and death, but unassisted humanity cannot rule either of them. To extend our dominion to those spheres, we must depend on God's grace and power. Since humanity's initial revolt, we have depended on God's grace to instill within us a desire to love him and hate Satan, and as we have seen in our critical reflections on intertextuality ([chap. 5](#)), Psalm 8 asserts that humanity finds its spiritual power to conquer by its petitions and praises to *I AM*. Consequently, his name is majestic in all the earth. In that same chapter, we noted that Jesus Christ as the pioneer of the faith has already won the victory over sin and death. Our faith in our Brother guarantees our triumph over all things, none excepted.

As we step onto the stage of life, we wear the victor's crown over all things through our faith in God, to whom belongs all the glory. He works in his vice-regents both to will and to do his good pleasure in establishing his rule over all things, including sin and death.

III. REPRESENTATIONAL ^ʾĀDĀM [“THE MAN”] IN GENESIS 2:7

Genesis 2:7 confirms the relationship between God and humanity: God forms the man. *I AM* is the primary initiator, *the* main actor. God is the one who produces the play of life. He writes the script, and he directs it. As we will see in [chapter 10](#), the narrative of the creation of Adam has a symbolic function. As God forms the first Adam out of the dust of the ground, he also forms every descendant of his from the ground. Job takes this understanding and creatively interacts with it:

“Your hands shaped me and made me.
Will you now turn and destroy me?
Remember that you molded me like clay.
Will you now turn me to dust again?” (Job 10:8–9)

The afflicted Job argues that it is folly for God to destroy humanity. He compares himself to a finely crafted clay vessel and asserts that it would be absurd for God to smash such a beautiful creation on the pavement. As in Genesis 2, the metaphor is used for the creation of every human being. The representational nature of Adam is indicated by his name, *hā^ʾdāmâ* (“the man”). Adam derives from *ʾādāmâ*, “ground,” indicating earthiness; the earth is humankind’s cradle, home, and grave. This first Adam is fashioned in a natural body for an earthly existence, but the heavenly Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:13) shares in this earthly state to secure for fallen humanity a spiritual body of imperishable glory in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42–49).

IV ASPECTS OF HUMANITY

Both the exegesis of pertinent texts and the definitions of crucial terms pertaining to humankind advance a biblical understanding of human nature.

A. Words for Humankind

The broadest Hebrew term for human beings is the collective singular noun *ʾādām*, which occurs 554 times in the Old Testament. *ʾĀdām* differentiates the mortal on earth from God in heaven (see *ʾādām*), who determines the earthling's potentialities and limitations (see [chap. 13](#); Gen. 2:7; cf. Prov. 11:7; 27:20; 30:2–4). *ʾĀdām* arranges his thoughts and plans his steps, but *I AM* establishes his steps (Prov. 16:1, 9), which are often incomprehensible to the mortal (20:24). The only sensible response of *ʾādām* is to commit his ways to *I AM* (16:3), who searches him out (15:11; 20:27) and blesses him or punishes him for his words and works (3:13, 18; 8:34; 20:25; 21:16; 24:12; 28:14, 17).

Another broad term, *ʾīś*, which occurs 2,183 times in the Old Testament, has a variety of uses, usually designating a male of any age, including both father and son, or a “man” “husband” (see Prov. 7:19) in contrast to “woman” “wife” (*ʾiššā*). It may also be used of the human species, including “man” and “woman” in distinction from animals (see 30:2, where it is parallel with *ʾādām*). It too distinguishes the human individual from God, making the human being conscious of the vast division between God and the human (see Prov. 5:21; 14:12; 21:2; 30:2–4). This inclusive term is used sometimes in connection with *geber*, referring to the male in his strength,^{[35](#)} and to *ʾēnôš*, referring to male in his weakness.

Throughout the Old Testament, human beings are conceptualized as psychosomatic unities, but fundamental components of their being in the Old Testament are *basar* (“body”), *nepeš* (traditionally, “soul”), *lēb* (“heart”), and *rûah* (“spirit”).

B. Body (Bāšār)

Bāšār (“body,” “flesh”) is used 270 times in the Old Testament. It designates the corporeal substance of a living human being or animal, with emphasis on the visual and graphic. Sometimes it occurs with more specific bodily parts: bones (Job 6:12), skin (46 times in Lev. 13). “(My/your) bone and flesh” signifies a biological relationship (Gen. 2:23).

C. *Nepes* (Traditionally “Soul”)

Nepes occurs 754 times and designates “passionate vitality,” the “*élan vital*, *vital*, vibrant with energy.”³⁶ English versions traditionally gloss *nepes* by “soul,” but this unfortunate gloss from Jerome (*anima*) misleads an English-speaking audience into thinking of “soul” in the New Testament sense of Greek *psyche* vis-à-vis the “seat and center of life that transcends the earthly.”³⁷ In the Old Testament, however, *nepes* refers to the passionate drives and appetites of *all* breathing creatures, including their hunger for food and sex (Prov. 6:30; 10:3; 12:10; 16:26; 19:15; 25:25; 27:7; cf. Deut. 23:24 [25] [“want” TNIV]; Ps. 78:18; Isa. 5:14; Jer. 2:24). A glutton is called a *baʿul nepes* (“an owner of appetite/hunger,” Prov. 23:2) and a greedy person with an unrestrained appetite, *rehab-nepes* (“wide of throat/appetite,” 28:25).

The substantive’s meaning probably derives from its verb’s meaning, “to breathe” or “to exhale,” perhaps leading to the noun’s reference to “neck” or “throat,” an image that often shines through (cf. Prov. 3:22, where it is parallel to *gargrôt*, “neck”). *Nepes* is frequently used with words denoting yearning (Deut. 12:20; Prov. 13:19). The human craving for God, however, distinguishes human *nepes* from animal *nepes* (Pss. 42:1–2 [2–3]; 84: 2 [3]; 119:20, 81). Since it refers to the basic nature of a human being as having and being “passionate vitality,” it is best glossed according to context by “hunger,” “self” (see Prov. 1:18, 19), and “life” (22:5). It should be translated “soul” only when it clearly refers to the appetite (see 13:19; 16:24).³⁸

D. Heart (*Lēb*)

“Heart” (*lēb/lēbāb*) is the most important anthropological term in the Old

Testament,³⁹ but the English language has no equivalent to it. It occurs 853 times in the Old Testament. Here it is analyzed according to its uses in modern conceptions, but the Hebrew made no such distinctions. The ancients attributed *the body's functions* to the heart. When Nabal's heart died, his body became like stone (i.e., it became paralyzed, not dead, 1 Sam. 25:37–38).⁴⁰ The heart in biblical anthropology controls the body, its facial expressions (Prov. 15:13), its tongue (12:23; 15:28), and all its other members (4:23–27; 6:16–19).

The Old Testament also attributes *the psyche's functions* to the heart. No other English word combines the complex interplay of intellect, sensibility, and will. *I AM*, who knows the heart (Prov. 17:3; 24:12), experiences all of its emotions (cf. 12:25; 14:10, 30; 15:15). The heart also thinks, reflects, and ponders (24:2); the function of the brain was unknown in the Old Testament. As the eyes are meant to see and the ears to hear, the heart is meant to discern and prompt action. The LXX translated “heart” in Proverbs 2:10 by “understanding,” because to the people of that culture it meant the same thing. When a person lacks insight or judgment, the Hebrew speaks of a “lack of heart” (10:13). The heart also plans (6:14, 18; 16:9); it is the inner forum where decisions are made. The Egyptian Memphite Theology says: “It is so, that the heart and tongue have power over all members ... the heart thinks everything that it wills and the tongue commands all that it wills.”⁴¹

Then too, biblical writers attributed *spiritual functions* to the heart; it accepts and trusts in the religious sphere (Prov. 3:5). The heart feels all modes of desire, from the lowest physical forms, such as hunger and thirst, to the highest spiritual forms, such as reverence and remorse. Closely related to its pious function is its ethical activity. In Proverbs the teacher warns the son against allowing his heart to covet the adulteress's beauty (6:25) and against envying sinners (23:17), but “the discerning heart seeks knowledge” (15:14). Basic to its psychological and spiritual functions is the heart's spiritual state or condition; it can be wise (14:33) and pure (20:9) or perverse (6:14, 18; 12:23; 15:7; 17:16, 20; 19:3; 24:2; 26:23–25). This direction or bent of the heart determines its decisions and thus the person's actions (cf. Exod. 14:5; 35:21; Num. 32:9; 1 Kings 12:27; 18:37). On the one hand, the sage uses morally persuasive appeals to accept wisdom to bend the heart's spiritual condition (Prov. 2:10; 3:1, 3; 4:21; 6:21; 7:3; 22:17; 23:12; 24:32), even as Ezekiel brought dry, dead bones to life in part by prophesying God's word to them (Ezek. 37:1–14). The sage's instruction must be memorized and retained with religious affections (Prov. 3:3), not merely by rote memory (cf. Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:18). On the other hand, the sage describes how the heart can spurn correction and discipline (Prov. 5:12) and become so

hardened that it cannot move in a new spiritual direction (Prov. 28:14; cf. Isa. 6:10; Matt. 13:15). Admonitions to accept a parent's teaching into the heart denote a conscious resolve to love with one's whole being the chastening lesson. As the heart receives these teachings, they influence character, but the heart as a totality must let these forces enter it and determine its direction. Since the heart is the center for all of a person's emotional, intellectual, religious, moral activity, it must be safeguarded above all things (Prov. 4:23).

Paradoxically, the eyes and ears are gates to those factors that shape the heart (Prov. 2:2; 4:21–27), and the heart in turn decides what they see and hear. Egyptian wisdom literature resolves the paradox by attributing God as the ultimate cause of good: “He whom God loves can hear; but he whom God hates cannot hear. It is the heart that allows a man to become a hearer or one who does not hear, and the one who is unable to hear is one whom God rejects.”⁴² “If God ‘touches’ a heart, then it is he who determines its will,” says Johannes Pedersen.⁴³ Proverbs 20:12 likewise traces the teachable ear and the morally insightful eye to God.

Theologians grapple with the paradox in terms of a morally free will and the bondage of the will so that the heart is not absolutely free. The Bible teaches that human beings are free agents, morally responsible to choose good and reject evil in any given situation (Josh. 24:15; 2 Sam. 12:1–10; John 7:24; Rom. 1:18–32; *passim*). Tragically, however, as the result of the Fall, the heart is in bondage to sin (i.e., to love self, not God) and so, though morally free, is not absolutely free to love God. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9; cf. Prov. 22:15; Eccl. 9:3).

“There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God....
There is no one who does good,
not even one.” (Rom. 3:10–12)

Only God can set the heart free from this enslavement to sin: “Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Rom. 6:17–18; cf. John 8:34–36). The slave (i.e., the heart) can be set free from his master (i.e., sin/selfishness). “Children [of God] born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God” (John 1:13). “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.... He chose to

give us birth through the word of truth” (James 1:17–18). “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13). In sum, the doctrine of moral freedom and the bondage of the human will to sin informs the theology of Moses, the prophets, and sages in the Old Testament, and of Jesus Christ and his apostles in the New Testament. It is also the doctrine of the greatest church father (Augustine), the Reformers (Luther and Calvin), and the Jansenists in the Roman Catholic Church. Pascal, a Jansenist, said, “The only way of reconciling these apparent contradictions, which ascribe our good deeds now to God and now to ourselves, is to recognize that, as St. Augustine says, ‘our deeds are our own, because of the free will producing them, and they are also God’s, because of his grace causing our free will to produce them.’ And, as he says elsewhere, God makes us do what he pleases by making us desire what we might not desire.”⁴⁴ Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

E. Spirit (*Rûah*)

Rûah (“wind,” “spirit”) occurs 378 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Literally, it denotes “wind” with the connotation that it has the power to set other things also in motion. In Proverbs 25:23 it refers to north wind that brings rain and other climatic conditions. It cannot be restrained (27:16). On the other hand, the powerful wind also is fleeting (11:29).

Rûah also denotes “breathing” as an expression of the human being’s dynamic vitality, unlike *nēšāmâ* (“breath”), which denotes the process of breathing, including the act of speaking. *Rûah* essentially denotes the power encountered in “wind” or “breath.”⁴⁵ The manner of breathing indicates one’s frame of mind: if “short” it indicates nervousness (Prov. 14:29), if “long” it indicates “patience” (17:27). This dynamic vitality manifested in breath becomes attenuated into its psychic designation of “mood” or “spirit,” just as, *ʾap* (“nose”), the physical manifestation of anger (i.e., “flared nostrils”), becomes attenuated into the psychic phenomenon of anger. When in the complex, yet unified, physical-psychic constitution of a human being physical vitality comes to the fore, *Rûah* is best glossed by “breath” (cf. Judg. 15:19; 1 Sam. 30:12). But when the psychical vitality of the human constitution comes to the fore, it is best glossed by “spirit” (cf. Gen. 45:27). When one’s *Rûah* “spirit”) is broken, one’s vitality, morale, and power to promote life are destroyed. The complexity of the physical-psychical vitality can be seen in miserable Ahab (1 Kings 21:4).

Because he gets bad news from Naboth, Ahab lies on his bed, turns himself toward the wall, and will see no one and eat nothing. Proverbs 15:4 assumes that the tongue of good people can heal the hurt and damaged spirit caused by the twisted tongue of evil people (cf. Isa. 57:14–21, esp. vv. 15–16, 19).

Rûah can also function as a synecdoche for a person's entire disposition (Eccl. 7:8, 9; Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26), the whole inner life (Job 7:11; Ps. 78:8) including his or her opinions or desires (cf. Ezek. 13:3), mind (Ps. 77:6 [7]), will (cf. Prov. 16:32), and motives (16:2; cf. 2 Chron. 36:22).⁴⁶ The plural of *Rûah* in Proverbs 16:2, paralleling “ways,” denotes that the complex patterns of behavior depend on complex motives. We are not only created beings wholly dependent on God, but also persons with intelligence, sensibility, and will that make us also independent. Robert D. Brinsmead writes,

The creaturehood and the personhood of man must be held both together and in tension. When theology stresses creaturehood and subordinates personhood, a hard-faced determinism surfaces and man is dehumanized.... When personhood is stressed to the exclusion of creaturehood, man is deified and God's sovereignty is compromised.⁴⁷

Hoekema adds: “To be creatures means that God is the potter and we are the clay (Rom. 9:21 [Isa. 45:9]); to be persons means that we are the ones who fashion our lives by our own decisions (Gal. 6:7–8 [cf. Josh. 24:15]).”⁴⁸

In sum, these words for aspects of humankind support the notion conveyed also by “image” and “rule” in Genesis 1:26–28 and its intertextual connections that the Writer of the drama we call *Salvation History* created man in his being and function to establish God's rule over the earth.

F. Life⁴⁹

In the middle of the Garden is the tree of life, offering eternal life beyond the original life that God breathed into man (see [chap. 10](#)). The symbol of a *tree of life* to represent continual healing so as to live forever (i.e., immortality) is part of the ancient Near Eastern culture in which Israel participated.⁵⁰ The first man by nature is susceptible to death but his continued sacramental eating from the tree of life renews life and prevents aging and death. The tree of life allows humanity to transcend its original mortality and move to a higher dimension, life beyond the creation to eternal life and immortality (Gen 2:9; 3:22).

The biblical hope of an afterlife is entirely in keeping with ancient Near Eastern literatures. Since Proverbs shows a heavy dependence on Egyptian instructions, it would be surprising if numerous references to “life” (*hayyôm*) that book meant less with the living God than the Egyptian hope of life with a “no god” (Deut 32:21). In Proverbs 12:28 the righteous are rewarded with “immortality.”⁵¹ Proverbs 14:22 teaches, “Even in death the righteous seek a refuge in God,” and 23:17 asserts that their future hope will not be disappointed, in contrast to the wicked who have no future hope (11:7a; 12:28; 24:19–20). Proverbs 24:16 teaches, “For if a righteous person falls seven times, then he rises; but the wicked stumble in calamity.” “Seven” symbolizes completeness, comparable to the boxer who is out of the count of ten and the cat that has exhausted its nine lives. Under the sun, the righteous look as though they have no hope. Yet the saying throws away that harsh appearance in a concessive clause — to use the boxer analogy — to focus on his rising after his apparent knockout. By contrast, Job and Ecclesiastes focus on the suffering of the righteous before they rise.

Humanity’s intuitive notion of justice in general revelation and the revealed notion of ultimate justice demands the doctrine of a hereafter. Instructively, in the first story of Adam’s descendants the unbelieving Cain murdered his faithful brother Abel, sending him to a premature death, after which Cain lived out a normal life span (Gen. 4). Likewise, in the first pericope of Proverbs, thugs murder the innocent traveler (1:10–19). For justice to be done, as the Bible assures us it will be (e.g., Prov. 3:31–35; 16:4–5), Abel and the innocent traveler must be vindicated and delivered from death in a future that lies beyond their clinical deaths. If the clinical death of the innocent is the last word, then those stories deconstruct the Bible’s claim that God upholds justice. Kathleen Farmer rightly comments: “One either has to give up the idea of justice or one has to push its execution in some realm beyond the evidence of human experience.”⁵²

Salvation from the grave in the Bible is more than being spared an untimely death, for if death has the last word, then death is god and swallows up the path of life. But the Bible teaches that death will be swallowed up by life from the dead (cf. Gen. 4:24; 2 Kings 2:1; Pss. 49:15 [16]; 73:23; Isa. 14:13–15; 1 Cor. 15:50–56). As noted above, Proverbs clearly teaches immortality (not necessarily the resurrection of the body), but Proverbs 15:24 implies an ascending from the grave below. Other texts outside of Proverbs teach that the journey of the righteous ends in resurrection and/or the presence of God himself (Job 19:25–27; Pss 16:9–11; 49:15 [16] (cf. 49:8),⁵³ 73:23–26; Isa. 14:13–15; Dan 12:2; John 14:1–4; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 12:2). The doctrine of immortality and

resurrection from the dead is brought into the full light of day in the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the midst of history to assure the resurrection of those in him at the end of history (1 Cor. 15; 2 Tim. 1:9–10; cf. John 11:23–26; *passim*).

Turning from the quantity of the abundant life to its quality, the Bible never describes the clinically alive wicked as in the realm of light and life; they are in the realm of darkness and death, a state of being already dead. Israel's sages likened taking hold of their teachings to taking hold of the tree of life. In the book of Proverbs (*hayyôm*life") refers to clinical life (27:27) and to abundant life that transcends sin and death. "The wage of the righteous person is surely life; the earnings of the wicked person is surely sin" (10:16 translation mine). The TNIV helpfully paraphrases "sin" as "sin and death." By its opposition to "sin," "life" implies spiritual life. Derek Kidner comments, "In several places it is not too much to say that 'life' means fellowship with God."⁵⁴ This abundant life is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the breath of life; it is essentially a relationship with God. According to Genesis 2:17, disruption of the proper relationship with the Source of Life entails death. Jesus said, "Have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matt. 22:32). The Bible is concerned to restore this relationship with God by faith in his revealed word, which consummately becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ. That faith produces the righteousness that yields eternal life.

The Bible emphasizes the eternal life of the righteous, but the doctrine of ultimate justice also entails the punishment of the wicked in an afterlife. Jesus confirmed the entailment and extends that punishment to an eternal punishment: " [The wicked] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). C. S. Lewis noted, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations — they are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals that we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit — immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."⁵⁵

V. DOCTRINE OF ANGELS

Right at the beginning of the Bible the people of God are introduced to the principalities and powers of God's intermediary realm between him and human beings. This introduction provides the cosmic background for understanding the irruption of the kingdom of God, of which they are a part.

The principal term for the inhabitants of this realm is "angel" (Heb. *mal'ak*; Gr. *angelos*), which means "messenger." The term is distinguished from earthly messengers by their mediating God's messages in the heavenly court to human beings. These divine beings populate heaven and are either faithful or rebellious. The former minister to the kingdom of God (Heb. 1:4); the latter oppose the redemptive purpose of God. Their origin is unknown; they are created, but immortal. They function to show the incomparability of *I AM* (Ps. 8:5–7; 1 Cor. 8:4–8; Heb. 1:5–13) and represent spiritual powers behind the nations (Deut. 32:8 TNIV; Dan. 10:13).

The head of the faithful angelic host, who minister to the kingdom of God, is the "angel of *I AM*" (Gen. 18:1–2; 19:1; 32:24–30; Exod. 23:20–22; Josh. 5:13–15; see [chap. 21](#), n. [34](#)). This company of angels, who in Daniel's vision numbers in the tens of thousands (Dan. 7:9–14), fights for Israel (2 Kings 6:17). The angels announce Jesus' birth, his resurrection, and his ascension, but are significantly absent during the passions of his life. The Son of Man routs Satan and his minions without their help as when he resists the Devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). Jesus' Father would have sent twelve legions of these angels to rescue him from the Roman soldiers had his Son asked for them (Matt. 26:53). But they will accompany the Lord in the judgment (Matt. 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7; cf. Gen. 19:1ff.).

The Serpent, an incarnation of Satan, demonstrates his superiority over the human spirit by vanquishing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, leading to their expulsion from the garden. The Deuteronomist also introduces us to demonic forces: an evil spirit invaded the core of Saul's personality, defeated him within, and triumphed over him to hasten him to his death; an evil spirit seduced Ahab into the battle that cost him his life. The New Testament makes clear that this anti-kingdom host is organized, not disorganized. Satan gives them direction and empowers them (Mark 3:22). In Mark, Satan is "the prince of demons" (3:22); in John, "the prince of this world" (12:31), and in Paul, the

spirit infecting the “principalities” and “powers of this dark world”: “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:11–12).⁵⁶ These evil, immortal spirits are more powerful than the human spirit, and Jesus does not challenge Satan’s claim that he could have offered Jesus all the kingdoms of this world (Gr. *kosmos*, in the sense of an organized system opposed to God; Matt. 4:8–10). Satan’s activity is evil: to destroy the kingdom of God (Matt 13:38; Mark 4:15; Luke 22:3, 31).

Jesus invaded Satan’s realm, and the demons recognized his superiority and the supernatural power that crushes them (Mark 1:24). Christ routed Satan and his demonic horde (Mark 1:24; 3:22). As a result, Satan lost his ascendancy over the world, and Christ’s disciples can tread upon him (Luke 10:18; cf. Gen. 3:15; Rom. 16:20). The human spirit, fortified by the Holy Spirit, is greater (1 John 4:4). Nevertheless, Satan still prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour and at the end of the time of his binding will be set free for a short time (Rev. 20:3). Powerful though he and his minions may be, they cannot separate the people of God from God’s love for them (Rom 8:38). In other words, the Bible rejects a doctrine of an eternal dualism between good and evil. Good prevails over evil.

THOUGHT QUESTION

As you step out onto the stage of life, who is your director? What is your life about? What role should you be playing? What are your endowments to fulfill your role? What are some of your lines?

[1.](#) Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began: Man in the First Chapters of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 73.

[2.](#) Emil Brunner, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, T. E. Jessop et al. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), 146.

[3.](#) B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 42–43, 58–59.

[4.](#) I am indebted to Desmond Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 11, for many of the preceding citations and wordings.

[5.](#) W. Foerster, *TDNT*, s.v. “*ktizo*” 3:1011, italics mine.

[6.](#) See also Bruce K. Waltke, “Relating Human Personhood to the Health Sciences: An Old Testament Perspective,” *Crux* 25, no. 3 (September 1989): 2–10.

[7.](#) I lean heavily in this section on Patrick D. Miller, *Genesis 1–11: Studies in Structure and Theme*, JSOTSup 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978). See now J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 55–60.

[8.](#) P. P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 309; §11, n. 1.

[9.](#) GKC, 398, §124g, n. 2.

[10.](#) GKC (§124g) recognizes this interpretation as a grammatical possibility.

[11.](#) ^ʿ*Elōhîm* probably has this meaning in Ps. 8:5 (“heavenly beings,” NIV). Ps. 8 is David’s lyric exposition of Gen. 1 (see [chap. 5](#)). David’s reference to humanity’s social status as being only a little lower than angels probably looks back to the “us” in Gen. 1, even as the rest of his poem does. If the psalmist was referring to “God” (so NRSV), not angels, one would arguably expect him to use direct address as in the rest of the poem; viz., “You made him a little lower than yourself.” Also, as elsewhere, the LXX, the oldest translation, and with which the Targum and prevailing Jewish interpretations harmonize, renders ^ʿ*lōhîm*

in 8:5 “angels,” and so does the writer of Hebrews (2:7).

[12.](#) In 1 Tim othy Paul refutes the heresy that angels made the world (see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 408–14).

[13.](#) Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1: The Pentateuch, trans. James Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1847), 62.

[14.](#) Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. F. Bolton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:154.

[15.](#) A most readable summary and treatment of “image” is given by Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image: The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1986).

[16.](#) The Aramaic form of the word also occurs. It is used 17 times in the book of Daniel.

[17.](#) In the first *tôlednôtñ*, “The Accounts of the Heavens and Earth” (Gen. 2:4–4:26), *’ādām* has its more specific sense with reference to the first man, Adam. In the second *tôlednôtñ*, “The Accounts of Adam” (5:1–6:8), it is used generically in Gen. 5:1b – 2; 6:1, 5 and specifically for Adam in Gen. 5:1, 3.

[18.](#) I discuss *nepeš*, traditionally translated “soul,” below.

[19.](#) John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. J. King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 95.

[20.](#) Eccl. 12:7, which contrasts “the dust returns to the ground it came from” with “the spirit (*rûah*.) returns to God who gave it,” could be construed as distinguishing man’s material from his immaterial aspects, but more probably, rather than expressing a unique thought in the Old Testament, Qohelet distinguishes the body from the life-breath, as in Gen. 2:7. In 3:21 he refuses to speculate whether there are different destinations for the *rûah*., probably the life-breath, of animals and people.

[21.](#) I lean heavily here on David J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynBul* 19 (1968): 53–103; and “Humanity as the Image of God,” in *On the Way to the PostModern: Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998*, vol. 2, JSOTSup 292–93 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 445–97.

[22.](#) Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 67; Klaus Koch, “Der Güter Gefährlichstes, die Sprache,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 12, ed. G. Krause and G. Müller (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1984), 569–86. He renders *nsm? t h.ayyîm* in Gen. 2:7 by “Sprachgeist” (“speaking breath”).

[23.](#) Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3/2, authorized trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 203.

[24.](#) Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild: ein Beitrag zur Begründung und*

Deutung des Bilderverbotes im Alten Testament (“God and Imagery: ...”) (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1956), 17–68 (17–18), cited by Clines, *On the Way to the PostModern*, 2:475–76.

[25.](#) God gives his breath/spirit to all that breathe and so creates each one (Ps. 104:29–30).

[26.](#) David J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19 (1968): 53–103.

[27.](#) Ian Hart, “Genesis 1:1–2:3 As a Prologue to the Book of Genesis,” *TynBul* 46, no. 2 (1995): 318.

[28.](#) E. Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 170.

[29.](#) Paul Humbert, “Études sur le récit du paradis et de la chute dans la Genèse,” *Mémoires de l’université-de Neuchâtel* 14 (1940): 165: cited by J. Maxwell Miller, “In the ‘Image’ and ‘likeness’ of god,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 293.

[30.](#) Cited by V. P. Hamilton, *TWOT*, 1:192. See also for other proposed theologoumena vis-à-vis *demûṭn*.

[31.](#) Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 69.

[32.](#) J. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 1–2.

[33.](#) Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 97.

[34.](#) Heb. *Hannāḥāš*. The article cannot be anaphoric but probably refers to an intrinsically definite noun so that it functions as a proper name (*IBHS*, 249, §13.6a).

[35.](#) “*Gebher* does not mean simply a man like *ʾādham* or *ʿenôsh*, neither of which indicates a particular sex, nor does it mean man in general, for which the Old Testament uses the Heb. *ʾîsh*.... Of course *gebher* also contains the element of strength, especially in a general sense. A *gebher* without power is a self-contradiction.... Apart from [Job 3:3, a child with a special future] *gebharim* are always grown men; children are not numbered with them (Exod. 12:37), and neither are women, of course” (Witold A. J. Kosmala, *TDOT*, s.v. “*gebher*,” 2:377).

[36.](#) Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 90.

[37.](#) BAGD, 893.

[38.](#) Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *TWOT*, 2:587–91, s.v. “*nāphash*.”

[39.](#) Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, “Heart,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 331–32.

[40.](#) English versions do not translate “die” literally, because to moderns, when

the heart dies, rigor mortis sets in.

[41.](#) Christa Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9: Eine formund motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials*, WMANT 22 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966), 41.

[42.](#) Ibid., 45.

[43.](#) Johannes Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), 104.

[44.](#) M. R. O’Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 154.

[45.](#) R. Albertz and Claus Westermann, *TLOT*, s.v. “rûah,” 3:1203.

[46.](#) Cf. R. G. Bratcher, “Biblical Words Describing Man: Breath, Life, Spirit,” *Bible Translator* 34 (1983): 204.

[47.](#) R. D. Brinsmead, “Man as Creature and Person,” *Verdict*, August 1978, 21–22.

[48.](#) Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 6.

[49.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 104–9.

[50.](#) It is mentioned in Gen. 2:2; 3:22, 24; Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4, in later Jewish eschatological literature (4 Esr. 8:52; Rev. 2:4; 22:2), and in Mandiac and Manichean sources (R. Marcus, “The Tree of Life in Proverbs,” *JBL* 62 (1943): 118).

[51.](#) Waltke, *Proverbs*, 544.

[52.](#) Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

[53.](#) Gerhard von Rad comments on Psalm 49:15 [16]: “The most likely solution, then, is to understand the sentence as the expression of a hope for a life of communion with God which will outlast death” (*Wisdom in Israel* [London: SCM, 1972], 204).

[54.](#) Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 53.

[55.](#) From C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*: cited by Raymond J. de Souza, “The Other Side of the Wardrobe,” *National Post* (December 8, 2005): A20.

[56.](#) Satan is not *Lucifer* (Latin for the Hebrew term meaning “Morning Star, son of the Dawn” — Isa. 14:12). This Venuslike figure is a mythic representation of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, who by conquest became the king of Babylon (Isa. 14:4, 25).

Chapter 9

THE GIFT OF THE BRIDE

The condition of an advantageous marriage is as desirable in the opinion of the world as it is vile and prejudicial in the sight of God.

Pascal in “Letter to Madame Perier upon the Projected Marriage of Mademoiselle Jacqueline Perier,” 1659

I. INTRODUCTION

The first eleven chapters of Genesis set the stage for God establishing his kingdom. We have already seen that the creation of the heavens and the earth out of the primeval chaotic waters is itself an act of salvation, and that God created human beings, male and female, in his image to bring the creation under their rule as his vice-regents. In this chapter we consider the Creator's intention for the social relationship of man and woman as they together rule the earth. More specifically, God establishes them in a marriage relationship, each having certain responsibilities. Man leaves his parents and clings to his wife, and she aims to help him in caring for the earth under God. The Sabbath and marriage are the only social institutions that antedate the Fall; they are not the result of the Fall, nor is the male-female ordained social relationship the result of the Fall. The home is foundational in God's program of salvation in part because it reflects God's covenant relationship with Israel and the cradle where the godly seed is brought into being and nurtured. In the warm embrace of a husband and wife, God ordains their fellowship and their giving birth to his offspring.

This chapter offers a broad survey of the role of women in the Bible with particular emphasis on the two creation narratives as revealing the ideal state. I also examine what the rest of the Old Testament teaches on the relationship of men and women and consider as well the New Testament, noting its continuities and discontinuities with the Old. My thesis, in brief, is that the two creation accounts reveal God's design for men and women. They are written to help them understand their natures and the roles for which they were created, not to bang them over the head into submission. The creation accounts assert that our sexuality lies deeper than our physical characteristics and gender socialization, and that our embodiment as male or female profoundly influences the way we view the world.¹ To put it another way, men and women have distinctive "glories." I contend that these accounts present the man and woman as having equality in their beings and the husband as having leadership in government and a wife to help him in their heavenly mandate to subdue the earth and keep the garden.

Conscious of the division and strife created in the contemporary church by the issues of women's roles in church, home, and society, I offer this study with an emphatic assertion that these issues are nonessentials for the unity of the church.

Rupert Meldenius, in a council on moderation (Frankfort, 1627), penned a simple motto for life in the community of faith: “In the essentials, unity; in the nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”²

A. Hermeneutical Issues and the Method of Criticism

1. Creation Narrative

To transcend the historically particular and culturally conditioned situations in which Scripture is given and to find what is normative, I need to exegete carefully the Creator’s intention for the man and the woman apart from the Fall. Because the creation narrative is expressed in a particular culture, there is a somewhat unavoidable circular reasoning here. But I can spiral out of that circularity. Just as I regard the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ as normative, though he became incarnate in a particular body and culture and gave expression to truth in that particular culturally conditioned form, so also Scripture’s teachings are normative, though they too find expression in historically particular and culturally conditioned situations.

Assuming the given particularity of all Scripture, the two creation narratives (Gen. 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25) should be regarded as normative because they describe God’s ideal for his creation. The rest of Scripture reflects conditions after the fall of humanity, a state of accursedness and corruption, in which God acts and reacts to human hard-heartedness. It is more problematic to use these later texts to establish what is ideal for the church, a people living in the “already” aspect of the kingdom of God, thus seeking an ethics and praxis redeemed from the Fall. Therefore, I turn to that portion of Scripture that transcends fallen historical and cultural particularities and that is intended to describe God’s perfect intentions in the pristine realm. This order of creation stands behind his rulings in the order of redemption (see [chap. 7](#)).

The two narratives serve as God’s founding charter for humanity. The rest of Scripture recounts the sacred story that, to a large extent, moves toward the restoration of the ideal espoused in this charter.³ For example, Jesus endeavored to recapture for his church the Creator’s original intention for marriage (Matt. 19:3–9), while noting that other portions of Scripture allowed for departure from the ideal due to the hardness of the human heart (19:8). Also, the apostle Paul based his doctrines regarding the complementary roles of women in the home and in the church on these creation cosmogonies (1 Cor. 11:3–12; 1 Tim. 2:12–

15).

2. The Rest of the Bible

The rest of the Old Testament contains patriarchal (i.e., the father's leadership, not abuse, of his household) assumptions reflecting its historically conditioned nature. For some theologians, this is sufficient to disqualify these texts from being used in the task of establishing the normative practice for the church. I disagree. There are at least three reasons why the Old Testament should not be dismissed from the process of establishing normative practice.

First, God is sovereign over Israel's culture. Throughout Israel's history God superintended its development. He initiated relationships with godly men and women and used them at critical junctures to mold Israel's history and culture. Thus, the development of Israelite culture was not due to Lady Luck, but to the sovereign Creator of the universe. Since his sovereignty extends even to assigning the pagans their gods and their cultures (Deut. 4:19), one may rightly suppose that the Sovereign did not hand over to chance either his representation of himself as Father, Son, and Spirit or the role of women within the kingdom of God (cf. Gen. 18:18–19).

Orthodox theologians must reject Krister Stendahl's comment, made while he was still dean of Harvard Divinity School, that God's numerous and strong masculine metaphors for himself are largely an accident.⁴ Contrary to Stendahl, the masculinity of Jesus Christ is not left to chance. His incarnation occurred at the right time and in the right way according to God's own sovereign purposes (Gal. 4:2–4).

Second, Israel's prophets, God's mouth, were iconoclasts, not traditionalists; they called Israel into the dock for numerous injustices. Abraham Heschel, in his justly praised work *The Prophets*, makes the point:

They challenged the injustices of their culture. The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered and awesome beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity. They exposed the scandalous pretensions, they challenged kings, priests, institutions and even the temple.⁵

Although the prophets inveighed against the abuse of power that oppressed women (Mic. 2:9) and gave a voice for those too weak to have a voice (Isa. 1:23), not one of them regarded patriarchy⁶ as an unjust or oppressive form of government. Quite the contrary. They interpreted the rule by women as God's

judgment against the sinful nation (cf. Isa. 3:12).

Third, our Lord was a revolutionary in his own age with regard to the role of women in society. He amazed his disciples by conversing with a woman, for in so doing he violated the prejudice of both the Jews and the Romans against women (John 4:27). The Son of God bestowed dignity on the Samaritan adulteress, who was “unclean” by Jewish standards, by revealing to her for the first time that worship would now be directed toward the Father in heaven rather than toward Jerusalem on earth (John 4:21–26). Moreover, he entrusted women to be the original witnesses to his resurrection, the cornerstone of the Christian faith, though according to Jewish law women were not competent to witness (Luke 24:1–12).⁷ He favored Mary of Magdala, out of whom he had cast seven demons, by allowing her to be the first person to meet him after his resurrection (Mark 16:9–10; John 20:14–18). His disciples refused to believe Mary’s report of the risen Lord, and if we may trust the historicity of the long ending of Mark, he rebuked them for their unwillingness to believe her (Mark 16:14). Yet he implicitly confirmed the role of men as rulers by not appointing a woman as one of the twelve apostles on whom the church is built, with Jesus Christ himself the chief cornerstone, though women followed him, ministered to him, and were close friends with him (see below for the meaning of *diakonos* and of *apostolos* in Rom. 16:1, 7).⁸

Does it make sense to argue that Jesus, who in these matters pertaining to theology was so countercultural with respect to women, chose only male apostles, upon whom he founded his church, because he was culturally conditioned? Is it not more plausible to think that if he intended to empower women who followed him to have equality with men in government, he would have chosen some of them to be apostles, either before or after his resurrection?

B. Forbidden Fruit

The commission of the Church of Sweden was formed to discuss the role of women in the church. They drew the conclusion that on the basis of the New Testament alone there was no case for women’s ordination. Stendahl agreed with their conclusion but contended that the New Testament was not decisive for the present day.⁹ Stendahl recognizes that Paul’s teaching in 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is built on the order of creation and, apart from 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 and Galatians 3:28, the rest of the New Testament also subordinates women in government (Col. 3:18–25; Eph. 5:22–32; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1–7). But he also

contends that 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 points beyond the order of creation, and Galatians 3:28 points beyond what the apostles otherwise taught and practiced. Accordingly, he argues, what the New Testament teaches is not automatically the authoritative and intended standard for the church through the ages. In other words, the apostolic teaching is inconsistent on this subject, and the contemporary church is free to deconstruct those texts based on the order of creation and move beyond them. In fact, he allows that “this tension” could have existed in the mind of Paul himself. If he is right, then the apostles in fact contradict themselves and God has left his church in confusion. I will return to 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 and Galatians 3:28 below. Conservative theologians who want to erect an egalitarian model obfuscate — so it seems to me — the meaning of the texts that Stendahl grants teach subordination of women, often with the godly intention of revitalizing the church by empowering women to use their God-given gifts that the church for too long has wrongly suppressed. Still other theologians obfuscate or outright reject the New Testament to empower their social agenda to elevate women to equal authority and leadership with men.

Until the twentieth century, the church almost universally, apart from some splinter groups, understood the Scriptures to teach a male priority in its leadership and government,¹⁰ but more and more evangelical churches and institutions are overthrowing their heritage, sometimes on the superficial basis that scholars are divided on the issue. The truth is that scholars are divided on most theological issues, including even the doctrines of God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ and of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ that validates him as the Son of God. In other words, giving up a doctrine on the basis that scholars differ in their opinions shows that no doctrine is secure and the more liberal perspective and practice will prevail. This is so because, if authorities differ—so the argument goes — one does as he or she thinks best. Anthony Thiselton, citing Robert Morgan, rightly notes that “some disagreements about what the Bible means stem not from obscurities in the texts, but from conflicting aims of the interpreters.”¹¹ Luther once said — borrowing from a saying of Euripides — that “whom God intends to destroy, he gives them leave to play with Scripture.”¹²

To be sure, all of us interpret texts out of a tradition, a consensus, and/or under the influence of some authority. This is inevitable and rational, for, as Hans-Georg Gadamer¹³ explains, we are aware of our own limitations and accept that others have better understanding. At the same time, this realization does not allow us to conform our interpretations to the prevailing cultural winds of political correctness, submitting our sacred heritage to the demagoguery of a

veneer of consensus. Rather, as followers of Christ, we must always submit our heritage and authority, as well as any cultural consensus to Scripture lest we make Scripture void.

II. MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

Those who would urge married women to give priority to fulfillment in careers outside of the home over against fulfillment in childbearing within the marriage structure are not offering sound doctrine. According to the first creation account, God created humanity as male and female (Gen. 1:26–28; cf. Matt. 19:4), whereupon he blessed them to procreate and to govern. He blessed them to enable them to procreate his image and similitude (cf. Gen. 5:1–3), thereby affording the opportunity to as many people as possible to sit at his banquet table of life. “Grace,” as Pope John Paul II noted in his remarks to Roman Catholic bishops, “never casts nature aside or cancels it out, but rather perfects it and ennobles it,”¹⁴ as Catholic theology has always asserted.

According to the second creation account, God’s mandate and benediction that the man and the woman procreate his image is to be exercised within the confines of monogamy.¹⁵ God institutes marriage by giving Adam his bride, defining them as husband and wife, and ordains the man to leave his parents and cling to his wife, forming a new home. By instituting marriage in the Garden of Eden, which the church restores, God represents marriage as an ideal and holy state, an act of worship (Heb. 13:4). As noted above, Sabbath observance and marriage are the only social institutions that precede the Fall, and the homes established through marriage provide the foundation stones for society. After the Fall, God institutes the state to protect society from criminals and the church to promote a new community of love in a conflicted world (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37–40).

The gift of the bride story emphasizes the goodness of marriage. *I AM*’s statement that Adam’s singleness “is not good” (Gen. 2:18) is more emphatic than “lacking in goodness,” a normal Hebrew way of saying that a situation is less than ideal. Thus, by his choice of words, he is emphatically calling Adam’s situation “bad.” God completes the man by the gift of a bride, not by placing him in a community, which is no surrogate for a wife. The man and the woman complement and complete one another. This account ends with no trace of male chauvinism, but with the coda that *the man* leaves his parents to cling to his wife (2:24).

The rest of the Old Testament also defines marriage as a holy and ideal state. Though certainly marriage is not required for holiness, it is instructive to observe

that the holiest people in the Old Testament are married. The high priest, who alone can enter once a year with awe and trembling into God's presence in the Most Holy Place, is married.¹⁶ Nazirites, the holiest people in the Old Testament by their own choice, not by birth as in the case of the high priest, likewise are married (see Num. 6:1–21). By definition Nazirites are “separated” to God (see v. 2), but they never fast sexually. They show their separation to the Creator by not cutting their hair, just as an orchard is set apart to God by not pruning it and an altar that is dedicated to God is made of uncut field stones. Nazirites symbolize their separation from earthly pleasures by not eating the fruit of the vine “that cheers both gods and men” (Judg. 9:13), and they show they belong to the God of life by a total separation from death. But they do not demonstrate their separation to God by celibacy. Marriage is part of their consecration, worship, and holiness.

Christ's apostle Paul elevates singleness for “gifted” individuals to an even higher state (1 Cor. 7). In regard to women who are called to singleness, however, his design is not to favor women's careers outside the home over motherhood within it, but in addition to minimizing the dangers of an impending “crisis” (v. 26), to enable them to be fully devoted to Christ without distraction (vv. 32–35). Apart from this “giftedness,” the apostle teaches as normative behavior that older women teach younger women “to love their husbands ... to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” (Titus 2:4–5).

After the Fall, God elevates godly mothers to a high status. In sovereign grace he changes the fallen woman's affection to enmity against Satan (Gen. 3:15). By his promise to give this new woman a triumphant, though suffering, offspring, he implicitly assigns her the role of bearing the seed that would destroy the Serpent, the adversary of God and humanity. The quintessential expression of that seed is Christ, who defeated Satan on the cross, but the mandate finds its fulfillment in every covenant child (Rom. 16:20). In response to the promise to give the woman seed to defeat Satan, believing Adam names his wife Eve, “because she would become the mother of all the living” (Gen. 3:20). Thus, every Christian mother, by being in Christ, bears his holy children (1 Cor. 7:14; cf. Isa. 53:10). If a woman has suffered any loss of leadership through her creation, *qua mulier* (1 Tim. 2:12–13; cf. Gen. 2:18–25), and (Gk. *kai*)¹⁷ through her historical guilt by Satan's deception, in contrast to Adam, in connection with the Fall (1 Tim. 2:14; cf. Gen. 3:1–14), Paul says she (singular) will be saved from that loss through bearing children in Christ if they (*meinosin*, i.e., the children) continue in the faith, love, and holiness with propriety (3:15; 1 Tim.

2:15). In short, the apostle is saying, “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” As a sign of my belief in that truth, I dedicated two benches to my mother at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando): “In memory of Louise Daab Waltke, who by faith, though dead, still speaks.”

Mary’s response to the angel’s announcement that she would be with child, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said,” models for Christian women an obedience she offers out of her freedom, her independence, and her thoughtful commitment so that her submission is meaningful and glorious, not a passive resignation to her fate.

III. THE EQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

The varied contemporary versions of feminism have had the heuristic value of reasserting the equality of women with men. Unfortunately, as has been documented many times, both the synagogue and the church have not only failed to proclaim this glad truth but have shouted it down. Those are black marks in sacred history. The error, however, lies in the interpreters of Scripture, not in the Holy Bible itself. If a rusty can (i.e., the church) lacks pure water (i.e., the truth), we don't blame the water but the can.

A. Equality in Creation

In the first creation account, both men and women are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26–28); they are created to be kings and queens (see above). Together, as his image, they share this derivative authority to be culture makers. The second account reinforces this equality and clarifies it. When *I AM* says, "I will make a helper suitable for [Adam]," he means that he will form a woman who is equal to and adequate for the man. She stands opposite him in her sexual differentiation but equal with him in her dignity as a human being. Adam's words in response to her formation from his own body are the only human words preserved from before the Fall. Untouched by envy and/or a desire to dominate and control her, he celebrates with admiration their being family (i.e., of the closest human relationships): "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."¹⁸ At the same time, he represents her sexual differentiation from him: "She shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:23).

The rest of the Old Testament reinforces women's equality in being and in dignity with men. After Sarah overreacts to the arrogance of her maidservant Hagar and drives her out of Abraham's house, the angel of *I AM* finds the runaway at a well. He says, "Hagar, servant of Sarai ..." (Gen. 16:8). Of the many thousands of ancient Near Eastern texts, this is the only instance when a deity, or his messenger, calls a woman by name and thereby invests her with dignity. Hagar is the Old Testament counterpart to the Samaritan woman (see John 4): both are women, both are not of Abraham's family, both are at a well,

and both are sinners, yet God treats both with compassion, gives them special revelations, and bestows on them unconventional dignity.

B. Equality in Parenting

Mothers stand on equal footing with fathers in teaching their children (Prov. 31:26). Israel's sages are cultural revolutionaries in elevating mothers to teach the national spiritual heritage to their children. The father's command to the son, "Do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Prov. 1:8), seems unexceptional until we realize that the mother is not mentioned as a teacher in ancient Near Eastern literature. For the mother to teach Israel's inherited wisdom, she herself had first to be taught, suggesting that "son" in the book of Proverbs is gender inclusive (referring to both sons and daughters), not gender specific.¹⁹

C. Equality in Charisma

In the Old Testament, women are called to be "prophetesses" on an equal footing with prophets. Miriam (ca. 1400 BC, Exod. 15:20–21) is the first of several who are named, including Deborah (ca. 1150 BC, Judg. 4:4–7), Isaiah's wife (725 BC, Isa. 8:3), Huldah (640 BC, 2 Kings 22:14–20), and the false prophetess Noadiah (ca. 450 BC, Neh. 6:14). Joel 2:28 predicts that in the last days *I AM* will fulfill Moses' prayer that all of *I AM*'s people, men and women alike, will become prophets (Num. 11:29). At Pentecost the Holy Spirit is given to both men and women, young and old alike, to enable them to proclaim boldly the triumphant news, Jesus is Lord of all, and to build his church (Acts 1:8, 14; 2:1–4, 17–18).

Huldah is a most remarkable prophetess with regard to the question of women's roles in worship and ministry. When Josiah's workmen find the Book of the Law while they are repairing the temple, Josiah directs five leaders to inquire of *I AM* about the book. Instead of going to Jeremiah and Zephaniah, they go to their contemporary, Huldah, to verify the book (2 Kings 22:8–20). Clarence Vos, in his superb doctoral dissertation on our topic, says,

That officials from the royal court went to a prophetess relatively unknown with so important a matter is strong indication that in this period of Israel's history there is little if any prejudice against a woman's offering

of prophecy. If she had received the gift of prophecy, her words were to be given the same authority as those of men.²⁰

D. Equality in Prayer

Covenant women pray directly to God without the priestly mediation of their husbands (contrast Jacob's prayerlessness [Gen. 30:1–2] with Rachel's effectual prayer [30:22–24]). Barren Hannah seeks dignity and worth through childbearing. She too goes directly to God in prayer, independent from her husband and from the high priest, both of whom are insensitive to her need.

E. Equality in Worship

Women sing and dance in worship, expressions of the acme of life. Miriam and Deborah compose the two oldest pieces of literature preserved in the Bible, which are regarded by scholars as literary masterpieces (Exod. 15 and Judg. 5). Women celebrate before *I AM* with singing, dancing, and tambourines (e.g., 1 Sam. 18:6; Ps. 68:25) although they are not part of the temple choir. Women offer sacrifices and gifts along with men (cf. Lev. 12:6). The laws for ceremonial cleansing in connection with bodily emissions are essentially the same for both sexes (Lev. 15). Women as well as men consecrate themselves to God as Nazirites (Num. 6:2). Sarah, when wronged by her female slave and by the apathy of her husband to the injustice inflicted upon her, appeals to God for justice without manipulating her husband (Gen. 16:5).

The role of women in ministry in the New Testament is better known. Luke takes pains to stress the important role that women play on Paul's second missionary journey when he establishes the church in Macedonia and Achaia (cf. Acts 16:13; 17:4, 12, 34; 18:2). The apostle has a vision of a man of Macedonia begging him to come and help him (16:9), and when he arrives he finds women in prayer who become his first converts in Europe (vv. 11–15). Women engage in church authorized ministries: Phoebe, Prisc(illa), Euodia, and Syntyche are celebrated as “ministers/couriers” (*diakonos*) or “coworkers” (*synergos*).²¹ In the church as represented in the New Testament, however, no woman is appointed to a position of authority over men.²² Rather, a woman is to keep silent in the church if she has a question about her husband's prophecy; she should ask him

about it at home (1 Cor. 14:34–35).^{[23](#)}

The mutual submission of men and women to one another is unique to the New Testament. Their equality before God in their nature, spiritual gifts, and prayer is found in both testaments.

IV MALE PRIORITY IN GOVERNMENT

Let us now turn to the question of whether the church should ordain women to the office of ruler/teacher (e.g., of priest, elders, and pastors in the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist traditions respectively). Here we need to distinguish clearly between call to ministry and appointment to an office since they are not the same thing. The Spirit gifts and calls women to minister in various ways (1 Cor. 12–14), but the church appoints elders to lead it (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 3:1–7). There is a growing movement within the church that rejects male government. Nevertheless, male authority in the home and in the church is founded on the order of creation and reinforced in the order of redemption as presented in both the Old and New Testaments.²⁴

A. In the Order of Creation

God establishes this pattern by creating Adam first and the woman to help the man (Gen. 2:18). As Paul notes in a passage dealing with the role of men and women, one that demands its own study, “man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Cor. 11:8–9). In other words, Paul gives governmental priority to the man by the sequence of the creation of man and woman and by the purpose for which the woman was created. Is it not plausible to assume that if God intended equality in government, he would have formed Eve and Adam at the same time and made them helpers suitable to each other? If he had wanted a matriarchy, would God not have formed Eve first and created the husband to be a suitable helper to his wife?²⁵

It is a truism of anthropology that male leadership is normative in every culture and that there is no evidence anywhere of matriarchy.²⁶ Steven Goldberg, chairman of the Department of Sociology at City College, City University of New York, in his rigorously argued book *Why Men Rule: A Theory of Male Dominance* (described by Margaret Mead as “flawless in its presentation of data”), wrote,

The point is that authority and leadership are, and always have been, associated with the male in every society, and I refer to this when I say that patriarchy is universal and that there has never been a matriarchy.... [Margaret] Mead acknowledged that “It is true ... that all the claims so glibly made about societies ruled by women are nonsense. We have no reason to believe that they ever existed.”²⁷

This truism of anthropology suggests that nature tends to validate Scripture that men, not women, were created to lead. God prepares the husband for leadership before giving him his bride by having Adam name the living creatures (Gen. 2:19–20, see [chap. 8](#) above). After *I AM* gives Adam his bride, Adam tactfully uses the passive form of construction, presumably not to dominate, for her generic name: “she shall be called ‘woman’ “ (Gen. 2:23). After the Fall he calls out her personal name, “Eve” (3:20).²⁸ Paul, as noted above in connection with 1 Timothy 2:14, forbids wives to have authority over husbands in the church (1 Tim. 2:12) also because the woman, not the man, was deceived and became a sinner. We need not detain ourselves here, however, in an exegesis regarding Paul’s reason for his ruling. What is important for our purposes is his ruling. Elsewhere I argue for the traditional understanding that this text is normative for the church.²⁹

Contrary to Stendahl’s contention, Paul does not contradict himself or the other apostles in 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 and Galatians 2:18. According to 1 Corinthians 11:11–12, the man and woman are dependent on one another for their existence. Their interdependence, however, does not rule out male priority in government. Likewise, the United States Supreme Court does not exist independently from the people, but the people are subordinate to its rulings. Paul’s statement “There is neither ... male nor female” (Gal. 3:28) pertains to who can be justified, not to gender roles in church administration. In the eschaton, of which we are already members by justification, there is neither gender. Paul also says there is neither Greek nor barbarian.

The sexual, social, and economic equality of all believers will be obliterated in the eschaton, but until the redemption of our bodies, believers still participate in the first creation with its sexual, social, and economic distinctions. The biblical instructions regarding the distinctive roles of men and women, of husbands and wives, address that obvious reality and serve the best interests of both sexes. As a result of the Fall and God’s judgment on the man and the woman, the woman desires to rule her husband and he seeks to dominate her (Gen. 3: 16).³⁰ The solution to this tragic power struggle that divides the home is the new creation in

Christ, in which the husband humbles himself and in love serves his wife, and the wife voluntarily submits herself to him in faithful obedience (Eph. 5:22). The rest of Scripture sustains a loving hierarchy, not democracy or matriarchy.

B. In the Government of the Trinity

Hierarchy in government is not the result of the Fall. It exists eternally in the Godhead itself, wherein the Son is always voluntarily subservient to the Father's will and the Spirit to both. In the mystery of the Godhead, in which the three persons are one and equal, the Son obeys the Father, and the Spirit obeys both. Paradoxically Jesus says both "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). Jesus veils his own glory to follow the path of humble obedience (Phil. 2:6–11). The idea that hierarchy is an evil that can be transcended is a failed Marxist notion, not biblical teaching.

However, Christian hierarchy, it must be insisted, is unlike worldly hierarchies. It is a government of mutual, active, voluntary submission. Leaders among God's people, on the one hand, love and serve others and become their slaves; they do not lord it over the governed. They abhor the worldly concepts of "having the last word" and of defining hierarchy as "a pecking order" (Matt. 20:25–28). Those who are led, on the other hand, actively, independently, and freely submit to this leadership. *Hierarchy*, *obedience*, and *submission*, are red-flag words because we invest them with worldly meanings, not with biblical ones. We need to sanctify them or invent new vocabulary.

C. God Images Himself as Male

God, who is over all, represents himself by masculine names and titles, not feminine ones. He identifies himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, not Parent, Child, and Spirit, nor Mother, Daughter, and Spirit. Jesus taught his church to address God as "Father" (Luke 11:2) and to baptize disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). God's titles are King, not Queen; Lord, not Lady.³¹ God, not mortals, has the right to name himself. It is inexcusable hubris and idolatry on the part of mortals to change the images by which the eternal God chooses to represent himself. We cannot change God's name, titles, or metaphors without committing idolatry, for we will have reimagined him in a way other than the metaphors and the incarnation by which he

revealed himself. His representations and incarnation are inseparable from his being.

D. Male Priests

Although God gives Israel prophetesses, he does not give them priestesses in contrast to other religions in the ancient Near East. Recall it is the priests' duty to teach the Law of *I AM* to the people (Deut. 17:11; 33:10) and the parents' duty to teach it in the home (Deut. 6:7–8).

E. Male Authority in Making Vows

A woman had the right to make vows to *I AM* independently from her husband, as in the case of Hannah. But the husband, in the case of a married woman, or the father, in the case of a young daughter living in her father's house, could veto the woman's vow (Num. 30:8, 16). A wife or daughter could not overrule the husband's or father's authority in the home by claiming she made a vow to *I AM*, appealing to a higher authority than her male attachment. A direct vow to *I AM* could not overrule the earthly authority of the husband, for *I AM* stands behind his authority. This command is not meant to show that women are inferior, but to protect the male leadership of the home. The fact that the rule is based on male leadership, not on male superiority, can be seen in the provision that the vow of a woman without male headship is as binding upon her as that upon a man (30:9).

F. Other Texts

Peter holds up Sarah as an example of a godly wife. In her self-talk, not in polite address, she refers to Abraham as her master (1 Peter 3:6; cf. Gen. 18:12). Other texts in both testaments teach that husbands have authority over their wives: "The overseer must be ... the husband of but one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2), never "the wife of but one husband." One cannot appoint a wife as a leader of the church without upsetting this government, for if a wife is the leader, her husband is subject to her authority (Heb. 13:17).

Deborah, however, who was married, is one clear exception to "patriarchy"

(Judg. 4:4–9), but it is the exception that proves the rule. The narrator makes his intention clear by shaming the Israelite men at that time for their fear of assuming leadership. Note, for example, how Deborah shames Barak, the military commander of Israel’s army, for his failure to assume leadership. After she mediates God’s command to him to join battle with Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, Barak replies: “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” Deborah responds, “Very well, I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this [i.e., full of fear], the honor will not be yours, for *I AM* will hand Sisera over to a woman [i.e., to shame him]” (Judg. 4:8–9; cf. 9:54). Deborah did not seek to overthrow patriarchy through her gifts, but to support it. Apparently *I AM* raised up this exceptional woman, who was full of faith, to shame the men of Israel for their lack of faith. If so, the account serves to reprove unfaithful men for not taking leadership, not to present an alternative norm to male authority. The story also shows, however, that *I AM* is above culture and not restricted by normative patriarchy.

G. The Conditional Nature of Male Rule

It is on the spiritual foundation that husbands and wives submit to one another out of reverence for Christ that Paul specifies the relationship between a husband and his wife. They express their submission in ways appropriate to their sexuality. A husband expresses his submission to his wife by loving her as Christ loves the church, and she to him by obeying him in everything (Eph. 5:21–24). If, however, the husband denies God’s authority over him, he undermines his own authority. His own authority is derivative and bestowed upon him to effect God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Should he seek to govern his home selfishly, not sacredly in accordance with God’s revealed will, then the wife must obey God, the ultimate authority, not her husband (cf. Acts 5:29).

V. CONCLUSION

The church ought to encourage women to minister according to their God-given gifts by, among other ways, opening up avenues of ministry such as those listed in Romans 12:3–8 and 1 Corinthians 12–14, and if appropriate, in connection with honoring them financially (Rom. 16:2; 1 Tim. 5:17). The Bible commends the equality of women with men in their being, dignity, *gifts*, and ministry. The Spirit validates this by calling and gifting women to the same kinds of ministries as men, such as prophesying (Acts 20:9), teaching (cf. Acts 18:26), pastoring, evangelizing, and helping the church in all sorts of ways (cf. Romans 16).

Nevertheless, the church should not appoint women (Greek *gynē*)³² to an office, such as being an elder (*presbyteros*,³³ see above for other ecclesiastical titles for this position) wherein she has authority over her husband (Greek *anēr*, Heb. 13:17). Since a woman is never designated as a *presbyteros* in the church, we should assume the regulatory principle that a woman not be a *presbyteros*. Here we need to distinguish clearly between a woman's call to ministry and her appointment to office over a husband—a very important distinction often overlooked in the discussion about the roles of men and women in the church. Scripture condemns the arrogance of anyone—male or female—who defines God, the world, and-or self independently from God's revelation. It also contends against those who see marriage as a galling bondage or who look down on motherhood as a lesser ministry than ministries outside the home.

The Bible consistently and without exception teaches male hierarchical priority in government in texts that address the issue. Earle Ellis writes,

The mind-set that places “equality” and “subordination” in opposition and that views distinctions of class and rank as evil *per se* is a largely modern phenomenon. It may reflect a justifiable resentment toward attitudes of disdain and elitism that often (and in a sinful society, always) flow from such distinctions, but it seems to be less aware of the egoistic and antisocial evils inherent in egalitarianism itself and sometimes expressed in programs for economic or social conformity, in a libertarian rejection of authority, and in a despisal of servanthood as a “deaming” role.

In any case Paul, like the New Testament generally, holds together quite

harmoniously an equality of value and diversity in rank and resolves the problems of diversity in a manner entirely different from modern egalitarianism. In this issue as in others, the Apostles find the key to the problem in Christology. Jesus himself.

“Who, though existing in the form of God,
Did not count equality with God as a prize,
But emptied himself
By taking the form of a servant...”
Philippians 2:6

That is, Jesus the Son of God manifested his equality with God the Father precisely in fulfilling a role of subordination to him. In Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11, Paul applies this analogy to marriage.³⁴

C. S. Lewis wryly observes, “The real danger [in the Christian doctrine of man’s *imitatio Christi* in marriage] is not that husbands will grasp [the crown of thorns] too eagerly, but that they will allow or compel their wives to usurp it.”³⁵ The “servant” empowers his wife to use her spiritual gifts to her fullest potential. On the other hand, the Bible instructs the wife to respect her husband as her lord, an instruction that entails obeying him in everything, as qualified above. Importantly, the Bible neither instructs the woman to manipulate the man to serve her, to be the proverbial “neck that turns the head,” nor the husband to hold his wife in subjection, to be the head that lords itself over the body. Serving and obeying in mutual subjection are inward graces worked in our hearts, consciences, behaviors, and customs by the Holy Spirit. These are ideals for which we strive, though recognizing they will never be fully attained any more than any of the other perfections of holiness. Failure to attain them should be accompanied with repentance and renewed faith, not discarded by cynicism, despair, or the seeking of new social structures.³⁶

THOUGHT QUESTION

How can an unmarried Christian man or woman fulfill the cultural mandate to subdue the earth and to fill it with God's offspring?

1. Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 10–17.

2. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 650–53. The full sentence as translated from its original Latin is “if we preserve unity in essentials, liberty in nonessentials, and charity in both, our affairs will be in the best position.” Meldenius discusses the difference between *necessaria* and *nonnecessaria*. Necessary dogmas are (1) articles of faith necessary to salvation, (2) articles derived from clear testimonies of the Bible, (3) articles decided by the whole church in a synod or symbol, (4) articles held by all orthodox divines as necessary. Not necessary are dogmas (1) not contained in the Bible, (2) not belonging to the common inheritance of faith, (3) not unanimously taught by theologians, (4) left doubtful by grave divines, (5) not tending to piety, charity, and edification. Meldenius concludes with a defense of John Arndt (1555–1621), the famous author of “True Christianity,” against the attacks of orthodox fanatics, and with a fervent and touching prayer to Christ to come to the rescue of his troubled church (Rev. 22:17).

3. Rev. 21 and 22 present the end of that history in images representing the Garden of Eden as regained.

4. God uses six feminine similes for himself (e.g., Isa. 42:14).

5. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 10.

6. By “patriarchy” I mean the father's supremacy in the clan or family; the legal dependence of wives and children; and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line.

7. J. M. Baumgarten, “On the Testimony of Women in 1QS_a,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 266–69.

8. *Apostolos* is used in two or three ways in the New Testament: of the Twelve, of the Seventy, and possibly of others, of whom presumably Junia was one. See note 22.

9. Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in*

Hermeneutics (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

[10.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, “1 Tim othy 2:8–15: Unique or Normative?” *Crux* 28, no. 1 (March 1992): 22–27.

[11.](#) Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 49.

[12.](#) Euripides said, *Quos Deus vult perdere, prius dementat* — “Those whom God wills to destroy he first deprives of their senses.”

[13.](#) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 248.

[14.](#) Cited in Richard John Neuhaus, “True Chris tian Feminism,” *National Review*, November 25, 1988, 24.

[15.](#) To judge from God’s reason for allowing divorce, God also tolerated polygamy because of the hardness of the human heart. The New Testament teaches that both divorce and polygamy are unfitting Chris tian behavior (cf. Matt. 19:1–12; 1 Tim. 3:2).

[16.](#) The high priest had to marry a virgin, not a widow or divorcee, to guarantee that the successor to his high and holy office was Aaron’s offspring (Lev. 21:13–15), not because a formerly married woman was discarded as used property. In fact, the Old Testament looks with compassion on both widows and divorcees (Mal. 2:13–16; 3:6).

[17.](#) Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 29.

[18.](#) Cf. (all citations from NASB) Genesis 29:14: “Surely you are my bone and my flesh” (Laban to Jacob). Judges 9:2: “Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?’ Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh” (Abimilech to leaders of Shechem). 2 Sam uel 5:1: “Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, ‘Behold, we are your bone and your flesh.’ “

[19.](#) For a fuller discussion, see Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 116–18.

[20.](#) Clarence J. Vos, *Woman in Old Testament Worship* (Delft: Judels & Brinkman, 1968), 168.

[21.](#) I opted to translate *diakonos* as “minister/courier” and not as “deacon” on the basis of the time-honored principle of interpreting the ambiguous and unclear by the clear and otherwise unambiguous teaching of the Bible. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Chris tian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (BAGD, 3rd ed. [Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000], 122, 230–31). M. Keyes (*Feminism and the Bible*

[Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995], 12) claims that Phoebe is also called “leader.” She says of Phoebe, “described in the Greek as a *gospel minister* [Gk. *diakonos* (Rom. 16:1)] and *leader* [Gk. *Prostates* (16:2)]. Using the same Greek root, Paul told *leaders* to *govern* [Gk. *ho proistamenos*] diligently (Rom. 12:8).” Her argument, however, is flawed philologically. To be sure, *prostatesm* derives from *proistemm i*, but in usage it never means “leader”; rather, it means “defender, guardian, benefactor”; and *prostatis* denotes “a woman in a support role, patron, benefactor (BAGD, 885) (cf. “succourer” [KJV], “benefactor” [TNIV; NRSV]). Moreover, *ho proistamenos* in Rom. 12:7 may mean “those who provide for others” (so BAGD, 870, entry 2; TNIV text note).

[22.](#) Al Wolters of Redeemer College (Hamilton, Ontario) in personal communication makes a convincing philological argument that Junia (Gr. *Iounia*) in Rom. 16:7 is a Jewish name: *Yehunniah* (“Yah is gracious”). If so, the name is masculine, not feminine. A doctrine based on an ambiguous personal name instead of on clear texts is not convincing.

[23.](#) Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 217–25.

[24.](#) For Paul’s theology of gender relationships in 1 Tim othy, see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 418–22.

[25.](#) For practical guidance on how a wife helps her husband, see E. Fitzpatrick, *Helper by Design: God’s Perfect Plan for Women in Marriage* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003).

[26.](#) I am not intending by this observation to suggest that Chris tian feminists are arguing for matriarchy. I am arguing that Gilder’s study suggests that the egalitarian model of leadership sets aside the order of creation.

[27.](#) Steven Goldberg, *Why Men Rule: A Theory of Male Dominance* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), 14, 18, 35; G. Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic, 1981), 136.

[28.](#) In the rest of the Old Testament, both parents name the children: naming of children is ascribed to women 26 times, to men 14 times, and to God 5 times.

[29.](#) Waltke, “1 Tim othy 2:8–15: Unique or Normative?”

[30.](#) Scholars (see D. Talley, *NIDOTTE*, 4.341–42, s.v. “*t^ešûqâ*”) disagree on whether *t^ešûqâ* in Gen. 3:16 has a positive sense of a woman’s sexual longing for her husband as in Song 7:10 [11] or a negative sense of to rule her husband as in Gen. 4:7. The precise parallelism of “desire”/“rule” in both 3:16 and 4:7 in the same *tôl^edôt* (2:4–4:26) and the context of judgment on the woman favor the negative interpretation. When working on the *Genesis Project* (April 6, 1976), I

arrived at this interpretation independently from S. T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?” *WTJ* 37 (Spring 1975): 380–81, summarized in *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), 68–69. J. Palmer in a personal communication observes how the Fall reversed the order of creation from male » female » animal to snake » female » male.

[31.](#) In Ps. 123:2 David uses the simile of a maid to a mistress, but he never uses mistress as a title for God.

[32.](#) The Greek word *gyne* means an adult woman, either married or unmarried. In disputed passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:3–16; 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12–15 the word certainly designates a “wife” and probably designates a “woman.” Likewise, *aner* may mean “man” or “husband.” Since Paul probably intends all men, whether married or unmarried, to pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling (1 Tim. 2:8), and women, not just wives, to adorn themselves modestly (v. 9), he probably intends *gyne* to denote “woman,” not “wife.” It seems rash to me to suggest that Paul would allow single women to rule married men.

[33.](#) *Presbyteros* can mean an “old man” or an “elder” as a church official in Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22f.; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5. (In all the places in Acts 15 and 16 mention is made of *hoi apostoloi kai hoi presbyteroi*, “the apostles and elders.”) We need not concern ourselves here with the relationship between *episkopos* and *presbyteros*.

[34.](#) E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 57.

[35.](#) C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 98, cited by Jonathan Mills in personal correspondence.

[36.](#) For an excellent analysis of the five models in the contemporary evangelical church regarding women in public worship, see John Stackhouse Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 121–40.

Chapter 10

THE GIFT OF THE GARDEN: HUMANITY ON PROBATION AND THE FALL

First part: Misery of man without God.

Second part: Happiness of man with God.

Or, First part: That nature is corrupt. Proved by nature itself.

Second part: That there is a Redeemer. Proved by Scripture.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 2.1

I. INTRODUCTION

The second cosmogony complements the first. The transcendent God who brings all things into being by his word is also the immanent God who, as a potter, forms the man by molding the clay and breathing his breath of life into the inert matter, and who, as a gardener, plants a garden for the man's stewardship. Humans rule the earth as *I AM*'s vice-regents. The first creation narrative begins with chaos and ends with God at rest after he has vanquished the darkness and abyss by his good creation. The second account begins with humanity in the Garden of Eden (2:15; i.e., a garden in Eden, 2:8), continues with humanity vanquished by the Serpent (i.e., Satan) and banished from the garden, and ends with Cain wandering in the land of Nod. Yet there is hope. By faith in God and his promise, Adam and Eve, who represent humanity, take up arms against the Serpent confident that their promised offspring will crush Satan, though not without having been hurt by the Adversary. This is the price they have to pay to establish God's kingdom. The promise begins to be fulfilled in Abel who is murdered by Cain.

Paradise: a place without pain, without suffering; a time when love and peace flourish. Paradise has been the object of hopes and dreams for every generation. Within the bosom of every person who experiences pain, injustice, or the death of a loved one, there aches the longing for a place of wholeness, a thirst for a time of healing. This is rooted in the essence of humanity: we are beings who do not accept the world as it is; something in our instinct, in our collective consciousness, tells us that the world at present is out of sync—there has to be a better time, a better place. We should assume from our experience that every human desire has an object to satisfy it. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food" (1 Cor. 6:13); for human love, a person who loves. In other words, people yearn for paradise, and paradise is meant for people to enjoy. Our nature dictates our desire for God and his benevolent presence; he is not the product of human imagination. To create desire and provide no means of satisfaction is diabolical, and that God is not.

The Garden of Eden narrative is universally compelling because it tells of a paradise within humanity's potentialities. The gut-wrenching decision of the first couple, so very "human" in its impulsiveness yet so very tragic in its consequences, grieves us, infuriates us, leaves us pining for "paradise lost."

Beneath the surface narrative, however, the story poses the crucial problem of human existence: unaided human beings cannot create paradise. Flawed and limited, they cannot oversee and ensure justice and wholeness; they cannot even tame the monster within themselves. Paradise comes at a cost. To live there, one must submit to the rule of an *other*, the owner of the garden. This is an essential feature of paradise: Do we choose to live in the garden and submit to the master? Or do we choose our own reign and face expulsion? Those willing to submit find wholeness and intimacy; those who choose otherwise echo the defiant sentiment of the fallen archangel, who in John Milton's words proclaims, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n." As we shall soon see, humanity, apart from those whom God has rescued from their rebellion, chooses to follow the lead of the fallen archangel.

But we move too quickly. To understand the meaning of this narrative, we must decide its literary genre and its structure and reflect on how it fits into the overall message of the Old Testament. Like the opalescence of pearl, its iridescent hues paint a richly textured theology, providing insights into God's earthly presence, human nature, marriage, Satan, temptation, sin, and death, and creating the expectation for a coming Seed, a second Adam, who will reclaim the garden. In short, the narrative poses the question that the rest of the Bible seeks to answer: How can human beings find their way back into paradise? A proper understanding of this narrative is foundational to Christian faith. Its mixing of theological themes necessitates, as elsewhere in this theology, theologizing by critical reflection on the text, entailing careful exegesis.¹

II. EXEGESIS OF THE NARRATIVE

A. Literary Genre

We must consider several key points in identifying the literary genre of the text.

1. *This narrative portrays historical realities.* The story of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — flows from the Garden of Eden story. Abraham is connected to Adam by a linear genealogy (Gen. 5; 9:18–27; 11:10–32), a genealogy that in its canonical context extends to David in the book of Ruth and to Jesus in Matthew and Luke. The authors of these genealogies do not make a distinction between Adam and Abraham by characterizing Adam as mythic and Abraham as historical. Indeed, they treat both of them as real, historical characters. Similarly, Christ and his apostles base some of their teachings on the historicity of Adam and Eve (Matt. 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–8; 1 Tim. 2:13). In Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, the apostle Paul contrasts Adam and Jesus Christ as the heads of two races of humanity. The historicity of both figures is foundational to Paul’s doctrine of human redemption through Christ Jesus.

Structurally, the story of the Garden of Eden is contained within the first of ten *tôlê dôt*: “This is the line of [proper name].” This places Adam and Eve squarely within the main narrative framework of Genesis. From this, it seems clear that a distinction between allegedly “mythical” characters and “historical” characters in the book of Genesis has to be considered an alien concept. There is little doubt that the narrator of Genesis intended his readers to understand Adam and Eve in the same light as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — as real, historical figures. God shaped a real Adam and Eve at the beginning of human history.

2. As we shall see in the exegesis that follows, *the Garden of Eden represents Utopia*, a world that contrasts radically with this world. God walks in this garden. Its water fructifies the entire earth. Its Tree of Life provides for the eternal preservation of life for those who eat of its fruit, and later that tree is surrounded by cherubim with flaming swords. The garden’s diabolical Serpent

did not originate in God's creation of the cosmos. These characterizing features sound more like a place in heaven than on earth, and that is probably the writer's intention. The story symbolizes that humankind was cast out of heaven, as it were, when they rebelled against God and sought to usurp his rule.

3. *The first tôl'êdôt: and the prologue are a theological-political narrative*, for as Bruce R. Reichenbach argues, the story of the creation of the cosmos and the gift of the garden justify Israel's right to Canaan.² His argument assumes that the garden is a type of Canaan. The garden is more desirable than any other place on earth, and Canaan is likened to that garden. As King of the earth, God has the right to parcel out the earth to whom he will. He placed Adam in the garden and Israel in Canaan (Lev. 25:23–24). But to retain the garden, Adam must obey God's word to administer the garden correctly just as Israel must obey the Torah to stay in the land. God expelled disobedient Adam from the garden and rebellious Israel from Canaan. Yet there is the hope that a seed will return to the garden with its Tree of Life and that a remnant of Israel will return to the land.

4. *The narrative has a suprahistorical dimension* — that is, while Adam and Eve are real people, they also are symbols, representing every man and every woman. Several elements in the story point to this understanding. The generic term *ʾādām* means “humankind.” As for “Eve” (which means “life”), the judgment upon her that she will suffer pain in bearing life demonstrates her symbolic capacity as the representative of all women. Every sensible woman wishes that Eve were purely historical so that the painful sentence would have fallen on her alone. But women understand intuitively that the promise of childbirth and penalty of her sin represent the joy and pain of every mother. As for Adam (“Earthling”), when God curses the ground to frustrate Adam's work and prophesies his eventual return to dust, we know from experience that Adam represents the fate of every man who is frustrated in his work and faces the certainty of death.

The symbolic approach to this particular narrative is found also in the New Testament. Jesus interprets the gift of the bride story as representative of every marriage. As God gives Eve to Adam, he gives the bride to every husband. Our Lord bases his logion regarding every marriage on the two creation accounts (Gen. 1:27; 2:24): “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matt. 19:6). This symbolic function of the archetypical narrative gives us a profound insight into our existence.³ Through this, it becomes a story with which every reader can identify.

5. *The narrative is an ancient Near Eastern cosmogony*, not a modern scientific cosmogony nor a treatise that a modern historian demands. Like the

first cosmogony, it presents God mastering matter in a dramatic way, climaxing in the emergent social situation of a man and woman in the garden under God's rule; it too lacks totality and makes no effort to be coherent with a straightforward reading of the first account. This cosmogony yields no more scientific information on how the original creation of human beings occurred other than that man derives from the ground, that originally the woman is derivative from the man, and that thereafter man is derivative from the woman. We find no discussions of cell formation, biochemistry, DNA, and the like. Instead, the text is a metaphorical representation of God making the human species: like a potter, "formed the man"; like a temple builder, "built the woman"; and like a tanner and tailor, "made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." In other words, the style of the dramatic cosmogony is artistic and figurative, not scientific and literal. Also unlike modern historiography, the biblical cosmogony neither depends on human testimony of observations and experiences nor on immediate conditioning causes. Rather, in a dramatic, artistic way the cosmogony represents God as the ultimate cause of human existence. Though the archetypical narrative "lisps" — Calvin's term for accommodation — in words and figures, all people understand its meaning.

6. Although it is the symbolic function we focus on in the present discussion, *the covenant people must also keep in mind the tragic historic consequence of their representative parents*: their sin is the "original sin" of every human being. We will return to this theme toward the end of the chapter. The line between reading this narrative historically and symbolically is attenuated because the narrator represents Adam as a historical figure, as humankind's representative head, and as a symbolic representation of the human condition, which moves in space from Eden to Nod and in time from childhood innocence to an inevitable conscious choice to disobey God. Because God reckons all as in corporate solidarity with their representative head, God imputes our representative's guilt to all of us. Adam's symbolic disobedience shows that each of us, had we been in the garden, would eat its good fruit and then spit in the face of our benevolent Creator, choosing our autonomy instead of loving and trusting the Creator who blesses us with his good gifts.

B. Structure of the Narrative

The following is the outline of the narrative.

- I. Introduction to the Narrative: The Negative State (2:4–6)
 - A. Superscription (2:4)
 - B. Exposition (2:5–6)
- II. Act 1: Humanity in the Garden of Eden (2:7–25)
 - A. Scene 1: Man on Probation (2:7–17)
 - B. Scene 2: The Gift of the Bride (2:18–25)
- III. Act 2: The Fall and Its Consequences (3:1–24)
 - A. Scene 1: The Fall (3:1–8)
 - B. Scene 2: The Shape of the Judgment (3:9–19)
 - C. Epilogue: Salvation beyond the Fall (3:20–24)
- IV. Act 3: Escalation of Sin: The Line of Cain (4:1–26)
 - A. Exposition (4:1–2)
 - B. Scene 1: Hostility between Cain and Abel (4:1–16)
 - C. Scene 2: The Line of Cain: Lamech (4:17–24)
 - D. Epilogue: The Godly Line of Seth (4:25–26)

The narrative comprises an introduction followed by three acts. Each act contains two scenes; the second scene of each act climaxes in a poem; each act then concludes with an epilogue. Act 1 recounts humanity in the Garden of Eden under the rule of God. Act 2 recounts the loss of the garden and a study of sin and its consequences. Act 3 is the continuation of sin in the seed of the Serpent, which finds expression in Cain and his descendants.

The first two acts of the narrative can be summarized as the story of Adam and Eve on probation. In the garden, they encounter a spiritual being who is spiritually stronger than they — someone human nature alone cannot spiritually resist nor overpower to establish God’s universal kingdom. Having been created with the responsibility to choose between options, Adam and Eve choose to submit to the Serpent’s temptation to disbelieve and disobey God rather than to respond in faith and dependence on God to overcome the Serpent. However, within God’s judgment of humanity in the aftermath of the Fall, there remains hope. The irresistible God—we now know through his Spirit—will change their hearts, and an offspring from the woman will bring forth a second Adam who will triumph where the first Adam did not. That Adam, however, must be more than human to escape the imputed guilt and to resist the same temptations. Act 3, whose basic theme pertains to the escalation of sin, culminates in the flood narrative, which is the subject of our next chapter.

C. Introduction to the Narrative: The Negative State (2:4–6)

1. Superscription (2:4)

The refrain “account of the line” (*tôl^edôt:*) marks this narrative as the first of ten major sections in the book of Genesis. As explained in [chapter 5](#), *tôl^edôt:* (from the root *yld*, “to bear children”) means “what is produced or brought into being by someone” (i.e., “descendants”). Because these genealogies have stories associated with them, English versions often gloss the Hebrew word by “account.”

Human beings give birth to other human beings, but who gives birth to the first human beings? The writer, in an ad hoc fashion, names “heaven and earth” (see 1:1) as the source from which human beings descend. One should be careful not to push this verse as a biblical support of the concept of “Mother Earth.” The cosmos, more specifically the earth, provides the raw material for man’s composition and sustains him, but the chief actor in this dramatic representation of man’s formation is God. The creation plot peaks when man receives the breath of *I AM* God, giving him the life of God.

Verse 2:4b uses the name *YHWH^elôhîm* (“I AM God”) for the first time. This title combines two of God’s personal names, which will be considered in [chapter 13](#). *YHWH* (“He is,” a derivative form of *I am*) is God’s name in relation to his covenant people, and *lôhîm* (“God”) labels him as the “omnicompetent” (i.e., omnipotent and omniscient) Sovereign of the universe (see also [chap. 7](#)). This rare combination of divine names signifies that one and the same God rules both the created order and history.⁴

2. Exposition (2:5–6)

The negative state depicted in the exposition (2:5–6) generates an expectation that the negative state will be transformed by the narrative’s end. In this case, the verses list three or four elements as part of the negative state: the absence of the “shrub of the field” (*šîaḥ ḥaśśādeḥ*) and the “plants of the field” (*‘ēseḥ ḥaśśādeḥ*) the absence of humanity, and the particular presence of a subterranean water supply in the absence of rain. The absence of humanity is quickly remedied in verse 7, and another system of water supply is provided in verse 10. *Šîaḥ ḥaśśādeḥ*, “shrub of the field,” refers to inedible wild growth, while

‘ēseb haśśādeh “plant of the field,” refers to cultivated grains.⁵ This interpretation is based on the distinction made in Genesis 3:18 between “thorns and thistles” in verse 18a and “plants of the field” in verse 18b. In other words, the wide varieties of vegetation that were made on the third day of creation had not yet been divided into the categories of inedible growth and cultivated grain. These two kinds of vegetation belong to the Fall.

D. Act 1: Humanity in the Garden of Eden (2:7–25)

1. Scene 1: Man on Probation (2:7–17)

The first scene asserts that humanity retains paradise by trusting God and obeying him. Faith and action kiss each other in Scripture. Only actions motivated by counting God trustworthy please him, and a mere profession of faith in him that is not accompanied by action is dead. Faith is shown by what we do (James 2:17–18).

a. God Forms the Man

The scene where God forms the man makes clear the proper relationship between God and humanity. The first cosmogony asserts that God creates human beings in his image to rule as vice-regents over all things on the earth. This supplementary cosmogony confirms that God is the chief actor, forms the man from the earth, and breathes his very life into the image. By this breath of life, man becomes a “living being” (Heb. *nepeš*, see [chap. 8](#)). Symbolically, as God forms Adam out of the dust of the ground, he also forms every person from the ground (Job 10:8–9; see [chap. 8](#)).

The representational nature of Adam is indicated by his name; *ʾādām* means “humankind.” Furthermore, being a derivative of *ʾādām* (“ground”), it signifies humanity’s earthiness; the earth is their cradle, their home, and their grave. This first Adam is fashioned in a natural body for an earthly existence, but the heavenly Son of Man (Dan. 7:13) shares in this earthly state in order to secure for fallen humanity a spiritual body of imperishable glory in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42–49).

b. God Plants the Garden: Paradise as Setting for

Probation

God plants an idyllic garden as the setting for humanity on probation. The failure of Adam and Eve in this paradise has profound theological significance. Since Adam is the only human being who could have resisted the Serpent's temptation, his failure implies that humanity that is not spiritually empowered by God does not match the Serpent's power and so keep covenant with God. In contrast to much sociological thinking that holds that the way to improve humans is to better their environment, this text shows that humanity at its best, when tested, rebels even in the perfect environment.

This theological understanding is found at the outset of Genesis. Each of the subsequent covenants—Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic—must be read within this presupposition: unassisted human faithfulness is an impossibility; any aspect of the covenant that is contingent upon human will alone is doomed for failure. The argument is simple: If Adam fails in the perfect setting of garden paradise without inherited guilt and a depraved nature, how can stiff-hearted Israel keep the Lord's teachings (*tôrâ*) in Canaan, a land known for its debauchery (cf. Deut. 31:26–29; 32:1–43; Josh. 24:19, 27)? And how can Judean kings in their own spiritual strength satisfy the conditional aspects of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:14)? Indeed, the failure of these later covenants is preordained by the failure of Adam and Eve in the garden. This failure, right at the start, implicitly anticipates a different sort of covenant relationship, one that does not depend on human faithfulness, but entirely on the grace of God through the second Adam. In other words, the text indirectly leads to theological reflection that produces truth.

(1) Topography (v. 8)

The setting of the probation is characterized by three topographical terms: *garden*, *east*, and *Eden*.

Garden. “Garden” (Heb. *gan*, from the root *gnn* [“to enclose, protected”] like English *garden* from *gart* [to enclose]) denotes an enclosed (and protected?) area with trees (and vegetables) designed to produce food and symbolizes blessing and well-being. The LXX renders *gan* by *paradeisos* (Vulgate, *paradisum*). The root *prds* goes back to Persian and so is philologically irrelevant to its Hebrew meaning; nevertheless, the concept is appropriate for the symbolic value of *gan*: “As well watered, rich in shadows and aesthetic qualities, in life forms, and potentially in produce, gardens recommend themselves as figures for all that is

desirable.”⁶

The garden in Eden represents a territorial space within creation that is qualitatively better than the rest of creation, a unique blessed place. In this special space, God invites human beings to enjoy a state of bliss consisting of harmony with God, with one another, with animals, and with the land. It is peace and wholeness, “the celestial city” with the wide expanse reserved for humanity. Human beings sense they were designed to belong in the garden; it is their home in the ultimate sense.

The garden, by extension, is a temple — God is uniquely present in a way he is not elsewhere. In this garden people meet God and walk and talk with him. As a temple, it is the axis between heaven and earth. Its sanctity is protected by cherubim (Gen. 3:24; Exod. 26:1; 2 Chron. 3:7) so that sin and death are excluded. The carved gourds, palm trees, open flowers, and cherubim on the cedar walls and olive wood doors of Solomon’s temple replicate the garden (1 Kings 6:18; 7:14–35; cf. Ezek. 41:17–26).⁷ The identification of Paradise as a temple is verified by eschatological use of the symbol (Rev. 20–21). In these closing chapters of the Bible, the eschatological temple is compared with Paradise, and Paradise is presented as the habitation of God, “where he dwells to make man dwell with him.”⁸

East. The garden is possibly described as being “in the east.”⁹ In the biblical world, the direction “east,” where the sun rises, represents life. If we were to take a trip down the Nile River, we would see that the temples of life are on the east bank while the monuments of death—the pyramids, the tombs, and the mortuary temple — are on the west side. Similarly, in Europe, cathedrals are always constructed on the east-west axis. The altar is placed toward the east, representing life. So, in this description of the garden, humanity is set at the source of abundant life, in a walled-off area, in fellowship with God.

Eden (Heb. *ēden*) means “luxuriance,” a landscape characterized by water and moisture.¹⁰ It perpetuates the notion of good things in life and symbolizes “a land of bliss.” Inferentially Eden is a mountain, and its garden is set atop this mountain. The text describes a river flowing from Eden through the garden and then becoming the four headstreams that water the entire land. This river, in contradistinction to the streams coming up from the earth outside the garden, symbolizes a heavenly supply of life-giving water (cf. Ps. 65:9) in God’s dwelling place. This heavenly water fructifies the temple-garden; after the garden is fed and nourished by the river of life, it serves as the conduit from which life-giving water pours to the ends of the earth. The psalmist celebrates the river of God: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the

holy place where the Most High dwells” (Ps. 46:4).

The prophets elaborate upon the symbol to depict the blessings that will pour from the temple of *I AM* in the new age to give life to the earth (Ezek. 47:1–12). It finds its fulfillment in the Spirit of God who flows from the believer (John 7:37–39). The Apocalypse brings the imagery to consummation by linking it with the Tree of Life. In the eschatological paradise, mortal saints living by their nearness to the presence of God will become immortal (i.e., continually healed and so immune to death) in that glorious temple (Rev. 22:1–2). After humankind is expelled from the garden, cherubim with flaming swords are positioned around the Tree of Life and serve to establish the garden as sacred space.

Other biblical writers also see Eden as a sacred mountain:

You were in Eden,
the garden of God; ...
You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
for so I ordained you.
You were on the holy mount of God;
you walked among the fiery stones. (Ezek. 28:13–14)

In this passage, the King of Tyre, who may represent Satan, is pictured as a powerful cherub before the throne of God in the Garden of Eden. But when the created potential to allow the sin of pride and hubris is found in him, he is thrown from the mountain. This fits with the details found in the ancient Near Eastern myths in which gods appear on mountains.

(2) Trees (v. 9)

Verse 9 tells us about the trees in the garden, placing them in three categories.

All kinds of trees. The garden is an orchard full of all sorts of wonderful trees that are both aesthetically pleasing and practical. An atmosphere of *joie de vivre*, an exuberant, luxurious celebration before the presence of God, fills the place. This description accentuates the folly of humanity in its rebellion. What could have made one tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, so attractive in comparison to the full range of colors and tastes that abounded in the garden?

*Tree of Life.*¹¹ In the middle of the garden stood the Tree of Life. It represents life that is beyond the original life that God breathed into man. The first man by nature is susceptible to death, but in his original creation his nature is neither evil nor corrupt. Nevertheless, continued eating from the tree would renew life and prevent aging and death. Apart from sin (i.e., disobedience to God’s command),

mortals had access to this tree. In ancient Near Eastern iconographic scenes, the gods and prominent persons such as kings serve themselves from a sacred tree. Terje Stordalen argues that “in this setting the Tree of Life would have a sacramental rather than a magic nature.” The Tree of Life allows humanity to transcend its mortality, the state in which it was created on the sixth day, and move to a higher dimension, life beyond the creation to eternal life and immortality. As one partakes of this sacramental fruit by faith, one participates in this eternal life. This highest potency of life was available in the garden and becomes once again available to us as we reenter the temple-garden through the second Adam and participate by faith in the sacrament of his body and blood, called “Eucharist” or “Communion” or “the Lord’s Supper.”¹² It will be experienced consummately in the resurrection of our bodies.

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. First, the expression “knowledge of good and evil” refers to knowledge of what prospers life and what destroys life. Second, it refers to ethical knowledge. It could also refer to knowing what advances and hinders physical life and so advances civilization, but this is unlikely, because eating the fruit affected Adam and Eve spiritually, not physically: “They realized they were naked” (Gen. 3:7). They knew for the first time their vulnerability to use or abuse their sexuality in their relationship. Third, the expression refers to wisdom and the discernment between good and bad that enables one to make right decisions and so to be successful (Deut. 1:39; 1 Kings 3:9). This is knowledge that belongs properly to God and his angels (cf. 2 Sam. 14:17). Since only God comprehends everything, only God knows absolutely or conclusively what is good and bad. Unless we know everything, we only know relatively. Moderns deny absolutes because they rule out God and his revelation. As a result, they are damned to relativism, agnosticism, and/or nihilism. The earthling’s knowledge is always finite and relative; only God knows as things actually are. Only God is in the position to discern those rules and regulations that promote life and hinder death (Prov. 30:1–6).¹³ Cornelius Van Til writes,

*If one does not make human knowledge wholly dependent upon the original self-knowledge and consequent revelation of God to man, then man will have to seek knowledge within himself as the final reference point. Then he will have to seek an exhaustive understanding of reality. He will have to hold that if he cannot attain to such an exhaustive understanding of reality, he has no true knowledge of anything at all. Either man must then know everything or he knows nothing. This is the dilemma that confronts every form of nonChristian epistemology.*¹⁴

Only God's Word enables the creature to discern what is truly good and bad; it makes wise the simple (Ps. 19:7).

The possession of this knowledge is not a neutral state, a desired maturity, or an advancement of humanity, as is commonly argued. The desire for it reflects the human temptation to seize autonomy. Samuel Terrien notes: "Self-certainty and autonomous self-sufficiency are close to hubris. A special kind of pride seduces human beings and gives them the illusion of perennial self-mastery."¹⁵ To seize this knowledge represents a declaration of independence, a rejection of God's sovereignty. Instead of trusting an omniscient God, the dependent mortal usurps the authority of the Immortal on whom his whole existence depends and seeks independently to discern good and evil. The ultimate motivation for this power grab is the naked desire to become gods themselves. God desires to save finite mortals from their flawed inclination to make their own laws. Because they attain this sinful state of being autonomous, they must not eat of the Tree of Life and be consigned forever in the forbidden state of being inclined to choose their own code of ethics (Gen. 3:22). G. K. Chesterton said, "A great man knows he is not god, and the greater he is, the better he knows it."

c. God Puts the Man on Probation

God places humanity in this temple-garden not to till it, but to engage in other horticultural activity directed toward the garden (cf. 3:17–19). Since the garden is, inferentially, a temple, human beings are inferentially priests. The man has the responsibility to "take care of" (Heb. *šmr* ["to keep and/or guard"]) and to "work" (*'bd* ["to serve"]) the garden; *šmr* and *'bd* are priestly terms for worship. Adam, like the Aaronic priesthood, fails to keep the garden sacrosanct. Ironically, by his not driving Satan from the garden, Adam was expelled by Satan. Adam, however, has no mandate to expand the garden, for he lives in the in-between time (see p. 208). God purposes the garden to cover the earth when darkness and sea are no more (Rev. 21–22).

God's first words to Adam are a command, thereby establishing the proper relationship between him and humanity. On the one hand, the sovereign King delegates to humanity the authority to rule under him. On the other hand, God's issuing of a commandment assumes man has the moral capacity to choose freely whether to obey or disobey God. In this covenant (i.e., obligatory) arrangement — called by some theologians "a covenant of works" or "a covenant of life" —

God graciously offers Adam, the representative of humanity, the right to remain in the land of bliss as *a reward* for his obedience.

The reward of retaining his life in the garden is not to be equated with *the gift* of eternal life represented by the tree. The First Adam, representing historically and existentially everyone, fails, loses the garden and the sacramental Tree of Life, and brings death upon all. The perfect obedience of the Second Adam satisfies God's covenant of works, and by "Adam's" faith in him God imputes Christ's righteousness to "Adam" (in a generic sense) and rewards him with Christ's eternal life (cf. Luke 4:1–13). The acceptable sacrifices of the old dispensation prefigure Christ's expiation of "Adam's" sin. Today the church symbolizes her faith by eating the Lord's Supper, which replaces the tree of life (John 5:24–26; Rom. 3:25–26; 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:45–69; *passim*). Only the blood of Christ can expiate sin; the blood of animals in the Old Testament sacrificial system could not.

Theologians refer to this whole arrangement of Christ's keeping the covenants works and of making atonement for sin through the faith of God's people as a "covenant of grace," which was inaugurated at the time of the Fall. Moreover, since Christ's atonement dealt finally and sufficiently for sin only through faith, Christ made atonement for the believer, not for the unbeliever. Some theologians, therefore, speak of Christ's "particular atonement" for the people of God.

Amazingly, God gives only one prohibition, a single dietary rule: "You must not eat." The command assumes that as God's image bearers, humans should think, plan, speak, and act as their Creator intends. The command is also for their good. The prohibition protects them from assuming self-serving autonomy in sin and death and to live instead under the Creator's loving and trustworthy rule and protection. Sin consists of an illicit reach of unbelief, an assertion of human autonomy to doubt God and know good and evil apart from him.

The penalty is death. Humanity is made to live by faith in God's Word, not by a professed self-sufficiency of knowledge (Deut. 8:3; Ezek. 28:6, 15–17). "In the day you eat" is a Hebraism for "when you eat." As God warns, at the time the man and woman usurp the role of God, they damage their relationship with God and with each other. Thus, they die spiritually. The introduction of physical death is an additional judgment, but it is also a blessing, as we shall see.

2. Scene 2: The Gift of the Bride (2:18–25)

As we saw in [chapter 9](#), Genesis 2:18–25 represents the ideal marriage before the Fall. It provides the basis for the laws against adultery (Exod. 20:14; Heb.

13:4); it serves as a model for marriage in the church (Matt. 19:3–12); it lays a theological foundation for government in the home and church (1 Cor. 11:3–12; 1 Tim. 2:9–15); and it is a type of the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:22–32).¹⁶

E. Act 2: The Fall and Its Consequences (3:1–24)

In act 2 the priestly guardians of the temple are now tested for their fidelity to their King. They are administered by a covenant that depends not on God's enablement, but on themselves. If they could have willed their own fidelity, God would have sustained them in their state of happiness. Their failure points to their need for justification and sanctification through a covenant of grace: God's enabling humans to enjoy fellowship with himself through Jesus Christ (see [chap. 11](#)).

1. Scene 1: The Fall (3:1–8)

a. The Shape of the Tempter (3:1a)

In the ancient Near East, serpents are rich in symbolism: of protection (Egyptian uraeus) and healing, of fecundity (Canaanite fertility goddess), of recurring youth (renewal of skin) as well as wisdom and magic (Num.21:9; 2 Kings 18:4), and of evil and chaos (deadly poison [Egyptian apopis]).¹⁷ In that world, the snake is a source of death and life, but in Genesis it is only the latter. In the Western Semitic world the snake was an object of worship, but in Genesis it is demonic. Behind the garden snake's façade shimmers a diabolical force. This fast-talking snake is an incarnation of a spiritual being that is outspoken in his hatred for God who presumably has an unknown prehistory. Later revelation labels this adversary of God and humanity "Satan" (Heb. *satan* "adversary, persecutor, or accuser") and the "Devil" (Greek *diabolos*, Job 1–2; Zech. 3; Rev. 12:9).¹⁸ Humankind were meant to subdue the creation by their speech, but the Serpent subdued them instead.

Everything God created on earth he called "good," but this is not true of a creature with malicious motives and deceitful tactics to alienate the husband and his wife from God, from one another, and from the garden, and to initiate death. In other words, the Serpent is spiritually not good, though incarnate in God's good creatures. His spiritual nature lies outside of the earth's origins, for he knows that when Adam and Eve eat of the fruit they will become as divine

beings, knowing good and evil (see 3:22). Although the Serpent's earthly origin is known, his heavenly, spiritual origin is blanked. In a word, the text says God made the crafty snake, but it does not say he made the Serpent. The origins of the Serpent, who hates God and tempts humanity to join him in his rebellion against God, are as mysterious as the God-opposing chaos. "Evil is not created by God nor is it outside God's power."¹⁹ The story of the Fall assures us that God will vanquish the spiritual Serpent and death as surely as he vanquished physical chaos.

b. The Shape of the Temptation (3:1b – 6)

What is the shape of the Serpent's temptation? We must be aware of Satan's schemes so that he does not outwit us (cf. 2 Cor. 2:11). He comes as an angel of light, not in a red suit with a forked tail and pitchfork. If he did, he would appear less enticing and alluring. This text exposes his subtle tactics.²⁰

First, Satan is an outspoken theologian who hates God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls their dialogue "the first conversation about God.... It is not prayer or calling upon God together, but speaking about God, going beyond him."²¹ Second, he damages Eve's relationship with God by an evaluative question. He sneers, "Did God really say?" The practical effect is to hook Eve into a dialogue that opens her mind to a whole new realm of possibility. Satan has no advantage over Eve or us until he diverts our attention with the possibility of disobeying.

Charles Duerr, the famous woodcut artist of the Reformation, captured this truth in his artwork. He depicts a gallant knight astride a white horse walking in the moonlight beneath poplar trees. In the dark ditch beside the road are hideous creatures reaching out to bring the knight down. The viewer fears for the knight's safety, until he or she notices that his eyes are focused not on the monsters and specters but on his castle home on a distant mountain. The evil forces have no advantage over him until they capture his attention. The first step into sin is to allow Satan to entice us into *questioning* the truthfulness of God's Word.

Second, Satan rephrases God's command into a question. He poses himself as a serious theologian: "Isn't this only Adam's testimony to what God said? How do you know? Is this really God's command? Let's debate it. Let's have a discussion about it: Is it reasonable? Loving? Just? Or even plausible? Is there a possibility of misinterpretation? Is this command historically conditioned?" Within the framework of faith, these questions are proper and necessary, but when they are designed to lead us away from the simplicity of childlike

obedience, they are wrong. Therefore, the second step into sin is to raise questions of interpretation designed to create *doubt* that leads us away from the simplicity of a childlike obedience.

Third, Satan emphasizes God's prohibition. He distorts God's gracious command, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden" (Gen. 2:16 NRSV), into "You must not eat from any tree in the garden" (3:1). The pragmatic effect of the question is to get Eve focused on what she cannot do. Instead of setting her sights on the gift of the Tree of Life and the freedom to enjoy all the other trees, the woman focuses on the one forbidden tree. She enters Satan's trap when she only partially corrects him and in her confused state puts the forbidden tree, not the Tree of Life, at the center of the garden. In fact, she does not even mention the Tree of Life. We take a third step toward sin when we *focus on the forbidden thing* rather than on God's true blessings.

Fourth, Satan casts doubt on God's sincerity and defames his motives as self-regard, not love. He says, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).²² The essence of the Serpent's message is that God is limiting Eve, restricting her from her full humanity. Today we hear this philosophy everywhere: Be liberated! Be free! Self-actualize! Unleash your inner potential! The Serpent's message even echoes in the church. Instead of sanctification, the church seeks self-improvement. Instead of holiness, the church seeks happiness. Wherever you hear this, have no doubt that what you hear is the hiss of the Serpent, the temptation to become something apart from what you were created to be.

With this fourth step, we continue stumbling toward sin by misrepresenting God's intentions and *resenting* what we imagine as unfair restrictions. Plato, in his dialogue *Euthyphro*, poses a moral problem in its classic form: Is something good because God wills it, or does God will something because it is good? The problem catches us on the horns of a dilemma. If we answer that it is good because God wills it, we lose morality because God could will evil (i.e., what is not in our best interest), and we would be forced to call evil good. On the other hand, if we answer that he wills it because it is good, God is no longer sovereign but subject to a standard higher than himself. The resolution lies in faith in God's character: He is simple goodness; there is no evil in him.

Fifth, Satan denies the truth of God's Word: "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). This is the next logical step of sin, for the fruit of doubt and resentment is unbelief. If God's words are a hindrance, the Serpent suggests that we ignore them or deny them. So in the modern church, many people prefer not to talk about, or in fact deny, sin and the judgment of hell because they hinder the quest for self-actualization, make people feel guilty, or lower their self-esteem. People

outside of the church are represented as losing out, not as being lost. Sadly many evangelical churches are in the process of buying into a guilt-free, pain-free, judgment-free gospel. The hiss of the Serpent is deafening and his bite is lethal.

The woman gradually yields to Satan's denials and halftruths. She disparages her privileges, considering the gift of the garden as not comparable to the fruit of one tree. She buys into the program of self-improvement, desiring to become like God, a knower of good and evil. She discounts God's word, pretending that God's stern warning of death is something that can be ignored.

Having stripped Eve of her spiritual defenses, Satan's work is done. Without God, the decision comes down to pragmatism ("the fruit of the tree was good food"), aesthetics ("pleasing to the eye"), and self-improvement ("desirable for gaining wisdom" [Heb. *haśkîl*, "to make herself wise and/or to achieve success"]).

c. The Shape of Sin (3:6)

Having walked the path of temptation, Eve takes the fatal step, *disobedience*. In sum, sin is the perversion at the core of our being that causes us to disobey. Sin is the desire, the imagination, "to be like God" — the refusal to be human, to be creaturely—that causes us to disobey. Correlatively, sin is an inward, spiritual breach of trust in God's character and his word that results in active disobedience.

d. The Shape of Sin's Consequences (3:7–8)

The consequence of sin is spiritual death, marked by alienation. Instead of feeling like gods, Adam and Eve feel shame, the shame of their guilty consciences. In that state of shame, they become alienated from one another and from God. Their alienation from one another is symbolized by their wearing fig leaf barriers. It is difficult to fully describe the visceral feeling of nakedness. It is something akin to the feeling of vulnerability. This works both ways: the unawareness of nakedness symbolizes openness and trust in the marriage relationship; however, the awareness of it indicates fear of exposure in an unsafe environment. Spouses do not want to commit themselves to a state of nakedness when they feel they will be put to shame and hurt in that relationship. We seek to cover ourselves up so that we cannot be abused, victimized, or criticized. Clothing is a symbolic barrier that protects us from the slings and arrows of others.

Once Adam and Eve declare their autonomy, they at once realize that each of them has the capability and the will to decide independently what is good and what is evil. Since the other person has chosen to defy God to advantage self, how can he or she be trusted not to abuse the other in self-interest? They cover themselves because a relationship cannot survive in an environment of distrust. Barriers, such as clothing, are erected by society to protect people from each other and to provide them with a measure of security in our fallen world. However, these barriers also remind us that we rightly hesitate to commit ourselves to intimacy.

Furthermore, humanity is alienated from God. The fig leaves do not cover Adam and Eve's nakedness before God. They seek cover, hiding in the trees because they do not want to hear God's voice. Perhaps God's voice sounds like thunder,²³ symbolizing his judgment. They are afraid of his condemnation and hide rather than confessing their sin and renouncing their wrongdoing and so finding mercy (cf. Prov. 28:13). In this exemplary narrative, the trees symbolize all the things with which people preoccupy themselves to run away from the Hound of Heaven. Today we can even hide behind the marble columns of the church and never meet God. Within the church there are all kinds of ecclesiastical matters and debates to occupy us so that we never have to attend to God in the inner recesses of our soul. We refuse to be reconciled to God by coming clean and finding his grace through the sacrifice he offers. By hiding we deprive ourselves of intimacy with God, the sweetest intimacy of all.

2. Scene 2: The Shape of the Judgment (3:9 -19)

a. The Investigation (3:9–13)

God, the just King, does not pass sentence without a careful investigation. In these verses, he conducts an investigation. Some texts teach that God knows everyone and everything all the time — none can ever escape his comprehensive awareness (Job 24:23; Pss. 33:13–15; 139:1–16; 147:5; Prov. 15:3; Jer. 16:17; Heb. 4:13). But other texts teach that God searches out a person or thing in order to know (Gen. 4:9; 11:5; 18:21; 22:12; Deut. 8:2). Some resolve the tension by explaining the latter as anthropomorphic—God taught his involvement in human history in human terms. But this explanation transforms his search into a charade. Rather, the omniscient God asks searching questions because he ordains to test and to prove reality in history and in the human experience. In other words, he authenticates his true humility and his honest desire for intimacy by

engaging in a serious dialogue with his human partners who by their words and actions prove their reality. Through his thorough and honest investigation of a person, he experiences and so discovers a person's character. His spirit searches out and so knows experientially a person's thoughts and motivations (1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; 1 Chron. 28:9; Pss. 33:15; 139:1–6, 23–24; Prov. 20:27; John 2:24–25; 1 John 3:20).

Jesus Christ, who knows the heart of every person (John 2:24–25), experiences human temptation that he might sympathize with us (Heb. 4:15), and he experiences human suffering to learn what it means to obey through suffering (Heb. 5:8). Similarly, God enters into human existence that he might experience our thoughts and actions. Since God knows a person's thoughts, motives, and actions, we can be certain that his judgments are just. No finite person can establish that kind of justice (1 Cor. 4:3–5).

Instead of confessing their sin and pleading to God for mercy, our representative heads exacerbate their sin and guilt by becoming defensive, not open, and by evading, rather than accepting, responsibility for their actions. Adam blames Eve (“she gave me some fruit”) and God (“the woman you put here with me”), and Eve blames the Serpent (“The serpent deceived me”). Through God's questioning of them, the man and woman establish in the historical experience of the partners their allegiance to Satan by distorting the truth, accusing God and each other, and excusing themselves from accountability. In the delightful garden God had given them, they have sufficient reason to trust him, renounce their sin, and pledge their allegiance to him; instead, the representatives of every man and every woman forfeit their opportunity.

b. The Judgment (3:14–19)

(1) Against the Serpent

The language pertains to serpents in general and to Satan in particular. The former are cursed by virtue of their being set apart from²⁴ other animals and made to crawl on their bellies and eat dust, in Scripture a symbol of abject humiliation (Pss. 44:25; 72:9; Isa. 49:23; Mic. 7:17). This particular Serpent incarnates Satan, who will be crushed by the spiritual seed of the woman (see below) but not apart from his wounding that seed, which is empowered to be fruitful and victorious. Serpents are presently cursed; Satan is presently without the presence and promises of God, impotent either to resist eternal death or to

bring about eternal life, and is being vanquished. But he will not be consummately and permanently rendered impotent and defeated until the eschaton (Matt. 25:41; Mark 4:15; Luke 10:18; Rev. 12:9; 20:2, 7). His spiritual seed, Cain, kills Abel, suggesting within the immediate context that he remains potent and powerful after the curse has been pronounced. God delays defeating him finally to work out his full program of salvation to his glory. Each generation of believers must learn to fight the fight of faith against him (Judg. 3:2; Job 1:6; Zech. 3:2; 2 Cor. 11:14; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9). God’s pronouncement that the Serpent is cursed is effective because of God’s unrivaled authority, not because his words are magic (see [chap. 7](#)). By his word he overcomes both resistant cosmic forces (Gen. 1) and spiritual power (Gen. 3:15).

In Zoroastrianism, there is an eternal dualism of good and evil, and neither triumphs. In Norse theology, evil ultimately wins. In the promise of God, human victory over Satan is sure.

Verse 15 explicates Satan’s defeat. The explication is full of God’s grace and glory. “I will put enmity” is a promise, not an appeal. His prophecy to the Serpent implies his sovereign grace. In the narrative, the woman left on her own gives her affection, her allegiance, and her friendship to the Serpent. By placing enmity between her and the Serpent, God utilizes his sovereign right to alter her religious affections and allegiance. The hostility toward the Serpent entails her reorientation toward God with a love for him and a desire for his intimacy.

The pronouncement that the woman’s seed will crush (šŪp) the Serpent’s head is called the *protoevangelium* (the first gospel message). The reach of this prophecy extends from Eve to the future of her seed throughout history. Though Eve deserves only death, God does not turn his back on her. Instead, in his kindness God restores her through the mission of her seed. His purpose will not be defeated. Humankind will yet be crowned with glory and honor, bringing all things under their feet as God originally intended.

But the victor must win the battle of spiritual champions by suffering: “And you [Serpent] will strike (šŪp) his heel.” In Jesus’ case, the Serpent struck through tyrannical political powers. Christ’s legal father, Joseph, seeks shelter in an inn, already crowded with people taken away from their own homes through the Roman emperor’s shuffling the lives of distant people. Because of the influx of strangers to his hometown, Joseph is turned away. There is no bed left even for a woman advanced in pregnancy, and she must deliver her child in a stable, where the child is laid in a feed trough. Messiah is born into an oppressed people, forced out of his parent’s city, and excluded from common shelter. Gary Mills writes,

The oppressed person, the homeless person, the excluded person must become a fugitive, driven ... into an exile that recalls the wandering of the whole Jewish people. Herod the persecutor takes up the role formerly played by Pharaoh, the men of power trying to stamp out God's chosen instrument—first his People, then his Son. The relationship of Jesus to worldly power is revealed from the very outset of his life. He is the ruler's prey, on the run from them down through the ages.²⁵

(2) Against the Woman

The woman suffers a great reversal: she is frustrated in all her natural relationships within the home. Her intimate relationship with her husband is destroyed, her joy of bringing forth new life is marred. However, her lost authority is regained by progeny, opening the door to redemptive history (see [chap. 9](#)).²⁶ The punishment “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” highlights the loss of intimacy between the man and the woman. The meaning of the word “desire” is important for the proper interpretation of this verse. Genesis 4:7 contains a similar construction in Hebrew: “Sin is crouching at your door; it *desires* to have you, but you must *master* it” (italics mine). “Desire” renders the same Hebrew word *ʾešûqâ*, and “rule” and “master” render the same Hebrew verb *māšal*. The parallel is transparently intentional and unmistakable: the woman “desires” her husband in the same way sin desires Cain, namely, to dominate. In other words, the relationship between man and woman is cursed with conflict; to love and to cherish is replaced by to domineer and to subjugate. An unregenerated woman desires to rule her husband, but the husband, being physically stronger, will dominate her. This will to subordinate the other is as inevitable as death (see v. 19). But their salvation is found in the second Adam. As members of the second Adam's race, they love to serve and submit to one another. In this relationship the husband rules by serving his wife, even dying for her, and she willingly obeys him in everything without compulsion. Christian marriage forms a beautiful image of Christ and his bride, the church (Eph. 5:21–33).

(3) Against the Man

The judgment against the man is painful toil. From the text, we know that work is a blessing from God who himself works; it is not in itself a curse. The ground is cursed, but not the man himself. The distinction is important. The

original blessing in work continues on for humanity, while the ground's power to produce life-giving food is broken but not eliminated. Unworked, the ground now yields inedible and frustrating thorns and thistles (Prov. 24:30–34). Because of sin, the whole order of creation is subverted (Rom. 8:20–21). Backbreaking labor and heavy sweat replace Adam's pleasant and delightful work in the garden. His investment of time and effort will not produce a just return. Nevertheless, the cursed ground will save the man from his apathy and sloth by calling him to diligent and timely work to avoid being plundered by the curse.

Like the woman, the man suffers a double judgment. Whereas formerly man was to rule the earth, now the ground swallows him, draining his effort, energy, and life, and eventually enveloping his body as it returns to dust. When he eats of the forbidden fruit, he instantly dies a spiritual death, but physical death — “to dust you will return” — is an additional sentence. The judgment of eventual physical death renders vain all work that a man performs in his lifetime. Whatever a man accomplishes in this world is forgotten and undone by the ground that undoes a man's own body. The author of the book of Ecclesiastes offers a rich contemplation of this curse.

On the other hand, physical death is also a blessing. Death delivers humanity from an eternal consignment to spiritual death. For Adam and Eve who die spiritually the moment they eat the fruit, death is a means of escape from the curse, and it opens the way to eternal salvation that outlasts the grave. Thus, death is our salvation so that we are not condemned to live forever in the fallen world.

3. Epilogue: Salvation beyond the Fall (3:20–24)

a. Adam's Faith and the Tunic of Skin

Adam demonstrates his restoration by believing the promise that the woman will bear the offspring that will triumph over the Serpent. By faith, he names the woman Eve, *ḥawwâ*, meaning “life.” He realizes that the hope of humanity lies in this promised seed. This act of faith shows that God in his grace has changed Adam's religious affections along with Eve's.

God now provides the regenerate man and woman with tunics of skin. The substitution of his skin tunics for their fig-leaf “loincloths” suggests that their own coverings were inadequate to cover their shame and to provide them with their felt need for protection. Since the tunics are made of skin, implicitly it took the shedding of blood, the offering up of life, to provide the needed kind of

covering. As such, the probable death of the animal foreshadows the death of Christ and his imputed righteousness that adequately covers our shame. However, the sacrifice is provided after, not before, God places enmity in the woman's heart against the Serpent and after Adam's exercise of faith. In other words, the sacrifice is made for regenerate persons, not for the unregenerate. The antitype, Jesus Christ, offered himself as a particular sacrifice for his chosen people: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11; see also vv. 1–10).

b. The Expulsion from the Garden

By eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve express their desire to usurp the divine prerogative and refuse to subordinate themselves to God. God's evaluation after their fall, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22), infers that they are confirmed in their state of vying with heaven. Neither they nor their world will ever be the same as before their rebellion. God drives the sinners from his temple-garden both to cleanse it and to protect them from an eternal bondage to sin and misery by eating from the Tree of Life. He will prepare a better way, a salvation beyond death where sin and sorrow will be no more. The matter is so urgent and important that God takes extreme precautions. He guards the tree with cherubim and a flaming sword. According to Revelation 2:7 those "who overcome" will be entitled to eat finally of the Tree of Life and experience life eternally in its highest potency.

Adam and Eve leave the enclosed boundary of the Garden of Eden and walk into a virgin world that will soon bear the full consequences of their fateful choice. The *ʾādām* in God's image will indeed become culture makers but not to God's glory. The line of Cain will develop the arts and sciences; their seed will "play the harp and flute" and forge "all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron" (Gen. 4:21–22). They will write poetry that gives full and creative expression to the human spirit, and in due course they will found universities and grant degrees in the arts and sciences. But yet it will all be depraved. They will build cities but name them after themselves and use them to defend themselves against one another. The good gold and wealth outside the garden (2:11–12), given by the Creator to enrich life, will also arouse their greed and occasion war. They will use their technology not only to improve their lives, but also to destroy life, turning their inventions against themselves, threatening mutual annihilation with weapons of mass destruction.

F. Act 3: Escalation of Sin: The Line of Cain (4:1–26)

Expulsion from the garden brings act 2, not the first *tôlê dôt*, to a fitting conclusion. Act 3 of that *tôlê dôt*, displays humanity's worsening situation outside the Garden. Elsewhere I have written,

The serpent tempts Adam and Eve to sin, but Cain sins after God encourages him to do what is right. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, but Cain murders his brother, fears being killed and his offspring repeatedly kill in unbridled revenge and debase God's ideal for marriage by polygamy. Not surprisingly, Cain's punishment is more severe than Adam's. According to David Dorsey, "Adam is ...

- driven from the garden, to settle in a new home east of Eden
- forced to till the soil to get food
- separated from the source of perpetual life (the tree of life), while Cain is ...
- driven out, doomed to wander forever with no permanent home
- not even able to till the soil for his food
- hounded by death (would-be killers) wherever he goes."²⁷

Alongside this worsening situation, however, the act assures us that *I AM* accompanies Adam and Eve and their family outside the garden ("I AM looked with favor on Abel and his offering," v. 4) and superintends the giving of the seed of the Serpent and of the woman ("God has granted me another child in place of Abel," 4:25). After the exposition (4:1–2) the act consists of two scenes and an epilogue. In the first scene, the prophesied hostility between the seed of the Serpent and that of the woman (3:15) takes shape in the hostility of ungodly Cain against godly Abel (vv. 3–16). The key word "brother" occurs seven times in 4:2–11. This distinction is followed in the second scene and epilogue by the contrast between Cain's ungodly offspring (4:17–24) and the godly line of Seth (4:25–26). The epilogue functions as a janus to the second *tôlê dôt*, the account of the line of Seth (5:1–6:8).

1. Exposition (4:1 -2)

In his grace *I AM* redeems both Adam and Eve by changing Eve's affections to hostility against the Serpent and presumably by empowering Adam to confess

faith in that seed. Both have their guilt and nakedness covered by a sacrifice. In other words, both Cain and Abel are nominal covenant sons. But Eve's statement at the birth of Cain and her names for her sons forebode a division between the sons. Her boast "I have begotten a man [^{ʔîš}] with *I AM*" (4:1, translation mine) jars the spiritually attuned. It contrasts sharply with Hannah's song at the birth of Samuel: "Do not keep talking so proudly ... *I AM* brings death and makes alive" (1 Sam. 2:3, 6), and with Mary's song at the birth of Jesus: "The Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 1:49). At the birth of Seth, Eve replaces her synergistic (i.e., putting her role in birthing on a par with God's) boast from the birth of Cain with praise of God: "God has given me another seed" (4:25, translation mine). Moreover, the names she gives them show her developing understanding. "Cain" (Heb. *qayin*) means "to acquire, get, possess," foreshadowing his proclivities, but Abel (Heb. *hebel*) means "vapor, breath," the father of all who get the short end of the stick. Eve credits God with "Seth," meaning ("[God] gave"), and Seth names his son "Enosh" (^{ʔnôš}) meaning "man in weakness," the father of the faithful.

2. Scene 1: Hostility between Cain and Abel (4:1 -16)

The hostility between Cain and Abel develops from their contrasting religions to their contrasting ethics to their contrasting judgments.

a. Cain's Religion (4:3–7)

The religion of Cain and Abel is strikingly similar. Both know to bring a tribute²⁸ (i.e., an offering of an inferior to a superior) to God. Both serve as priests at an altar; both worship the true God, *I AM*; and both want to be accepted by God. But *I AM* looks with favor on Abel's tribute (*minhâ*), not on Cain's (see [chap. 4](#) above). This is so not because God favors shepherds over farmers (so Hermann Gunkel)²⁹ —Adam was a gardener; and not because God is inscrutable (Claus Westermann)³⁰ — he is not capricious; and not merely because Abel offered his in faith (Heb. 11:4; Calvin)³¹ — it does not explain how they expressed their faith differently; and not because Cain's offering is bloodless (Gerhard von Rad)³² — tribute is normally bloodless (Lev. 2:4; 1 Sam. 10:27 [= "gifts"]; 1 Kings 10:25). Cain manifests his lack of faith by his tokenism — "Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil" (v. 3) — but Abel scented his tribute offering with the incense of love, faith, and devotion (the most common interpretation) — "Abel brought fat portions from some of the

firstborn of his flock” (v. 4; see [chap. 4](#) above). Unless we offer our best to God, our sacrifice is a stench in his nostrils. What is not said of Cain’s offering is as important as what is said of Abel’s. Cain offered some fruit, not the firstfruits as the Law mandated.

Cain’s lack of devotion to *I AM* worsens to anger against God. Instead of repenting for his failure to please God, he becomes angry with God, expecting God to change to accommodate his sacrifice instead of his changing his sacrifice to please God. God’s question, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” (v. 7) assumes Cain knows right from wrong, but the rebel leaves the question hanging. He cannot affirm by faith that God does right.

b. Cain’s Ethics (4:8–9)

Since “Acquire” (that is, Cain) trusts himself, not God, God warns him that sin — which he personifies as a crouching lion ready to devour its prey — needs to be mastered. In other words, sin is represented as virulent, like a malignant cancer, not benign and passive. Self-reliant Cain, unable to learn from the mistake of his parents with the Serpent, thinks he can master it. He cannot and does not. Sigmund Freud may have been the first to articulate psychologically that we are not masters in our house, ruled as we are by unruly passions, but he is not the first to discern it. Like his parents, Cain is tested, warned of failure, and fails to resist a hostile spiritual power.

Cain’s failure at the altar leads to his failure in the field — theology and ethics are inseparable. His renunciation of God leads to his renunciation of God’s image; his bad feelings toward God spill over into his bad feelings toward his brother. His cankered and corroded soul leads to loss of contact with this brother. His irrational rage against his younger brother—presumably out of jealousy—escalates to fratricide. Having dispatched his brother to a premature death, he absurdly takes no responsibility for his death: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9). His play at innocence reprises his father’s attempt at concealment: both reject the doctrine of God’s omniscience of the human heart. The seed of the Serpent is a murderer like his father (John 8:44).

c. Cain’s Judicial Sentence (4:10–16)

In an obvious outrage against Cain’s crime, the Judge thoroughly investigates the matter (see above). The Judge shows his omniscience because he hears the blood of Abel crying out to be avenged (cf. Gen. 18:21; Exod. 2:23–24; Ps.

34:17; Isa. 5:7). Implicitly the first martyr, the first to have his heel crushed, continues to have a relationship with God. If God did not vindicate him and reward his virtue, indeed, God would not do what is right and the seed of the woman would have his head, not his heel, crushed. But the narrative, a masterpiece of indirection, blanks how and when Abel will be rewarded. Suffice it to know that God in his justice will do what is right for the faithful in a future that outlasts death.

God places Cain under a curse—the first human to be cursed—linking him to the sentence against his father (Gen. 3:14). God cursed the ground to frustrate Adam; now he curses the son, who has alienated himself from God and his brother, by alienating him from arable, fertile soil and from others (“you will be a restless wanderer,” 4:12). The ground, which God intends should produce and sustain life (Gen. 2:7, 9, 19), “drinks” innocent blood and so reverses the divine intention. For in opening its mouth, as it were, to drink Abel’s innocent blood, God makes the ground sterile for Cain. Because of the sin, humanity and the creation are out of kilter. Again Cain does not seek forgiveness and restoration; instead, he whimpers: “My punishment is more than I can bear.... I will be hidden from your presence” (4:14). The self-pitying rebel irrationally fails to believe that God, who made him and sees his heart, can see his situation and prevent the world from dissolving into anarchy. He fears physical and social exposure but not the God from whom he cannot hide. In his guilty conscience, none will be his “keeper” (“whoever finds me will kill me,” 4:14). He makes no distinction between Abel and the line of Seth, and his own seed. Though Cain is deserving of death, the merciful God amazingly tattoos him to protect him from revenge, allowing him to live out his natural life span and to enjoy the arts and the sciences. His death will be final, unlike Abel’s. The human situation must grow even worse before God introduces capital punishment (9:5–6).

3. Scene 2: The Line of Cain: Lamech (4:17–24)

In God’s common grace, family life is enjoyed by unbelievers as well as by believers, but in Cain’s family there are polygamists and self-avengers, as epitomized by Lamech. Cain’s lineage produces the first metallurgy, the first poetry, and the first cities. His lineage is symbolic of human culture with great civilizations and no living God. The ambiguity of godless human culture is portrayed by paralleling advances in civilization with an increase in violence. The earthly city (Heb. *‘ir*, meaning a fortified settlement) epitomizes the ambiguity: it provides both civilization as a pain reliever for wandering and alienation and as protection against human irrationality and vengeance; it

culminates in 11:4 in the building of a city that challenges God’s supremacy. By contrast the faithful look for a heavenly city (Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1–4; Heb. 11:10–11; 12:22; 13:14).³³ Instead of honoring God, the unbeliever honors a human being, naming his city after his son. This reverse direction will give rise to a self-idolizing, Machiavellian state.

Lamech (4:19–24) represents both a progressive hardening in sin — polygamy (contra 2:24; Matt. 19:5–6) and a grossly unjust vendetta — and the extension of the cultural mandate from animal husbandry (v. 20) to the arts (v. 21) and sciences (v. 22). He expresses his titanic tyranny in song (vv. 23–24).

4. Epilogue: Godly Line of Seth (4:25–26)

Instead of building a civilization apart from the living God, Seth calls his son “Enosh,” to signify human weakness, and “at that time” (i.e., “beginning with naming of human weakness”) Seth’s line “calls upon the name (*qārā’ bēšēm*) of I AM.” *Qārā’ bēšēm* means “to worship” (i.e., to make petition and to give praise”), but they will not experience the significance of that name until the exodus (see [chap. 13](#), n. [21](#)). Cain, like most unbelievers, knows about God, but he does not know God in intimacy. Seth’s line produces the spiritual giants Enoch and Noah. Lamech, in the line of Cain, and Enoch, in the line of Seth, represent the seventh generation in the seed of the Serpent and in the seed of the woman respectively. The former inflicts death; the latter does not die. In spite of the vicissitudes of history, God keeps his promise to give a seed to destroy the Serpent (3:15).

In *tôlêdôt* 2 (Gen. 5:1–6:8), this line, presumably retaining the seed of the woman, lives exceptionally long lives. In the parallel Sumerian King List, kings who lived extravagantly long lives before the flood are listed, but in Genesis 5 ordinary people are given dignity by having their names listed. Their long lives match astronomical cycles known to the Babylonians. A correspondence may symbolize that their lives are full and follow a meaningful pattern that ends with completion.³⁴ The death knell, “and he died,” sounds for all of them, except Enoch, who “walked with God” (i.e., in a mutual friendship in which each listened to the other). God takes him, suggesting the possibility that death is not the irrevocable and invariable last word for all.

III. THE DOCTRINE OF SIN

A. Satan and Fallen Angels

According to Jesus (John 8:44) and Paul (cf. Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 11:3), the Serpent embodies Satan. The Apocalypse unmasks his true nature and the motives behind his halftruths and distortions. His subtle blandishments and innuendoes are a cover-up for his malice, fury, and cruelty (cf. 1 Peter 5:8). He lies about God and is intent on bringing about the death of humanity. It bears repeating that humanity in its own strength is no match for this spiritual being (cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:27; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 2:2; 6:12; 1 Thess. 2:18; 1 Peter 5:8; 2 John 8; Rev. 6:1–17). But he is no match for God who binds his power (Job 1:12; Luke 10:18–19; Rom. 16:20; Col. 2:15; 1 John 5:18). He successfully tempts Adam in the garden, but the second Adam resists him by God's word in a wilderness, whereupon the Devil flees (Luke 4:1–13; James 4:7).

Inferentially, the Serpent is a part of the heavenly court. First, the text states that everything God creates in the seven days of creation is good (i.e., that which furthers life); by contrast, the Serpent is malevolent and hinders life. Second, human beings are created to bring everything under their dominion, but this Serpent is shrewder than they are and brings them under his dominion. Third, God uses speech to transform chaos into cosmos, and he gave speech to humans to give order to his world; by contrast, the Serpent uses speech to confuse, not order; his words are full of lies and halftruths. Fourth, the Serpent knows about divine matters that are not accessible to mortals. To Adam and Eve he says, "When you eat of [the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), and after she eats, the Lord God announces to his heavenly court: "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (v. 22). In other words, the Serpent has divine knowledge beyond human knowledge (cf. Job 1:6–12; Zech. 3:1–2).

Even in this text, he is obviously more than just a Serpent, for he speaks. But one may question whether his speech was heard with physical ears or in the

mind. In any case, the temptation does not arise from [self-]suggestion but from an attack by a spiritual adversary upon the mind (see [chap. 22](#) on 1 Sam. 28:4–25).

Having identified the Serpent as a mask for Satan, who moves between the heavenly court and earth, it becomes clear that sin originates within the heavenly council prior to the beginning of the creation of the universe as described in Genesis 1. This is so because although God certainly creates the angels (cf. Ps. 33:6; John 1:3; Rom. 11:36; Eph. 3:9; and especially Col. 1:16), there is no mention of their creation in the Genesis creation accounts. Moreover, since God does not create moral evil — for there is no sin in him (James 1:13), though he does paradoxically create physical evil (i.e., “disaster” [Isa. 45:7]) for good ends — Satan must have rebelled against God sometime between his creation and this encounter in the garden.

According to the New Testament, a number of angels, who, inferentially, were under probation with him, joined him in this rebellion in contrast to the holy angels who are confirmed both in worshiping God (Pss. 103:20–21; 148:2; cf. Matt. 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; Acts 10:22; Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:21; 1 Peter 1:12; Rev. 14:10; and especially Jude 6) and in protecting believers (Pss. 34:7; 91:11; cf. Matt. 18:10; 1 Cor. 11:10; Heb. 1:14).

Ezekiel 28 may shed light on Satan’s origins.³⁵ The two oracles of Ezekiel 28 (vv. 1–10; 11–19) present both the “ruler (*nāgîd*) of Tyre” and the “king (*melek*) of Tyre.”³⁶ The first is human, the second is angelic, a guardian cherub, full of wisdom and beauty, covered with every precious stone, living in the bliss of the Garden of Eden, the mountain of *I AM* (vv. 13–14). Many commentators think that this mythological imagery is drawn from Genesis 2 and that the king of Tyre refers to Adam, for both are said to be in Eden. But the description of the king of Tyre is not apt for Adam. Rather, the imagery fits Satan quite well: an angelic cherub in God’s court, full of wisdom and adorned with the jewels of Israel’s high priest (compare Ezek. 28:13 with Exod. 28:17–20). If this idea is correct, the king of Tyre can be equated with that city’s demonic god (i.e., Satan) who stands behind the charismatic prince of Tyre. The lament for this Edenic king provides an account of the origin of evil in the created world. God accuses this anointed cherub: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor” (Ezek. 28:17).

Paul probably has this text in mind when he asserts that the Devil is condemned for his pride (1 Tim. 3:6).³⁷ Unlike “[Jesus Christ], who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” but to be used in humble service to others (Phil. 2:6–11), Satan regards his

superiority to the other creatures as being for his own exaltation and, correlatively, his advantage as an opportunity to disadvantage others. From the contrast between the serving mind of Christ versus the self-serving mind of Satan, all of history, which is still reaching for a climax, unfolds.

Unlike human beings, Satan is confirmed in being supremely evil. Moreover, angels, literally “heavenly messengers,” are not babes and sucklings. Mortals in their own strength are no match for Satan and his horde (cf. Eph. 6:11–12), but when the saints arm themselves with petitions and praise to God, weak mortals rout strong heavenly powers (cf. Eph. 6:13; Ps. 8:2; see [chap. 5](#) regarding intertextuality).

Satan and his minions prowl the earth to attack God’s saints (Matt. 12:45; Luke 22:31; 1 Peter 5:8). Their range, however, is restricted by God, and when God withdraws his restraint as the Ultimate Cause, he sends them to accomplish his will — e.g., to inflict a test as in the case of Job (Job 1:9–12), a punitive defeat as in the case of Ahab (1 Kings 22:19), or to invade an evil personality to hasten the divine judgment as in the case of Abimelech and the Shechemites (Judg. 9:23) and of Saul (1 Sam. 16:2, 14–23).

B. Nature of Sin

Ethics is the study of values, the process and principles that allow people to decide what actions are right or wrong. For example, some argue that some actions are inherently wrong and that the end does not justify the means. Others argue that an act ought to be evaluated based on the weighing of the good and evil it produces. The attempt to establish human rules of ethics apart from the Bible is at the heart of the sin problem. This can be inferred from our narrative. Why is eating fruit from a tree wrong when nobody gets hurt? How can the human pursuit to know what is good and bad be wrong? Isn’t the drive to better oneself a noble instinct? Nevertheless, a self-reliant human attempt to establish an ethical system is itself symptomatic of sin. Fundamentally, sin is not about hurting people or doing wrong according to human evaluations. Sin is disobedience to God’s Word and cannot be severed from the spirit that gives rise to it: a breach of trust in the goodness of God’s character and in the truthfulness of his Word. Sin is a person’s rejection of God’s Word in order to establish his or her own rules. The search for rules apart from God’s Word is symptomatic of sin because they demonstrate the degree to which humans have come to “know good and evil” apart from God. The refusal to bow to God’s rule in order to

establish one's own rule is rooted in pride, the essence of sin. The human quest for autonomy — to be independent from God's revealed Word—was, is, and always will be the primary issue. Only the omniscient God knows truly what is good (see [chap. 1](#)).

Most Hebrew words for “sin” in their theological use refer to the overt violation of God's standard or rule. Here we give the normal English renditions of the most common Hebrew words in this semantic range. *Ḥattāʾ* (“sin”) depicts missing, intentionally or unintentionally, God's standard. More narrowly, *pešaʿ* (“transgression”) denotes “rebellion,” a willful violation of God's norm or standard and so a legal offense. *ʿAwôn* (“iniquity”) denotes destructive power. *ʿAwôn* (“guilt”) denotes a particular type of consequence for an offense. *Maʿal* (“unfaithfulness”) is “normally reserved for serious sin against God, often associated with idolatry and carrying with it extreme penalties.”³⁸ *Raʿ* (“evil”) refers to sin's ugliness in God's sight. *Rešaʿ* refers to the guilt before God of being selfish (i.e., to disadvantage the community to serve self). It is the opposite of *ʿSedeq* (“righteousness”), which means “to advantage the community.” This righteousness “finds its basis in God's rule of the world.”³⁹

Though “sin” can be used with reference to wrongdoing against a neighbor, in a strict theological sense, sin is against God because it violates his standards and incurs his wrath. David invests his lament for his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband with this narrow meaning: “Against you, you only, have I sinned” (Ps. 51:4). He injures his neighbors, but he sins against God. When Jesus heals the paralytic, saying, “Friend, your sins are forgiven,” the scribes rightly reason, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). Unfortunately, they draw the wrong conclusion — namely, that Jesus blasphemed, not that he is the Lawgiver.

Moreover, sin spreads like wildfire. After being tempted by Satan and eating the forbidden fruit, Eve tempts Adam and he consents, they dissimulate and blame others, and their firstborn, Cain, murders his brother and fears being killed. In turn, Cain's offspring repeatedly kill in unbridled revenge and debase God's ideal for marriage by polygamy. Sin is like a lethal lion crouching at the door, wanting to devour. It is stronger than Cain, and he cannot master it. Unless checked immediately by faith, sin is like yeast that works through the whole batch of dough (cf. Gen. 6:1–8; Rom. 1:28–31; 1 Cor. 5:6–7; James 1:14–15; 3:5–6). In the days of Noah, sin so progressed that every imagination of the human heart was evil. Apart from Noah, the originally good earth became filled with thoroughly bad people with corrupt ways who ruined the earth. The depth and comprehensiveness of human depravity prior to the flood portends the end

of history at the Parousia (Luke 17:26–27; 2 Tim. 3:1–5; Rev. 20:7–10).

C. The Fall and Its Consequences

Adam and Eve were created in a state of righteousness (acceptance with God) and innocence (a state of untested righteousness). They would have continued in a state of blessed sanctity with God and of enjoying life in the garden if they had obeyed God and not eaten the forbidden fruit. If they were already mortal in the sense that they are aging and destined for certain death, why would God pronounce a clinical death verdict for them?⁴⁰ God's unique presence in the garden guarantees its sanctity. By Adam and Eve's failure to trust the goodness of God's character and the truthfulness of his word, they disobey and instantaneously "fall" from their state of bliss in the garden into a tragic state of irreversible sin and death and banishment from the garden.

The consequences of Adam's disobedience are catastrophic: they lead the race into original sin (see below) and death (see exegesis; Rom. 5; cf. 2 Esd. 7:10, 17).⁴¹ The unsatisfactory state of human life and of the world is not the original state, nor is it due to life not yet having evolved into a satisfactory state.⁴² The ground is cursed; we live in pain and in the expectation of certain physical death that renders all human work futile. Sin creates disharmony between God and humankind, between one human being and another, and between humankind and the creation. Apart from God's grace and salvation, humanity and the world are without hope of escaping this worse state. However, it must not be assumed that the Fall made lions into carnivores or that the world outside the garden was as perfect as the garden. The chaotic waters that threaten life were present but restrained, and man was delegated to control the wild animals (see [chaps. 7](#) and [8](#)).

D. Original Sin

The irreversible, worse state is the result that our representative heads bring themselves and their posterity under the grip of Satan, sin, and death. "Original sin" refers to the disobedience through which the representatives of humanity lead the race into a state of guilt and condemnation, and to the passing on of their now-depraved being to their progeny. Their serving self, not God, pollutes every aspect of every human being—that is to say, humanity is totally depraved.

If the greatest commandment is to love God with one's whole being, does it not follow that the greatest sin is not to love God with one's whole being? And is it not true that no one loves God perfectly, unlike Jesus? Their original sin brought Adam and Eve and their descendants under the grip of sin in their religious affections and moral behavior and made all humankind guilty before God. John Henry Cardinal Newman remarked that the more he contemplated the human race, the clearer it became to him that it is "implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity."

1. Pollution of Human Nature

The historic fall (i.e., the fall from innocence and bliss into disobedience and death) instantaneously changes the divine-human relationship. Adam and Eve dread God's presence, fear one another, and speak halftruths like the Serpent. Though some religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism do not reckon with a personal god and therefore don't acknowledge sin in its strict sense of being a violation of God's law,⁴³ all religions admit something is wrong with human nature and indirectly bear witness to the universality of sin. Salvation history confirms the doctrine that sin is universal and inevitable. Like a quickly spreading cancer, sin pollutes Cain and his descendants (Gen. 4), and its consequences give death the final word in Seth's descendants (Gen. 5). Even after the universal flood, humanity is not purged: "Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood" (Gen. 8:21) is the divine verdict.

Numerous Scriptures confirm the doctrine. Wise Solomon asks rhetorically, "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin'?" (Prov. 20:9). And in prayer he confesses, "There is no one who does not sin" (1 Kings 8:46). The apostle John agrees: Anyone who says he is without sin deceives himself and the truth is not in him (1 John 1:8). Jeremiah says, "The heart [see [chap. 8](#)] is deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9) and asks of sinners, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?" (Jer. 13:23). Of the wicked, David says, "From the womb they are wayward and speak lies" (Ps. 58:3), and of himself, reflecting upon his gestation period from parturition to conception, he laments his moral impotence: "I was brought forth in a state of iniquity, and my mother conceived in a state of sin" (Ps. 51:5 [7], translation mine; cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Job 15:14–16; Pss. 14; 19:13; 51:5–6 [7–8]; 32; 130:3; Eccl. 7:20; Ezek. 18:31; cf. John 3:3; Rom. 3:9–19; 7:18–19; 8:7; Eph. 2:3; 4:17–19; Titus 1:15–16, James 3:2).⁴⁴ With regard to the Wisdom Literature, Roger Whybray speaks of the "the doctrine of 'original folly' " (Prov. 22:6, 15).⁴⁵ As Immanuel Kant warned, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever

made.” Paul’s doctrine of the universality of sin is well known.⁴⁶

In sum, theologians rightly speak of “total depravity.” By this they do not mean that the natural person cannot do good deeds through God’s common grace; they mean that sin enslaves humanity, obscuring our minds, degrading our feelings, and enslaving our wills to love self, not God and others. Albert Einstein observed, “The real problem is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil from the spirit of man.”

2. Original Guilt

The fact that Adam’s sin polluted human nature is easily grasped when we consider that since all humanity proceeds from Adam, we must inherit his nature, one that is spiritually dead. Less easy to grasp is the concept of original guilt, which asserts that all humanity participated in Adam’s sin and is therefore held responsible for that sin by God. The apostle Paul, an authoritative exponent of God’s thoughts, teaches that God appointed Adam the role of representing all his posterity; his choice to disobey the covenant of works led the whole human race into sin and death. Likewise, God ordained Jesus Christ to be the representative head of all believers. In his perfect obedience to the covenant of works, he merited eternal life for all who participate in the covenant of grace by their justifying faith in Christ. This theology is sometimes referred to as “federal theology” (from Lat. *foedus*, “covenant”), but in truth it is the biblical theology of Paul (see Rom. 5:12–21; 8:29–30; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). The concept of representative headship exists in all sorts of legal and cultural settings. In the biblical world, the patriarch represents the clan; the father, the family; and the king, the nation. In the United States parents legally act for their children, and people in Congress represent the citizens. Assuming the corporate solidarity of the race with its progenitors, Adam and Eve represented all people.

Since humanity’s first representative, Adam, failed, the elect by God’s merciful and intervening gift of faith identify themselves with the second representative, Jesus Christ, who by his sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension, and giving of his Spirit, cleanses the human conscience, pays the debt incurred by every and all sin forever, and reverses the tragic effects of the Fall (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:22).

E. Total Depravity

Humanity not only bears the original guilt but also is totally depraved. Unregenerate people are impotent to escape sin's dominion. Paul recollects about ten Old Testament texts in Romans 3:10–18 to make the point that all are under sin's dominion: Psalm 51:4; 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Psalms 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 59:7, 8; 36:1. Jesus agrees: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44; cf. 15:4–5; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:4–5).

Orthodox theologians speak of total, not absolute, depravity. The term does not mean that all indulge themselves maximally in every lust. Quite the contrary. The Old Testament is clear that there is a progressive hardening in sin. In the line of Cain, sin develops from his failure at the altar to find God's favor through his token offering,⁴⁷ to his failure in the field in the murder of his brother, to the bloodthirsty vendetta of his final seed, the polygamist Lamech. Sin reaches a saturation point just prior to the flood: “every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5). Alexander Pope captures the truth in his heroic couplet: “Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, as to be hated needs but to be seen. Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face, we must first endure, then pity, then embrace.” In Robert Louis Stevenson's macabre story, Dr. Jekyll represents the good side of humanity, and Mr. Hyde, the evil. Eventually the diabolical Hyde triumphs and takes over the once kindly doctor.

Also, “total depravity” does not mean that unregenerate people are without a conscience and unable to perform deeds that help others. In the Old Testament, while the men of Sodom were utterly wicked (Gen. 19), Abimelech, king of the Philistines, feared God (Gen. 20). Unlike the pharaoh whom Abraham encountered (Gen. 12:10–20), Abimelech would not take a married woman into his harem. Though Abimelech stood outside the eternal kingdom of God marked off at that time by the sign of circumcision, God favored him and through a dream protected him from sinning. Similarly, Joseph could talk to his pharaoh about God, who also gave the pharaoh dreams (Gen. 41). This is so because Joseph's pharaoh did not set himself up as god, but was wise, just, and benevolent. Moses, however, could not speak of God to the pharaoh of his day because the tyrannical pharaoh believed himself a god.⁴⁸ Unregenerate people may “fear God.” Because this is so, it is possible in a pluralistic society to speak of God without referring to Jesus Christ in particular.

Rather, what is meant by “total depravity” is that no unregenerate heart has the love of God as its motivating principle (cf. Rom. 8:7). The unregenerate person may be altruistic and do good deeds, but he or she is not prompted by love of God, nor are the deeds done in voluntary obedience to God's will. Even if people keep God's Word, they do so out of love for self, not for God. Since it

pertains to their heart, it touches every aspect of their spiritual being: thoughts, feelings, will, and thus behavior.

The end result of total depravity is that without God's gracious intervention, unregenerate people struggle to live between the demands of their conscience and their drives and appetites. Everything they do is with mixed motives and produces mixed results. Moreover, because of original sin and total depravity, humanity builds a culture not to glorify God but self. Because of the Fall, their accomplishments at best are tarnished. The splitting of atoms unleashed unthinkable power to light up our cities and to obliterate them. A computer, which is the result of many collective minds, outthinks and outperforms any individual, enabling people to do the unimaginable, such as landing on the moon or spreading child pornography around the world with just a click. Fuel gives humankind mobility, but its overconsumption threatens the planet's ecology. In short, because of the Fall, civilization is a mixed blessing.

Since humankind is totally depraved, no human being can produce the pure virtue of faith (1 Cor. 13:13). James 1:7 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." Paul agrees: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this [i.e., salvation through faith] not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:8–10).

F. Seed of the Serpent versus the Seed of the Woman

The judgment of the Serpent entails a battle of champions between Satan's offspring and the woman's (Gen. 3:15). Translators of English versions of the Bible commonly use "offspring" to render Hebrew *zera* ("seed"), a figure for descendants. Like the English word "seed," *zera* can refer to an immediate descendant (Gen. 4:25; 1:13), a distant offspring, or a large group of descendants. Normally ambiguity is removed as a discourse continues. However, the further discourse of Scripture, which unpacks the spiritual riches of God's indictment on the Serpent, does not screen out these three meanings; it merges them. The immediate seed of the woman is Abel, then Seth. The collective seed is the holy offspring of the patriarchs (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). After Genesis we do not hear again of the promised seed from the loins of a hero of faith until God promises David a seed from his loins (2 Sam. 7:12), which should also be

understood in all three ways.

The unique fulfillment of this seed promise, Jesus Christ, comes into the world through the immediate seed of the woman, who is harbinger of the patriarchs and of David. Eve herself is a harbinger of the Virgin Mary, a woman who in a unique way gave birth to Christ (Isa. 7:14; 9:6–7; 49:1–2; Matt. 1:18–23; Luke 1:27; Gal. 4:4; Rev. 12:1–5). Paul, an authoritative interpreter of “seed” in Genesis, refers the seed of Abraham to the individual Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16) and then turns around to include the church in Christ as Abraham’s seed (v. 29). In other words, Paul uses “seed” to refer to a single distant descendant and to a large group. Since the seed struggles against the Serpent’s presumably collective seed, we infer it has its collective sense. But since only the head of the Serpent is represented as crushed, we expect an individual to deliver the fatal blow and to be struck uniquely on his heel. This prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who defeated the cosmic powers.⁴⁹

After the Fall, humanity is divided into two communities: the elect, who love God and pray to enthrone God as King over all, and the reprobate, who love self (John 8:33, 44; 1 John 3:8) and seek to dethrone God from his rightful place and usurp his authority. Obviously, the seed of the Serpent are not literal, little snakes, for as we have established, the Serpent is only a masquerade for a heavenly spirit. Moreover, the “seed of the Serpent” does not refer to demons, for that does not align with the struggle between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 and the spiritual struggle between the people of God and the “world” that informs the rest of Scripture. That interpretation would make the rest of history only a sideshow of a war in heaven of which we know little. Rather, it refers to natural humanity, whom he has led into rebellion against God, thereby contaminating the human race. In line with this interpretation, Jesus identifies the Devil as the father of those who seek to murder him (John 8:44).

The seed of the woman triumphs over the seed of the Serpent; however, this triumph is not without cost — the Serpent strikes the heel of the promised seed. In Hebrew, both words “crush” and “strike” are from the same root שׁוּב. This parallel shows that both are grievously wounded by each other, but the blow dealt to the Serpent by the promised seed is fatal. In other words, the elect “offspring” must suffer before achieving glorious victory over Satan’s dominion. This prophecy finds its unique fulfillment in the suffering and triumph of the second Adam and its ultimate fulfillment in the community united with him, in their victory over the forces of sin, death, and the devil (Rom. 16:20). I say “unique” because his sufferings and triumph crush the Serpent in a way unmatched by the rest of the seed. By his suffering on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, he destroys the power of sin and death, providing

atonement for the redeemed (Col. 2:13–15), and he is to consummate his full victory at his second advent (2 Thess. 1:5–10).

The suffering of the Israel of God paradoxically is part of their salvation. This is so because suffering saves them from eudaemonism, a system of ethics in which attainment of happiness and personal well-being is the highest goal. In this self-serving system, people do good in order to receive good. In the biblical ethical system, God has pledged himself to do what is just, rendering to each person what his or her works deserve.

But God inserts a gap between action and its consequences, and this gap between virtue and reward includes suffering, so that the elect seed does not confound morality with pleasure. This gap of suffering allows God to work grace into his people. If God rewarded us immediately, we would be destroyed, for because of our inherent depravity, we would become users of God, as Satan alleged of Job (Job 1:8–10). But by having to suffer, we become more dependent on him to comfort, strengthen, and protect us as we patiently wait for him to reveal his full glory.

Paul put it this way: “We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:2–5). Moreover, by our perseverance in suffering, we prove the genuineness of our faith—of greater worth than gold (1 Peter 1:6–7). Even the quintessential Seed, who destroyed the Serpent by his death on the cross, learned obedience through his sufferings (Heb. 2:10; 5:7).

IV. THE DOCTRINE OF CONVERSION

The narrative of the Fall explains the changing of the woman’s affections from allegiance to Satan to allegiance to God as solely due to divine grace: God put her enmity against Satan in her heart. This is a promise, not an appeal. This change of affection also entailed a change in the woman’s inner being, and we should assume that Eve felt the change as repentance for her past folly. Every good and perfect gift, including repentance, comes from God.

Later revelation regarding individual conversion, however, is often an appeal to repent and so emphasizes the human response. God implicitly asks Cain to repent regarding his unacceptable sacrifice. This change of mind is often called repentance: to change from sin to God. The prophets called upon apostate Israel

to “repent [Heb. *šûbû* qal of root *šûb*] and turn away [Heb. *Hašûbû* hiphil of *šûbû* from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations” (Ezek. 14:6 NASB; see 18:30; Isa. 55:6–7; cf. Isa. 19:22; Ezek. 33:11; Hos. 14:1; Joel 2:13). *šûbû* means simply “to turn.”

The rabbis placed great value on conversion/repentance; it has been called the Jewish doctrine of salvation.⁵⁰ For them, repentance *tšûbû* is a legal term; it means turning to the Law in obedience to the expressed will of God and so entails doing good works.

John the Baptist and Jesus, however, called upon the nation to repent (Gr. *metanoia*, lit. “to change the mind”) of their sins in connection with the good news that the kingdom had come in Jesus Christ. John preached, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt. 11:20). Jesus condemned the Jewish leaders: “And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him [John the Baptist]” (Matt. 21:32). Peter also called upon the nation: “Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). In other words, these preachers called upon the nation to turn away from old confidences and the sin contained in them — a corrupt priesthood and self-righteous — and turn to the Jesus who brought the kingdom of God to them.

Paul called upon Jews and Greeks to repent of their old gods and the sins associated with them and to believe in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21; cf. 17:30; 2 Tim. 2:25). Whereas *tšûbû* must be repeated because humans will invariably break the Law, conversion to Jesus Christ is a decisive act that affects the inner personality. This repentance will produce the fruits of righteousness (Luke 3:8). Christ sent his “angels” to admonish the seven churches of Asia Minor to repent and return to their first love (Rev. 2:5). Paul speaks of a godly sorrow in connection with true repentance (2 Cor. 7:9–10).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does the narrative of the Fall arm you against the notions that equal distribution of wealth and/or education will create peace? How do you personally participate in this creation account pertaining to temptation, sin, the Fall, and the seed of the woman?

[1.](#) The Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life are referred to in Gen. 13:10; Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4; Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 28:11–19; 31:1–18; Joel 2:3; cf. LXX Isa. 65:22 (see Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis, übersetzt und erklärt*, HAT, 3rd ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910], 10).

[2.](#) Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Genesis 1 as a Theological-Political Narrative of Kingdom Establishment,” *BBR* 13 (2003): 47–69. Charles Yu independently noted the striking similarities between the story of humanity on probation in Eden and Israel on probation in Canaan (see [chap. 6.II.C](#)).

[3.](#) For the power of symbolism as archetypal images in Jung’s view, see Anthony H. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 575–82.

[4.](#) As argued in [chapter 7](#), the laws of creation are laid down by the same God who gives the religious and ethical laws governing human behavior. To defy these social rules and regulations flies in the face of the way he structured the universe.

[5.](#) See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part 1: From Adam to Noah*, trans. I. Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961], 102. David Toshio Tsumura objects to Cassuto’s interpretation: “If the term *haśśādeh* refers to the wild uncultivated ‘field’, in contrast to ^a*dāmāh*, the ‘shrub’ and ‘plant’ of the field should be taken as wild plants which grow without man’s efforts, regardless of edibility.” However, he fails to take into account Cassuto’s argument that “plant of the field” is the term used for the worked land that yields cultivated grains in 3:18b: “You will eat the plants of the field” (Heb. *‘ēśeb haśśādeh*). In 3:19 this is clarified to mean “By the sweat of your face you will eat bread.” This parallel suggests that “you” is linked to “the sweat of your face” and “plants of the field” is connected with “bread.” By analogy, since “plants of the field” refers to “cultivated grain,” the *śīah haśśādeh* probably

refers to the “thorns and thistles” of 3:18a. Judging by the changed vocabulary, “the shrubs of the field” and “plants of the field” in 2:5 should be distinguished from the “vegetation” (*‘ēšēb*) the earth brought forth on the third day. This vegetation is clarified by appositional constructions to refer to “bearing herbage” and “fruit bearing trees.” God gives this herbage to humanity (1:29), and to animals he gives every “green herbage” for food (1:30). Cassuto’s interpretation also satisfies the exegetical expectations drawn from other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, which represent the negative state at the beginning of the narrative as transformed by the end of the story (cf. Gen. 1:2–2:1; Prov. 8:22–31).

[6.](#) T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2000), 86.

[7.](#) Ibid., 111–38.

[8.](#) Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 28.

[9.](#) Stordalen (*Echoes of Eden*, 261–70) questionably argues *mqdm* has its temporal notion, “from of old” (i.e., at the front border of time) and belongs to the category of primeval.

[10.](#) For an extensive discussion of its meaning, see Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, 257–61.

[11.](#) The concept of a tree of life to represent eternal life is part of the ancient Near Eastern culture in which Israel participated. It is mentioned in Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24; Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4; and in later Jewish eschatological literature (4 Esd. 8:52) and in Mandaic and Manichaean sources. In that connection it also signifies healing (cf. Ezek. 47:12; Rev. 22:2) (see Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]).

[12.](#) “The Lord’s Supper ... for the perpetual remembrance of his sacrifice of Himself in His death; the sealing of all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and, to be a bond, a pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body” (Westminster Confession, 29.1).

[13.](#) Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 259–60.

[14.](#) Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 17 (italics his).

[15.](#) Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 282.

[16.](#) Most of this discussion is previously published in my article “The Role of Women in the Bible,” *Crux* 31, no. 3 (September 1995): 29–40.

[17.](#) K. R. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological and Literary Study* (Haddonfield, N.J.: Haddonfield House, 1974); cf. A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), 212.

[18.](#) The apocryphal book of Wisdom first connects the entrance of evil into the world of humanity: “By the envy of Satan death entered into the world” (Wisd. 11:24).

[19.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 47.

[20.](#) John Milton begins his classic poem *Paradise Lost* with the devils in Pandemonium, the chief city of Hell, putting forth different arguments for opposing God. Their discussions warp virtues into vices.

[21.](#) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 70.

[22.](#) “Like God/divine beings who know[s] good and evil” (^ʿlōhîm yōdēʿa tōb wārāʿ) is ambiguous. On the one hand, the plural ^ʿlōhîm yōdēʿa can be an honorific for God, in which case it means “God who knows ...” (*IBHS*, 123, §7.4.3d). On the other hand, it can be a countable plural — the usual use *yōdēʿa* — in which case it means “divine beings who know....” The latter meaning is more probable, for after they eat of the forbidden fruit, God says unambiguously, “... ... *kʿehad mimmenû lādaʿat* (“like one of us to know good and evil,” Gen. 3:22).

[23.](#) Perhaps Gen. 3:8 should read, “Then the man and his wife heard the thunder of the LORD God as he was going back and forth in the garden in the wind of the storm, and they hid” (see Jeffrey Niehaus, “In the Wind of the Storm: Another Look at Genesis III 8,” *VT* 44 [1994]: 263–67).

[24.](#) The *min* is locational (“away from,” *IBHS*, 212, §11.2.11b), not comparative (“above”/“more than,” *IBHS*, 214, §11.2.11e [3]), because the other animals, certainly not the clean, are not cursed.

[25.](#) Gary Mills, *What Jesus Meant* (New York: Viking, 2006), 4.

[26.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, “1 Tim othy 2:8–15: Unique or Normative?” *Crux*, 28, no. 1 (March 1992): 22–27.

[27.](#) See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

[28.](#) Hebrew *minhâ* — in the Pentateuch always elsewhere a grain offering.

[29.](#) Gunkel, *Genesis, übersetzt und erklärt*.

[30.](#) Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 296.

[31.](#) John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 193–96.

[32.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J. H. Marks, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 104.

[33.](#) In his famous *City of God*, Augustine traces humanity’s twin cities — the earthly and the heavenly — to Cain and Abel. Cain’s city symbolizes that worldliness — the ideal of living within the world, in safety and security — is associated with sin. The heavenly city, by contrast, is a spiritual reality only, without political or social power. Its inhabitants may live in the earthly city, but their hearts do not reside there. Nevertheless, both cities are part of God’s plan and, despite the antagonism of the two cities, the story is ultimately about the city of God.

[34.](#) Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 111–12.

[35.](#) The text is fraught with too many textual and lexical problems to be treated here.

[36.](#) “Ruler” (*nōgîd*) is used only once in the book of Ezekiel. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, apart from Dan. 9:25–26, the word refers to charismatic kings as chosen by God. The phrase “king of Tyre” may refer to Melkart, the patron deity of Tyre, who was known as the “king of the city” (v. 12).

[37.](#) The translation “Lucifer, son of the morning,” in Isa. 14:12b, comes from Jerome’s rendering of the Hebrew *ḥêlêl ben-šāḥār* (“Bright Burning One of the Dawn”). “Lucifer” in Latin means “the bearer of light.” “The Bright Burning One of the Dawn” is a figure for Venus, the bright morning star (see Robert Alden, “Lucifer, Who or What,” *JETS* 11 [1968]: 35–39). In Isa. 14 *ḥêlêl ben-šāḥār* functions as a metaphor for Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, who also became king of Babylon, not as a title for Satan (see S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2–14:23* [Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1970]). The expression “how you have fallen from heaven” in Isa. 14:12a refers to Sennacherib’s loss of political ascendancy (cf. Isa. 14:13–15; Lam. 2:1; Luke 10:15).

[38.](#) J. Gordon McConville, *I and II Chronicles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 17.

[39.](#) John W. Olley, *Righteousness in the Septuagint of Isaiah: A Contextual Study* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 38.

[40.](#) John Goldingay (*Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel’s Gospel* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 144–46) denies the traditional Christian doctrine of a fall. He says that Gen. 3 “does not speak of this event as

‘sin’ or as a ‘Fall,’ nor do any other First or Second Testament texts.” But Paul says, “Sin (*harmartia*) entered the world through one man [i.e., Adam, 5:14], and death (*nekrous*) through sin, and in this way death came to all men.... the result of one trespass (*paraptōmatos* [‘transgression,’ ‘as a rule of sins against God,’ BAGD, s.v. ‘*paraptōma*,’ 621]) was condemnation for all men.” Goldingay argues that the image of “the” Fall was introduced by the apocryphal book of 2 Esd. 7:118. If I read him correctly, he minimizes — if not outright dismisses — Paul’s doctrine that sin and death entered the world through Adam and impacted all human beings by noting that Paul’s doctrine corresponds with Esdras’s observation. His denial undermines the doctrine that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believers by their corporate solidarity with their representative head.

[41.](#) Though Frank Thielman does not use the term, he teaches the doctrine in *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 476–77.

[42.](#) Here we take up only the biblical evidence for the doctrine of original sin and bypass the gainsayers such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr *et al.* These theologies have been impacted partially by modern science with its worldviews of a universe governed by static laws and yet in a dynamic, evolutionary process and by reducing the first *tôlê dôt* to myth, and not by the clear teachings of Scripture.

[43.](#) Hinduism has many god figures, but its absolute “god” is nonpersonal.

[44.](#) The Sumerian poem “Man and His God” (ca. 1700 BC) also expresses this conviction: “Never has a sinless child been born to its mother.... A sinless workman (?) has not existed from of old” (S. N. Kramer, “*Man and His God: A Sumerian Variation on the ‘Job Motif,’*” VTSup 3 [Leiden: Brill, 1955], 179).

[45.](#) Roger N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), 125.

[46.](#) See Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 350–53.

[47.](#) See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word, 1987).

[48.](#) Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*.

[49.](#) See Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 385–86.

[50.](#) J. B. Bauer, “Conversion,” *Sacramentum Verbi* (1970), I, 138.

Chapter 11

THE GIFT OF THE NOAHIC COVENANT

When those who had seen Adam were no longer in the world, God sent Noah whom he saved, and drowned the whole earth by a miracle which sufficiently indicated the power which he had to save the world, and the will which he had to do so, and to raise up from the seed of woman him whom he had promised.

Noah saw the wickedness of men at its height; and he was held worthy to save the world in his person, by the hope of the Messiah of whom he was the type.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 10.644; 9.613

I. INTRODUCTION

The flood narrative's story of a universal natural disaster and the drama of the divine preservation of one family ruling over the full roll call of animals in the original creation speaks to the deepest fear and hope of humanity.¹ Humanity's assertion of autonomy rings hollow when confronted by the awe-inspiring magnitude of the Lord of Hosts' power in the forces of nature. In the face of hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes, people wonder and fear, worried about a judgment from a God whom they refuse to acknowledge publicly. But there is also hope in the flood narrative, reflecting the human desire to see the world remade, formed into a place where the injustices of the past and the prejudices endowed by history are erased so that humanity can truly live in peace and harmony. The flood narrative addresses the soul's deep stirrings of fear and hope.

The flood narrative addresses more than human psychological angst and hope; it provides a contemplation into these emotions by interfacing God's character with human behavior. Hence the key term *covenant* (i.e., a solemn undertaking of an obligation) forms an *inclusio* around the first act of this narrative (Gen. 6:9–9:17; see esp. 6:18; 9:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17). God's conditional covenant with Noah at the beginning of the narrative preserves Noah and the earth during the flood, and God's unconditional covenant with Noah after the flood guarantees that the earth will endure until the end of the world.

Genesis 6:1–8, the janus between the account of Adam's line and the account of Noah's line (*tôl'ê dôt*: 2 [5:1–6:8] and *tôl'ê dôt*: 3 [6:9–9:29]), focuses on the universality and the intensity of sin that motivates God's wrath to eliminate humanity and the earth, which was meant to sustain them and over which they were meant to establish his rule.² In contrast, however, *tôl'ê dôt*: 3 of Genesis focuses on God's glory—his grace, mercy, patience, and covenant fidelity—which is motivated by Noah's keeping covenant with God and his offering a sacrifice on an altar that typifies the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. In short, the righteousness of this one man and his sacrifice save the earth.

II. THE NOAHIC NARRATIVE WITHIN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY³

Recall that in establishing his rule God punishes the wicked and saves the righteous for the glory of his name. In this section we first reflect upon the connection between God's attributes and human behavior to provide more insight into what motivates God to exercise his wrath and extend his grace. We extend that contemplation into the *theoria* of the covenant relationship. Second, we seek to locate the Noahic narrative and covenant within the full context of the Bible. Finally, we consider the light the Noahic narrative sheds on two contemporary social issues: ecology and capital punishment.

A. Providence and Human Responsibility

The narrator represents God as fully involved in his relationship with human beings and with his creation. God “regrets” and “is pained” by sin and human mismanagement of his good earth, and he takes pleasure in Noah’s offering.⁴ If these representations of God’s emotions are minimized as merely anthropopathic language, we are still left with the question, What is the reality they represent other than what the text says?⁵ God is personal and authentic—but never out of control — in his feelings. He is always sovereign: in control of his creation and his passions.

God demonstrates his sovereignty by intervening in the affairs of this world wherever, whenever, and in whatever way he chooses. Commenting on Proverbs 19:21, I wrote,

The manifold images developed in the human thinking organ are one thing, but what finally transpires as a reality is another. God can make them successful or cancel them (cf. 2 Sam. 15:30–17:14) or bring about the reverse of what people intended (cf. Prov. 20:24; 27:1; Gen. 45:4–8; 50:20; Job 23:13–14; Isa. 45:9; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; 23:11–15). Even the best human plans and efforts cannot stand before him if he does not will it

(Prov. 21:30–31; cf. Isa. 7:7; 14:24; 46:10; Ps. 33:11).⁶

But God normally does not intervene to protect people from sin and its consequences. He did not protect Adam and Eve from the Serpent, nor Abel from Cain, nor the daughters of men from tyrants, nor the earth from violence. Rather, he allows people to be authentic and in so doing validates human nature in the crucible of history. Adam shows he is no match for Satan and is easily led astray, and Cain shows that man courts self-destruction by engaging in self-congratulations. Nevertheless, God restricts sin and its consequences. God protects the garden and Tree of Life by expelling Adam; he marks Cain with a tattoo and destroys the corrupt earth, while he preserves Noah to start over again. God intervenes to change Eve's religious affections, and we may assume that he does the same for Noah.

The narrator represents Noah as finding God's favor (6:8) before representing him as righteous and blameless (6:9). "Favor" or "grace" (*ḥēn*) entails that the benefactor chooses to favor the beneficiary, not that the beneficiary deserves the favor (Gen. 18:3; 19:19). The text, however, cannot be pushed to mean that God's favor endows Noah with the righteousness that pleased God. That truth rests on the broader theological basis of total human depravity and God's exclusive goodness and authorship of every good thing.

God responds with patience and justice to the human situation by delaying 120 years before inflicting the judgment he had threatened. The delay allowed people time to repent while Noah preached to them of the coming flood and built a huge ark to accommodate the repentant (6:14–17). We see many cases in Scripture that show that if God plans to do evil and the people repent and do good, the evil will not transpire, and vice versa (e.g., Jer. 18:5–11). God regrets precisely because he is unchangeable. Paul House notes, "God's regret⁷ means action must be taken, not that a great cosmic mistake has been made."⁸ In other words, God's motives are always good and just.

To be just, God must be omniscient and omnipotent). Israel's God both "saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" and unleashed the flood to return the earth to its original chaotic waters.⁹ On the other hand, we read that the Sovereign rewards the faithful in various ways. He avenges Abel's blood in a future that outlasts death, takes Enoch to himself so as not to interrupt their friendship by death, and spares Noah and his family while destroying the rest. In other words, Abel believed God, and he died. Enoch believed in God, and he did not die. Noah believed God, and everybody else died. The first three heroes of faith celebrated by the writer of Hebrews (11:4–7),

drawn from the first three *tôlêdôt*: of Genesis, experienced radically divergent results from their faith. The common denominator of their faith is that they all pleased God. The writer of Hebrews, however, assures us that all of them will receive in the end the inheritance God has promised to the faithful (Heb. 11:39–40).

God's mercy exceeds his wrath. In the account of Noah's line, the universality of sin leads to universal destruction, but the righteousness of one man motivates God to exercise his covenant loyalty to the faithful family and through him to spare his creation. On account of the righteousness of Noah and his family (see below for "righteous" and "blameless"), God saves them and the full roll call of the original creation. Likewise, through the typical sacrifice of God's obedient followers on Noah's altar after the flood, he promises never again to destroy the earth.

This divine trait to respond to human behavior, even to the behavior of one individual, places the weight of accountability squarely on human shoulders, even on one individual. If God would save the entire creation through the righteousness of one man, then it is difficult to exaggerate the significance of individual persons and their choices in God's sight. Salvation history depends ultimately on God's grace and his intervening initiatives but never apart from individual heroes of faith. God in his sovereign grace chooses individuals as his partners for his great undertaking to redeem humanity. In other words, God is the first cause of every good and perfect gift, including faith; yet he so orders historical events that they always conform to the second causes, "either necessarily, freely, or contingently,"¹⁰ including human responsibility to respond to him in faith and to embrace his covenant of grace. God's omniscience never clashes with his goodness and justice.

B. God's Covenant of Grace

1. Nature of Covenants

Covenant (Heb. *bêrit*) means "a solemn commitment of oneself to undertake an obligation." More especially, God authors the covenants and graciously obligates himself to fulfill blessings to elect beneficiaries, usually on the basis of their trust in God as demonstrated by their obedience to do his will.

2. Covenant of Works versus Covenant of Grace

The interplay between God's character and human accountability is foundational to understanding the so-called covenant of grace.¹¹ Theologians sometimes contrast a covenant of works with Adam before his fall into sin (cf. Hos. 6:7) with an eternal covenant of grace with the second Adam, Jesus Christ. According to the covenant of works, God obliges himself to bless Adam if the representative man obeys God's command not to eat of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 1:28–30), but to sentence him to death if he disobeys (Gen. 2:15–17). Adam fails and so receives death, not life. After the fall into original sin and the loss of Paradise, the covenant of works is no longer a possibility. In his sovereign grace, God establishes his "covenant of grace" on the basis of the benefits of Christ's active obedience and his atoning death, validated by his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, and the empowering presence of his Spirit. Although the term "covenant of grace" is not used, this concept is present in Romans 3.

3. Israel's Historic Covenants

All the later progressively unfolding covenants in the history of redemption are based on this covenant of grace. These covenants divide that history into distinct dispensations wherein God governs his people differently — for example, by conscience, law, and Spirit. He begins with the covenant to the first representative mortals to give them an elect seed to defeat their archenemy (Gen. 3:15). The covenant of grace finds further expression in the Noahic covenant, which preserves the earth for all people (Gen. 9:9–17). In the Abrahamic covenant, God swears to give the patriarchs an eternal seed and land so that they might bless all peoples (Gen. 15, 17, 22). In the Mosaic covenant made with Israel at Sinai, Israel seals its relationship with *I AM* to be his holy nation by accepting his teachings, which guide the nation to the realization of its elected destiny to be a priestly kingdom (Exod. 19–24). In his covenant with David, God promises to set his servant's house over his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7; Pss. 89; 132). In the new covenant, God openly proclaims the covenant of grace that makes these historic covenants possible. The Israel of God, the elect beneficiaries of these covenants, count God trustworthy to keep his promises in his unfolding program of salvation history culminating in the second advent of Jesus Christ (Jer. 31; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:8–13). Though these covenants initiate new epochs in the administration of God's kingdom, the enduring beneficiaries are unified by their common election to trust the God of Israel to make them heirs of the blessings of the covenant of grace and its unfolding expressions in the historic covenants.

4. Conditional and Unconditional Historic Covenants

The covenants can be analyzed into four types related to their conditional and unconditional nature.

1. *God's covenant with Adam before his fall* into sin and death failed because it is entirely conditional — that is, it depends entirely on human nature unassisted by God's grace. The covenant God mediates through Moses to guide the nation to the fulfillment of its destiny is similar. It too fails when Israel depends on itself (i.e., apart from sovereign grace) to keep its conditions. Nevertheless, the Mosaic covenant makes the Israel of God who live by faith a holy people and a light to the nations.

2. *God's covenant with Adam after the fall* is unconditional — that is, it depends entirely on God's grace — and so is the new covenant that Christ mediates with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, which Jesus equates with his apostles who represent his church (cf. Jer. 31:31; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:17–33; Heb. 8). God unconditionally promises Eve she will bear a champion who will defeat Satan. The new covenant is made with Israel and Judah for the time of Christ after Israel's exile. This new covenant is better than the old (the Mosaic) because it is based on a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:23) and offered by a better high priest in a better sanctuary (Heb. 7:26–8:13). Moreover, it guarantees a better hope because it depends on better promises. The old covenant arrangement as represented in the book of Exodus depends on Israel's promise to keep the Law, but the new covenant arrangement depends on God's promise to write the law on the heart of his elect. These unconditional covenants are realized in the Israel of God, not nominal Israel.

3. The *Noahic covenant* is originally conditional and now universally unconditional. Noah is a paragon of the ideal covenant partner: “righteous,” “blameless,” and one who “walked with God” (6:9), three crucial terms for understanding biblical ethics. “Righteous” combines piety and ethics: “to bring about right and harmony for all ... related in the community and to the physical and spiritual realms.... It finds its basis in God's rule of the world.”¹² As such, the righteousness that pleases God is rooted in faith in the truthfulness of his promises and in the goodness of his character. The “righteous” (*saddiq*) willingly disadvantage themselves for the sake of God's creation (Gen. 8:10), their neighbors (cf. Ezek. 18:5–9), and their heavenly King. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of righteousness.

By contrast the “wicked” live for themselves, independent of God and neighbors. They disadvantage others in order to advantage themselves. Correlatively, “justice” denotes actions taken to restore community when there is

a fracture. Hence, righteousness and justice go together. When the community has not been served, it is up to the righteous to bring justice by punishing the oppressors, delivering the oppressed, and restoring the righteous community.

“Blameless” (Heb. *tammîm*) literally means “to be whole and complete” and so signifies a wholehearted commitment. In regards to ethical behavior, *tammîm* means “to abstain from sin” rather than “to be free from sin.” It describes a course of life characterized by integrity, endowed with a strong character with the will to refrain from sin; it does not mean being without sin (cf. 2 Sam. 22:24). “To walk with God” implies agreement and communion with God (cf. Amos 3:3); it also implies teaching by God. Noah not only keeps the moral standards God reveals in human conscience, but also the special revelations God gives him in his communion with God, such as building the ark (6:22) and provisioning it (7:5) according to *I AM*’s instructions.

Representative Adam showed that the natural man could not generate this virtue, especially after sin entered the world. An unregenerate person, shackled in sin, cannot generate virtue that pleases God. Yet it is part of our depraved nature to believe that with a little more progress in education, technology, and/or political engineering, we who have fallen can lift ourselves up. From Icarus to the builders of Babel onward, we have yielded to this temptation to believe in ourselves. Our refusal to trust in the Triune God’s grace through the gospel of Jesus Christ and not to trust in ourselves mires us in the muck of our depravity. Our depravity keeps us from learning truth. The virtue of faith is God’s gift to those whom he chooses as covenant partners (Eph. 2:8). “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13). In other words, Noah’s righteousness is not a work to gain merit with God but the outcome of his faith in God, as seen in his building and provisioning the ark.

I AM proves himself a covenant-keeping God. He shuts Noah and his family in the ark (7:16) and remembers Noah when the flood triumphs (8:1). *I AM* preserves Noah and his family through the flood because Noah obeyed God (7:5); if he had not, they too would have perished in the flood.

I AM’s unconditional covenant with all humanity never again to destroy the earth as long as it endures in spite of its sinfulness is conditioned on Noah’s offering that assuages God’s wrath against sinful people (8:20–22; 9:8–17). As a result, human vice-regency can be extended through multiplication and dominion over the entire earth until God’s forbearance is exhausted at the time of the Parousia.

4. The *Abrahamic and Davidic covenants* are also unconditional, but like the Noahic covenant are rewards for faithful service. God’s covenant with Abraham (ca. 2000 BC) and with David (ca. 1000 BC) pertain to them and their offspring,

perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Like the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants presume a warm spiritual relationship between the covenant partners before God obligates himself.

As *I AM* of history and *I AM* of life, God unconditionally grants his faithful servant Abraham a fief that consists of eternal seed, sustained on an enduring land, and includes kings to rule the nations. Obviously, these eternal rewards far exceed a lifetime of investment and so are packed full of God's grace. But the unconditional covenant blessings to Abraham are enjoyed fully only by that portion of his posterity who by faith accept circumcision and live righteously as defined by the Mosaic covenant and empowered by the New Covenant.

The Davidic covenant is similar. As a reward for his servant's faith and service, God covenants to give David an eternal seed, throne, and kingdom, but only those believing kings who obey the Mosaic law from regenerate hearts enjoy those rights without God's discipline.

C. Flood Narrative in History of Redemption

The flood narrative assures us that God will not again pull the rug out from under the drama of salvation history. The stage is firmly fixed for God's original blessings on humans (Gen. 1:28) to be realized through his blessing on them through Abraham. His unconditional covenant takes into account the universal and inevitable reality of human sinfulness. This earth will not be torn down until it is ultimately consumed by fire, whereupon it will be replaced by a new cosmos (2 Peter 3:10–13). God's providential preservation of all life throughout the span of human life until the final eschaton is known as God's "common grace" — the Creator's indiscriminate goodwill by which "he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).

EXCURSUS: MESOPOTAMIAN MYTHS AND THE FLOOD

There are three Mesopotamian myths: (1) the Sumerian account with the hero Ziusdra, (2) the Old Akkadian account with the hero Atrahasis, and (3) the Old Babylonian account with the hero Utnapishtim.

As is well known, the Mesopotamian flood narratives closely approximate the biblical account: (1) A hero builds a boat to preserve the human race through a universal, devastating flood from which a new world emerges from the aquatic chaos. (2) The hero sends birds to survey the earth's new terrain after the flood. (3) When the humans emerge from the boat, they offer sacrifices to the gods. The biblical narrative, however, stands apart in significant ways, both in wisdom and in theology. For example, the dimensions of Noah's ark are those of modern ships, but the Babylonian ship, though pitched within and without, is an unstable cube. Noah sensibly first releases the raven, which braves the storm, can feed on carrion, and can remain in flight much longer than the dove. He then releases the gentle, timid, and low-flying dove. The hero in the Babylonian parallel, however, sends in sequence a dove, a sparrow, and then a raven.

The most radical difference in the two accounts is the Bible's investing the story with a covenant concept. In the Mesopotamian accounts, overpopulation or humanity's noise interrupts the sleep of the gods and provokes their wrath, and the hero's wisdom and bravery saves him. In the Bible, humanity's wickedness arouses God's anger, and Noah's righteousness, not his wisdom and bravery, motivates God to save him. The biblical narrative is calculated to place all wisdom on God and promote human trust and obedience to him. In the Mesopotamian account, the gods gather around the sacrifice like flies because they are hungry; in the biblical account, Noah's sacrifice assuages God's heart with regard to sin.

Many people waste time and emotional energy worrying about the earth's destruction from various disasters, such as a recurrent big bang, an asteroid disturbing the earth's orbit, or a life-annihilating thermonuclear war. They should not. The earth will be here until Jesus comes again. Moreover, human beings now have an advantage over the animal kingdom. Originally they were

commanded to rule the animal kingdom with no assurance they could; now the animal kingdom is handed over to human power by the animals' fear of people. They will provide food for human beings. But they may eat an animal only after it has been drained of its blood (i.e., of its symbol of life).

Warren Gage, in a brilliant analysis and convincing thesis in his *Gospel of Genesis*, analyzes five striking parallel motifs between the origins of the antediluvian era, the first cosmos, and the postdiluvian era in which we live.¹³ Gage argues that the parallels show that history is ruled by the hand of God and that as the antediluvian world was destroyed because of humanity's wickedness, so this world eventually will be destroyed because of unrestrained wickedness. He sketches the five parallels as in figure 11.1.

The chart reveals five motifs — creation (Gen. 1:1–3:8 and 8:1–9:3), Adam (1:26–30; 9:1–7), fall (2:4–3:24 and 9:20–23), conflict of seed (4:1–24 and 9:24–27), and judgment (Gen. 7 and Rev. 22)—each of which has striking parallels between the antediluvian and postdiluvian worlds. Judgment terminates the first cosmos, and its correspondence in the second cosmos awaits the final destruction of the earth in the day of *I AM*, that is, the day of *I AM*'s glory when he punishes the wicked and rewards the faithful, making all things new in the final cosmos as the home of the righteous (2 Peter 3:10–13).

1. Creation

The antediluvian, original creation of the cosmos has striking parallels with the postdiluvian re-creation of the world, and these parallels as set out by Gage can be extended to the creation of Israel and the creation of the church.

a. Original Creation and the New Creation

1. The “earth” is created (Gen. 1:2) and re-created (Gen. 8:1b – 2) out of the “deep” and chaotic “waters” aided by the sending of the “wind” (Heb. *Rûah*). The “wind” from God “hovers” upon the face of the aquatic chaos at the beginning, and the wind dries up the waters and the dove flies over them at the new beginning (1:2; 8:9).

2. Once again the “waters” and “sky” are differentiated (1:6–8; 8:2).

3. With the receding of the floodwaters from the “earth,” the mountaintops “appear” as had the original dry land (1:9; 8:3–5) in connection with vegetation, represented by the olive leaf (1:11–12; 8:11).

4. This deliberate imaging of the original creation as in a mirror continues in

the restoration of birds to the sky above the “ground” (8:6–12; cf. 1:20–23; and 8:13–14; cf. 1:9–13).

Figure 11.1 The History of the World: The Macrocosm*

GENESIS 1		<i>The World That Was</i>		GENESIS 7
CREATION	ADAM	FALL	CONFLICT OF SEED	JUDGMENT
1. Waters of chaos cover the earth, Gen 1:1–2	1. Man commissioned in God's image, Gen 1:26	1. Adam sins in a garden, Gen 3:2	1. Cain, condemned to wander, founds wicked city of Enoch, Gen 4:17	1. Days of Noah are upon the earth, Gen 6:13
2. Spirit hovers upon face of the waters, Gen 1:2	2. Man commanded to fill the earth, Gen 1:28	2. Adam partakes of fruit of knowledge, Gen 3:6	2. Seth, with son Enosh, begins to call upon Name of LORD, Gen 4:26	2. God brings cloud upon earth to destroy the wicked with a flood, Gen 7:23
3. Dry land emerges, vegetation brought forth, Gen 1:2	3. God brings animals to Adam for naming, Gen 2:19	3. Adam shamefully naked, Gen 3:7	3. Daughters of man taken to wife by sons of God, Gen 6:2	3. Old heavens and earth pass away before the present heavens and earth, 2 Pet 3:5–7
4. Old world finished, God rests, Gen 2:2		4. Adam's nakedness covered by God, Gen 3:21		
		5. Adam's sin brings curse upon seed, Gen 3:15		
GENESIS 8		<i>The World That Now Is</i>		REVELATION 22
THE NEW CREATION	NOAH, THE NEW ADAM	THE FALL RENEWED	SEED CONFLICT RENEWED	THE NEW JUDGMENT
1. Waters of Noah cover the earth, Gen 7:18–19	1. Man recommissioned in God's image, Gen 9:6	1. Noah sins in a vineyard, Gen 9:20	1. Noah's sons, to avoid wandering, found wicked city of Babel, Gen 11:4	1. "Days of Noah" again upon the earth, Matt 24:37–39
2. Dove "hovers" upon face of the waters, Gen 8:9	2. Man commanded to fill the earth again, Gen 9:7	2. Noah partakes of fruit of vine, Gen 9:20	2. Shem's descendant Abram begins to call upon Name of LORD, Gen 12:8	2. God comes in clouds to destroy the wicked with a fire, Matt 24:30; cf. 2 Pet 3:7
3. Olive leaf betokens emergence of dry land, Gen 8:11	3. God brings animals to Noah for delivering, Gen 7:15	3. Noah shamefully naked, Gen 9:21	3. The harlot Babel seduces the sons of Zion throughout the ages, cf. Dan 1:1; Isa 47:1–15; Rev 17–18	3. Present heavens and earth pass away before the new heavens and earth, 2 Pet 3:13
4. Present world finished; God receives sacrifice of rest, Gen 8:21		4. Noah's nakedness covered by sons, Gen 9:23		
		5. Noah's sin brings curse upon seed, Gen 9:25		

*From Warren A Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Carpenter, 1984), 16.

5. The “birds,” “animals,” and “creatures that move along the ground” are called out from the ark, as in the first creative calling from the voice of God (1:20, 24–25; 8:17–19).

6. The reappearance of the nuclear family, Noah and his wife, both of whom bear “the image of God,” as the heads and sole representatives of the human race, functions as a reprise of the creation of *ʾādām* as “male and female.” The heavenly King again graciously “blesses” humanity and restores the cultural mandate to “be fruitful,” “increase in number,” “fill the earth,” and implicitly to “rule every creature,” as “the fear and dread of [them would] fall upon ... every creature” (1:28; 9:1–2).

7. After God finishes creating the old world, he rests (*šābat*) from his work, and after he restores the renewed earth, he finds “rest” (Heb. *nûah*) in the aroma of the “priest’s” sacrifice. Both the creation and its preservation by re-creation are redemptive

God shines into the primeval darkness his creative light and turns the chaotic

waters into what he himself calls a “good” creation. Similarly, God’s provision of Noah’s ark “saves” the creation from the cataclysmic flood. By this mirror image, the re-creation bears the unmistakable fingerprint of the Creator. Moreover, the preservation of the creation through “re-creation” underscores God’s commitment to preserve his creation and to accomplish his purpose that human beings rule the earth.

b. Creation of Israel

The motif of “new creation” also finds an echo in the birth of Israel as a nation. Once again *Rûah* (“wind”) and water play crucial roles. As the fleeing Israelites become trapped between the waters and the Egyptian army, God performs a new act of creation, redeeming a people for himself to be his special possession. “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night *I AM* drove the sea back with a strong east *Rûah* and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided” (Exod. 14:21). In this defining act of salvation in Israel’s history, once again, there is the imagery of *Rûah* driving the chaotic waters apart to bring forth dry land, the means for God’s salvation/creation of his people.

Rûah means either “wind” or “spirit,” a wordplay that opens these passages to other interpretations. Isaiah seems to have noted this possibility in his interpretation of the Exodus narrative in Isaiah 63:11–13:

Then his people recalled the days of old,
the days of Moses and his people —
where is he who brought them through the sea,
with the shepherd of his flock?
Where is he who set
his Holy *Rûah* among them,
who sent his glorious arm of power
to be at Moses’ right hand,
who divided the waters before them,
to gain for himself everlasting renown ...?

For Isaiah, the physical east “wind” that divides the waters in Exodus becomes the Holy “Spirit” that empowers Moses.

Meredith Kline notes other echoes between the redemptive creation of cosmos with the creation of Israel.¹⁴ In addition to giving the nation birth by dividing the

waters of the Red Sea with the wind (Exod. 14:21), God allows Israel to walk through the sea on dry ground (14:29; cf. Gen. 1:9; 8:13). To guide them on their way to their full salvation in the Sworn Land, *I AM* gives them light by night in a pillar of fire (Exod. 13:21; cf. Gen. 1:3). God's superintending care through the *Rûah* hovering over the face of the abyss at the time of the creation is paralleled by his superintending care of Israel in the wilderness (Gen. 1:2; Deut. 32:11). The word translated "hover" (Heb. *rûp* in Piel) is used only in these two passages. Gage concludes, "The exodus event culminates in the eisodus into the paradisaical Canaan, a redemptive correlative to the creative sabbath (cf. Heb. 4:3–10)." ¹⁵

Israel's prophets and poets tend to meld together these three redemptive-creative acts. In addition, they often do so using the imagery (but not the theology) of the ancient Near Eastern creation myths. These myths depict the creating deity overcoming the primeval waters by doing battle with a repressive anticreation god, a monster (see [chap. 7](#)).

c. Continuities and Discontinuities with the New Testament

In the New Testament, the theme of new creation finds its fulfillment both in the church and in the new heaven and earth. With regard to the former, the move from "wind" to "spirit" becomes explicit. The church, God's new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), is created by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, as the incipient church gathered together, "suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house.... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:2–4; cf. Luke 3:16; John 3:5). ¹⁶

Furthermore, the church is also created through baptismal waters. The cataclysmic flood was for judgment and purification (i.e., a rebirth of the physical world with its history of corruption wiped clean). In the New Testament, the flood is interpreted as prefiguring Christian baptism (1 Peter 3:21). As a Christian comes through the water, he or she is symbolically imbued with the Holy Spirit, a new creation with the corrupted history erased by the cataclysmic "flood." For Christians all things are already made new because "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). With regard to the latter, the theme of new creation finds its consummation in the creation of the new heavens and new earth that the people

of God will inherit (2 Peter 3:1–13; Rev. 21–22).

2. New Adam

a. Noah as New Adam

In the aftermath of the re-creation, God reestablishes humanity, his image, over the earth (9:2; cf. 1:24–27), promises to multiply all living creatures (8:17; cf. 1:20–22), and climactically, endows humanity with divine blessing (9:1; cf. 1:28–30).

1. *Adam and Noah are uniquely associated with the “image of God,” an expression found only in Genesis 1:26–28 and 9:6.* “In the Adam narrative, [the image of God serves] as the basis of man’s [human’s] identity, and in the Noah narrative as the basis of man’s [human’s] protection” (Gen. 1:27; 9:5–13).¹⁷

2. *God commands both Adam and Noah to “be fruitful and increase in number” (1:18–30; 9:1–7),*¹⁸ informed by God’s blessing upon the humans, a blessing that entails both fruitfulness and authority.

3. *Both Adam and Noah “walk with God” (3:8; 6:9).*

4. *Both Adam and Noah rule the animals*—Adam, by naming (2:19), and Noah by preserving (7:15).

5. *Adam names the animals; the restored Adam saves them.* These striking continuities again emphasize that God remains faithful to his original intention that humans function as his vice-regents over his creation, “even though every inclination of [their] heart[s] is evil from childhood” (8:21). However, after the flood God defines their rule more precisely as taking the shape of human government, placing the sword in their hands to execute justice and avenge the death of the innocent. Their rule is further assisted by God’s placing the fear of humans in all other living creatures (9:2) and his holding the whole animal kingdom accountable for the death of any of those who are the image of God. Moreover, the custodians of the earth may now eat animals, but not wantonly—they must not eat their lifeblood.

b. Israel as New Adam

I AM blesses Israel as he blesses Adam and Noah; they become so fruitful that even mighty Egypt fears them (Exod. 1:6–10). He leads his people, whom he calls his “firstborn son” (Exod. 4:22), on dry ground through the threatening sea, which like the flood destroys the seed of the Serpent and saves God’s people

from the corruption of Egypt. As Paul expresses it, “they were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor. 10:2). *I AM* guides them through the dreadful wilderness to his holy mountain, Mount Zion, from whence they fulfill, *ʾādām*’s original commission to rule the earth. Moses by faith celebrates God’s guidance to and planting of his people “on the mountain of [their] inheritance” in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:13–18). And the psalmists, in hymns of petition and praise sung at the temple on that holy mountain, celebrate its fulfillment (Pss. 8, 20, 21, 33, passim). *I AM*’s reign, however, is more precisely defined by the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. According to the former, God’s blessing on the nations becomes contingent upon their blessing Abraham and his seed (Gen. 12:1–3; 22:15–18). According to the latter, God commits the rule of Israel and of the nations to the house of David (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17; Pss. 2, 72, 89, 110, 132).

c. Jesus as New Adam

The divine commission to Adam and to Noah to fill the earth and to subdue it — backed up by the divine blessing and enabling — finds its ultimate fulfillment in the second Adam, the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4), and in his church. After his resurrection, Christ “breathes” his Spirit upon his disciples, empowering them to forgive sins (John 20:23). Matthew concludes his gospel with a scenic depiction wherein Christ claims authority over all nations and commissions his disciples to baptize all nations and teach them his commandments (Matt. 28:16–20). Luke concludes his account of Christ’s earthly ministry with a scenic depiction of the Mount of Olives wherein the ascending Christ extends toward his disciples in blessing his hands that have blessed the children, healed the lepers, and given sight to the blind (Luke 24:50–53). By pouring out his Spirit upon his church, he raises up a holy seed from the sons of death and gives them an everlasting name (Isa. 56:4–5). This theme finds its fulfillment when the righteous ones find their final rest in the new heaven and earth. At that time Christ will subdue all things under his feet (Eph. 1:11–23; Col. 1:18–20). Moreover, as humanity has born the image of the earthly Adam, in its resurrection it will bear the image of the heavenly Adam (1 Cor. 15:42–49). At this time of humanity’s complete redemption, the meek will rule over a new and regenerated earth, as coheirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

3. Sin

a. Sin of Adam and Noah

Adam sinned through eating in a garden, and Noah sinned through drinking in a vineyard (3:6; 9:21). The result of their sin is a consciousness, a “knowing” (3:5; 9:24)¹⁸ of nakedness (3:7; 9:21); the first “knowledge” alienates the fearful couple, and the second “knowledge” alienates a father from a son. In both instances, the nakedness is covered. God covers the nakedness of the first couple, and the godly sons of Noah cover his (3:21; 9:23). As a consequence of the sin, human seed becomes divided between those pledging allegiance to Satan and those standing for God, and Noah’s sin brings a curse upon Canaan.¹⁹

The sin of Noah sheds light on the human plight. At one time or another, most people become disgusted with what is going on in the world — the intractable problems among people: hatred, prejudice, and greed that lead to cruelty and war. The problems are insoluble because hatred and prejudice are burdens of our depraved nature and our history. Because we cannot change or forget, our nature and memory doom us. In response, the idealistic ones among us ask: “What if we started over? What if we expunged history and wiped the slate clean?” The account of Noah puts the lie to that solution. Only through the second Adam and regeneration by his Spirit will the world be saved and humanity realize its dream and divine destination.

b. Sin of Israel

From the very first, immediately after their experience of God’s redemptive creation, as an ungrateful and stubborn child, the tribes of Israel rebel against God in the wilderness and subsequently in the Sworn Land (Ps. 78; cf. 106). Right after Moses celebrates their exodus from Egypt, they begin their rebellion against their King by grumbling about the food and drink he provides them (Exod. 16:1–3; 17:1–7). They promise at Mount Sinai, “We will do everything *I AM* has said; we will obey” (Exod. 24:7); yet while Moses is still on the mountain of God, Aaron in the valley at its base leads them into the worship of the golden calf (Exod. 32). Only God’s grace in response to Moses’ intercession spares them (Exod. 33–34).

c. Victory of Jesus

The second Adam—here is the greatest discontinuity between the testaments

— unlike Adam, Noah, and Israel, does not fall into sin. Consequently, he alone saves the “world” — that is, all people who trust themselves to him. In him, God’s initial purpose for humanity to rule the earth finds its fulfillment. In him, history finds its meaning (Eph. 1:10). The God of peace will bruise the Serpent under this Seed (i.e., Christ and his church [Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:1–9]).

4. Conflict of Seed

a. Adam and Noah: Elect and Nonelect

As a result of their sin, a divine curse falls upon a portion of the offspring of both Adam and Noah (3:14–19; 9:25). In the case of Adam, it falls upon Cain’s line, that portion of humanity that does not experience the divine grace that puts enmity in their hearts against the Serpent. In the case of Noah, the curse strikes the son that exposes, rather than covers, his father’s nakedness. Consequently, the “seed” of both Adam and Noah are divided into the elect and the nonelect. For Adam’s descendants, it is the division into the seed of the woman sharing her religious affections and the seed of the Serpent sharing his. For Noah’s descendants, the line of Shem carries the seed of the woman and the line of Canaan carries the seed of the Serpent. Gage notes that “Cain, condemned to wander, founds the wicked city of Enoch (Gen. 4:17),” and “Noah’s sons, to avoid wandering, found the wicked city of Babel.”²⁰ In the first cosmos, the tyrannical line of Cain stood over against the line of Seth, which carried the promises of God and the hope of humanity; in the second cosmos, the rejected Canaanites (in the line of Canaan) stands opposed to the elect Israelites (in the line of Shem).

b. Israel: Remnant

The conflict between the seed of the Serpent and the woman continues in the covenant home between Cain and Abel. Before their births God had placed enmity in Eve’s heart against the Serpent, and Adam believed God’s promise that she would bear a seed that would crush the Serpent. Both Cain and Abel outwardly worshiped Israel’s God, *I AM*. That conflict within the external covenant community continues within national Israel. The holy seed that calls upon the name of *I AM* in Jerusalem is itself divided into unfaithful and faithful Israel (cf. Exod. 32:25–29; Josh. 24:15). By the time of Israel’s later prophets, the leaven of apostasy has so altered Jerusalem that the prophets condemn her as

being comparable to Egypt and Sodom (Ezek. 16:23–26; Amos 4:10–11). Nevertheless, *I AM* faithfully preserves a remnant who participate in God’s eternal covenant and merit the right to rule the earth as the true seed of Abraham (Mic. 4–5).²¹

c. New Testament: Church and World

The theme of the conflict between the seeds finds a double fulfillment in the New Testament. First, before the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), humanity continues to be divided between those who, like Cain and the builders of the Tower of Babel, seek their salvation in temporal, visible cities, and the people of God who look to the eternal city “whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). Second, some professors of Christianity are like seed sown on rocky soil or among thorns, but others are good seed that produces a crop (Matt. 13:1–23). Within the church, and faithful teachers must contend against false teachers (Acts 20:29–31; Gal. 1:6–9; 1 Tim. 1:3; Jude 12–13; Rev. 2:20–25).

5. Judgment and Salvation

a. Adam and Noah: A Paradigm

The story of the first cosmos ends in judgment, destruction through the flood. In this regard, Gage notes, “The implication of the pattern of historical presentation in Genesis requires the projection of general apostasy and cosmic judgment into postdiluvian prophecy to satisfy the pattern of parallel narratives.”²² In other words, this parallel reading of the creation and flood narratives creates an expectation of a future judgment. However, the flood narrative is not focused on destruction, but rather on God’s salvation. This duality of destruction/salvation in the flood story becomes a paradigm for understanding God’s judgment, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The Bible defines justice as retribution, not rehabilitation. C. S. Lewis rejected the latter idea as an assault on the very concept of justice. “When we cease to consider what the criminal deserves and consider only what will cure him or deter others, we have tacitly removed him from the sphere of justice altogether; instead of a person, a subject of rights, we now have a mere object, a patient, a ‘case.’”²³

b. Israel: A Remnant

Gage argues that God's judgment on Noah's generation provides three motifs for understanding other instances of God's judgment in the Bible: (1) "as in the days of Noah" (i.e., universal wickedness), (2) the "flood" of judgment (i.e., a punishment as extensive as the wickedness), (3) and the salvation of the righteous remnant.²⁴ He explicates his thesis by noting God's judgments on Sodom, Egypt, Canaan, and Jerusalem.

God "rains" (Heb. *māṭar* [Gen. 7:4; 19:24]) fire upon the cities of the plain and "destroys" (Heb. *šāḥat* [Gen. 6:17; 19:13]) Sodom and Gomorrah, but Lot and his house are spared. Gage also notes, "The door of Lot's house, like the door of the ark, is shut by heaven (Gen. 19:10; 7:16)."²⁵ Concerning Egypt, Gage notes that as in Noah's case, Moses' life was delivered from the waters by an ark (*tēbā* is unique to Noah and Moses [Gen. 6:14; Exod. 2:3]) daubed with pitch, and while the Egyptians had suffered the wrath of heaven, the faithful in Israel had found safety behind the door of the Passover (Gen. 7:16; Exod. 12:21–23).²⁶

On Canaan, Gage argues, "The correlative to the Flood was the ban [Heb. *herem*] ... by which everything having the breath of life was to be destroyed by the sword." But righteous Rahab delivers her father's household (Josh. 2:19; Gen. 7:16), "like Noah finding safety behind the door (Josh 2:19)."²⁷

Finally, of Jerusalem, Gage notes that the prophets liken God's judgment through the Assyrians to a great flood (Isa. 8:7–8; 17:12–13; cf. Amos 8:8; 9:5) and through the Babylonians to the waters of Noah (Isa. 54:9). Crediting Jack P. Lewis²⁸ for the analogy of the flood in Isaiah, Gage notes that "the flood of judgment coming upon Jerusalem is described as wrath poured out of the windows of heaven (Isa. 24:18; cf. Gen. 7:11, 8:2)."²⁹ As with Sodom's overthrow, God pours out his wrath upon Zion as a consuming fire (Lam. 4:11; cf. 2 Chron. 36:19) and links his covenant faithfulness to the faithful remnant of Israel with his covenant promise to Noah to preserve the earth (Isa. 54:9).³⁰ Gage concludes, "The righteous are called upon to return to their chambers to seek shelter behind the door of safety (Isa. 26:20; cf. Exod. 12:21–23 and Gen. 7:16) until *I AM* brings the remnant back in a new exodus (Isa. 51:10–11) to his holy mountain (Isa. 27:13)."³¹

c. New Testament: Final Judgment

In the New Testament, the motifs of the flood and judgment are connected to the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple in AD 70 and the ultimate judgment at Christ's second coming.³² Gage notes that Christ compares the time of his coming in judgment to the days of Noah and Lot (Matt. 24:37–39; Luke 17:28–32) and to Daniel, who says, “the end [of Jerusalem] will come like a flood” (Dan. 9:26). The setting up of the abomination that causes this desolation, says Jesus, is a signal for “those who are in Judea [to] flee to the mountains” (Matt. 24:15–20; cf. Gen. 19:17).³³ When Christ comes to punish the tyrannical seed of the Serpent with its just penalty of everlasting destruction, he will appear in blazing fire with his angels (2 Thess. 1:6–10). After destroying the present cosmos in fire (2 Peter 3:10–12), he will save the seed of the woman to dwell in the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:13). This connection between the flood and the final judgment is aptly encapsulated in the words of a Negro spiritual: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!”³⁴

“The fire next time” is something many of us prefer not to think about. Rather, we focus on (re-)creation as the symbol of God's grace in preservation and regeneration for individuals and societies. We hope for new beginnings, relying on the belief that the human predicament is a product of memory and history and can be overcome through mass societal undertakings such as education and reduction of poverty. But the repeated pattern of re-creation, renewed founder, sin, conflict, and judgment in the Bible emphatically underscores the point that humanity is incapable of establishing or maintaining a just society.

Ultimately, the problem is not history, memory, or environment, but human nature. Starting over is not the answer to the problems of human society; the solution cannot be a mere physical re-creation. New heavens and a new earth are nice and good, but without regenerate inhabitants, they are as doomed as the Garden of the Eden. Thus, the flood provides only half of the solution; the other half awaits Jesus Christ and his baptism in the Holy Spirit. The water clears away the sins of the past, but the Holy Spirit is needed to change human nature and the course of human destiny for good.

As a final note on this sequence, we observe the phrase “of every kind” (*ʾmînēhû*, Gen. 6:20) and its resemblance to the language in Genesis 1. This echo is one of many hints to the purpose of this narrative: a re-creation of the earth in the coming of God's kingdom.

D. Ethics and Ecology

Although we do not fear a cataclysmic end to this earth but look for Christ's return, we are still called to steward God's creation. Part of God's ultimate judgment will concern how we have treated the creation he entrusted to us. The unethical wicked "corrupt" the earth; the ethical righteous preserve it. How the wicked disadvantaged their own generation and those of their progeny by disfiguring the earth to gratify their greed is not clarified, but today the wicked spoil the creation by polluting the atmosphere with carbons, contaminating the land and sea with garbage and toxic waste, and raping the land by strip mining and clear-cut harvesting. They wantonly hunt animals, fish, and birds to extinction, exterminate plants, and preserve vegetation only if it has the potential to advantage them. In short, the danger to the creation lies in the realm of the moral and political (cf. Lev. 18:28; 25:23).

Life on the ark represents the social hierarchy God intends. Within this miniature cosmos, which is designed by the Creator (see 6:14–16), human beings under God tend to the creation (6:18); animals submissively stay within their space (6:20); and the vegetation sustains its lords (6:21). When humans overstep their boundaries and usurp the place of God, animals likewise transgress (6:12). To keep animals in their place, God instills them with fear and dread, setting up hostility between human beings and animals.

People have a responsibility to care for and preserve animals. They have the power of life and death over the animal kingdom (9:2). The intentional repetition of the phrase "every living creature" (and "all life") affirms God's desire to preserve every species. The human ruination of the earth's ecological systems and the annihilation of species are matters of grave concern to the Creator. If God will not extinguish the species, how much more must the creature honor that commitment? The righteous save the creation and restrain their appetites for the glory of God and for the good of all people.

Righteous Noah models the ideal. In 8:9 the narrator unexpectedly slows down narrative to describe the interaction between Noah and the dove: "He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark." This narrative technique of slowing time virtually pauses the action and paints a frozen mental image in the mind of the reader: amid the chaotic waters, atop a lonely ark, stands a man with an outstretched hand, holding a dove. The picture paints a restored relationship among God, humans, and God's creation. Noah, a conservationist and an animal lover, takes care of God's creation.

The righteous not only preserve the creation, but they also cry out for justice. They take a stand against raping the earth. They do not call for an end to cutting down trees — Noah must have cut down a small forest to build the ark (see 6:22) — but they do call for responsible management.

E. Ethics and Capital Punishment

Although the text forbids absolutely the taking of human life and mandates just as absolutely the taking of the life of anyone who sheds blood, we may presume the language is hyperbole and that the taking of innocent life is in view. This is so because God's law mandates the taking of the life of a person for various crimes such as murder (Exod. 21:12–16) and forbids the taking of life in the case of manslaughter (Num. 35:6–34).

The principle of *lex talionis* (i.e., life for life) is clarified in *I AM*'s commands to his covenant people regarding the murderer (Num. 35:16–21) and in Paul's teaching about the Christian and the state. In the case of manslaughter, the guilty are consigned to cities of refuge, not penitentiaries, until the death of the high priest (Num. 35:22–28). In the case of murder, however, capital punishment is exacted. In the New Testament, the Christian must not avenge himself for any wrongdoing but leave room for God's wrath to avenge it (Rom. 12:19). God in turn appoints the civil government as his minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil (Rom. 13:4). The supreme Lord and King arms the civil authority with the sword, the instrument of death, for the punishment of evildoers. The legislation "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6) gives evidence that the civil authority as God's minister now has the responsibility to execute capital punishment for a capital offense. This is an obligation, not an option. Three times God says, "I will demand an accounting" (9:5).

Innocent blood shed by homicide must find recompense; God requires an accounting for this blood; he is its vindicator (2 Kings 9:26; Ps. 9:12; Heb. 12:24), but the texts do not specify how. Innocent blood pollutes the guilty person and is expiated by the death of the murderer (1 Kings 2:32) or through atonement (Deut. 21:7–9). Even in the case of manslaughter, the killer cannot be freed before the high priest dies. If the innocent blood is not expiated, God brings judgment on the land (Deut. 19:13; 2 Sam. 21; 1 Kings 2:5–6, 31–33). The blood of the innocent will be paid for, if not by the individual perpetrators, then by the community that refuses to establish justice. Because of the value of human life as the bearer of God's image and the justice required for the spilling of innocent blood, God invests humankind with judicial authority to exact capital punishment, further demonstrating his appointment of the human race to be his ruler on this earth. This authority is the foundation for organized government (Rom. 13:1–7). God institutes the home before the fall to create a society where love can flourish. He institutes the state after the flood to prevent crime. Thus

Nahum Sarna says, “The destruction of the old world calls for the repopulation of the earth and the remedying of the ills that brought on the flood. Society must henceforth rest on more secure moral foundations.”³⁵

The law carefully protects the falsely accused. There must be at least two or three witnesses to convict a person of a crime (Deut. 19:15). If a witness perjures himself, the judge hearing the case will do to the perjurer as he intended to do to the accused, including life for life (Deut. 19:16–21). Finally, the witnesses themselves must be involved in the execution (Deut. 17:2–7).

However, if the murderer truly repents of his crime, he should find mercy (Prov. 28:13). Although David took away the purity of Bathsheba and murdered her husband, he found forgiveness on the basis of God’s sublime attributes of grace, unfailing love, and mercy (2 Sam. 12:13–14; Ps. 51). The blood of Christ atones for all the sins of all his elect forever (Heb. 7:23–28).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does the flood narrative direct your purpose in life to think about and act with respect to the earth's ecology?

[1.](#) For the exegesis of 6:9–9:29, see Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 121–51.

[2.](#) The “sons of God” are best understood as demon-possessed kings. The perverted psyches of these tyrants allowed this entrance of the demonic. The Nephilim (i.e., “fallen ones”) — who also existed at the time of Moses (Num. 13:33) — were probably their offspring, also called “heroes.” They filled the earth with violence. For more detail see Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 117–18.

[3.](#) For the exegesis of the third *tôlê dôt* of Genesis, see *ibid.*, 121–51.

[4.](#) God's changing his mind (Gen. 6:6, *yinnāhem*, “regretted” [TNIV]) entails his providential involvement in history. When people sin or repent of sin, God responds appropriately (Exod. 32:12, 14; 1 Sam. 15:11; 2 Sam. 24:16; Jer. 18:9–10; Amos 7:3, 6). He also experiences indignant rage (v. 6, *yit'asšeb* [“deeply troubled,” TNIV]).

[5.](#) “Smelled the pleasing aroma” is an anthropomorphism (Gen. 8:21).

[6.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 15 – 31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 115.

[7.](#) *Niham* (Niphal) in Gen. 6:7 denotes both emotional grief and intellectual regret (change of mind); see *HALOT* 2:688.

[8.](#) Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 68.

[9.](#) It is illogical to conclude from the doctrine of God's omniscience that all judgment is the result of human sin.

[10.](#) Westminster Confession of Faith, [chap. 5](#), “Of Providence,” art. 2.

[11.](#) See H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), esp. [chaps. 13](#) and [16](#).

[12.](#) John W. Olley, “‘Righteous’ and Wealthy: The Description of the *Saddiq* in Wisdom Literature,” *Colloquium* 22, no. 2 (May 1990): 38–45.

[13.](#) In this section I lean heavily on Warren A. Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Carpenter, 1984), 10–14.

[14.](#) Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 13–34.

[15.](#) Gage, *Gospel of Genesis*, 21.

[16.](#) I am indebted to Cleon Rogers for pointing out in a personal communication a probable intertextuality between the Feast of Weeks, the book of Ruth, Psalm 29, and especially Christian Pentecost. The original purpose of the Feast of Weeks (Exod. 34:22; Deut. 16:10) or the Feast of Harvest (Exod. 23:16) was to thank *I AM* for the grain harvest (Lev. 23:15–22). At this feast the firstfruits were waved before *I AM* (Lev. 23:11, 15). In Christian terms Pentecost marked the beginning of the church. The Christian believers at Pentecost were the “firstfruits” of the new age being inaugurated (Acts 2:4, 41). Around AD 150 the Feast of Weeks was thought to be the time when Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, and Pentecost was to commemorate this event (see H. L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* [Munich: Beck, 1922–56], 2:601). Although the rabbinic quotations are late, they may reflect earlier tradition. If so, this too is significant for Christian Pentecost, because at Pentecost the coming of the Holy Spirit, who wrote the law on the human heart, replaced the old administration by the law that was written on rock. At this feast, in addition to the Hallel (Ps. 113–18), which stressed God’s faithfulness to Israel, Ps. 29 was sung and the book of Ruth was read, whose story took place at the barley harvest and stressed God’s faithfulness to preserve the family line through which King David came. This too is significant, because Christian Pentecost proclaimed that Christ, son of David and Son of God, has assumed his throne at God’s right hand (Acts 2:29–36). Ps. 29 is especially significant for Christian Pentecost. The psalm has three parts: (1) the praise of the mighty Sovereign in heaven (vv. 1–2), (2) the picture of the mighty Sovereign in a thunderstorm (vv. 3–9), and (3) the praise and provision of the mighty Sovereign (vv. 10–11). The depiction of the display of power of *I AM* in a thunderstorm (Ps. 29) is perhaps echoed in “the blowing of a violent wind [that] came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting” on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2). The tongue-shaped flames of fire remind one of the lightning of Ps. 29:7, and that these were over each one gathered there indicates that the Spirit had come with power for each. That those receiving the Spirit were “declaring the wonders of God” (Acts 2:11) parallels the praise of those singing Ps. 29, esp. v. 9. That the eternal King grants to his people power and peace (Ps. 29:11, strength and shalom) is realized in the filling

of the Spirit and walking in reliance on Jesus Christ.

[17.](#) Gage, *Gospel of Genesis*, 11.

[18.](#) Ibid.

[19.](#) In Gen. 9:24 “found out” (TNIV) translates the Hebrew verb “to know.”

[20.](#) Gage, *Gospel of Genesis*, 12.

[21.](#) Ibid., 16.

[22.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, *Micah*, in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 2:675–723.

[23.](#) Ibid., 14.

[24.](#) C. S. Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 288.

[25.](#) Gage, *Gospel of Genesis*, 63.

[26.](#) Ibid., 64.

[27.](#) Ibid.

[28.](#) Ibid., 65.

[29.](#) J. P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 8.

[30.](#) Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis*, 65.

[31.](#) Ibid.

[32.](#) Ibid., 65–66.

[33.](#) Ibid., 66.

[34.](#) Ibid.

[35.](#) James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), xiii.

Chapter 12

THE GIFT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT: THE CHOSEN SEED

The God of Christians is not a God who is simply the author of mathematical truths, or of the order of the elements; that is the view of heathens and Epicureans.... But the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Christians, is a God of love and of comfort, a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 8.556

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bible is all about the irrupting kingdom of God, and Genesis is all about the elect “seed,” a metaphor for the people of God who constitute that kingdom. The narrator uses the refrain *tôlê dôt* (TNIV “this is the account of [proper name’s] family line,” from the root *ylâ*, “to beget”) to give his book structure and meaning. His use of key words such as “seed” (i.e., “offspring,” “descendants”) and “blessing” (“making fertile and victorious”) reinforces the book’s theme that God elected the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bless the earth. They are the heirs of the promissory covenant God made with Abraham.

The prologue of Genesis represents God as bringing his good creation into existence by fiat to overcome the primeval chaos, climaxing with God’s creating humankind in his image to rule over the good creation that sustains them. In the first of its ten *tôlê dôt* however, the representative man, succumbing to Satan’s temptation, rejects God’s rule for his own rule. The results are catastrophic: chaos (i.e., the disruption of the original good creation) and human shame, which signifies Adam and Eve’s sense of guilt, separating them from the Creator’s presence, his blessing of life and victory, and one another. Nevertheless, God intervenes by electing to change the woman’s affections toward the Serpent from attraction to hate. Yet in the promise that Eve will give birth to a “seed” that will crush the head of the Serpent, God warns that the Serpent will crush her seed’s heel. In brief, salvation history recounts her elect seed reversing the chaos Adam introduced.

The breach between the two seeds immediately becomes apparent at the end of *tôlê dôt* 1 in the conflict between the righteous Abel and the unrighteous Cain. The former approaches God with an acceptable sacrifice by bringing God the best, and so finds access again to God and his blessing; the latter approaches God with an unacceptable token sacrifice. His less than best, manipulative sacrifice dishonors God and wins God’s wrath, not his blessing.¹ Cain’s failure at the altar leads to his inability to master sin (Gen. 4:7, 11, 14). Out of envy of his brother and anger against God, Cain irrationally kills the true worshiper, but we are sure that clinical death only bruises Abel’s heel. Cain’s hubris results in God’s banishing him from his presence. Like an infectious contagion, sin

spreads and escalates in Cain's lineage.

God replaces childless Abel with the line of Seth *tôlê dôt* 2). His lineage begins to call upon the name of I AM ("the LORD") in their acceptable reconciliation to the forgiving God (Gen. 4:25–26). By *tôlê dôt* 3 (that of Noah) the yeast of sin spreads through humankind until it sours the whole human lump — all except righteous Noah. Universal sin merits God's universal flood, which returns the creation back to chaos. But in the ark that bobs on top of the flood is Noah's family ruling and saving the creation in miniature. At the end of *tôlê dôt* 3, it becomes obvious that Noah and his descendants still carry the gene of original sin (Gen. 8:21). In *tôlê dôt* 4 sin's contagion is so rampant that the human community collectively revolts and seeks to usurp God's heavenly rule to establish their own renown by building a tower into the heavens to overcome the mortals' restriction to earth. To minimize human hubris, God divides humanity into warring nations. But God preserves a salvific seed through elect Shem, terminating in the birth of Abraham, as recounted in *tôlê dôt* 5.

The election and call of Abraham begins a new divine initiative, the forming of a new nation to bless the nations. A nation, however, entails the new motif of land. The holy nation needs sanctified space and sustenance. *Tôlê dôt* 6 (about Abraham) recounts that God entered into a promissory covenant, sworn to by his own oath. The Abrahamic covenant promises that God will bless the patriarch with fertility and give his seed the land the Canaanites defiled. *Tôlê dôt* 8 and 10 narrow down the heirs of the covenant to Isaac, not Esau, and to Jacob and his twelve sons respectively. The narrator profiles these heirs of Abraham's covenant with Abraham's sons Ishmael *tôlê dôt* 7) and Esau *tôlê dôt* 9). Ishmael and Esau sire nations, but do not inherit God's covenant promises to Abraham.

As recounted in *tôlê dôt* 10, Providence leads the heirs of the covenant out of the land to escape Canaan's contagion by becoming aliens in racist Egypt until the iniquities of the Canaanites are fully ripe and ready to be cut down by Joshua's sword. Thus, the book of Genesis ends with the holy seed in Egypt awaiting the time when God will call them to realize his promissory covenant to give them the land. We turn to their misfortune in Egypt and to God's deliverance of them to worship him in the land as recounted in Exodus in the next chapter.

II. RELATIONSHIP OF GENESIS 12–50 TO GENESIS 1–11

Both humanity's fall and God's plan for its redemption begin with a single individual. With Adam, one man's unfaithfulness and disobedience bring a curse upon the earth along with pain and death upon all humanity. With Abraham, one man's faith and obedience bring the potential for a land of unique blessing and of life to all. Genesis 1–11 features the creation of the earth and humanity in general and their fall into corruption and rebellion; Genesis 12–50 features the formation of one family from which God creates a new people, places them in a new land, and invests them with the potential to bless all humanity. The story of the Fall poses the challenge; the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 11:27–25:18; 25:19–35:22; 37:2–50:26) are God's definitive response.

In other words, the primeval history (Gen. 1–11) and the patriarchal narratives are tightly related. In this chapter we begin by contending that the primeval history peaks in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). The patriarchal narratives begin with this call of Abraham to venture by faith to a new land where God will give him offspring from whom he will fashion a nation to bless all the nations on earth. The concentric structure of these narratives also indicates key themes of the narratives. God's call of Abraham and his covenant with Abraham present blueprints for the rest of Genesis, the Pentateuch, and indeed, the Bible. Two crucial aspects of that call and covenant are the identifications of the "chosen seed" and the "chosen land." This chapter features the "chosen seed." The "land" theme will emerge in our reflections on Joshua ([chaps. 18–19](#) below). In sum, when God calls Abraham to go to a new land and makes an unconditional covenant with him to make of Abraham's offspring a nation to bless all families of the earth, he initiates a *kairos* moment in salvation history.

A. Creation and Re-creation

Two motifs connect the primeval history and the patriarchal history: creation/re-creation and spread of sin/spread of grace. Here, in outline form, is a summary of the parallel structures between the antediluvian creation and the

postdiluvian re-creation in the primeval history.²

- A Creation out of chaotic water with divine blessing (1:1–2:3)
- B Sin involving nakedness, seeing/covering nakedness; curse (2:4–3:24)
- C Division of humanity into elect and nonelect (3:15–4:16)
- D No descendants of murdered younger, righteous Abel (4:8)
- E Descendants of sinful son Cain, who builds a city (4:17–24)
- F Descendants of chosen son Seth: ten generations to Noah (5:1–32)
- G Downfall: unlawful union (6:1–4)
- H Brief introduction to a faithful savior, Noah (6:5–8)
- A' Re-creation out of chaotic water with divine blessing (6:9–9:19)
- B' Sin involving nakedness, seeing/covering nakedness; curse (9:20–23)
- C' Division of humanity into elect and nonelect (9:24–27)
- D' Descendants of younger, righteous Japheth (10:1–5)
- E' Descendants of sinful son Ham, who builds cities (10:6–20)
- F' Descendants of chosen son Shem: ten generations to Terah (10:21–32)
- G' Downfall: unlawful union (11:1–9)
- H' Brief introduction to a faithful savior, Abram (11:27–32)

Note that as the introduction of Noah as the faithful savior signals the pivotal event that initiates the parallels to the antediluvian narrative, so the introduction of Abraham signals the transition from the primeval history (Gen. 1–11) to the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 12–50). Noah is the faithful savior in his depraved world; through him God preserves the creation in spite of human sin that climaxes in the unholy union of the sons of God with human daughters. When human rebellion escalates again and climaxes in an unholy union for the purpose of building the Tower of Babel, God again intervenes and saves them through Abraham and the nation he fathers through Sarah. In this fashion, the patriarchal cycles are anticipated by the overall pattern established in Genesis 1–11. Both major divisions of the primeval history of Genesis as a whole pivot on an elect, faithful seed.

B. Spread of Sin/Spread of Grace

The parallels between the two divisions of the primeval history also point to the spread of sin within the human race counteracted by the spread of God's grace.³ Genesis 1–11 consists of four distinct narrative episodes: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, and the Tower of Babel. Genealogies that form the backbone of Genesis divide these last three stories and form an alternating pattern of story and genealogy. Moreover, these four stories share a similar pattern. Each begins with God's rule and humanity's rebellion to that rule. They conclude with a divine word, God's judgment, and the mitigation of that judgment, demonstrating God's mercy.

The following chart shows the progression of the four key alternating elements in the stories, revealing the magnitude of human rebellion, the corresponding righteous judgments of God, and his constant mercy to mitigate the effect of his judgments. Note that the primeval history (*tôlê dôt* 1–5) does not draw to conclusion with a single act of divine mitigation to the judgment at the Tower of Babel. In its stead, the entire patriarchal narratives, God's election of Abraham and his seed (*tôlê dôt* 6–10), fulfill that function.

	Adam and Eve	Cain and Abel	Noah and the Flood	Tower of Babel
Rule	Tree	Do right	Conscience/ walk	Scatter
Rebellion	Eat	Fratricide	Total evil	Tower
Judgment	Death	Nomad	Flood	Language/nations
Mitigation	Seed	Protective tattoo	Ark	Abraham elected to bless nations

1. Adam and Eve

Rule. God obviously rules as a benign sovereign in the Garden of Eden. That scene begins with God's creating a paradise to live in and culminates in his giving Eve to Adam as his bride. The benign Sovereign's command is simple: accept your creatureliness; do not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (i.e., do not seek to usurp the place of God and become your own lawmakers, see [chap. 10](#)).

Rebellion. Tempted by Satan, Adam and Eve rebel against God. Eating of the forbidden fruit expresses their rejection of God's rule and their assertion of autonomy.

Judgment. Adam and Eve die spiritually, as symbolized by the protective barriers they sew to protect themselves from one another and by their hiding in

the trees to separate themselves from God. Instead of trust and intimacy, fear and anxiety reign in the human sphere. In addition God makes them fulfill their distinctive functions in painful labor: the woman in childbearing, the man in his work, and both ultimately in clinical death.

Mitigation. But the mitigation of the judgment is the seed of the woman. From the woman will come the Seed that will triumph where Adam failed, defeat Satan on behalf of humanity, and win for them eternal life.

2. Cain and Abel

Rule. The rule of God is assumed in the Cain and Abel narrative. God's question to Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" (Gen. 4:7) assumes the existence of conscience, a universal standard by which humans can evaluate both the rightness of their behavior and the integrity of their spiritual relationship with God.

Rebellion. The narrative assumes that Cain understands the need to worship God by offering a sacrifice. But by offering "some of the fruit," he fails to offer the Creator the firstfruits, in contrast to Abel who offers the firstborn of his flock. As a priest at the altar, Cain worships the right God but cynically performs his religious duties, hoping to manipulate God to favor him without pouring upon his sacrifice the fragrant oil of sincere worship. When challenged by God to affirm that God is trustworthy, he walks away from the question. Cain's reach for human autonomy is subtle and manipulative, a rebellion more sinister than the straightforward rebellion of his parents. His spiritual death at the altar leads to his ethical failure in the field when he murders his younger brother and refuses to take responsibility for him.

Judgment. God exiles Cain from the arable and fertile land to become a restless wanderer. Without God's protection Cain becomes a wanted killer. His response exemplifies the self-centered individual. Instead of showing contrition, he portrays himself as the victim: "The punishment is too great! I can't handle this!" Once again sin defiles the human conscience and alienates people from God and one another.

Mitigation. But God graciously places a mark on Cain so that no one will kill him. He sentences Cain to live out a normal life span in his unredeemed, alienated state. Significantly, civilization, which consists of arts and science, originates in the city Cain builds. Humanities and the sciences, which should have been used to develop a culture to God's glory, originate with a man who hates true religion and is incapable of brotherly love and culminate in Lamech's

polygamy, tyranny, and bloodthirsty revenge.

3. Noah and the Flood

Rule. Noah is a righteous man who has both the revelation of conscience and special revelation — as seen by his distinction between clean and unclean animals. His special revelation later becomes codified and expanded in the Mosaic law. His generation has both intuitive conscience and Noah's prophetic preaching.

Rebellion. But Noah and his family are profiled as lone figures against the black background of total religious and social failure. Cain rebels through tokenism and eventual fratricide, but during Noah's time tyrants rule the earth, creating royal harems. Evil has become so pervasive that every imagination is evil.* Even the line of Seth, which outlasts the flood through Noah and his family, conforms itself to the age and dies in the flood.

Judgment and mitigation. God's universal judgment through the flood is in proportion to the degree of rebellion. Humanity's universal corruption leads God to corrupt the entire earth. As the destructive waters pour forth, the plan of God and the hope of humanity and the future of the creation floats on top of the flood in Noah's ark.

4. Tower of Babel

Rule. God commands humanity to scatter. Isaac M. Kikawada notes that some of the Near Eastern flood epics assert that the purpose of a universal flood was to control human population. Kikawada argues that in ancient civilizations where too many people lived in one place, congestion and lack of resources resulted in famine and disease. The ancient civilizations wanted population control because their health and hygiene required it.⁴ In that worldview life is a conditional good, depending on whether it is too crowded or not. By contrast, in the Bible human life is an unqualified good. The biblical text deals with the problem of overcrowding by commanding people to scatter, to spread out and fill the earth.

Rebellion. Instead of scattering, humanity rebels because they seek security and peace without God. They build a tower as a symbol of their attempt to build a society apart from God's rule, creating their own utopia. The strength of their united purpose is their common language. Instead of scattering and depending on God, they choose to usurp his heavenly dominion. Today the United Nations building advances the long shadow of Babylon's iconic tower. Both are symbols

of humanity's vain effort to reunite and secure peace apart from God's gift of the Prince of Peace. Mathematics and science, which form the new universal language, attempt to undo the judgment of Babel. Through this new language, what human beings can achieve seems to have no limit. Whatever they can do, they do, even building orbiting space stations to defy their restriction to the earth. Having pillaged the earth, they hope to pillage space to gratify their greed.

Judgment. God responds to human hubris by confounding their languages and so destroying their strength. Their loss of communication divides them into nations. Given their original sin, the murder of a brother escalates to national wars. This resulting slaughter exacts more death than an isolated though universal flood.⁵ In World War II alone fifty million people were killed, and today technological developments between combative nations threaten to exterminate life and ruin the good earth.

Mitigation. If the judgment of the Tower of Babel effects horrific wars, where is God's new act of grace, which we have come to expect from the preceding three scenarios? He gives his answer in his call to Abraham, who by faith emerges from the nations to be blessed by God and to extend his blessing under God to the nations.

III. STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 12–50

Whereas alternating structures characterize the primeval history, concentric structures characterize the three patriarchal narratives. They too are separated by genealogies, including the genealogies of nonelect Ishmael, son of Abraham, and nonelect Esau, son of Jacob (Gen. 23:1–25:18; 35:23–36:43).

A. The Concentric Structure of the Abraham Cycle (11:27–22:24)

- A Genealogy of Terah (11:27–32)
- B Promise of a nation and start of Abraham’s spiritual odyssey (12:1–9)
- C *I AM* protects and enriches deceitful Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (12:10–20)
- D Abraham chooses land by faith; Lot chooses Sodom by sight (13:1–18)
- E Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot in war (14:1–24)
- F Land covenant with Abraham and annunciation of Ishmael (15:1–16:16)
- F’ Seed covenant with Abraham and annunciation of Isaac (17:1–18:15)
- E’ Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot in prayer (18:16–33)
- D’ Lot flees doomed Sodom and settles in Moab (19:1–38)
- C’ God protects and enriches deceitful Abraham and Sarah in Philistia (20:1–18)
- B’ Birth of Isaac and climax of Abraham’s spiritual odyssey (21:1–22:19)
- A’ Genealogy of Nahor (22:20–24)

The concentric structure of the Abrahamic cycle focuses on the inseparably related themes of God’s promise to Abraham to provide land and seed. The Abrahamic narrative begins by introducing us to Abraham and his family,

focusing on Sarah's barrenness. The rest of the narrative forms three acts. Act 1 concerns the theme of the land, beginning with Abraham's migration to the land (Gen. 12:1–9) and concluding with God's covenant to give his faithful servant the clearly marked out land of Canaan as his fief (Gen. 15:1–19). Act 2, concerning the theme of seed, begins with Abraham's attempt to fulfill God's promise by producing Ishmael through Hagar, moves through God's fulfillment of his promise by the birth of Isaac (Gen. 21), and climaxes in God's testing of Abraham's faith by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22). Act 3 (Gen. 22:20–25:11) is a transition section, preparing the way for the *tôlê dôt* of Ishmael (Gen. 25:12–18) and of Isaac (Gen. 25:19–35:29). It recounts the death of Abraham and Sarah and introduces Rebekah and Isaac, who give birth to Jacob, the central character of the next major *tôlê dôt* the *tôlê dôt* of Isaac.

1. Act 1

Act 1 has five scenes, all pertaining to the Sworn Land, with a promised seed as a submotif. The first scene recounts how Abraham obeys God's command to migrate to an unseen land that was at the time occupied by the Canaanites (Gen. 12:1–9). Climactically, the pilgrim builds altars at Shechem and Ai, symbols of his laying claim to the land for *I AM*. The second begins with a famine in Canaan. Not counting God trustworthy, Abraham chooses the bread of Egypt out of God's will in exchange for the stones of Canaan in God's will. This unfaithful act, but for God's intervention, would have cost him his life and Sarah's purity. Scene 3 recounts Abraham's faith in offering the Sworn Land to Lot in order to establish peace with a brother. But Lot chooses Sodom by sight, not Canaan by faith, leaving the land entirely to Abraham. Scene 4 shows Abraham's deliverance of Sodom and his nephew from the hands of four invading kings. Finally, in the climactic fifth scene, God makes an irrevocable, unconditional covenant to give Abraham the land of Canaan with the clearly marked boundaries of the ten nations currently dwelling in it.

Scene 5 is also a janus passage, a transition to act 2, for it reintroduces the theme of seed — in this case, the physical seed of Abraham, an inseparable component of God's covenant to give the land as a permanent possession to Abraham and his descendants. The connection between the Sworn Land and the promised seed can be seen in the consistent co-occurrence of the two in Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:5, 13–16, 18; 17:7–9, 12, 19; 22:15–18; 24:7; 28:13–14. In fact, Genesis 13:17 and 15:7 are the only verses where God promises the land to a patriarch without a concomitant promise to provide descendants.

2. Act 2

God's gift of the land, the dominant theme in act 1, is scarcely mentioned in act 2. Rather, the main theme of the second act is indicated by its first verse, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children" (Gen. 16:1a; cf. 11:30). This negative state is reversed toward the end of the act, "Sarah ... bore a son" (21:2). The first scene recounts the efforts of Abraham and Sarah to gain an heir through Hagar and her son, Ishmael. The result of this human effort apart from God's blessing is domestic tension that reverberates throughout history (16:1–16).⁶ In scene 2 God makes another covenant, this time with Abraham and Sarah to multiply them greatly and to empower them to give birth to nations and to kings. This covenant is conditioned upon the beneficiaries' faithfulness, as signified by circumcision (17:1–27).

In scene 3 divine visitors confirm that the covenant will be fulfilled through Isaac, Sarah's seed — not Ishmael whom Abraham also circumcised. Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot in prayer (scene 4: 18:16–33), and in scene 5 *I AM* responds by rescuing Lot, but the drunkard Lot unwittingly gives birth to Moab and Ammon through incest with his daughters, who are crude and animalish (19:1–38). "The older daughter said to the younger, '... there is no man ... to come upon us as is the way of all the earth' " (literal rendering of 19:31). This ignoble birth of Lot's descendants functions as a foil to the noble birth of Isaac, whom Abraham will instruct in what is right and just (18:19). Scene 6 parallels the second scene in act 1 where God rescues Abraham from Egypt. Again the matriarch who will bear the elect son is in jeopardy in a pagan king's harem, but as before, God spares her through inflicting the offending kingdom with a plague. Scene 7 recounts the birth of Isaac (21:2), and the drama in act 2 peaks in scene 8—will Abraham sacrifice to God this long-awaited son?

B. The Concentric Structure of the Jacob Cycle (25:19–35:22)

- A Oracle sought; struggle in childbirth; Jacob born (25:19–34)
- B Interlude: Rebekah in foreign palace: pact with foreigners (26:1–35)
- C Jacob fears Esau and flees land (27:1–28:9)
- D Heavenly messengers (28:10–22)
- E Arrival in Haran (29:1–30)

- F Jacob's wives are fertile (29:31–30:24)
- F' Jacob's flocks are fertile (30:25–43)
- E' Flight from Haran (31:1–55)
- D' Heavenly messengers (32:1–32)
- C' Jacob returns to land and is reconciled to Esau (33:1–20)
- B' Interlude: Dinah in foreign palace; pact with foreigners (34:1–31)
- A' Oracle fulfilled; struggle in childbirth; Jacob becomes Israel (35:1–22)

The Jacob cycle, the *tôlê dôl* of Isaac, also features the inseparable themes of land and seed. Scenes A/A' in the outer frame and F/F' at the pivot pertain principally to the themes of seed and land. D/D' and E/E' feature the seed's presence in the land. The interludes, B/B', pertain to fertility and protection in the land.

C. The Concentric Structure of the Twelve Sons Cycle

- A Introduction: beginning of Joseph story with a dysfunctional family (37:2–11)
- B Jacob mourns “death” of Joseph (37:12–36)
- C Interlude: Judah signified as leader of twelve tribes (38:1–30)
- D Joseph's enslavement in Egypt (39:1–23)
- E Joseph savior of Egypt through favor at Pharaoh's court (40:1 – 41:57)
- F Journeys of brothers to Egypt (42:1–43:34)
- G Brothers, especially Judah, pass Joseph's test of brotherly love (44:1–34)
- G' Joseph gives up power over brothers (45:1–28)
- F' Migration of family to Egypt (46:1–27)
- E' Joseph savior of family through favor at Pharaoh's court (46:28–47:12)
- D' Joseph's enslavement of Egyptians (47:13–31)
- C' Interlude: Judah blessed as ruler (48:1–49:28)
- B' Joseph mourns death of Jacob (49:29–50:14)
- A' Conclusion: end of Joseph story with a reconciled family (50:15–26)

Unlike the two previous cycles (Isaac versus Ishmael; Jacob versus Esau), no further distinction is made between the natural and the supernatural seed. All twelve sons of Jacob are part of the supernatural seed and become the patriarchs or eponymous ancestors of the twelve tribes that will constitute the nation of Israel. The issue to be resolved in this cycle pertains to kingship. Which of the twelve will rule his brothers? And out of which tribe of Israel will the king of Israel arise? In this struggle Joseph, father of Ephraim, becomes the ruler over his brothers while they sojourn in Egypt, but Judah emerges as the king worthy to rule Israel in the land. Judah's four older brothers are disqualified: dull Reuben by his incestuous relationship and the hotheads Simeon and Levi for using the sacred rite of circumcision to destroy the Shechemites who raped their sister. We will return to the theme of kingship in [chapter 24](#).

IV. KEY TO SALVATION HISTORY: CALL OF ABRAHAM (GEN. 12:1–3)

God’s command to Abraham, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), accompanied by seven promises, pertains to three expanding horizons that *en nuce* present God’s salvific program.

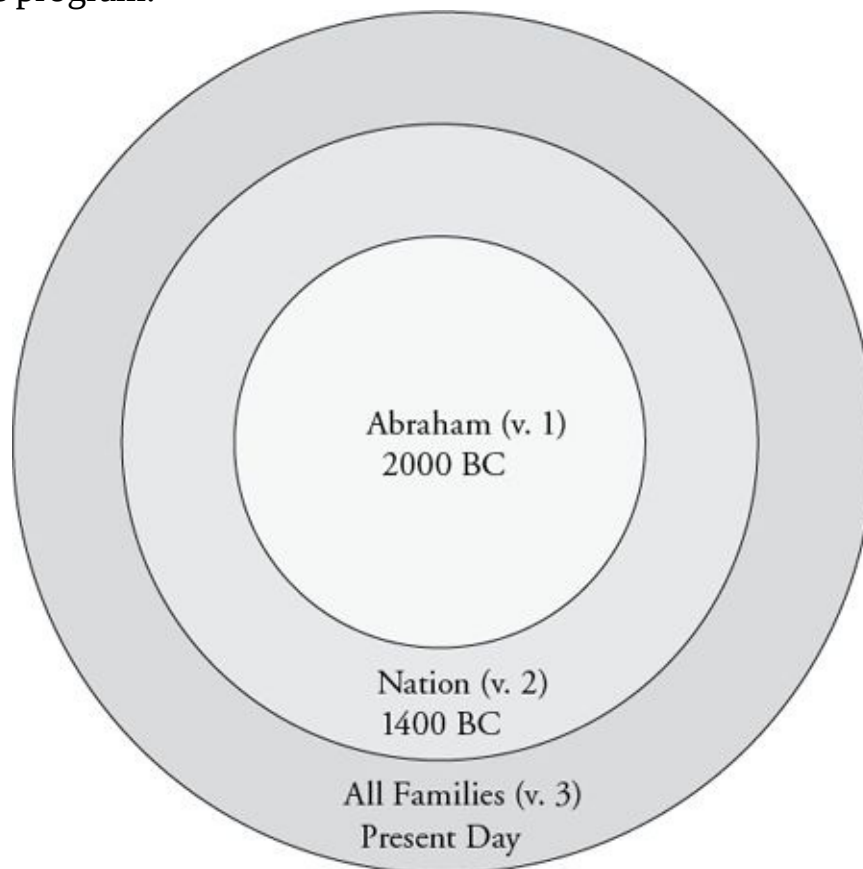


Figure 12.1

A. Individual (12:1)

As illustrated by the three concentric circles in figure 12.1, the salvific program begins within the narrow confines of God’s election of Abraham.⁷ In

the same way that the unique, all-sufficient, self-sustaining God called the good creation into existence, he now calls Abraham to disassociate himself from his family for the benefit of the nations (Gen. 12:1). Paul House comments, “Election here does not exclude or condemn anyone. Rather it works exclusively as a benefit to a world that has no intention of doing what is right.”⁸ Moreover, election here and its attendant blessings work in conjunction with Abraham’s obedience to that call (12:2).

B. Nation (12:2)

God promises to make Abraham into a great nation (i.e., a people with political control of its own affairs and destiny): a promise that defines the agenda for the rest of the Primary History.⁹ A nation typically is a common people (a primary theme of Genesis) with a constitution/law (the main theme of Exodus–Deuteronomy) and usually has a common land (a theme of the Pentateuch and Joshua) and a common leader/king (the principal theme of Judges –Kings). The last two are not essential; Israel existed as a pilgrim nation in the wilderness and in exile without a land or a king. These themes constitute the nation’s common memory that also binds them into a nation and defines their character. This promise of nationhood is certified, refreshed, and defined more precisely by God through his covenants with Abraham in [chapters 15](#) and [17](#). In [chapter 15](#) God gives Abraham the land where he has lived as an alien. In [chapter 17](#) he promises to make Abraham the progenitor of royalty and nations, making him exceedingly fruitful. Then, as a reward for his radical obedience in offering up Isaac, God swears by himself to make Abraham and his seed a universal blessing.

John Goldingay notes that in Genesis, as in *Enuma Elish*, the creation of the cosmos leads directly into the origin of the nation, but unlike *Enuma Elish*, the Primary History documents a temporal gap spanning centuries and even millennia between the creation of the cosmos and of Israel’s monarchic state. This is so in order that the people of God learn to live by faith on God’s word. True Israel knows it exists as a pilgrim people until the consummation of God’s oath. In the interim they also experience God’s blessings that encourage their faith. Human hope normally depends on poverty and uncertainty, but the hope of God’s people is also based on God’s track record and his triumphs, especially in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. The church’s witness to God’s victory in the future is based on a victory already achieved in history.

C. Universal (12:3)

The climactic third element of Abraham's call expands the horizon of his blessing to the whole earth for all time. Hence, the flow of God's saving acts in history moves from blessing a particular, faithful individual and his family to blessing all peoples. The term "to bless" (*brk*) with God as subject denotes procreative largesse and victory, accompanied with a sense of loyalty to the future generations (Gen. 1:28; 26:24; 27:27–29). It also connotes redemption, a relationship with God that transforms the beneficiary and provides security, safety, and victory.

God promises to bless those who bless faithful Abraham and his family but "to curse" (*ʔrr*) whoever curses (*qll*) him. "Those who bless Abraham" refers to those who invoke God's blessing upon him and the nation he will father. In other words, in view are the peoples who recognize Abraham and his seed as the mediators of divine blessing and so pray for God's prosperity upon them. But none can disregard God's mediator without incurring the divine curse. *Qll* means "to esteem lightly, to disdain," and *ʔrr* ("curse"), the antonym of *brk*, means "to inflict sterility, chaos, death, loss of relationship and transformation to the worse."

Although the text promises both blessing and curses, the Hebrew text emphasizes the divine resolution to bless, not curse. Like Old English, the Hebrew verbal system distinguishes between "I shall curse" (simple future) and "I will bless" (firm resolve). The latter is the form used in 12:3. Moreover, the narrator uses a plural form to refer to those blessed, but a singular form to refer to the cursed, suggesting a broad scope for blessings and a limited scope for curses. Nevertheless, whoever demeans Abraham's Seed — today, Jesus Christ of Nazareth and his church—by treating them as just any other human being or institution, not as God's Mediator, will suffer God's curse. An apostate Western civilization is increasingly suffering this reversal from fortune to misfortune. In the next chapter we will again see that God chooses an individual in order to use him or her to bless all who are open to the blessings or to judge all who spurn his grace. The promise that "all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you" is clearly not quantitative, but qualitative: not every human being that has ever lived will be blessed, but representatives of all peoples will be blessed.

V. PROMISE, COVENANTS, AND OATH

God's three expanding promises depend on Abraham's obedience to abandon his country and family and go to the land of Canaan. God later refreshes, expands, and clarifies those promises by two covenants and an oath.

A. Land Covenant (15:1–21)

Throughout the narrative, Abraham slogs it out in the land on the basis of God's promise to give him the land of the Canaanites. He hangs on to this promise even though, when his honored wife dies, he has to *buy* an expensive cemetery plot as his first piece of real estate in the land ([chap. 23](#)). In the climactic scene of act 1 of the Abrahamic cycle, God rewards Abraham with a renewed promise of a seed and ratifies his promise regarding the land by making a unilateral, irrevocable covenant to give him the land of the Canaanites as his permanent fief (Gen. 15). That land will extend from the "Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18, translation mine).¹⁰ God's later covenant to give Abraham and Sarah everlasting royal seed and his climactic oath to make the nation they bear a universal blessing are reckoned as a single covenant (Deut. 7:8; Neh. 9:32; Mic. 7:20; Luke 1:72–73; Heb. 6:13–20).

The climactic scene of act 1 consists of two night visions. Each vision has the following structure: (1) God's promise, (2) Abram's question, (3) God's prophetic word, (4) God's visual response, (5) and concluding statement.

Section 1 *Genesis 15 1 -6: The Seed*

God's Promise	After this, the word of <i>I AM</i> came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."
Abram's Question	But Abram said, "O Sovereign <i>I AM</i> , what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."
God's Prophetic Word	Then the word of <i>I AM</i> came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."

God's Visual Response He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Concluding Statement Abram believed *I AM*, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Section 2 Genesis 15:7–21: The Land

God's Promise He also said to him, "I am *I AM*, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."

Abram's Question But Abram said, "O Sovereign *I AM*, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

Preparation

for God's Visual Response and Enacting the Covenant So *I AM* said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

God's Prophetic Word As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then *I AM* said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

God's Visual Response When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

God's Covenant to Give Abram the Land On that day *I AM* made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates — the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."*

These covenant promises come at the heel of [chapter 14](#), where, after Abraham defeats the invading kings, he refuses to take any reward from

Sodom's pretentious king lest he detract from the true Victor's honor by allowing others to think that the king of Sodom made him rich. By forgoing the reward offered by the pretender, Abraham, by faith, anticipates God's reward. Graciously responding to Abraham's requests for clarification and assurance, God promises to give an heir and land as his reward. *I AM* reassures his faithful servant by a prophetic word and assists his faith with visual demonstrations at night.¹¹

To underscore the seriousness of God's intent, God grants Abraham a vision in which God binds himself with a curse. After sunset when darkness falls, *I AM* symbolically presents himself as an awesome smoking firepot with a blazing torch passing between the halves of the animals Abraham has slaughtered as a covenant sacrifice.¹² According to extant ancient Near Eastern texts, passing between the slain animals is a ritual that invokes a curse on the participants if they break the covenant. To walk between the carcasses is to submit oneself to the fate of the slaughtered animals as a penalty for covenant breaking.¹³ Note that only God walks between the carcasses, signifying that the covenant is not conditioned upon Abraham's future action, but based on Abraham's past faithfulness.¹⁴

B. Everlasting Covenant (17:1–27)

I AM's second grant to Abraham—this in the form of a covenant¹⁵ by a legal grant¹⁶ — is marked out by the introduction “*I AM* appeared to him” (Gen. 17:1) and by the conclusion “God went up from him” (17:22).¹⁷ The scene's introduction emphasizes the impotency of Abraham to effect this covenant — a ninety-nine-year-old man cannot be exceedingly fruitful (17:1). His body has become a dried-up tree without sap, and Sarah's womb at ninety years of age has become a wilted flower. This offspring clearly depends on the Author of Life, who even raises the dead (Rom. 4:18–25). This covenant distinguishes itself by being an “everlasting covenant” between God and Abraham and Abraham's offspring (v. 7).

The covenant has three parts, signaled in the TNIV by the refrains, “as for me [*IAM*]” (Gen. 17:4–8), “as for you [Abraham]” (vv. 9–14), and “as for Sarai [Sarah]” (vv. 15–16). The scene climaxes in Abraham's quick acceptance of his obligation to circumcise his household (v. 23). The details of his obedient response form the denouement (vv. 24–27). This second covenant, unlike the

first, features the theme of seed, especially royal offspring (Gen. 12:7; 13:10–17; 15:1–7; 49:8–12; Num. 24:7–9; Matt. 1:1). Nahum Sarna helpfully notes the scene’s parallel AB/A’B’ structure.

A Abraham the progenitor of numerous nations and of kings; his name is changed (17:1–8)

B Law of circumcision set forth (17:9–14)

A’ Sarah the progenitress of numerous nations and of kings; her name is changed (17:15–22)

B’ Law of circumcision carried out (17:23–27)¹⁸

The parallel structure exposes this covenant’s emphasis and expansion: to make Abraham and Sarah exceedingly fruitful and to bring forth nations and kings. Indeed, he will be so fruitful that God changes the man’s name from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“a father of a multitude”). The covenant promises are guaranteed because *I AM* will be their God, a promise guaranteeing them prosperity and protection. However, unlike the Noahic covenant with its rainbow sign, which depends totally on God to fulfill its blessings, the Abrahamic covenant with its circumcision sign depends on active faith obedience of the human partner to initiate the sign that activates its blessings. Without the sign a male forfeits his right to belong to the covenant community under God’s blessings. That sign of identification in the flesh has been replaced in the church by baptism for both men and women (Col. 2:9–12). Circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament are signs and seals of justification by faith that precedes them, and both represent the inward work of the Spirit to circumcise the heart and to place us in Christ’s crucified and resurrected body. Abraham kept the covenant sign and secured the covenant blessings for his descendants (Gen. 26:4–5). Neither circumcision nor baptism justifies; they signify justification and acknowledgment of Abraham’s God, who raises the righteous through faith in his promise.

C. God’s Oath (22:1–19)

God’s promise to Abraham was conditioned on his leaving his homeland and his family to go where God showed him. God’s “land” covenant was to give Abraham and his offspring the land of Canaan as a fief and God obligated himself to fulfill that covenant in the time of Moses and Joshua, but it did not

guarantee them the land as an everlasting covenant. God's "everlasting" covenant was conditioned on Abraham walking before God and being blameless (Gen 17:1–2) and on his and his descendants' obedience to circumcise their males. Abraham fulfilled those conditions, so God, in connection with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in a type, finally swore to keep this covenant forever. Now his becoming a nation and a universal blessing was sure, because God is eternal and the ruler of history. It was no longer conditional.

"I swear by myself, declares *I AM*, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Gen. 22:16–18).¹⁹

The texts of Genesis 12:1–3; 15, 17, and 22 distinguish between "says" (gives a promise), "makes a covenant," and "makes an oath." John Goldingay helpfully distinguishes them: "A promise is a formalized statement of intent and commitments.... Covenants and oaths are even more formalized and explicit commitments, made with ceremony and solemnity, even more self-binding."²⁰ In truth, however, an oath is the most solemn attestation of the truth or inviolability of one's words. People don't go to jail for breaking a contract, but they do go to jail for lying under oath. We should speak of the "Sworn Land," not the "Promised Land."

The writer of Hebrews comments, "Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath" (Heb. 6:16–17). If Abraham kept his side of the covenant obligations, how much more will God keep his oath (2 Tim. 2:13)?

VI. THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE CHOSEN SEED

(Because this is a biblical theology with an emphasis on the Old Testament, I reflect cursorily, in an appendix to this chapter, on the history of Christian doctrine regarding the relationship of God's chosen people in the old and new dispensations.)

A. Introduction

The significance of the agricultural metaphor “seed” for offspring is explicated by the creation narrative: “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds” (Gen. 1:11). As the seed of plants and trees produce according to their kind, human seed develops according to its “kind.” The “kind” of humans in view extends beyond racial distinction and physical features into character, behavior, and most important, spiritual proclivity. In other words, a seed has a given nature, and the nurture of history, including God's gracious intervention, gives it its distinctive shape.

EXCURSUS: THE UNITY OF GOD’S CHOSEN PEOPLE

In the history of orthodox Christian doctrine, three theological systems regarding the relationship of ethnic Israel (i.e., Jews) and the church (mostly Gentiles) have held the field. During most of the twentieth century in North America, historic dispensationalism prevailed, as popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible. In this system Israel/the Jews and the church are radically separated. The Jews are administered by the Sinai Covenant and the church by the New Covenant. The Jews are an “earthly people” because they are thought to be destined to inherit the land of Canaan and to rule the nations for a thousand years after Christ raptures (“catches up”) his church; by contrast, the church is destined to inherit the new heavens and the new earth.

A heretical form of dispensationalism — “two covenants” theology — contends that there are two covenants of God: the Jews who are related to God through Torah, and the Christians who are related to God through Christ. This system is unorthodox because, among other reasons, it confesses that Jews today can be saved without confessing Jesus Christ, thereby denying the necessity of his death to make atonement for sin.*

For most of the church’s history, a “replacement,” or “supersession,” theology prevailed. In this system God has abrogated his covenants with ethnic Israel and given them to his church. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, “realized eschatology” has held sway. In this system the kingdom promised to Israel is realized in the church and the consummation of that kingdom is still future, either in a questionable millennial kingdom or in the eschaton. Moreover, many today contend that before this future time, all ethnic Israel will be saved.

In this chapter I continue to reflect on the unity of God’s people through their common faith in Christ, though they sing different parts of his song. The Israel choir sang in anticipation of Messiah’s coming sacrifice; the church choir sings antiphonally in remembrance of his sacrifice (see [chap. 10](#)).

In [chapter 15](#) I reflect on the relationship of the unified people of God to the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. In this unified system the

substance of the Old Covenant is not replaced by the New. In the old dispensation, national Israel was administered by the Law while individual believers inwardly experienced the grace of the New Covenant through faith in Christ. The church, which is a holy, spiritual nation that visibly transcends political boundaries, is now administered by Christ's Spirit in connection with the Law being written on her heart. Then, in this chapter and [chapter 20](#), I reflect that the *visible* people of God have always included a nominal people of God who have not experienced inwardly the grace of the New Covenant through a living faith. In the old dispensation, Israel consisted of both those circumcised in the flesh and those circumcised in their hearts as well. In the new dispensation, the church consists of those baptized only with water and those baptized by the Spirit as well. The true people of God are invisibly united by having circumcised hearts and being baptized by the Spirit into Christ, though the latter grace was not revealed before Christ inaugurated the new age. At the end of church history the people of God will include the bulk of ethnic Israel. In other words, according to this unified understanding of God's people, God's covenant promises to Israel in connection with Abraham, Moses, and David are not abrogated but rather fulfilled and supplemented in Christ and his church.

Finally, the unified understanding of God's people as consisting of believers and unbelievers entails that when the nominal church degenerates to the extent that it abrogates the objective and eternal standard of God's Law and becomes, as it were, the synagogue of Satan, it too is under God's wrath and punished individually and corporately, temporally and eternally (see the fates of the seven churches in Asia Minor [Rev. 2–3], and apostolic warnings in the New Testament [e.g., Rom. 11:18–21; 1 Cor. 10:1–13; Jude 3–7]). Nevertheless, there has been and always will be at least a remnant of true believers.

In the Bible this metaphor can be used to refer to either physical and/or spiritual offspring. The first instance of this metaphor, in Genesis 3:15, refers to the spiritual: the seed of the Serpent versus the seed of the woman. In [chapter 9](#) we demonstrated from the text that all human beings by nature are physically made of earth's matter, that all bear the image of God, and that after the Fall all inherit both seminally and federally original sin and guilt. But in his sovereign grace, God intervenes to change the woman's religious and ethical affections by putting enmity against the Serpent in the woman's heart and in her children. Thus, religious affections are not inherited but effected by God's gracious intervention. In other words, there is always a potential for God to intervene and

change an offspring's expected nature, as in the cases of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.

The metaphor is also used to refer to physical offspring. In many cases "seed" refers to an immediate descendant, and usually to an individual son (Gen. 4:25; 15:3; 19:32, 34; 21:13; 38:8–9; 1 Sam. 1:11; 2:20; 2 Sam. 7:12). As in English, however, "seed" can also be a collective for a large group of offspring and in this use commonly refers to distant offspring (Gen. 9:9; 12:7; 13:16; 15:5, 13, 18; 16:10; 17:7–10, 12; 21:12; 22:17–18). "By extending promises to the seed of the patriarchs, the promises are cloaked in a prophecy and fulfillment pattern."²¹ Paul plays with the metaphor's singular and collective potentials in Galatians 3:16 and 29.

The word *seed* can be either an individual or collective term. As such it aptly expresses the age-old dilemma to balance the individual and society. The people of God enter his kingdom individually, but within that kingdom they are a corporate solidarity, unified by their covenants, the Spirit, and their union in Christ.

Four covenants progressively unite the people of God. After God enacted his covenant with Abraham, all the people of God, both Jew and Gentile, are Abraham's seed by their baptism into Christ. The sign of this unity in the old dispensation was circumcision; in the new dispensation it is their baptism into Christ, making them Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:26–29). After God effected the Mosaic Covenant with Israel, all the people of God subscribe to the absolute and eternal values of that covenant. In the sin offerings in anticipation of Christ's atoning death and in drinking the cup that remembers Christ's blood that was shed for the remission of sins, the people of God testify to their being united by the New Covenant. Finally, after God made his covenant with David, setting him and his house over his kingdom forever, all God's people recognize Christ Jesus "who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:3–4 TNIV).

The people of God also possess in common the same Holy Spirit and so love one another. According to Tertullian, the pagans in amazement commented of the Christians, "See how they love another!" Ideally, the people of God are all for one and one for all (cf. Acts 4:34–35).

Paul's favorite expression for the church is that its members are "in Christ." In Paul's theology, what happened to Christ happened to all. In [chapter 10](#) we spoke of our corporate solidarity with the first Adam and the Second Adam. Through spiritual baptism, symbolized by water baptism, the people of God died together with their Lord to their old lives and are raised together with him to new

life. Paul describes their unity in terms of the individual members of the body, each insufficient in itself but an essential part of the whole (1 Cor. 12).

In sum, “there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope ..., one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4–6). Those who confess their common covenants and their fulfillment in Christ are to make every effort to maintain the unity of Spirit. With regard to matters that are less than these essentials that unite them, God gave gifted individuals to bring the church to doctrinal unity (Eph. 4:7–16). Tragically, throughout church history its leaders have insisted on unity of doctrine in nonessentials as a basis for unity in spirit (see [chap. 9](#), note 2). By reversing the apostolic order to give priority of unity of spirit over unity of doctrine, the church has been unable to grow into the desired unity of doctrine.

B. Genesis 1–11

After the division of the human seed broadly into two spiritual races, the seed of the woman — as seen in Abel and then in Seth — reproduce her love for God, and the seed of the Serpent—as seen in Cain and his progeny—reproduce his spiritual enmity against God. The contrast and struggle between the two seeds is the central theme of the book of Genesis. Its ten *tôl^edôt* give the book its spine; its linear genealogies trace the holy seed from Adam and Eve to the twelve tribes of Israel. Physically, all human beings are the seed of the woman, but some are the spiritual seed of the Serpent and others the spiritual seed of her enmity against the Serpent.

A decisive narrowing of that lineage occurs when Noah prophesies that God commits himself to Shem and that Japheth’s seed will be both enlarged and eventually take Shem’s place, a prophecy that finds fulfillment in the New Testament, not the Old Testament (see [chap. 11](#) above). The Table of Nations locates Japheth’s seed mostly along the northeastern coastlands of the Mediterranean, the area from which the Gentiles of the early church mostly come. In the fulfillment of this prophecy, Japheth functions as a synecdoche for all the nations. Shem stands in stark contrast to Canaan, Ham’s youngest son, who is cursed to serve Shem and Japheth (Gen. 9:24–27). These three seeds develop further distinctives, as represented in the segmented genealogy of the Table of Seventy Nations (Gen. 10),²² distinctions that God hastens and defines by dividing the offspring of Noah’s three sons into language groupings (Gen. 11:1–9). However, the narrator, by placing the Table of Nations after Shem and

Japheth's blessings, communicates the notion that the nations are primarily participants in Noah's blessing, not Canaan's curse.

C. The Holy Olive Tree (Romans 11:1–36)

The metaphor of “seed” in the Abraham narrative leads naturally to other agricultural metaphors in the rest of Scripture. Once Israel is “planted” in Canaan, it is referred to variously in the Old Testament as “vine,” “vineyard,” “garden,” “olive tree,” “fig tree,” and more. These metaphors serve as stock symbols of Israel in the Old Testament, and they are used extensively by Jesus and Paul. An important extension of the metaphor for defining and tracing the development of the notion of the people of God is that of an olive tree in Romans 11:13–27.

Romans 9–11 form a literary unit within Paul's epistle. Here Paul reflects theologically on the role of ethnic Israel in salvation history. The section is framed by a personal lament (9:1–5) and a closing doxology (11:33–36). The intervening portion consists of four units (9:6–29; 9:30–10:21; 11:1–10, 11:11–32). The last three begin with Paul's asking a question (9:30; 11:1; 11:11); all four conclude with a series of Old Testament quotations (9:25–29; 10:18–20; 11:8–10; 11:26–27).

The four units develop Paul's argument as follows: (1) The patriarchs provide the nourishing sap of the enduring olive root. (2) The tree's natural branches (i.e., Abraham's natural descendants) turn to unbelief and are broken off. (3) While ethnic Israel (later known as the Jews) is unfaithful to its covenant-keeping God and, as Jews later on, rejects the gospel of Jesus Christ, not all of them are unfaithful; a remnant of true Israel always emerges. (3) While the Jews mostly reject Jesus Christ, “wild branches” (the Gentiles who accept him) are grafted into ethnic Israel's historic privileged position as heirs of God's covenants with the patriarchs. By the second century AD the church has an almost exclusively Gentile character. (4) The situation of ethnic Israel's hardening, however, is not permanent. Israel has experienced a hardening “until” (*achri*) the full number of Gentiles will be saved, and in this way all Israel will be saved.

Let us look at each of these four developments more closely.

1. Holy Root: Patriarchs

The decisive development in the identification of the chosen seed in Genesis occurs when God calls upon Abraham to leave his own country, people, and father's household. Abraham's responsibility to obey the call and his rewards in eternal covenants clearly emphasize human accountability to God's commands. Yet the distinctive gap between Abraham's worldview and that of his moon-god-worshipping, pagan family implies God's gracious intervention in the process by sowing in Abraham's unbelieving heart the heavenly seed of faith.

By obeying the heavenly voice, the prophet Abraham becomes the mediator of God's blessing to all who accept both him and the nation he fathers. This nation, however, does not encompass all of Abraham's physical descendants. The chosen seed is identified as Isaac, supernaturally born through Sarah's dead womb, not Ishmael through the womb of the insubordinate Hagar. Of the twins, Jacob is chosen, not Esau, according to God's right to extend mercy to whom he will: "Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad ... [Rebekah] was told, 'the older will serve the younger' " (Rom. 9:11; cf. vv. 10–29). Hereafter, however, God does not intervene again to distinguish one of the descendants to inherit Abraham's blessing. Rather, the narrator draws his book toward a conclusion with Jacob — in the first sustained poem in the Bible and one of the oldest of any length — pronouncing appropriate blessings on all twelve eponymous ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's deathbed blessing prophesies their unique destinies within their common destiny as a nation (Gen. 49:1–28). In other words, Abraham's seed at the end of Genesis becomes identified with all Israel's descendants without distinguishing those who embrace Abraham's true faith in God.

A few of what the narrator calls Jacob's "blessings" (see Gen. 49:28) could more accurately be labeled "anti-blessings," such as those pronounced on Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. However, these anti-blessings are indeed blessings if we see them in terms of the nation's destiny. By demoting Reuben for his turbulent attempt to supplant his father and/or his uncontrolled sex drive, Jacob saves Israel from reckless leadership. Likewise, by cursing the cruelty of Simeon and Levi, he restricts their cruel rashness. Furthermore, these anti-blessings anticipate that although the tribes are united by blood and history and are reckoned by God as a unified nation, not all participate in the patriarch's faith.

2. The Natural Branches: Israel and the Remnant

God acts on behalf of this nation. He fructifies them inordinately in Egypt, as recounted in Psalms 105 and 106 as well as in Deuteronomy 26:1–11. God

makes Israel so fruitful that they become too numerous for the Egyptians, whose heart God turns to hatred so that Israel will turn to *I AM* in their affliction. In an irony of history, God gives them divine birth as his firstborn son from the alien womb of Egypt. He does so by Passover blood, by “wind” at the Red Sea, and by water in their baptism with Moses in that Sea. In the wilderness on the way to the Sworn Land, God spreads out a cloud as a covering and a fire to give light by night. He feeds them heavenly manna and brings water out of the hard rock. Then God gives them the land of Canaan (see [chap. 20](#) below).

From the very beginning of this nation’s history, we can observe a deep rift between those Israelites who respond to *I AM*’s mighty acts with true faith and those who do not. At Sinai God calls upon the nation that has seen his tremendous acts on their behalf in Egypt to show they count him trustworthy by risking their destiny upon living in conformity with his word. Though they say they will obey and honor God with their lips, their hearts are far from him. At the first opportunity, they exchange their Glory for the image of a bull, giving credit for their deliverance to a manmade object, and engage in a pagan sex orgy. Though they repent, they lapse time and again into faithlessness, even turning to the Baal of Peor and his unclean ways. Only a few faithful stalwarts, such as Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Caleb, and Phinehas, show true faith in *I AM* by persevering through trials and tests. In other words, “true” Israel was already only a remnant within national Israel.

Although the second generation, led by Joshua, remains faithful and chooses to count God trustworthy and to worship him, the third generation turns to the Canaanite fertility gods. When God sends charismatic leaders to rule during the epoch recorded in the book of Judges, the people continue, in spite of periodic revivals, to reject the faith they have received by tradition from their fathers. In the crisis posed by the Philistines, God gives them David, his faithful servant, to be their shepherd king, but most of his successors forsake *I AM*. Israel’s kings have the responsibility to retain the land by faithful service, but their unfaithful kings lead the apostate nation into exile (2 Kings 17, 25).

In addition to the oracles of doom, based on the covenant curses, the prophets deliver oracles of salvation, based on God’s faithfulness to fulfill his oath to bless Abraham and his nation. These salvation oracles foresee Israel’s return to the Land and God’s enacting with the nation a new covenant through the Messiah (Isa. 11; Jer. 31; Ezek. 37). The second Jewish commonwealth fulfills the prophetic vision of the nation’s return to the land, but the commonwealth remains a small province within the successive Persian, Greek, and Roman empires and is still administered by the old covenant but without a king until Jesus Christ. A remnant composed of people such as Ezra and Nehemiah waits

for a future king to save them and fulfill the prophetic dream (Ezra 9; Neh. 9). In other words, the revived tree still bears a few good branches yielding sweet fruit, but most branches are unfruitful.²³

During the Second Temple period between Malachi and John the Baptist, Abraham's seed are called "Jews," a shortened form of "Judeans." The term originally designated a member of the state of Judah (2 Kings 16:6; Neh. 1:2; Jer. 32:12).²⁴ Non-Jews in postexilic times use this term of either former inhabitants of the province of Judah as opposed to other nations (Est. 9:15; Dan. 3:8; Zech. 8:23) or of proselytes to Judaism (Esth. 8:17). However, by the time Jesus arrives on the scene, he likens the Jewish state to a fig tree that has leaves but no fruit (Mark 11:20–25). The religious leaders of the Jewish province in collaboration with the political and military might of the Roman Empire put Jesus Christ to death, a death he could refuse but does not.²⁵ Though these religious and political establishments mock the Crucified One as a pretender to the throne, God mocks them by darkening the sky of the Roman sun god and by an earthquake that rends in two the temple curtain that represented the privileged status of the Jewish priesthood (Mark 15:33, 38). His ascended Son is about to bring in with the heavenly power of the Holy Spirit the promised kingdom of God.

Because the term "Jew" becomes associated with Christ-rejecting Judaism, it confounds salvation history to identify the religion of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets as Jewish, which is as opposed to Christ and his disciples as Babylon was to Jerusalem and Israel. Jewish is post-Christian and anti-Christian Israel. In other words, the history of nominal (i.e., "in name only") Israel's religion and of its extension into Judaism is a model of people under God's present judgment and future salvation. By contrast, the history of "true Israel" and its extension into a faithful church is a model of a people under blessing. An unfaithful church is presently as much under God's curse as post-Christian Israel.

Nevertheless, we need to remind ourselves that Israel is the holy root that supports the church: Israel gave the church its metaphysics, its worldview. God revealed his sublime attributes; he is the sole Creator, Lord of creation and of history. Through Israel he showed that his salvation history has rhythm and meaning. The church is the heir of Israel's blessed covenants, holy Torah, and ennobling mission to establish the kingdom of God. Above all, Israel gave the church its Lord and Savior: Jesus Christ. Salvation is of the Jews.

3. Wild Branches: Gentiles in the Church

While the natural branches (i.e., the Jews) are being cut off by their disobedience in rejecting Christ, wild branches (i.e., Gentiles who accept the gospel of Christ) are pouring into Israel's privileged position as Abraham's offspring. This development began already with Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17). God's promise to bring forth from them many nations has both a biological sense and a spiritual sense.

The biological interpretation is validated by the genealogies of Keturah (Gen. 25:1–4), Ishmael (Gen. 25:12–18), and Edom (Gen. 36:1–43). The spiritual interpretation finds support both within the covenantal promise itself and within the canon. Within the covenantal promise, it is declared that kings will come out of Abraham's loins, but it is not said that the nations he fathers are thus begotten (Gen. 17:6). Moreover, circumcision, the sign of the covenant, is extended to every male in Abraham's household, "whether born in your household or bought with your money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring" (Gen. 17:12–13).²⁶ This command implicitly suggests the possibility of nations who are part of Abraham's covenant (under the sign) but do not proceed from his loins. This suggestion is confirmed by the psalmist, who in Psalm 87:4–6 declares the inclusion of Gentiles among the people of God, and by the apostle Paul, who interprets Abraham's fatherhood of nations as having its fulfillment in Paul's mission to the Gentiles (Rom. 4:16–17; cf. Gal. 3:15–19). According to this spiritual interpretation, "father" in the clause "I have made you a father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5) designates a spiritual relationship, as in Genesis 45:8 and Judges 17:10.

Jesus anticipated that a new people would inherit the kingdom of God. In his story of the good Samaritan, the Jew in the ditch discovers that the Samaritan is his neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus predicted, "Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:10–12). Moreover, he taught that unless one's righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, that person cannot enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20). In fulfillment of this prophecy, the Roman centurion and not the high priest—like Naaman and not Ahab — inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, the Pharisees are excluded from the kingdom because they reject the new covenant the Messiah brought.

Time and time again *I AM* sends to Israel and Judah prophets to call them back to their spiritual heritage, but national Israel beats and kills them. Finally, he sends his Son and they crucify him (Mark 12:1–12). With that rejection, there is no one else to send. In other words, the end has come for national Israel. As

the prophets and his Son have foretold, *I AM* forsakes them as a nation and chooses instead to form a new Israel. The Stone the builders of the old nation reject, God makes the Chief Cornerstone of his new temple, a temple composed of living stones from all nations (Ps. 118:22; Mark 12:10; 1 Peter 2:4–8). The ascended Son of God and of David creates this new Israel from his heavenly throne by sending the Holy Spirit to bless his church, which none can defeat (Matt. 16:13–20; Acts 2). Those who had not been God’s people now inherit the privileged status as his elect, holy nation (1 Peter 2:9–10, 12).²⁷ In the words of Paul’s analogy of the Israel of God to an olive tree, the natural branches (the Jews) are broken off and wild branches (the Gentiles) are grafted into the cultivated olive tree to become the heirs of Israel’s covenants (Rom. 11:11–29; Eph. 2:11–12). Horticulturists usually insert a shoot or slip of a cultivated tree into a common or wild tree, but the wise Farmer, “contrary to nature,” grafts wild branches into a cultivated tree. Christopher Wright says,

Gentiles now share the root and sap of Israel’s sonship, glory, covenants, law, temple worship, promises, patriarchs—and ... the human ancestry of the Messiah. The Gentile Christian, therefore, is a person of two histories: on the one hand, his own national and cultural background, ancestry and heritage..., and on the other hand, his new spiritual, “ingrafted” history — that of God’s people descended from Abraham which he inherits through inclusion in Christ.²⁸

In Ephesians Paul shows the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church by contending that the church inherits ancient Israel’s covenants.²⁹ By abiding in Christ, the true Vine, Christians now bear the spiritual fruit that heretofore God had failed to savor from the vine of national Israel he had so carefully cultivated (Isa. 5; John 15). God, however, again leaves a remnant supported by the holy root of the patriarchs. Before *I AM*’s return, the natural branches (i.e., the mass of Abraham’s physical descendants) will be grafted into the holy tree and bear true fruit (see [chap. 20](#)).

Although God will never cut down the cultivated tree rooted firmly in his covenants and oaths to the patriarchs, he cuts off and grafts in branches, both natural and wild, appropriate to his righteous wisdom and mercy. Like Israel of old, the church continues to have both true believers and nominal believers. “Some churches have become so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan.”³⁰ The tragic history of national Israel thus serves as a sober warning to the nominal church. Throughout church history God

has sternly cut off wild branches and mercifully grafted in new ones, always preserving a few of the natural branches. The churches that formerly inhabited Turkey were warned in the letters of the Apocalypse that their lampstands would be removed (e.g., Rev. 2:5). True to his word, God removed that lampstand, or branch, when they failed to heed his warning.

Today God is in the process of cutting off branches in Western civilization, as he implicitly threatens in Romans — “you also will be cut off” (11:22)— and replacing them with branches in the developing nations.

4. The Natural Branches: All Israel Will Be Saved

The situation of ethnic Israel’s hardening, however, is not permanent. Israel has experienced a hardening “until” (*achri*) the full number of Gentiles will be saved and in this way all Israel will be saved. In this connection Paul quotes Isaiah 59:20–21 and 27:9 that the deliverer will come from Zion (see [chap. 20](#)). To understand what Paul means by “all Israel will be saved,” we must explore three ambiguities. First, does *achri* denote only a *terminus ad quem* (i.e., terminative time, entailing nothing beyond that terminus)? Second, to what does *houtos* (“in this way”; NIV “so”) refer? Third, who is “all Israel”? Our answer to these questions depends on the interpretation of the argument of 11:11–32 as a whole.

Douglas Moo notes that Paul develops this section by a symmetrical pattern of a three-stage process in which God’s blessings oscillate between Israel’s sin and rejection, the Gentiles inclusion, and Israel’s final acceptance. Here is an adaptation of Moo’s schematic representation:^{[31](#)}

Abc¹: vv. 11–12: “trespass of Israel”—“salvation for Gentiles”—Israel’s fullness

Abc²: vv. 13–16: “rejection” of Israel — “reconciliation of the world — “acceptance of Israel” (equal to “life from the dead”)

Abc³: vv. 17–24: “natural branches [Israel] broken off” — “wild shoots [Gentiles] grafted in” — “natural branches grafted back in”

Abc⁴: vv. 25–26: “hardening of Israel” — “fullness of Gentiles” — “all Israel will be saved”^{[32](#)}

This symmetrical pattern strongly argues that in Abc⁴: (1) “until the fullness [NIV “full number”] of the Gentiles” refers to the end point of God’s program for Gentile salvation, after which he will again return to his program for Israel.

(2) “In this way” refers to the pattern of Israel’s hardening resulting in the gospel going out to the Gentiles, and their acceptance of it, which in turn leads finally to fullness of salvation for Israel. (3) “All Israel” (i.e., the people seen as a corporate solidarity, not as each and every individual [cf. Mark 1:5]) refers to ethnic Israel at their future time of acceptance leading to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul calls this pattern a “mystery” (i.e., a hidden plan of God not previously revealed). Nevertheless, although to Paul it is a mystery, it conforms to the prophecies that “the Deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob” (Rom. 11:26).^{[33](#)}

For the identification of Zion in 11:32 (cf. Isa. 59:20–21a [= Rom. 11:26–27a] and 27:9 [= Rom. 11:27b]), which draws Paul’s argument on the benefits of being a Jew to its climactic conclusion in 11:11–32, see [chap. 20](#). In conclusion, the church has a primary responsibility to evangelize the Jews, for there will always be a remnant of them in the church, and the effort will not fail, because in the hopefully not-too-distant future, *I AM* will again deal with all Israel in mercy and bring them to repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ: David’s son according to the flesh, and God’s Son according to the Spirit.

VII. SPIRITUAL CHARACTER OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The creation narrative lays down the principle of “according to its kind” where the progeny reflects the nature of its progenitor. As we conclude our study of the Abrahamic covenant and the identity of the chosen seed throughout salvation history, we now turn to the question, What is the spiritual genetic code of the seed that bears fruit to God’s glory and pleasure? Here we limit our research to the holy root, the patriarchs.

A. Introduction

A person’s life is complex and contains ambiguities (see Carl Jung in preface, p. 18); however, when that life is told as part of a story, it is frequently the task of the storyteller to highlight the person’s defining characteristic. One thinks of Scrooge as stingy, of Sherlock Holmes as perceptive. What are the defining characteristics of the patriarchs, the icons that the narrator uses to represent his ideals for the people of God? To answer this question, we need to be reminded that the patriarchs, their wives, their children, their friends, and their enemies all function in the narrator’s hands as examples of how faith works in a drama combining comedy and tragedy. None of the patriarchs is what literary critics call a “flat figure”³⁴ (i.e., static and stereotypical); rather, they are “round figures” (i.e., complex and developing), steadily moving toward a defining moment when their dominant characteristics emerge most powerfully. Moreover, we meet the biblical characters in times of crises and stress. Their responses to these severe divine tests reveal their true character.

Moshe Weinfeld argues that there are striking similarities between the patriarchal accounts and the *Aeneid* epic. He explains the common features in the two works of literature created hundreds of years apart and reflecting two entirely different cultures as due to a psychology of “foundations.”³⁵ Whether his analogies hold up or not, the notion of a people’s psychological need of foundations is intuitively right. The accounts of the patriarchs provide the Israel of God with an understanding of its foundation.

B. Abraham: Icon of Faith

Hebrews 11 catalogues *heroes of faith* in the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews devotes one verse in tribute to each hero with the exception of two characters. The author devotes six verses to Moses and twelve to Abraham. The disproportionate space given to Abraham reflects a clear consensus that Abraham's defining characteristic is faith: he fears God (Gen. 22:12), walks before *I AM* (17:1; 24:40), and listens to his voice (22:1–14; 26:5). His faith in God's trustworthiness emerges in story after story: his departure for an unseen land (Gen. 12:1–9), his offering the Sworn Land to Lot (Gen. 13), his military campaign against four powerful Mesopotamian kings (Gen. 14–15), his belief in God's supernatural giving of offspring (Gen. 16–17), and above all, his sacrifice of his "only" son (Gen. 22:2).

The Bible does not, however, paint a picture of a man of perfect faith, but of a man who stumbles and gets hurt. He is slow to leave his homeland for an unseen land; when he arrives, he walks right through it to feast on Egypt's bread; and he obeys Sarah and seeks at first to fulfill the divine promise of a seed through his own, not God's, empowering. Finally, just before the birth of Isaac, he pulls the same "sister" deception trick he had used in Egypt. Thus, even the greatest hero of faith sometimes fails. We need to keep this balanced view of Abraham in mind as we focus on Abraham's characteristic trait. The three covenant/oath scenes, though not the only illustrations, reveal key elements of his notable faith.

1. *Faith That Justifies (15:1–7)*

Traditionally, theologians helpfully distinguish between two aspects of faith: *fides qua*, the act of faith ("trust"), and *fides quae*, the content of faith ("believe"). Both are essential to saving faith. Christian Scientists focus on *fides qua* (i.e., trust), but they do not believe (*fides quae*). Nominal Christians may confess creeds, but they do not trust the God of the creeds. Abraham committed himself to God's promises.

I AM comes to Abraham with the promise of great reward (*fides quae*), but Abraham cannot see it. He cannot see the innumerable offspring, the nation and church that are to come from his loins and faith. He sees only the physical "reality" before him — no children, a servant as heir. In response, God uses two instruments of grace, word and vision. He directs Abraham's gaze upward away from his "reality," using the sight of the heavens as the gateway to a heavenly sight — an abundant blessing that cannot be counted. As Abraham sees the stars,

he “sees” the reality of God’s promise, and he trusts/believes (*fides qua*).

In essence, God uses the stars above to engage Abraham’s imagination so that he can “see” what he cannot see because, fundamentally, faith is imagination — not of human concoction but informed by the word of God. More than that, believers receive inward assurance by God’s Spirit that what they hope for and do not see is certain. People with such faith see beyond their sensory perceptions. What the faithful see and hear in their inward vision stands opposed to their physical sight: the physical world abused by human depravity as individuals and political and social groups of this world seek to empower themselves apart from God. But those with faith understand that the physical sights are fated for transience. Faith is like an inspired dream in which one lives. Some dreams don’t die easily; others, like the one *I AM* gave to Abraham, never die. The invisible, celestial city whose builder is God and which the people who live by faith only see and embrace from afar, is in fact solid, rock-hard, unfading reality. By God’s word and inward vision, faith comes to fruition. Pascal drew this conclusion: “It is the heart that perceives God, and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.”^{[36](#)}

Abraham believes God’s word to him of a S/seed through whom he will bless the nations, and God reckons Abraham’s sure confidence in him to keep that promise as equivalent to keeping the law, as equivalent to all righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Samuel Terrien writes, “Abraham had no law to obey. In such a context, his righteousness was not viewed as a reward for obedience. The text points to the inwardness of his attitude and to the totality of his devotion.”^{[37](#)} Believing that God is trustworthy and that he will keep his covenants and promises lies at the heart of a relationship with God. It is a nonnegotiable. But no human being—for all are stained with original sin — can conjure up this pure virtue of certain and inwardly assured faith by human resolve. Such a faith is God’s gift to his people with whom he chooses to partner (Eph. 2:8–9). True Israel is born not by a human decision but of God (John 1:13).

Genesis 15:6 is a foundational building stone in Pauline theology upon which he builds the doctrine of justification by faith instead of by works (Gal. 3:6–14).^{[38](#)} Abraham places his entire trust in the prophetic word that promises, as it were, the birth of an heir from the dead (Rom. 4:17–21; Heb. 11:11–12). God reckons his faith in this seed, pregnant with its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, equivalent to meeting his moral demands. In this, Abraham models our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s sacrifice for sin, and God’s crediting that faith to us as righteousness (Rom. 4:22–25).^{[39](#)}

2. Loyal Obedience (Gen. 17)

The Heidelberg Catechism (AD 1563) answers Question 61 this way: “It is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.” Abraham’s obedience proves his faith by fulfilling the command “walk before me and be blameless” (17:1) and by circumcising his household (17:9–14, 23–27). Gordon Wenham explains,

Whereas inaugurating the covenant was entirely the result of divine initiative (17:1–8, 15–22), confirming [or sealing] it involves a human response, summed up in v. 1 by “walk in my presence and be blameless,” and spelled out in the demand to circumcise every male.^{[40](#)}

Devotion and obedience, the fruit of living faith, is faith’s correlative aspect: “Faith ... is not alone in the person justified, but it is ever accompanied with all other saving graces and ... worketh by love.”^{[41](#)} To “walk before God and be blameless” means to orient one’s entire life by taking every step with reference to his presence, promises, and demands.^{[42](#)} Abraham keeps faith with God and circumcises his family, and so the covenant is now irrevocable and unconditional. God will do for Abraham all he has promised.

But to enjoy the covenant’s provisions, the future seed must receive the sign of circumcision, “the seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). Any male who refuses to take the sign that his procreative organ has been set apart for God “will be cut off from his people” (Gen. 17:14; cf. Gen. 21:4; Luke 1:59; Phil. 3:5). At Sinai *I AM* further stipulates that the nation will enjoy the covenant blessings by loving God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves. That demand, however, can only be effected by the Holy Spirit, who must write the law upon the heart. In other words, the outward ritual of circumcision by itself will not satisfy the conditions of the covenant. What is required and is symbolized by the outward act is the Spirit’s circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 44:7–9).

Today God defines his people, not by their physical descent from Abraham, but by their spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ (see [chap. 20](#) below). Jesus Christ keeps God’s covenant perfectly and fully and is reckoned by God as the believer’s representative before him. Moreover, God administers them by the new covenant written on their circumcised hearts (Jer. 31:31–34; Rom. 2:28–29; 2 Cor. 3:2–6; Gal. 6:15). Thus, circumcision, the old sign of membership in the

covenant community, is replaced by the rite of baptism. This new rite symbolizes that the child of God is “circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ” (Col. 2:11). It also symbolizes that they live not naturally but supernaturally by faith, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12). In baptism they place themselves at the disposal of and entrusted to the triune God (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38; 8:16; Rom. 6:3–4). In continuity with circumcision, God gives the institution of family a significant role in the baptism ritual, allowing the faith of the parents to serve as the basis for the entrance of the child into the covenant community (Gen. 7:1; Acts 16:31). This is so because in Christ’s body the traditional divisions are broken (Gal. 3:26–29) and all are welcome, adults and children (Luke 18:15–17; cf. Luke 1:59; 2:21; Phil. 3:5). However, once again the community must guard against the danger of those participating in an initiation rite without living by faith the life of God’s new covenant.

3. Radical Obedience (Gen. 22)

Drawing from Erich Auerbach’s reflections, Everett Fox comments that biblical style “favors one central preoccupation: a man’s decision in relationship to God.”⁴³ This preoccupation is illustrated fully in the scene of “The Binding of Isaac,” the critical moment of decision faced by Abraham in his relationship to God. In this scene, Abraham and *I AM*’s commitments to one another are strained to their limits. *I AM* commits himself to bless the earth through Abraham and Isaac by making them into a great nation within the community of nations; Abraham commits himself to live on the basis of counting God trustworthy to be wise and just in his instructions and faithful to keep his promises. God tests that commitment by asking Abraham to kill his “only” son, the promised heir of his faith.

The command is absurd. Søren Kierkegaard likens the relationship between a father and his son to an old man with a cane. It is sad when an old man dies, leaving his cane behind. But it is much sadder when the cane is taken from the old man. God commands Abraham in his old age to break his cane. More than that, God’s command defies human reason. The meaning of Abraham’s whole venture depends on the life of his son. For decades he has lived in hope of this son and has watched him grow probably into puberty, yet God commands Abraham to negate his significance and all he hoped for. Worse yet, the

command is morally questionable. To be sure, the firstborn male of the womb belongs to *I AM* (Exod. 13:1), but is not the taking of an innocent life murder (Gen. 9:5–6; Exod. 20:13)? At the least, the command tests the very limits of morality. In short, *I AM* is calling on the man of faith to live in radical obedience to God’s commands against the norms of emotion, reason, and ethics.

Abraham passes the test with flying colors. When God calls Abraham in this scene, Abraham responds, “Here I am,” indicating that he is ready to hear and obey. Unlike his pleading with God to spare Sodom, this time he obeys without an argument. Torn between his faith in the divine command and the command to nullify the promise, between affection for God’s gift and for God, Abraham leaves the donkeys and the servants at the base of the mountain and begins the fateful climb with his son. Abraham’s lonely journey up the mountain symbolizes the lonely, psychological journey of faith to the place of obedience and sacrifice. But God proves faithful and provides the ram for the sacrifice, keeping his promise to mediate his blessings through Isaac.

For some unknown reason, God chooses this history in which we find ourselves to validate his own reality and ours. He does not test us beyond our ability (1 Cor. 10:13) or lead us into sin, but he does test the quality of what we are; and the proof of what we are is what we do (James 2:14–24). We are not to put God to the test (Exod. 17:2, 7; Deut. 6:16; Luke 4:12), but to respond humbly and obediently to his Word.

Abraham experienced the fulfillment of different aspects of God’s promises: “*I AM* had blessed him in every way” (Gen. 24:1; 26:12; 35:9). But he did not experience the promise of his becoming a great nation, nor will he experience all his covenant blessings until he realizes them with us in the eschaton (Heb. 11:39–40). Until then, the people of God live by faith to taste more of what they already enjoy.

Turning to the New Testament, John’s gospel is all about faith in the present age: faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30–31). In Psalm 2 those terms refer to a human king, but in John they are redefined to refer also to Jesus of Nazareth as one who was united to God before his birth, became a man in Jesus of Nazareth, and remains a God-man for all eternity. He is God’s one-of-a-kind Son.^{[44](#)}

C. Isaac: Sober Warning against Sensuality

For those who wish to live the life of faith, Isaac’s narrative serves as a sober

warning against succumbing to sensuality. While many believe that Isaac's defining characteristic is passivity and/or submissiveness, that appraisal applies only to the scene of "The Binding of Isaac," in which Isaac is at most an adolescent. Rather, the defining moment for Isaac comes not while lying on the altar under Abraham's blade, but on his imagined deathbed in the scene "Isaac Blesses the Twins" (Gen. 26:34–28:9). Anticipating imminent death and facing the need to pass on the torch of God's blessing to the next generation, Isaac fails utterly, demonstrating the spiritual insensitivity of a life that has become enslaved to physical sensuality.

We can observe the narrator's negative evaluation of Isaac from two significant gaps. First, among the ten *tôlêdôt* in Genesis, there is no *tôlêdôt* of Abraham. That is to say, while there are full-fledged sections devoted to Abraham (*tôlêdôt* of Terah), Jacob (*tôlêdôt* of Isaac), Jacob's twelve sons (*tôlêdôt* of Jacob), and even small, marked-out sections for the descendants of Ishmael and Esau, there is no section devoted to Isaac, his life story split between Abraham and Jacob's sections. This intentional omission of Isaac from the overall structure of Genesis speaks volumes about the place of Isaac among the patriarchs.

Second, after the "Isaac Blesses the Twins" scene, Isaac and Rebekah essentially vanish from the story line. In the denouement of this tragic scene, in *tôlêdôt* 8 (25:19–35:29), Isaac and Rebekah send Jacob off to his uncle Laban to save him from Esau's wrath. From that moment, the unhappy couple are not heard from again until the brief mention of Isaac's death and burial at the end of the Jacob cycle (Gen. 35:27–29). There is no mention of Rebekah's death and burial at all. Her last words to the fleeing Jacob are: "I'll send word for you to come back from there ..." (Gen. 27:45). She never does. Instead of bringing the matriarch's life to a closure, the narrator chooses to memorialize Deborah, Rebekah's nurse from childhood and closest surrogate (Gen. 35:8)!

In light of the memorial narratives devoted to the other patriarchs and matriarchs (Gen. 23:1–20 for Sarah; 25:1–10 for Abraham; 35:16–20 for Rachel; 49:33–50:14 for Jacob), the narrator's silence on Isaac and Rebekah is deafening. The two hang on to their place in salvation history only by the skin of their teeth (Job 19:20; 1 Cor. 3:15).

Although Isaac's story is "gapped," some of the elements of his rise and fall can be pieced together from the impressive narratives about his father, Abraham (Gen. 11:27–25:11), and about his son Jacob (Gen. 25:19–35:27). By putting these sequential pieces together, we can document the trajectory of Isaac's life. In short, he ascends spiritually until when, in his sixtieth year, his prayed-for

twins are born. The first scene after that occurs fifteen years later (Gen. 25:27–34, “Esau Sells his Birthright”), and there we find a hint of Isaac’s heading down the path that will culminate in his climactic failure when he is about a hundred and thirty years old.

1. Triumphant Isaac

Five pieces in Isaac’s triumphant early years merit comment. First, the Abraham narrative (Gen. 11:27–25:11) features the miraculous birth of Isaac. The plot of Abraham’s narrative exposes the maturing of Abraham and Sarah’s faith through their desire to have the baby God has promised them, a baby that can come only through divine miracle. Isaac’s miraculous birth, however, is no guarantee that his life of faith will not miscarry.

Second, the miracle baby receives the finest theological education available. *I AM* chooses Abraham for this very reason: “I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of *I AM* by doing what is right and just, so that the *I AM* will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19).

Abraham both talks and models the faith, and Isaac is a good son, as demonstrated in the “Binding of Isaac” scene (Gen. 22). A son who is strong enough to carry on his back a load of wood sufficient for a sacrifice is certainly able to resist an aged father if he is so minded. The narrator depicts Isaac as having the habit of obedience, a trust in his father’s love and care, and trust in God’s provision. But as Solomon warns, “Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from words of knowledge” (Prov. 19:27).

Third, Isaac and Rebekah bask in the proverbial marriage “made in heaven.” Abraham arranges for the marriage by sending his chief servant back to his home in Northwest Mesopotamia to get a wife for his son. Upon his arrival at the well in Abraham’s hometown, the servant prays to *I AM* to prosper his journey by sending a virgin who will respond to his request for a drink by offering him a drink and (here’s the stinger!) offering to water his ten camels! Before he has finished praying, Rebekah comes out and fulfills his prayer (Gen. 24:12–21, 48). The time and setting when the lovers’ eyes first meet simultaneously at Beer Lahai Roi (“The Well of the Living One Who Sees”) (24:62–64) indicates the smile of Providence. Nevertheless, this marriage made in heaven becomes dysfunctional. In the “Isaac Blesses the Twins” scene, husband and wife are no longer talking.

Fourth, Isaac is a godly man until his old age. We have already noted his

habits of trust and obedience to both God and his father. In the “Birth of the Twins” scene (Gen. 25:21–26), we learn that Isaac has prayed to *I AM* on behalf of his wife for twenty years before *I AM* answers his prayer (vv. 20–21, 26). The height of Isaac’s spiritual journey accentuates the tragedy of a life that begins with prayer and ends in prayerlessness.

Finally, until his relative old age, the blessing of God shines cloudlessly upon him. The scene “God Protects Rebekah in the Philistine’s Harem” (Gen. 26:1–11) occurs between her marriage to Isaac and the birth of the twins. This must be so, because at the time Abimelech takes Rebekah into his harem, he does not know she is married. Had she been visibly pregnant with the twins, or nursing them, or having them tugging at her skirt, Abimelech would have known she was married.

The scenes “Isaac Triumphs over the Philistines at Beersheba” (Gen. 26:26–33) and “Abraham Triumphs over the Philistines at Beersheba” (Gen. 21:22–34) are so similar that source critics for over a century have held them up as examples of a crude redactor’s piecing together of contradictory doublets of the same events. The narrator, however, carefully distinguishes the two events (Gen. 26:1) and notes that Isaac redug his father’s wells (vv. 15–22). In other words, these echoes show that God keeps his promise to bless Abraham’s offspring along with him (Gen. 22:15–19; 26:23–25). These two scenes at Beersheba also show that Isaac embraces his father’s vision and trust in God. As on Mount Moriah where he obeys his father, at Beersheba he obeys God to stay in the land during famine. Here he does not shrink from the arduous task of redigging his father’s wells.

2. Tragic Isaac

Whereas God’s benediction shines upon Isaac in the above scenes, no such light dispels the dark and gloom of the “Isaac Blesses the Twins” scene. The narrator sets up this climactic scene by poignantly foreshadowing Isaac’s defeat in the introduction to the scene “Esau Sells His birthright”: “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau” (25:28 TNIV). A literal translation of this verse produces a clearer causal connection between Isaac’s love and his sensual appetites: “Isaac loved Esau because of the game in his mouth!” His desire to indulge his appetite is the fly that will spoil the ointment, the little fox that will spoil the vine. George Rawlinson comments: “The father loves Jacob ‘because he did eat of his venison’ (25:28), giving evidence thereby of a spirit, which lapped in a life of ease, had become in a certain measure tainted with sensuality,

not of a gross kind, indeed, but still such to seriously weaken his character and to place him on a lower level of spiritual development than either his father Abraham or his son Jacob.”⁴⁵

What is hinted at comes to full fruition in the tragic scene that brings the final curtain down on Isaac and Rebekah’s lives. The narrator encloses this scene within a frame, an *inclusio*, that highlights Esau’s Hittite wives who repulse his parents (Gen. 26:34–35; 27:46; cf. 28:8–9). Within this frame, the narrator constructs four partial scenes: Isaac and Esau (Gen. 27:1b–4), Rebekah and Jacob (Gen. 27:5–17), Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 27:18–29) and Isaac and Esau (Gen. 27:30–40). From the *inclusio* and the four partial scenes, we draw attention to notable features in this dark portrait.

a. Inclusio

From the “Birth of the Twins” scene (Gen. 25:23) and from the “Isaac Blesses the Twins” scene (Gen. 26:34–28:9), it is clear that in his failed attempt to bless Esau, Isaac violates both God’s word and the inner witness of his heart. Instead of being led by God’s word and the inner witness of his spirit, Isaac is led by his appetites. Ignoring God’s word to Rebekah that the elder son would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23), Isaac seeks to reverse the relationship between the two brothers by offering his benediction to Esau:

“May nations serve you
and peoples bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.” (Gen. 27:29)

In this scheme, Isaac also transgresses against his own heart. As noted in the *inclusio*, Esau’s pagan wives are “a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah” (Heb. *mar Rûah*, “bitterness of spirit,” Gen. 26:35) to the extent that were Jacob also to take his wife from among the Hittite women, Rebekah would reckon her life not worth living (Gen. 27:46). Though Esau’s wives gall Isaac, Isaac doggedly plots to bless Esau’s descendants by mothers who would negate the identity and *raison d’être* of the holy family, placing covenant relationship with God in jeopardy. In short, at the close of his life, the once righteous Isaac ignores both God’s word and his own heart to cater to his sensual appetite (cf. Prov. 25:27).

b. Partial Scene 1: Isaac and Esau

Understanding the significance of a patriarch's blessing in the ancient Near Eastern society gives a yardstick by which we can measure the full extent of Isaac's sinful intention to bless Esau (cf. Gen. 27:4). Eugene Roop comments, "The elder son [who traditionally received the blessing by primogeniture] became the head of the family, the one who carries the family tradition: defining the family's understanding of itself, speaking for the family, and carrying out the family's direction."⁴⁶

Is Esau worthy of this position of leadership, the mediator of God's blessings and heir to Abraham's covenant? The scene "Esau Sells His Birthright" makes clear why God rejects Esau from having dominion over Jacob. Esau's choice of a bowl of soup over the birthright displays a character intent on immediate gratification of drives and appetites and a concomitant unwillingness to deny a moment of pleasure in order to receive a much greater future reward. The soup's red color probably connotes passion, a designation that sticks to Esau for life in his alias, Edom, meaning "red"; and his given name Esau means "hairy," symbolizing his brutish nature. Whereas the godless give priority to today's gratification, not tomorrow's hope, godly people at any stage of life count their present sufferings for righteousness as "light and momentary troubles ... achieving ... an eternal glory that outweighs them all" (2 Cor. 4:17). The narrator concludes the "Esau Sells His Birthright" scene with the quick serialization: "[Esau] ate and drank, and then got up and left" (Gen. 25:34). The string of action verbs suggests that Esau's actions are unthinking reflexes, not products of reflection. His flagrant and callous disregard for the value of the birthright is certainly to despise it.

Incredibly, Isaac wants to bless his brutish, unreflective son with dominion over his cultured, reflective twin brother because he loves Esau's hunting skill that indulges his appetite. His taste for game jades his spiritual "taste." In this scene, "Isaac Blesses the Twins," the expression that he loves tasty food occurs three times (Gen. 27:4, 9, 14); the word for "tasty food" occurs six times (see 27:4, 7, 9, 14, 17), and its correlative *sayid* ("game") eight times (27:3, 5, 7, 19, 25, 30 ["hunting" in TNIV], 31, 33). Alexander Whyte comments, "When I read Isaac's whole history over again, with my eye upon the object, it becomes as clear as a sunbeam to me that what envy was to Cain, and what wine was to Noah, and what lewdness was to Ham, and what wealth was to Lot, and what pride and impatience were to Sarah, venison and savory meat were to Isaac."⁴⁷ The "game in his mouth" has become the dominating reality of Isaac's old age.

c. Partial Scene 2: Rebekah and Jacob

In the first partial scene, the narrator shows Isaac putting his mouth before his heart; in the second, the narrator reveals that this scheme is being carried out behind closed doors (“I overheard your father say to your brother Esau” [Gen. 27:6]). A patriarch’s passing on of the divine blessing within the holy family should have been a joyous family celebration. Jacob blesses his offspring openly: “Gather round so that I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel” (49:1–2). Likewise, the dying Moses openly blesses the tribes of Israel (Deut. 33:1). In contrast, Isaac’s sensual choice of Esau over Jacob cannot stand up to the blazing light of the family’s scrutiny, and he knows it. To escape their censure, especially that of his more spiritual wife, he darkly chooses to do God’s business privately by summoning Esau alone for his audience (Gen. 27:1). The surreptitious nature of this scheme along with Rebekah’s discovery of it puts in motion the sequence of deception that tears apart the holy family. We can often judge whether an action is right or wrong by our willingness to lay it open to public scrutiny. Am I an open book? Or even better, is my checkbook an open book?

d. Partial Scene 3: Isaac and Jacob

The third partial scene, the encounter between Isaac and Jacob, reveals the sensual and secretive rebel depending not on God’s word and his own spirit, but on his fallible senses to lead him. As such, Isaac’s physical blindness symbolizes his spiritual blindness. Derek Kidner comments,

All five senses play a conspicuous part, largely by their fallibility, in this classic attempt to handle spiritual responsibilities by the light of nature. Ironically, even the sense of taste on which Isaac prided himself gave him the wrong answer.... The real scandal is Isaac’s frivolity: his palate had long since governed his heart (25:28) and silenced his tongue (for he was powerless to rebuke the sin that was Esau’s downfall); he now proposed to make it his arbiter between peoples and nations (29). Unfitness for office shows in every act of this sightless man rejecting the evidence of his ears for that of his hands, following the promptings of his palate and seeking inspiration through—of all things—his nose (27).⁴⁸

As a result, Isaac, the patriarch, the leader of the holy family, becomes the fool, the dupe of a trick, the butt of the joke. In fine dramatic irony, Isaac thinks

that he is blessing Esau but is in fact deliciously blessing Jacob, God's choice.

e. Partial Scene 4: Isaac and Esau

The fourth and last scene makes the remarkable point that in spite of his vices, Isaac nevertheless exercises faith in God while pronouncing the blessing. He firmly believes that he has mediated God's irrevocable blessing. When Esau bursts out with his loud and bitter cry, "Bless me — me too, my father!" (Gen. 27:34), Isaac answers: "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.... I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine" (vv. 35, 37). The writer of Hebrews reflects God's amazing grace by recalling only Isaac's faith: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob" (Heb. 11:20). This strange mixture of self-service and virtue characterizes many who minister falteringly by faith.

D. Jacob: Icon of Prayer

Jacob's life serves notice that a life of faith is essential to please God and that a triumphant life of faith depends on prayer.

There is no greater condemnation a person can possibly receive than God saying, "I hate that person." Similarly, there is no greater commendation than God saying, "I love that person." These extremes of divine evaluation fall upon the twins, Esau and Jacob (Mal. 1:2–3; Rom. 9:13), yet they are unexpected from the human point of view. From the divine viewpoint, however, the twin brothers differ radically— Jacob believes God's promises to Abraham while Esau does not.

Few characters in the Bible start out as unlovely and unlovable as Jacob, whose condemnable character is symbolized by the literal meaning of his name "heelclutcher." However, his defining moment in the scene "Jacob Wrestles with the Angel of *I AM*" (Gen. 32:22–32) encapsulates his transformation from a tarnished believer to a triumphant believer. This transformation is not a reward for Jacob's goodness but is entirely due to God's grace. Geerhardus Vos comments that Jacob's "reprehensiveness features are rather strongly brought out. This is done in order to show that the divine grace is not the reward for but the source of noble traits. Grace overcoming human sin and transforming human nature is the keynote of the revelation here."⁴⁹

Jacob begins his spiritual development with his ambition to fulfill the divine

blessing by his own wit and strength. He “steals” (as Esau sees it) the birthright by taking advantage of Esau’s hunger, and he steals the blessing by deception (Gen. 27:36). Having been duped out of birthright and blessing, Esau consoles himself with the thought of killing his twin brother after his father is dead (v. 41). Consequently, Jacob becomes a fugitive.

In this time of fear and doubt, God appears to Jacob (“Jacob’s Dream at Bethel,” Gen. 28:10–22) and encourages Jacob’s faith in the same way he has done with Abraham, by word and vision. God assures Jacob that he will receive all the blessings of his fathers: land (v. 13), seed (v. 14), and blessing to the nations (v. 14), guaranteed by God’s continuing presence with him (v. 15).

Upon his arrival at Abraham’s hometown in Aramean country, Jacob shows his brute strength by single-handedly removing the rock over the well that three shepherds already gathered there could not move without more help (Gen. 29:1–14). His strength, like his cleverness, trips him up, leading him away from depending on God in prayer. Here the narrator deliberately contrasts Abraham’s chief servant who prayed at the well for a suitable bride for Isaac with Jacob who falls in love with his wife-to-be at the well but without prayer. Later when Rachel complains, “Give me children, or I’ll die!” Jacob becomes angry with her: “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?” (Gen. 30:1–2). It never enters his head to pray for his barren wife as his father had done for twenty years on behalf of his mother.

The moral law of reciprocity, however, cannot be turned aside. “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Gal. 6:7). Fulfilling one’s destiny by human strength leads to self-victimization. Jacob ends up alone, alienated from a grieving father and mother (Gen. 27), his angry brother (Gen. 28:1–9), bickering wives (Gen. 30), and self-serving uncle and cousins (Gen. 31–32). Nevertheless, God blesses his sojourn in Mesopotamia, where he becomes fertile in property and progeny.

Eventually the runaway has to confront his past. After notifying Esau of his return, Jacob learns that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred armed men. Cowering alone behind the boundary of the Jabbok River, Jacob faces the defining moment of his life in the scene “Jacob Wrestles with the Angel of *I AM*” where God transforms “Jacob,” the ambitious trickster, to “Israel” (Heb. *yisʾrāʾēl* “because you have struggled with God (*kî-śārîṭā ʿim-ʾēlōhîm*) and human beings and have overcome” (Gen. 32:28–29 TNIV).

Jacob’s transformation can be captured in several oxymorons. It begins with the truth *when we are most alone we are not alone*. His transformation occurs in a scene fraught with mystery. The narrator begins by introducing us to a man: “[Jacob] was left alone, and a man wrestled with him” (Gen. 32:24). However,

the man is a mystery, for we are given neither identification nor motivation for his behavior. The mystery deepens as the narrator depicts the dialogue between the two wrestlers with Jacob seeking a blessing from the man and the man presuming to change Jacob's name to Israel, paralleling the precedent of *I AM*'s changing Abram's name to Abraham (Gen. 32:26–28). Then the narrator tantalizes us with the possible revelation of the secret, as Jacob seeks the name of the stranger. But alas, the stranger refuses to give his own name — is it beyond understanding (Judg. 13:17–18)? The scene concludes with no certain assessment by the narrator but an unexpected pronouncement from Jacob: “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (Gen. 32:30).

Who is this stranger? Is he a man (according to the narrative) or God (according to Jacob)? The narrator, who controls Jacob's words, probably intends that the man is the Angel of *I AM* (*malak YHWH*), God's special messenger with human appearance, but whose authority and presence is frequently equated with God's. (For a full discussion of the Angel of *I AM*, see [chap. 14](#).) Hosea confirms this interpretation by calling the man an “angel” (Hos. 12:4). In this scene, however, the narrator does not explicitly identify the being as an Angel of *I AM*. The intentional ambiguity allows the narrator to create the double entendre in 32:28, where the man says to Jacob, “... because you have struggled with God and with men...” His all-night struggle with the God-man encapsulates his lifelong struggle with God and with men.

The intentional ambiguity also allows us to move our focus from Jacob's human relationships to his relationship with God. At the beginning of the scene, we are led to believe that Jacob is wrestling another man; at the end of the scene, we discover that he was wrestling with God all along. This narrative device invites us to read the Jacob narratives, his conflicts and struggles, as pointers toward his conflicted relationship with God. In other words, *the horizontal axis points to the vertical axis*— that is to say, Jacob's struggles in human relations points to his struggle in relationship with God. In the “Esau Sells the Birthright” scene, he expresses his faith as well as faithless ambition. Undoubtedly, the faithful Abraham, who dies when the twins are fifteen years old, has shared with his grandsons his vision that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, would inherit the land, and would bless the earth. Esau despises the seemingly impossible dream, but Jacob believes it, though his faith is mixed with his desire for the material double portion that goes with the dream. Throughout his journeys, his life reflects the conflict between his faith in God and his faith in his natural abilities — wit and strength.

The third oxymoron is that *God prevails through severe mercy*. Amazingly, Jacob is so strong that even the Angel of *I AM* can only wrestle him to a

stalemate. But with cruel kindness, “when the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man” (Gen. 32:25). That breaking of Jacob’s strength saves him from his conflicted nature, for he is powerless to wrestle any longer, unable to fulfill his ambition in his own strength.

Yet Jacob’s *vice is his virtue*. Quintilian writes, “Ambition is a vice, but it can be the father of virtue.” When the angel cripples his hip, Jacob does not quit. Instead, he clings to the angel and prays for God’s blessing. His ambition to achieve through his own wit and strength is transformed to an ambition to achieve through prayer and faith. He prevails because “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Hosea puts it this way: “ [Jacob] struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor” (Hos. 12:4). In other words, he overcomes the angel by begging for his favor! Israel prevails through words, not strength; through prayer, not human might. From this point onward, he will answer to the name “Israel” because, as God explains to him, “you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome” (Gen. 32:28).

In the denouement of the scene, the sun rises upon a transformed man, physically broken but spiritually whole. In the next scene, the former coward limps boldly before his family to meet Esau with faith’s assurance that he will prevail.

In sum, the people through whom God establishes his children are Abraham’s seed in Jesus Christ, a seed that is characterized by faith, by prioritizing the witness of the heart over sensual desires and by prayer.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do you relate yourself to Abraham and his seed. Why? What spiritual qualities demonstrate that you belong to that seed?

- [1.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “Cain and His Offering,” *WTJ* 48 (1986): 363–72.
- [2.](#) For more detail see Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 127–30.
- [3.](#) See also *ibid.*, 190–92.
- [4.](#) Isaac M. Kikawada, “Noah and the Ark,” *ABD* 4:1129.
- [5.](#) See Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 132n34.
- [6.](#) See B. Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: Morrow, 2002).
- [7.](#) Although the focus is on Abraham, the text assumes he exists with a new family, including Sarah and their offspring. The ten *tôl^edôt* associate the first ancestor with their descendants.
- [8.](#) Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 73.
- [9.](#) The promise is intensified by an infinitive absolute in Gen. 18:18: “Abraham will surely become (*hāyô yihyeh*) a great nation.
- [10.](#) See Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 245.
- [11.](#) “Word of the *I AM*” (*d^ebar YHWH*) is a technical term for prophetic word, and “vision” (*mah^azeh*, 15:1) denotes a supersensory audition and/or vision. The two correlative words confirm that the patriarchs were prophets (Ps. 105:15).
- [12.](#) Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of the Land of Canaan by the Israelites* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 252.
- [13.](#) E.g., an eighth-century BC Assyrian text from North Syria includes the following clause: “This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’lu. If Mati’lu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off ... the head of Mati’lu be torn off, and his son” (J. B. Pritchard, “Treaty between Ashurniari V of Assyria and Mati’lu of Arpad,” *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, trans. and annotated William F. Albright *et al.* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969], 532).

Jeremiah also makes reference to the same ritual: “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces” (Jer. 34:18). The two passages make the symbolic meaning of the ritual clear. For other parallels see Weinfeld, *Promise of the Land*, 251–58.

[14.](#) In God’s economy first nations do not have a permanent claim to their land. God owns the earth and judges nations by taking away their land and giving it to whom he will (cf. Deut. 2:20–23; Amos 9:7; Hab. 1:5–2:14; Acts 17:26).

[15.](#) “Covenant” occurs more than 12 times in this scene, 9 times as “my covenant.”

[16.](#) Weinfeld, *Promise of the Land*, 222–52, 258.

[17.](#) Three names for God occur in this scene: (1) *I AM*, his covenant-keeping name; (2) *El Shaddai* (“God Almighty”), evoking the idea that “God is able to make the barren fertile and to fulfill his promises” (Wenham); (3) *ʿēlōhîm* (“God”), signifying God’s transcendence over the nations.

[18.](#) Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*. JPS Torah Commentary 1 (Philadelphia:Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 122.

[19.](#) “Covenant” occurs more than a dozen times in this scene, nine of them as “my covenant.”

[20.](#) John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 197.

[21.](#) Victor P. Hamilton, *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “*zr^e*,” 1:1152.

[22.](#) Seven is the biblical number of perfection, and ten is the number of fullness. Seventy represents both, suggesting the representative character of the Table of Nations.

[23.](#) Obviously, a careful distinction must be made between the history of Israel’s religion and the theology of Moses and the prophets who follow in his train. In the former, Israel becomes like the surrounding nations; in the latter, they are a “peculiar” people. Archaeological artifacts bearing witness to Israel’s syncretism with Canaanite theology are best interpreted in light of this tragic history of Israel’s religion according to the Bible (see [chap. 1](#), n. 39).

[24.](#) The name derives from Aramaic *y^ehūdai* (a Jehudite or Judaite — i.e., Jew).

[25.](#) In other words, Jerusalem itself has become Babylon, the enemy of the Israel of God. Jesus predicts the judgment of Jerusalem in the same terms the exilic prophets predicted the fall of Babylon (cf. Matt. 24 and Mark 13 with Isa. 14:4a, 12a, 15; 34:3–4; 48:20a; 52:11; Jer. 50:1, 6, 8, 28; 51:6–10, 45–46, 50–

51; see also Ezek. 32:5–8; Joel 2:10–11, 30–32; 3:14–15).

[26.](#) Circumcision obviously involves a man's wife and reminds her too of her responsibility to walk with her husband under God and with him to raise godly descendants. "Circumcision wasn't *male*-centered, but *descendant*-centered and *community*centered" (C. Custis James, *Lost Women of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 63).

[27.](#) See Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 573–74.

[28.](#) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 53.

[29.](#) Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 401–3.

[30.](#) Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.2.

[31.](#) Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NIDNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 684. In this exegesis of Romans 9–11 I lean heavily on this commentary and the bibliography cited in it (683–739).

[32.](#) In vv. 30–31 Paul alters the pattern to make the point that God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on all now (v. 32). Here the pattern is as follows: Gentile disobedience — Gentile mercy now through Israel's disobedience. Israel's disobedience — now Israel's mercy now through God's mercy on Gentiles.

[33.](#) Before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1947, most Christians held to the doctrine of supersession (i.e., the church replaced or superseded Israel). Since then, many Christian theologians have supported the notion that ethnic Israel still has a role to play in salvation history. Exegesis confirms what Blaising calls "the new consensus" (see Craig Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *JETS* 44, no. 3 [2001]: 435–50).

[34.](#) Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 23.

[35.](#) Weinfeld, *Promise of the Land*, 1–21.

[36.](#) M. R. O'Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 169.

[37.](#) Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 78.

[38.](#) For an excellent new perspective on Galatians in light of recent criticisms of its traditional interpretation, see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 262–75.

[39.](#) See *ibid.*, 347.

[40.](#) Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1994), 20.

[41.](#) Westminster Confession of Faith, [chap. 11](#) on justification.

[42.](#) This command has royal implications since it is similar to the one given Solomon (1 Kings 9:4–5) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:3). This royal language is appropriate to the one who will become the father of kings (see Wehham, *Genesis 16–50*, 20–21; cf. Gen. 24:40; 48:15).

[43.](#) *In the Beginning: A New English Translation of the Book of Genesis*, trans. with commentary and notes by Everett Fox (New York: Schocken, 1983), 81.

[44.](#) See Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 150–62.

[45.](#) George Rawlinson, *Men of the Bible: Isaac and Jacob. Their Lives and Times* (New York: Revell, 1890), 42.

[46.](#) Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987), 183.

[47.](#) Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters: Adam to Achan* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1898), 158.

[48.](#) Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, OTC (London: Tyndale, 1967), 156.

[49.](#) Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 93.

[*](#)A personal anecdote is appropriate here. Several times in translating the New International Version of the Bible the committee rejected formerly suitable English renderings because they had acquired a double entendre with potential immoral connotations. It occurred to me that every word could become debauched and corrupted through double entendre until one could not speak or think without debauched humor operating. I took heart, however, in recalling that God chose the Canaanite language, in which the most depraved literature of the ancient Near East was written, to become the Hebrew language, in which the Bible was written. In his mercy and redemptive power, God chose the language of the most depraved culture to sanctify as the language of Holy Scripture.

[*](#)Ten is the biblical number of fullness.

[*](#)See Craig Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” *JETS* 44/3 (2001): 440–42.

Chapter 13

THE GIFTS OF ELECTION AND GOD'S NAME

Grace is indeed needed to turn a man into a saint; and he who doubts it does not know what a saint or a man is.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.508

I. INTRODUCTION

Exodus 1 functions as the transition from Genesis to Exodus.¹ The book of Genesis, as we noted in [chapter 2](#), ends with the sons of Israel, numbering seventy (Gen. 46), sojourning in Egypt, and its sequel, the book of Exodus, self-consciously begins with the sons of Israel in Egypt, numbering seventy. The emphasis on the chosen seed's multiplication builds on God's command in Genesis 1 to humankind to multiply and on God's promise to the patriarchs to make them into a great nation. Terrence Fretheim rightly comments on Exodus 1, "The focus is on *continuity with both creation and promise themes within Genesis*."² When Pharaoh appears (v. 8), he is placed in opposition to Joseph, and in the rest of the chapter he seeks to thwart God's resolve to bless Israel. Nevertheless, the plans of the immutable *I AM* will not be thwarted. Ironically, Pharaoh's means to destroy Israel (the Nile) becomes a vehicle for Moses' deliverance, Pharaoh's daughter prepares Moses to destroy Egypt, and she pays Moses' mother to take care of him (cf. Gen. 45:7–8; 50:20).

This primary theme of Genesis, the chosen seed, is worked out in the rest of Exodus amidst other obstacles and is interwoven with other themes — most importantly, the giving of God's law to govern his chosen people. The chosen seed now becomes a nation, an unruly multitude prone to complaints and despair. They are enslaved by the pharaoh and require *I AM*'s mighty acts of salvation to combat the Egyptian power.³ God delivers his people from Egypt and preserves them in the wilderness because they are the elect heirs of the promissory covenant with Israel's fathers; and though discouraged, they do not accept the way things are in hopeless mute acceptance. Their complaint shows they are unwilling to resign themselves to their fate and hints at their conviction and hope—weak though it may be—that their God can change their condition. He does not redeem them because of anything the nation has done except to groan and cry out and so provoke his *misericordia*, a broken heart at the cry of his suffering people. Though not resigned to their fate, they lack the faith of their forefathers, reluctant to embrace God's vision and promise.

I AM, the protagonist bent on fulfilling his promise to Abraham, must overcome the obstacles of Egyptian oppression without and of Israel's discouragement within. *I AM* calls Moses to rally the people, fights for them

against the Egyptian military, leads them safely to Mount Sinai, and gives them his holy law to govern them and establish through his holy people his universal kingdom of love and justice in the darkest places on earth. In sum, the Exodus narrative recounts foundational interventions of God to establish his kingdom on earth.

Like the structure of Genesis, the structure of Exodus points to the book's main themes. God delivers his people from their misfortune in Egypt so they might worship him in the land. Paul A. Wright, scrutinizing the syntax and rhetoric of the Exodus narrative, reveals the book's major spatial and temporal divisions, highlighting these themes: "Israel's Redemption from Egypt and Preservation in the Wilderness to Sinai" (1:1–18:27) and "Israel's Ratification of God's Covenant/Law and Preparations for Worship at Sinai" (19:1–40:18).⁴ The first division consists of two sections: "Israel's Redemption from Egypt" (1:1–13:16) and "Israel's Preservation in the Wilderness to Sinai" (13:17–18:27). In this chapter we focus even more narrowly on the first of these: "Introduction to Israel's Redemption" (1:1–6:27) and its theme of election, which involves the revelation of God's name (3:1–4:17; 6:1–13). The next chapter of this theology ([chap. 14](#)) will focus on 6:28–18:27 and its themes of God as deliverer (6:28–13:16) and as warrior (13:17–18:27). The second major division of the book of Exodus is the subject of both [chapter 15](#), the theology of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 19:1–24:19), and [chapter 16](#), the theology of the liturgical laws (Exod. 25:1 – Lev. 27:34).

II. THE GIFT OF ELECTION

A. Exegesis of Exodus 1:1–6:27

As we have demonstrated throughout, the narrator's rhetoric guides us to his theology; hence, we begin with an analysis of the structure and poetics of the book. The following outlines Exodus, Part 1: Election and God's Name.

- I. Janus Passage: Genealogy of the Holy Seed (1:1–7)
- II. Act 1: Election of Moses (1:8–2:22)
 - A. Scene 1: God's Elect in a Hostile Nation (1:8–22)
 - B. Scene 2: Preservation of Moses at Birth (2:1–10)
 - C. Scene 3: Moses Flees to Midian (2:11–22)
- III. Act 2: Call of Moses (2:23–6:13)
 - A. Janus Passage: God Remembers the Covenant (2:23–25)
 - B. Scene 1: God Calls Moses at Mount Horeb (3:1–4:17)
 - C. Scene 2: Moses Returns to Egypt (4:18–31)
 - 1. Incident 1: Moses Takes His Leave from Jethro (4:18)
 - 2. Incident 2: Additional Instructions and Prophecy on the Way to Egypt (4:19–23)
 - 3. Incident 3: Circumcision of Moses' Son (4:24–26)
 - 4. Incident 4: Moses Meets Aaron and Elders in Egypt (4:27–31)
 - D. Scene 3: Initial Failure (5:1–6:1)
 - 1. Incident 1: Moses Meets with Pharaoh (5:1–5)
 - 2. Incident 2: Pharaoh's Order to Slave Drivers (5:6–9)
 - 3. Incident 3: Slave Drivers' Demand to the Israelites (5:10–14)
 - 4. Incident 4: Israelite Foremen Meet with Pharaoh (5:15–19)
 - 5. Incident 5: Israelite Foremen Complain to Moses (5:20–21)
 - 6. Incident 6: Moses Complains to God (5:22–6:1)
 - E. Scene 4: God Renews His Call to Moses (6:2–13)
 - 1. Incident 1: God Commands Moses to Speak to People (6:2–9)
 - 2. Incident 2: God Commands Moses to Speak to Pharaoh (6:10–13)
- IV. Conclusion: Election and Genealogy of Levi (6:14–27)

The grouping of Exodus 1:1–6:27 as a unit is based on both structural devices and concept. Two genealogies frame the unit: the genealogies of Jacob’s twelve sons (1:1–7) and of a shortened form of that genealogy with a focus on the fourth son, Levi (6:14–27). The concept of election informs the whole. Moreover, janus passages and introductions at 1:1–7 and at 6:28–7:3 further delineate the boundary of the unit.

1. Janus Passage: Genealogy of the Holy Seed (1:1–7)

As defined in [chapter 5](#), a janus contains transitional material designed to bridge two sections by looking back to the preceding unit and looking ahead to the following unit. As the narrator of Genesis uses janus passages to connect the ten *tôlêdôt* the Exodus narrator uses this technique to mark off the units of the book, as demonstrated by Wright in the following table.⁵

I								
1:1–6:27	1:1–7 Transition and introduction	1:8–22 Circumstances of the multitude	2:1–22 Moses' birth, preservation and failure as a deliverance	2:23–35 Transition	3:1–4:17 The calling of Moses	4:18–26 Conclusion and transition to obedience	4:27–6:13 Obedience second failure: oath/charge	6:14–27 Genealogy of the deliverer
II								
6:28–13:16	6:28–7:8 Transition and introduction	7:9–10:29 Nine plagues and no deliverance	11:1–10 Transition	12:1–13:16 Tenth plague, Passover, and deliverance				
III								
13:17–18:27	13:17–22 Transition and introduction	14:1–15:21 Victory over Pharaoh and the Song of the Sea	15:22–17:16 The way to Sinai and the need for belief	18:1–12 The goodness of the Lord	18:13–27 The need for the law and transition to law			
IV								
19:1–24:18	19:1–6 Transition and introduction	19:7–20:21 Preparation for and receiving of the law	20:22–26 Transition	21:1–23:33 The ordinances with coda	24:1–2 Transition	24:3–11 Covenant concluded	24:12–18 Moses on the mountain/ transition to the tabernacle	

Figure 13.1

Each of the first four main sections or parts of the book begins with a janus. These units are further subdivided by other janus passages. The first janus passage of Exodus (1:1–7), framed by the Hebrew expression *benê yis’rā’ēl* (“the sons of Israel” [1:1] and “Israelites” [1:7]), and numbering the descendants of Jacob at seventy (or 75 [LXX]), connects the book of Exodus to Genesis (cf. Gen. 46:8; see pp. 346–47).⁶ Furthermore, the notice “Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died” (1:6) brings closure to the “seed” theme in Genesis

but implies continuity by raising a question about its future. The final verse emphatically answers that question with four consecutive verbs referring to strength and fertility (*prh* “be fruitful”; *srs*, “to swarm”; *rbh*, “to become numerous”; and *šm*, “to be numerous, strong”). The sense is escalated by the phrase *bim^eōd m^eōd* (lit., “with greatness, greatness”; i.e., “to an exceeding greatness”) and the concluding observation: “the land was filled with them” (1:7). This vocabulary is drawn from Genesis 1:28, narrowing humanity’s mandate to Israel in particular, who will mediate God’s blessing to all people.

This janus also looks back to God’s fulfillment of his promise to Abraham to grant him innumerable descendants and to fulfillment of two of God’s three promises made to Jacob upon his descent to Egypt: (1) to make Israel a great nation in Egypt (Gen. 46:3); (2) to go with them and care for them (Gen. 46:4; 50:24–25); and (3) to bring them from Egypt to the sworn land (Gen. 46:4; 50:24–25). The third is partially fulfilled in the narrative found in Exodus 6:28–13:16, where God redeems Israel from Egypt. In other words, the plot of Exodus is driven by God’s faithfulness to fulfill his promissory covenant to give the patriarchs the sworn land (see esp. 2:23–25; 6:5; Ps. 105:10, 42). Thus, by using this janus, the narrator signals that in both structure and content Exodus continues the book of Genesis.

2. Act 1: Election of Moses (1:8–2:22)

I AM’s call of Moses to deliver his people is God’s first intervention in the irruption of his kingdom after his being silent for four centuries. Act 1 chronicles the life of Moses from birth to his exile in Midian. The first scene explains the plight of the Israelites as they face slavery and the systematic murder of all their male offspring. This plight serves as the backdrop for the rest of the act. The second scene recounts the story of Moses’ birth and his providential deliverance from drowning. The act concludes with Moses as an adult attempting to right the injustice against his people, failing, and fleeing to the wilderness of Midian where he finds a wife and family.

a. Scene 1: God’s Elect in a Hostile Nation (1:8–22)

The scene opens ominously with an Egyptian king who “did not know about Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). The reference to Joseph conjures up the Genesis narrative where the Egyptian society is delivered from mass starvation due to Joseph’s mediation of God’s wisdom and blessing (Gen. 47:25). Joseph’s charisma causes

the pharaoh to favor Jacob and his family, and so he grants them the fertile land of Goshen and invites members of Jacob's family to take care of his own flocks (Gen. 47:6). In response, Jacob exercises the prerogative of the elect and blesses the pharaoh (Gen. 47:7, 10).

In contrast, the pharaoh of the Exodus narrative does not see Israel — a people obviously blessed by God with fertility — as a source of blessing but as a source of threat.⁷ The pharaoh and the Egyptians make a fateful choice, choosing fear over faith, forgetting the blessing they once enjoyed under Joseph's rule. Wright cogently notes: "As a nation Egypt is faced with the same decision as was Cain, to accept the way of God or reject it (Gen. 4:7). Choosing her own wisdom (Exod. 1:10) over God's (Gen. 12:1–3), Egypt tries to turn a situation of perceived threat (Exod. 1:9–10) into personal advantage (11). Israel is seen as a people of slaves, not a nation of blessing."⁸

Egypt's decision to restrict population growth eventually ushers in the exodus and Egypt's defeat. Having chosen his own course, the pharaoh, like Cain and his lineage, becomes ever more hardened in his rebellion against God and his people. His first plan imposes forced labor upon the Israelites to build cities (Exod. 1:11), including harsh work in the fields (v. 14), but by divine enabling, the Israelites are stronger than he anticipates. His second plan escalates his attempt to control Israel's multiplication by ordering the Hebrew midwives to abort at delivery every newborn Israelite boy. But the God-fearing midwives (vv. 17, 21) — insignificant women by the world's standards — foil the plan of the pharaoh, who embodied the beings and powers of Egypt's gods, making him a quasi-or semi-divine being (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–28). The scene peaks in his third foiled plan. God frustrates Pharaoh's general edict to all Egyptians to drown every Israelite baby by having his own daughter ironically save the boy who will defeat Egypt. Once again women — this time by their feminine intuition — defeat the pharaoh: a mother and two daughters. God is not mocked. In poetic justice, God kills all of Egypt's firstborn males at the first Passover and drowns the pharaoh's troops in the Red Sea.⁹ In a delicious irony, women who fear God defeat the mighty Pharaoh.

b. Scene 2: Preservation of Moses at Birth (2:1–10)

In this bitter context, God chooses Amram and Jochebed (Exod. 6:20) of the tribe of Levi—the mediatorial tribe between God and Israel within the mediatorial nation between God and the world — to give birth to a son who already at birth is a "fine child" (Heb. *tôb*, "good," 2:2), "fair in the sight of

God” and “no ordinary child” (Acts 7:20, TNIV text note). Recognizing the child’s exceptional promise, in faith his mother hides him for three months (Heb. 11:23) and then places him in a papyrus “basket” — the same Hebrew word is glossed “ark” in its only other occurrence (Gen. 6:14).¹⁰ Providentially, instead of the ark being found by the pharaoh’s boats of war that plied the Nile, the pharaoh’s daughter finds and spares the child, gives him to Jochebed to nurse him for three years, adopts him, names him,¹¹ and educates him in all the famed wisdom of Egypt (Acts 7:22).¹² His providence works in conjunction with a spunky sister who suggests Jochebed be the wet-nurse for the childless princess. Moses’ miraculous deliverance and rearing foreshadow the deliverance from Egypt he later effects for Israel and the moral rearing he will give the nation that he founds.

c. Scene 3: Moses Flees to Midian (2:11–22)

When Moses turns forty, he chooses by faith to identify himself with his circumcision rather than with his Egyptian family and in so doing embraces the suffering of his people rather than the pleasures of a corrupt court (Acts 7:23; Heb. 11:24). He expresses his new allegiance to his own people by killing an Egyptian who is mistreating a Hebrew. When he then realizes that his own people question, for the first of many times, his right to lead them, and that the pharaoh has already discovered his killing of an Egyptian, he flees to Midian. In Midian he again shows himself as a zealot for justice by delivering seven daughters of the priest of Midian, Jethro/Reuel, from oppressive shepherds. He marries Zipporah, one of the priest’s daughters, and stays in Midian forty years.¹³

Historian Arnold Toynbee generalized this pattern as “withdrawal and return” in the formation of great men. The pattern is true of Abraham (Gen. 12), of Jacob (Gen. 27–32), and of Israel’s trial in the wilderness — forty years of advance toward the sworn land. These are all types of Christ, formalized by Luke as forty days of Jesus’ ordeal in the wilderness. At the end of this process of spiritual formation, in which Jesus knew hunger and denial, he was strengthened and comforted, and angels brought him food (Matt. 4:11), like the people of Israel with manna in the desert. All are spiritually tempered and toughened by their withdrawal for their great work.

3. Act 2: Call of Moses (2:23–6:13)

Act 2 begins with another janus (Exod. 2:23–25). The main body of the episode comprises four scenes. In the first and the fourth framing scenes, God commands Moses to speak to his people about the deliverance Moses is about to effect and to the pharaoh to let God’s people go to worship him. In both scenes God reveals his personal name. The two middle scenes chart Moses’ return to Egypt and his initial failure to convince the pharaoh and his own people. This failure sets up the necessity of *I AM*’s second call of Moses and makes God’s mighty deeds recounted in act 2 of Exodus more glorious.

a. Janus Passage: God Remembers the Covenant (2:23–25)

The main function of a janus — to provide transition from one section to another—entails that the passage itself can easily be relegated to either section. As a conclusion to the first act, Exodus 2:23–25 shows the providential delivery of Moses as evidence of God’s remembrance of his covenant with Abraham. As the introduction for the second act, the call of Moses is seen as a consequence of God’s remembrance (i.e., “acting upon a previous commitment,” as in Gen. 8:1) of his covenant. In the context of both, we see that the entire life of Moses, his deliverance and his call, serves as instantiation of God’s faithfulness to his promises. As in the Noah passage where God’s remembrance of Noah functions as the crux of the flood narrative, God’s remembrance of his promises in this passage helps the reader understand the significance of Moses’ birth and provides the driving motivation for the rest of the narrative.

b. Scene 1: God Calls Moses at Mount Horeb (3:1–4:17)

The act narrating Moses’ call to deliver his people opens with Moses tending the flock of Jethro at Mount Horeb (i.e., “desert”/“desolation”). Here the angel of *I AM* appears to him in flames of fire from within a bush that isn’t consumed. God’s plenipotentiary represents the God of the patriarchal promises and his presence makes the ground around the bush holy (see p. 361–62). Israel’s two greatest leaders — Moses the founder of the nation and David who expands the kingdom to its promised dimensions — are both called from tending flocks to become shepherds (i.e., “providing for” and “protecting”) of God’s people (see p. 878).

After setting the stage, the narrator of the Exodus narrative records God's call on Moses to deliver God's oppressed people from the tyranny of Egypt and to lead them to the land sworn to the patriarchs. Moses, however, is reluctant to obey and raises four objections to his call: (1) "Who am I?" (3:11). (2) The people will ask of God "What is [the meaning of] his name?" (3:13). (3) "What if [the people] do not believe me?" (4:1). (4) "I have never been eloquent" (4:10). God replies that he will be with Moses and will perform signs and wonders, but his anger flares when Moses asks God to send someone else. God graciously gives him Aaron as his mouthpiece (4:14–17). The proof that God calls Moses and is with him is that Moses brings the people back to the mountain to worship (i.e., to serve) God on it (3:12). The proof, of course, is of value to Moses and Israel after it is fulfilled. The demonstration of Moses as a deliver validates his claim to be a Lawgiver. Until then, however, Moses must step out in faith without this proof. The people already revered Moses and *I AM* after the Red Sea experience, but Moses will know who he is at the end of the first section of Exodus, laying the foundation for the second (see outline, p. 347).

c. Scene 2: Moses Returns to Egypt (4:18–31)

Scene 2 begins with Moses returning to Egypt. God gives additional instructions and a prophecy about the pharaoh's opposition and decrees a poetic-justice punishment for Egypt that for enslaving God's firstborn, they must pay with the lives of their firstborn. At this point we encounter a remarkable story: *I AM* meets Moses to kill him (Exod. 4:24). The incongruity between this verse and the previous passages where God delivers and calls Moses to go to Egypt highlights God's concern for covenant keeping (see below). The scene concludes with Moses and Aaron before the elders of Israel. Before Moses confronts the pharaoh, Israel's elders must embrace both the God of the covenant and God's deliverer.

d. Scene 3: Initial Failure (5:1–6:1)

Scene 3 is a masterpiece of storytelling. The narrator weaves together six short incidents in two cycles using direct speeches to highlight the immediacy and rapid flow of events that are triggered by Moses' confrontation with the pharaoh.

I. Cycle 1 (5:1–14)

- A. Moses/Aaron confront the pharaoh to let God's people go and worship (5:1–5).
- B. Pharaoh orders Egyptian taskmasters and Hebrew foremen to increase Israel's work (5:6–9).
- C. Taskmasters and foremen deliver Pharaoh's order to the people, and taskmasters beat foremen (5:10–14).
- II. Cycle 2 (5:15–6:1)
 - A. Foremen confront a hardened pharaoh (5:15–19).
 - B. Foremen confront Moses and Aaron and accuse them of injustice (5:20–21).
 - C. Moses and Aaron accuse *I AM* of being unfaithful to his promise (5:22–6:1).

The urgency of the narration accentuates the wickedness of Pharaoh, the fickleness of God's elect, and the powerlessness of Moses and Aaron to effect salvation. This initial failure teaches the elect that, in addition to trusting and worshiping the covenant-keeping God and having faith in a covenant-keeping leader, they must also embrace the darkness attendant to their election (see below).

e. Scene 4: God Renews His Call to Moses in Egypt (6:2–13)

In the final scene of the act, God once again calls Moses and commands him to speak to Israel and Pharaoh. He reveals himself as the covenant-keeping God and promises to deliver his people from slavery and to bring them to their own land. However, it is clear at this point that he does not promise immediate deliverance. God has an agenda: to harden Pharaoh's heart (see p. 356) so that *I AM*'s triumph over Pharaoh will be so stunning, so total, and so triumphant that his people will never forget their God's might and thus will be spiritually armed for whatever future conflicts they confront (Exod. 4:21; 6:6–8). Wright comments, "Suffering is not to be viewed only in relation to the baser affections of man in opposition to God. It must also be comprehended in light of God's greater work to bring glory to his name (6:1; see also Isa. 66:18–19). And sometimes this greater glorification entails the greater temporal suffering of the elect in order to increase the witness of God in the midst of the nations."¹⁴

f. Conclusion: Election and Genealogy of Levi (6:14–27)

The genealogy of Levi brings act 1 (Exod. 1:1–6:14) to completion and forms a frame with the genealogy of 1:1–7. In scene 1 God deals patiently with Moses when he refuses the call, but when Moses finally fails to trust God's empowerment and begs, "Please send someone else" (4:13), *I AM*'s anger burns against him. In a compromise God offers Aaron to be the mouthpiece. Moses pays a high price for accepting the compromise. Instead of his lineage becoming the holy nation's high priests, Aaron's lineage carries that privilege for the rest of Israel's history until Christ replaces it with the Melchizedekian priesthood. Moses is God's earthly representative while he lives, but he forfeits his genealogical succession to Aaron. Wright comments, "That portion of the call which is forfeited can and may be picked up in the election and call of another."¹⁵

B. Theological Reflections on Act 1

1. Elective Grace of God

The people of God are elected to be God's mediatorial kingdom of universal blessing, and, since the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, they are ultimately destined to consummate that mission. Christopher Wright says, "God so loved the *world* that he chose *Israel*."¹⁶ They are chosen for this unique status and destiny by their descent from Abraham, not by their own choice and merits, and they are marked as the elect by infant circumcision before they have done good or evil. Today his elect hear the Shepherd's voice and in obedience to him receive the mark of baptism that identifies them as having been baptized into Christ and by so doing becoming Abraham's mediatorial seed.

a. Elect Multitude in a Bitterly Hostile Nation (1:8–25)

Israel's elect status as recipient and mediator of blessing leads Egypt to fear and oppress them instead of having faith in God's blessings through them. In

other words, Israel's election to be the seed of God's universal blessing entails their involvement in a hostile world, not their withdrawal from it to bask in its privileged status. As foretold to Eve, the election of the holy seed to crush the head of Satan, who is the spirit behind Egypt's hostility to God's people, entails having one's heel crushed (Gen. 3:15). God's promise to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3), infers a destiny where some will bless and some will curse. By this promise, God establishes Abraham and his seed as the litmus test — the peoples of the world are judged by their faith in and their interaction with God's elect (whether to curse or to bless). The very nature of this promise means that God's election is not a blessing that can be enjoyed in seclusion by communities hiding out in the desert. It is not some private, individual assurance of material prosperity and physical health. It is, rather, a special status given to a people who by their divine calling must live before the eyes of the world, engage with the nations, and today pose the fateful question to any and all peoples: "We are God's elect in Christ Jesus. Will you curse or bless the church?" Inevitably those hostile to God, those who are the seed of the Serpent, will choose to curse; hence, God's elect must suffer. But this suffering is not punitive; it is part and parcel of God's plan for the redemption of the world.

In his sovereign mercy, God elects some to achieve his purpose to bless the others to whom he shows mercy, not for the elect's self-regard alone (Gen. 6:2; 13:11; 14:17; 17:9; 18:25). The Bible does not teach what is commonly called "double predestination" (i.e., as he selects some to salvation, he elects others to damnation). The Scriptures never represent God as choosing some to disbelieve. Rather, it teaches that God determined to use those to whom he did not extend mercy to stumble over the rock (i.e., Christ Jesus) to achieve his plan to make Christ the cornerstone of his temple composed of his chosen people (1 Peter 2:8). He hardened the pharaoh who had hardened his heart (see below; [chap. 15](#)).

John Goldingay, however, goes too far when he says, "The Bible does not develop a doctrine of rejection to parallel its doctrine of election."¹⁷ In truth, both the apostles to the Jews and the apostle to the Gentiles develop a doctrine of rejection. To them, God does not reject some, but he uses their rejection of him to extend mercy to the others on whom he will extend mercy. Goldingay cites Paul Van Buren, "Election, as Israel presents it, means recruitment,"¹⁸ but it should be added that the recruitment becomes effectual only to those to whom God extends his mercy. Christ validates this claim: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Paul says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart for the same reason: " 'that I

might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’... What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory?” (Rom. 9:17–23).

b. Election and Preservation of Moses in Midian (2:1–25)

As the book of Genesis demonstrates vividly, God chooses to partner with individuals for his work of redemption. Not surprisingly, in the book of Exodus, the story of Israel’s election narrows specifically upon the election and call of one man, Moses. The story of Moses’ deliverance shows that God’s elective purpose for Israel cannot be thwarted. As God preserves the creation through Noah’s ark, he preserves his salvation of the world by delivering Israel via another “ark” (*tēbâ*) bobbing on top of deadly Egyptian water.¹⁹ Election entails completion; what God elects to do, he does (Rom. 8:27–31), and completion entails omniscience and omnipotence. To complete his work God must know the situation that thwarts his purpose and must have the power to overcome it. Together these two sublime attributes constitute God’s *omnicompetence*, enabling him to establish his rule according to his good pleasure. Moreover, knowledge without power is weak, and power without knowledge is dangerous.

In addition to trusting God’s omnicompetence to fulfill his providence, the elect must also trust God’s wisdom and grace, for the timing of fulfilling his will is entirely in his hands and not subject to human manipulation. Paul Wright notes, “God’s response appears first as faithfulness to His promises (1:12) and secondly, as timely aid (1:17–21).”²⁰ To assure us that his Providence is on his own time schedule, God prophesied to Abraham centuries beforehand that his seed would be enslaved and mistreated in Egypt for four hundred years (Gen. 15:13).

The elect must also depend on God to raise a leader and not grasp their own salvation in self-will. Salvation belongs to *I AM*, not to human initiative. That truth is underscored by Moses’ failure to deliver his people without God’s calling and empowering, even though his cause was just. In spite of his failure, however, God does not abandon him but preserves his righteous saint in Midian and blesses him with a covenant-keeping wife (see Exod. 4:24–26).

2. Election and Covenant

God's election of Israel entails the commitment of covenant partners to one another that finds expression in their keeping their assumed obligations.

a. Election and Covenant Commitment (3:1–4:26)

Election entails a special relationship between the covenant partners: God and his people. By electing Abraham's seed, God obligates himself to relate to this people differently from all others. *I AM* claims Israel as his firstborn, a claim that provides the rationale for his deliverance and for his covenant to be sealed at Sinai (Exod. 4:22–23). This special relationship entails mutual knowledge. God knows about Israel's plight ("God looked on the Israelites and knew" [Exod. 2:25, literal translation]), and he reveals his name and his character, as revealed by his holy laws (see [chaps. 15](#) and [16](#)), so that his people may know him. It entails an exclusive relationship in which God pledges to treat the elect as his "treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5; see discussion in [chap. 16](#)), granting them a privileged status among the nations of the world — but Israel must serve no other gods. It entails mutual devotion and loyalty (Exod. 20:6) and also proximity such that God dwells amid his people through the presence of the tabernacle (Exod. 25:8).

This special relationship is not about fulfilling obligations. Rather, it is, at its heart, about a relationship of love and intimacy between persons, between God and his people (see Deuteronomy and below, "Election and Covenant Keeping"). So it carries all the risks of relationship, such as the hurt of betrayal and its consequences. When Israel repeatedly betrays God through their disobedience and disloyalty, God is not spared the experience of frustration and anger and righteous jealousy that leads to judgment, as revealed in the words of his prophets (see [chap. 28](#) below). But God's infinite capacity for love also produces tenderness, patience, and forgiveness. Thus, though he wounds, he also binds up.

God's commitment to this relationship is so absolute that in the end God himself ensures its success by sending his Son to fulfill the obligations of his elect. Jesus comes as the true Israel, a covenant partner who knows God, loves God, and is utterly loyal to God, even unto death. By the perfect obedience and loyalty of this covenant partner, God extends the privileged status of the elect to all who demonstrate their election by their faith in Jesus Christ. This new Israel, the church, experiences the special relationship with God in a new way through the administration of the Spirit who, encouraging, guiding, and rebuking, dwells

in the hearts of this people.

Finally, note that election works in cooperation with human prayer. Israel cries for help and does not quit their God nor deny the reality of their afflictions, saying, “We will be happy regardless of our circumstances.” They feel the full pain of their suffering and seek God’s help. If Israel had quit or denied the reality of their sufferings, they would still be in Egypt. God responds by remembering his covenant promises.

b. Election and Covenant Keeping (4:24–6:13)

(1) Election, Circumcision, and Worship (4:24–29)

The Abrahamic covenant provides for the responsibilities of God to care for Israel and of Israel to accept his covenant as shown by circumcision. As God begins to fulfill the obligations of his promise to the patriarchs by calling Moses, he also demands that his human partner fulfill covenant obligations. Moses accepts his call, trusting God to keep covenant with Israel, but then fails to keep covenant by neglecting to circumcise his son. Circumcision reflects God’s intent to set apart the procreative elect as the means for salvation of the world. For the Israelites, to circumcise a child reflects the parents’ faith in God’s promise and a commitment to partner with God in effecting his plan of salvation for the world. Correspondingly, the failure to circumcise the next generation reflects a lack of faith in God’s promise. (Joshua 5:2 serves as evidence of the faithlessness of the wilderness generation.) Consequently, Moses is under a sentence of death for his disobedience—and if the righteous Moses almost perishes, what will happen to the unrighteous Egyptians? God calls Moses to enact God’s covenant obligations toward Israel, but this cannot be done if Moses himself breaks the covenant. Amazingly, the Midianite wife God blessed Moses with during his exile circumcises their son, saving Moses’ life and making him a covenant keeper fit to lead the people. Circumcision as the sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:10–11) is, as Michael Fox says, “a synecdoche for covenantal obligation.”²¹ Without keeping this covenant obligation, Israel’s sons would not be spared in the tenth plague and could not participate in the Passover Feast (Exod. 12:44, 48–49).

Moreover, before Moses enters Egypt and confronts the pharaoh, Israel’s elders must themselves embrace both the God of the covenant and God’s deliverer. The elders show their faith in both by worshiping the Lord when Moses validates his calling by the signs he performs.

(2) Election and Embracing Suffering (5:1–23; 6:1–12)

In addition to trusting and worshiping the covenant-keeping God, the beneficiaries have to embrace the darkness attendant to their election. In this case they had to embrace the hardness of Pharaoh's heart just as the people of God later embraced the hardness of the Roman Empire and of the Holy Roman Empire, even to death, and as the Mennonites embraced the hardness of Stalin. Christ warns, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18–19). The chosen have to embrace that truth in order to participate in God's salvific work.

III. THE GIFT OF GOD'S NAME, *I AM*

A. Introduction

When *I AM* calls Moses at Mount Horeb to deliver Israel, he reveals the meaning of his name (Exod. 3:1–4:23, esp. 3:14–15), and in his second calling of Moses in Egypt after Moses' initial failure, he reveals to Israel the significance of that name (6:2–4). Characters in Genesis ascribe names to God appropriate to their encounters with him, but in these two situations God himself reveals the meaning and significance of his names, offering a deeper intimacy with himself through his revelation.

Names in the ancient Near East provide insights into the nature, character, prospect, hope, and destiny of the person bearing the label; they are not merely euphemistic labels of identification, as is often the case in our culture. William Sanford La Sor says that a person's name is "based closely with a person's existence, representing and expressing his or her character and personality. To learn a person's name is to enter (into) a relationship with his very being."²² God changes a person's name in order to reveal his or her destiny (Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, and Jacob to Israel).²³ God's revelations of his names in Exodus 3:1–5 and 6:4 are significant texts in writing theology of the Old Testament. These self-revelations serve to encourage the beneficiaries of the revelation to remain faithful so that they may carry out God's will in the most difficult situations. Moses and Israel need to know the meaning and significance of his name so that they may throw themselves into the fray with the powerful Pharaoh and retain their loyalty to him in face of Pharaoh's hardening opposition.

However, apart from their contribution to biblical theology, these texts are well known for another reason—they serve as the linchpin for what is commonly known as the "documentary hypothesis." The argument for this hypothesis as it relates to these texts is easy to follow. In Exodus 3 Moses says to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" That is,

Moses asks God, “What is your name?” as though it was heretofore unknown. In Exodus 6:2–3 God says that by his name *I AM* he was not known to the patriarchs. Both texts fly in the face of the Genesis texts that say that the patriarchs called upon the name of *I AM*, implying that Israel already knows the name.

Source critics contend that this contradiction results from a poorly executed merging of three different documents, each with a different time line for the revealing of God’s name. In the J (Yahwistic) document,²⁴ God’s name as *I AM* is known at the time of Seth (Gen. 4:25); in the E(lohistic) document, God reveals his personal name when he calls Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14–15); and in the P(riestly) document, God reveals his name when he calls Moses after his initial failure to show fortitude in confronting Pharaoh (Exod. 6:4–5). According to source critics, a recognition of three contradictory sources is the only credible solution, and a responsible biblical theology must base itself on that reality, not on the dogma of infallible inspiration.

Of course, these texts and the source-critical arguments based on them challenge the validity of the methodology we have adopted in this book, that is, to allow a narrator’s rhetoric in a presumed literary unit point to his theology. A defender of a text’s literary unit may convincingly explain away changes in style and of divine names as intentional; he may demonstrate that doublets are not doublets at all; or he may argue that roughness of style where these criteria fall together may point to redactional activity, while still insisting on the text’s integrity.²⁵ But these types of explanations do not suffice in dealing with a matter so theologically sensitive as the revelation of God’s name. Hence, these texts serve as an excellent proving ground this change of the divine name in the shift from story to plot can be neither validated nor negated but seems unlikely to me. To be sure, Yahweh was probably added secondarily in some passages of Genesis such as 14:18, but these involve text critical problems. If, however, the narrator says the patriarchs worshiped in the name of *YHWH* (*qārā’ b’sēm YHWH*) when in fact they worshiped in another name (Gen. 4:26; 12:8), we are dealing with his integrity in reporting history. Would he mislead his audience on such a theologically sensitive issue as the name in which one worships without clarification? Elsewhere, when names are changed, the text for a narrative-rhetorical approach that assumes Scripture’s integrity. To be credible, a rhetorical approach that assumes Scripture’s integrity must present a plausible way of explaining this apparent contradiction.

We now turn to the exegesis of the texts of Exodus 3:1–4:17, with a focus on 3:13–15, and Exodus 6:1–13, with a focus on 6:2–4. Note at the outset that it is

highly unlikely that a writer who demonstrates so many times and in so many ways his tremendous artful and literary skills would allow a glaring contradiction of his sources to exist in his magnum opus. In truth a heavy burden of proof for contradictory sources lies with the source critic, not the literary critic.

B. The Meaning of *I AM*: Exegesis of Exodus 3:1–4:17²⁶

From a form-critical viewpoint, Exodus 3:1–4:17 presents a paradigm of other callings of charismatic figures that feature God overcoming human reluctance. After the divine appearance that sets the stage for Moses' calling (3:1–6), there follows the "commission" (vv. 7–10), a whole series of "objections" (3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13), and God's response, using "signs" (3:12; 4:2–9).²⁷ The text broadly divides into 3:1–10 and 3:11–4:17.

1. The Setting of the Call and Theological Reflections (3:1 -10)

Grammatically, a disjunctive indicator at the beginning of verse 1 (translated "Now Moses") signals a new unit.²⁸ Verse 1a transitions the audience from Moses with Jethro in Midian (Exod. 2:16–22) to Moses with his flock in Mount Horeb (3:2a). An alternating structure of God's encountering Moses (A) followed by Moses' response (B) gives unity to this introduction:

(A) There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. (B) Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

(A) When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" (B) And Moses said, "Here I am."

(A) "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (B) [Presumably, Moses takes off his sandals.]

(A) Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the

God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” (B) At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

(A) The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.... So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (B) [Moses begins his first speech.]

Conceptually, verse 1 functions as transition; verses 2–3 detail the physical setting; verses 4–6 depict the divine confrontation; verses 7–9 introduce and provide rationale for the call; and verse 10 presents the call. The entire unit serves several theological functions.

a. God’s Immanence: The Angel of *I AM*/God

The immanence of the transcendent God in time of need is seen in his appearing to Moses as represented by the “angel of *I AM* (*malʾak* YHWH).” Who is this angel? The term occurs fifty-nine times in the old Testament, and the synonymous term “angel of God” occurs nine times. Earlier references to “angel of *I AM*/God” are found in Genesis 16:7, 9–11; 22:11, 15; 48:16. In Genesis 31:11 “the angel of God” equates himself with “the God of Bethel” (Gen. 31:13; cf. 28:10–22). In each case he appears at a time when those to whom he is sent are in critical need.

Malak means “messenger” and is glossed as “messenger” or its equivalent when sent by a human king from a court on earth but as “angel” when referring to a divine messenger from the heavenly court.²⁹ In either case the messenger is clearly distinct from the sender (2 Sam. 24:16; Zech. 1:12–13). An extended encounter between the angel of *I AM*/God and Manoah and his wife is described in the book of Judges. In this narrative the angel of the Lord/God has a human appearance but is equated with God. To Manoah’s wife his appearance is awesome (Judg. 13:6), but Manoah sees only a man (v. 8). Nevertheless, both husband and wife think he is merely human, until he ascends in flames without descending. When they realize that the one whose name is beyond understanding and who associates an offering of food to himself with offering sacrifices to God is the angel of *I AM*, they equate their encounter with him as seeing God (Judg. 13:1–22). Elsewhere he speaks for God in the first person (Gen. 16:7–14; 21:17–19; 22:11–12; 31:13; Exod. 3:2; Judg. 6:11–23).

In the biblical world, the *mapak*, who bears a message, is fully equated with the sender (Judg. 11:13; 2 Sam. 3:12, 13; 1 Kings 20:2–6). The king’s plenipotentiary is treated with the same respect as if the king himself were

present. The messenger, like a press secretary for the president of the United States, is empowered to speak for the king, for he is presumed to know fully the mind of the king (cf. Gen. 21:17; 22:11; 31:11; Exod. 3:2; 14:19; 23:20; 32:34). *I AM*'s angelic captain (Num. 22:23, 31; 1 Chron. 21:16; Dan. 10:5, 20) is also treated in this fashion. But the angel of the Lord seems to be more closely related to God than other angels and is entrusted with messages of supreme importance, including birth announcements, even the birth announcement of Jesus Christ to the Virgin Mary.^{[30](#)}

Some have equated the angel of *I AM* with Jesus Christ. This argument is plausible in that both are distinct from God and yet equated with God. But this argument must be rejected for several reasons. First, more than one being, such as a priest or judge, can have the status of being distinct from God yet equated with God. Second, there is a crucial difference between the angel of *I AM* and Jesus Christ. Since in Christ's incarnation all the fullness of the godhead dwells in him bodily, there is no reason to think a preincarnate revelation of him would be anything less. Third, the New Testament never lowers the identity of the Son of God to an angel of any sort. Neither Christ nor his apostles equate Jesus of Nazareth with the angel of *I AM*.

b. God's Humility and Holiness

The presence of the angel of *I AM* in the bush exemplifies God's humility (Exod. 3:2) and holiness (v. 3). The Eternal lowers himself into a bush amid the dirt and the rocks; he is present among the goats and sheep with dung hanging off their tails. Yet, his humility does not compromise his holiness, for none, not even Moses, may enter his presence with dirt on their shoes. This paradoxical scene, where God demands respect by being clean in the midst of dirt and dung, communicates the power of God's holiness to purify the surrounding impurities. This idea is intensified by the next paradoxical image, a purifying fire (i.e., God) dwells in a bush that is fit for kindling (i.e., Israel) without consuming it (vv. 3–5). This symbolic theophany also foreshadows God's grace to stay in the midst of his people after they commit adultery with a fertility deity on their wedding night with *I AM* (Exod. 20–34, esp. 32–34).

c. God's Faithfulness

God's faithfulness compels him to keep his promises to the fathers. God's self-identification as the God of the fathers forms the basis for the rationale of

God's call—he is about to fulfill his promissory covenant (Exod. 3:7).

d. God's Mercy

God is caring and compassionate (Exod. 3:7–9). God sees, and God hears. God's concern and compassion, as well as his faithfulness, lie at the foundation of God's call to Moses. As in the flood narrative where “God remembered Noah” and preserved the ark, in this text God sees and hears the suffering of his people and delivers them. He delivers his people from the oppression of Egypt to give them a land flowing with milk and honey.

2. Moses' Objections to the Call (3:11–4:17)

Moses, in response to God's call, makes a series of objections, creating another alternating structure, which consists of Moses' five objections and God's five responses: (A) 3:11 (B) 3:12; (A) 3:13 (B) 3:14–22; (A) 4:1 (B) 4:2–9; (A) 4:10 (B) 4:11–12; and (A) 4:13 (B) 4:14–17. Finally, 4:18–23 implies Moses accepts the call.

a. First Question/Objection: “Who Am I?” (3:11–12)

In the first cycle, Moses' rhetorical question, “Who (*mî*) am I,” does not aim to gain information but to give information with passion.³¹ His self-abasing question — to judge from the form-critical context of objection and refusal to a commission — expresses his doubt about his ability both to go before Pharaoh and to bring Israel out of Egypt. God's response is twofold. God promises to Moses: “I will be with you,” and he gives Moses a sign that when he brings Israel out of Egypt, Moses will again worship *I AM* on the mountain with all the people.

Significantly, God does not answer Moses' surface question by reassuring him of his educational background, leadership potential, or other talents that might qualify him for this job. To Moses' question, “Who am I?” God responds with, “I will be with you (*‘ehyeh ‘immdk*).” The promise of divine presence is more than sufficient for all challenges and obstacles. Moses' qualifications are irrelevant — God will make it happen. The promise of divine presence signifies the transfer of the holy, consuming fire from the bush to Moses and his people.

b. Second Question/Objection: “What Is the Meaning of His Name?” (3:13–22)

(1) Use of the Divine Name

For his second objection, Moses anticipates a hypothetical, not rhetorical, question that the people may ask of him — a question he probably also asks for himself: “What is his name?” (traditional gloss, Exod. 3:13). By this question, Moses is seeking to know the name the Israelites should invoke for their deliverance. That this is his intention becomes clearer in verse 15, where God says, “This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered [‘invoked’ (*zīkrî*)] from generation to generation.” The root *zkr* means “to remember” and/or “to mention.”³² In the derived stems, especially the Hiphil, it means “to mention, name.” The noun *zeker* means “memory” and/or “mention” and/or “name.” Here and in Job 18:17; Psalm 135:13; Proverbs 10:7; and Isaiah 26:8 it is used interchangeably with *šēm* the Hebrew word for “name.” Proverbs 10:7 is instructive: “The righteous are invoked/remembered [translation mine]” (*zeker*), denoting the active cognitive occupation with a person or situation by retaining and reviving impressions of the person and *proclaiming him or her* to others.³³ One cannot invoke without remembering, and one cannot remember well without invoking/proclaiming.³⁴

(2) The Meaning of YHWH

The only name by which the fathers call upon (i.e., invoke in petition and praise) God is *YHWH* (Gen. 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25), to whose meaning we give attention now.

If the patriarchs have indeed invoked the name *I AM*, then it makes no sense for Moses to ask for God’s name at this point in the narrative—Moses and the people would already know it. But is this indeed what Moses is doing?

In biblical Hebrew *mî* (usually glossed “who?”) is the animate, interrogative pronoun that focuses on the person. Thus, *mî šēmekā* (lit., “Who is your name?”) is used to ask for someone’s name (Judg. 13:17). The inanimate pronoun *mah* is used when the focus is on the circumstance rather than the person. Thus, *mah šēmekā* (lit., “What is your name?”) seeks the meaning of the name (Gen. 32:28). It should not surprise us to find that Moses uses *mah* rather than *mî* in this pivotal text, asking *mah šēmô* (“What is the meaning of

his name?”).³⁵ Within the context of the narrative, Moses is really anticipating this question from the Israelites: “Given all the suffering we have been through, what does *I AM* mean anyway?”

If Moses were simply asking for God’s name, God’s response would be simple: “My name is *I AM*,” but that is not God’s response. On the contrary, God provides in Exodus 3:14 the etymology of *I AM* and its *meaning* by revealing his full-sentence name: ^{ʾehyeh} ^{ʾašer} ^{ʾehyeh} (glossed in NIV as “I AM WHO I AM”).³⁶ God abbreviates his full-sentence name to a single verb: “^{ʾehyeh}” (“I am/will be”). In the same verse, God changes his abbreviated name from the first person ^{ʾhyh} to the third person *yhwh* (“I AM has sent me”) because the first person is appropriate only in God’s mouth and the third person is appropriate in Israel’s mouth when they invoke/mention God’s name.³⁷

Therefore, the meaning of the two shortened forms, ^{ʾhyh} and *yhwh*, and *yhwh*, depend on the meaning of the sentence name, ^{ʾehyeh} ^{ʾašer} ^{ʾehyeh}. The verb ^{ʾehyeh} comes from the Hebrew hollow root *hyh* (or *hwh*), whose meaning roughly correlates with the English verb “to be.” The root may have a stative sense (“I am”) or an active sense (“I happen/become”). These two senses are frequently attenuated in usage. The active sense sometimes occurs in the suffix conjugation (normally past tense), as in Exodus 7:10, where “Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it *became* (*hyh*) a snake.”

In our text, the verb is in the prefix conjugation (indicated by the first ^{ʾehyeh}), which designates either future tense “will be” (i.e., “I will be what I will be”) or iterative present, “I am who I am.” *I AM*’s preceding response, “I am/will be (^{ʾehyeh}) with you” (Exod. 3:12), favors an attenuated sense, with no sharp distinction between the two tenses. In the prefix conjugation, the active and stative senses become attenuated in curse and blessing formulae or in a wish for actualization: The word of *I AM* will *be/become* effective in the way predicted or wished for. Thus, God says to Abraham: “you *will be/become* a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). A similar sense occurs in prophetic oracles to describe events embodying *I AM*’s personal intervention (e.g., “For Gaza *will be/become* abandoned” [Zeph. 2:4]). The sense that something happened or will happen due to God’s miraculous and/or personal intervention fits that context.

Vocalized differently, as in *yahweh*, the form could signify a causative notion (i.e., Hiphil), in which case it would mean “I cause to be” (i.e., the one who creates). But because *hyh* never occurs elsewhere in the causative stem, this rendering is unlikely. In legal prescription, *hyh* dictates the relationship of the covenant people to God, people, or the environment (e.g., “all creatures ... that do not have fins or scales ... *shall be* to you an abomination” [Lev. 11:10,

translation mine]), but Exodus 3 does not pertain to legal prescription. In covenant formulae *hyh* describes the relationship of the covenant partners obligating each to a particular behavior (e.g., “I will be your God and you will be my people” [Jer. 7:23; cf. 2 Sam. 7:14]).

The pronoun ^{ʾa}*ser* introduces a relative clause qualifying ^{ʾe}*hyeh* (i.e., “I AM the one who is I AM”) — that is, God’s attributes are pure and without mixture: pure being without dependence; pure power without limitation; pure love without self-regard; and so on (see [chap. 17](#) below). Had he intended to say “I will become what I will become,” we might expect the sign of direct object, ^{ʾet}, as in Exodus 33:19: “*ḥannōtî ʾet ʾa^šer ʾāḥōn w^ʿriḥamti ʾet ʾa^šer ʾa^{ra}ḥēm*” (“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion”).³⁸ In both Exodus 3 and 33 Moses is requesting information about God’s nature in connection with God’s name. The second suggests he is pure in his sovereign grace, showing mercy on whom he will.

In its function God’s name suggests his pragmatic presence. This sense of God’s being can be captured in the English phrase “I am who I am for you.” His simplicity shows there is no shadow of variability in him. God is dependable; he can be counted upon. This pragmatic interpretation best fits the five cycles of 3:11–4:17:

3:11–12: Moses asks “Who am I?” God responds, “I am with you.”

3:13–15: Moses asks, “What is your name?” God answers, “I am who I am” — that is, “so pure in sublimity that you can count on me.”

4:1–5: Moses argues, “They will not believe me.” God gives him the sign of the rod that turns into a snake as his cachet.

4:10–11: Moses continues to resist: “I am not eloquent.” God replies, “I am (^{ʾe}*hyeh*) with your mouth.”

4:13–17: Moses protests for the last time: “Send someone else.” God becomes angry and sends Aaron as his assistant, promising, “I am with your mouth and his mouth.”

Fortified with this reassurance of God’s all-sufficiency and effectiveness, Moses is ready to challenge the pharaoh, who, in Moses’ world, is reckoned as a quasidivine being (see above). Israel will invoke the name *I AM* again and again in confronting adversaries and adversity. God’s uncompromised simplicity guarantees the success of Moses’ mission.

C. Significance of *I AM*: Exegesis of Exodus 6:2–13

Nonetheless, after the initial confrontation with the hardened Pharaoh, both Moses and Israel lose heart. God responds, again commanding Moses to speak. He now reveals the significance of his divine name within the context of his display of power over the pharaoh (Exod. 6:1).

Exodus 6:2–13 can be analyzed into two incidents: God commands Moses to speak to Israel (vv. 2–9), and God commands Moses to speak to the pharaoh (vv. 10–13). Both divine commands (vv. 6–8, 10–11) are met with discouragement: first by the people (v. 9), then by Moses (v. 12). In the first incident, God reveals to Moses the significance of his name, *I AM* (vv. 2–5); and on that basis commands Moses to deliver a prophetic oracle to Israel (vv. 6–9).

The divine speech to Moses is framed by initial and terminal *eny YHWH* (“I am *I AM*” [6:2, 8]) to indicate the greatness of the one speaking. It is divided by the logical particle *Ikn* (“therefore”) and by another reassertion of the Author, “I am *I AM*.” In verse 2, “I am *I AM*” introduces the divine speech to Moses; in verse 6, it introduces the divine speech to the people. The two speeches combined form the following chiasmic structure:

- A Identification of the Author, “I am *I AM*” (v. 2a)
- B A recollection of God’s promissory covenants to the patriarchs before he made himself known/was known³⁹ by/as *I AM* (vv. 2b–4)
- C *I AM* heard the Israelites groaning under Egyptian bondage (v. 5)
- C’ *I AM* will free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (v. 6)
- B’ A recollection of God’s promissory covenants and oath to the patriarchs after they know he is *I AM* (vv. 7–8a)
- A’ Identification of the Author, “I am *I AM*” (v. 8b)

The first half (A — C) reflects upon the Lord’s covenants with the patriarchs concerning the past; the second half reflects upon his covenants with the patriarchs concerning the imminent future. The recollection of God’s promissory covenant and oath in B’ (Exod. 6:7–8) occurs after the deliverance. *I AM* gives a sevenfold declaration of what he is about to do and defines what the patriarchal covenant signifies in this context. Significantly, the same word, *šebaʿ*, means “oath” and “seven.” From this sevenfold experience they will *know* what the name *I AM* signifies.

If Israel is to know “I am *I AM* your God” (Exod. 6:7) by their experience with God’s fulfillment of his covenant obligation, then it makes sense to say that

the patriarchs do not know God as *I AM* for they have not experienced God as the mighty Warrior who fulfills his promise. Thus, God says, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name *I AM* I did not make myself known to them” (6:3). In biblical Hebrew, “to know” means “to experience,” not merely “to know about.” When used with an object, not the objective clause “to know that,” there is no divorce between the subject knowing and the object known; the known becomes internalized in the knower. This is beyond a mere cognitive grasp of concepts. Other languages formally distinguish between “to know personally” and “to know about”: German, *kennen* and *wissen*; French, *connaître* and *savoir*; Spanish, *conocer* and *saber*.

The nomadic patriarchs are few in number and know/experience God as *El Shaddai* (El/God Almighty), the only patriarchal divine name of El compounded with a descriptive word and not restricted to a given altar. But the patriarchs have never known/experienced the name *I AM*. To be sure, the patriarchs invoke the name *I AM*, but the patriarchal narratives never assert that the patriarchs “know/experience” this name. Similarly, the patriarchs know the content of the promissory covenant, but until the exodus, Israel has not experienced/internalized its realization.

The parallelism between B and B’ supports this reading. “By my name *I AM* I was not known to them” (Exod. 6:3) is the passive counterpart to the active statement, “You will know that I am *I AM*” (v. 7).⁴⁰ In other words, what is intended in verse 3 is “It was not known to them that I am *I AM*.” The active statement “to know that I am *I AM*” occurs about fifty times in Scripture and is labeled by scholars as the recognition formula — that is to say, the expression means “to recognize that I am *I AM*.” This formula occurs in connection with *I AM*’s miraculous interventions and presents as the purpose of the divine intervention to make known that *I AM* is Israel’s covenant-keeping God with all that that entails. The formula occurs in two clusters: in Exodus (e.g., 6:7, 17) in connection with Israel’s exodus from Egypt, and in Ezekiel in connection with Israel’s exodus from Babylon (e.g., 37:6, 13). God miraculously intervenes on their behalf in the former through mighty acts of war; he miraculously intervenes in the latter by miraculous word through amazing prophecies of their deliverance beforehand.

“I am *I AM*” frames God’s speech to Moses in Exodus 6:2–8, and within that his prophecy to Israel (vv. 6–8). The honor of the Author, the name *I AM*, is at stake with his promissory covenants and oath. All of God’s promises are conditioned upon the significance of that name; it assures his people in times of crisis when they invoke his name that he is Israel’s covenant-keeping God.

We are not arguing that Exodus 3:11–14 and 6:4–5 may not have been derived

from sources; we do not know enough about the composition of the Old Testament to be dogmatic. But we are arguing that these revelations about the name *I AM* do not contradict the patriarchal narratives. Rather, these two self-revelations of God contribute significantly to the narrative theology of the Primary History in explaining the meaning of the name that Israel's invokes and in giving the significance of the name: *I AM* miraculously intervenes to help his people in their crises.

IV. OTHER NAMES FOR GOD

A. Names Used by the Patriarchs

The patriarchs have ascribed several names to God that Israel could have invoked. These names are also used exclusively by Job and his three friends, who apparently lived during the patriarchal period.

1. *El*

Biblical writers sometimes use *'ēl* as a generic appellative for a divine being, not a specific name for Israel's God (as in Deut. 33:26 ["the God of Jeshrun"]; 2 Sam. 22:32 ["who is God, but I AM"]; Ps. 22:1 *'ēl* "my God"], and in Deut. 32:12; Ps. 81:9 [10] where it references a foreign god). Sometimes a generic appellative becomes restricted to a unique appellative and becomes a name. (For example, "mother" may become uniquely within a family "Mother." Commonly an article is used; "city" becomes within a restricted locale "the City"). In the Ugaritic texts, and probably in the patriarchal narratives, *'ēl* occurs as a unique appellative ("El"). In the Canaanite pantheon, as known from the Ugaritic texts, *El* is the proper name for the god *par excellence*, the head of a pantheon of lesser gods. In the Old Testament, *'ēl* is sometimes, but rarely, used for this Canaanite deity (cf. Ezek. 28:2; Judg. 9:46).

In the patriarchal narratives there is a series of divine names for Israel's God involving combinations of *'ēl* with a qualifier: *'ēl^{el}lôhê yis'ra'ēl* ("El, the God of Israel" [Gen. 33:20]), *'ēl^{el}lyôn* ("El/God, Most High" [Gen. 14:18–22]), *'ēlr'î* ("El/God Who Sees Me" [Gen. 16:13]), *'ēl 'ôlam* ("El/God Eternal" [Gen. 21:33]), and *'ēl šadday* ("El/God, Ruler of All"? [Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3]). Several of these names also occur in the Ugaritic texts. Moreover, in the patriarchal narratives they occur with reference to distinct sanctuaries or altars, respectively at Shechem, Jerusalem, Beer-lahai-roi, Beersheba. The meaning of *El Shaddai* is neither certain nor used in a distinct locale. Its traditional rendering is "God Almighty," following the Septuagint (*pantokratōr*) and Vulgate

(*omnipotent*). Rabbis questionably explain the meaning by an etymological scheme, arguing that *se* means “who/which” and *day* means “sufficiency” (i.e., “God Who Is Sufficient”). Moreover, the patriarchs worshiped God in a cultus probably derived from the worship of El: in connection with trees (Gen. 21:33) and with *maṣṣēbā* (memorial stone pillar, Gen. 28:18).

Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (later called Jerusalem; cf. Ps. 76:3), worshiped El Elyon (Creator of heaven and earth), and Abraham—or at least the narrator of Genesis — equated Melchizedek’s God as his God, *I AM*. Job and his friends also worshiped *El*, and Job’s biographer equated their God with *I AM* (Job 5:8; 9:2; *passim*).

If *’ēl* by itself or in its various combinations with qualifiers is not a generic appellative but a specific name for God, then we need to explain why the biblical writers call the God of the fathers by the same name as the high god in the Canaanite pantheon. Source critics and historical critics believe that these names in the patriarchal narratives represent an earlier, distinct stage of Israel’s religion, or at least a development within it. Frank Cross writes, “The wide overlap in attributes, epithets, and names of Yahweh with El suggests that Yahweh originated as an El figure, splitting apart from the old god as the cult of Israel separated and diverged from its polytheistic context.”⁴¹ However, the Biblical writers unquestionably intend these names to refer to *I AM*. Indeed, Cross implicitly admits that he and others are directly contradicting the biblical witness: “We must emphasize that these epithets, however, were interpreted in the tradition that preserved them as names by which Yahweh was called.”⁴²

In my judgment, we can propose a better explanation for the similarities between the Canaanite texts and the Old Testament than positing a speculative reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion. To begin, we must understand that God reveals himself through human languages. For much of the Old Testament period, God revealed himself through the Canaanite dialect that eventually became biblical Hebrew. To employ a language means also to employ its metaphors, imageries, and terminology. Hence Genesis 8:21 records that “*I AM* smelled a pleasant aroma,” retaining a mythic way of saying, without mythic theology, that God accepts the sacrifice. Another example of mythic language includes the mention of the “food of God” (Lev. 21; cf. Ps. 50:12–13).⁴³ In the same way, God adopts the Canaanite religious terminology, such as *’ēl* and fills it with truth. Since *’ēl* is also a generic appellative for “god,” in contrast to “human being,” it is especially subject to use by more than one religion for its unique god.

That this name of God is the same as the name of the Canaanite high god does

not mean that the Canaanites and Israelites equated these deities, any more than we would not differentiate between two people bearing the same name. The depraved character of Canaanite *El* differs radically from the holy God of the Bible. For example, one Ugaritic text portrays *El* as, in Cross's words, "a vigorous and prodigiously lusty old man as is fitting for the primordial procreator and patriarch."⁴⁴ Cross, if I read him correctly, implies that on the story level this is the God that Abraham worships! But as he notes, this is not the view of the narrator on the discourse level. Earlier we argued that it is methodologically wrong to deconstruct the narrator's point of view (see [chap. 4](#)).

2. *'elôah 'elôahîm*

God's people in all ages have referred to God as *'elôah* and *'elôahîm*, respectively singular and plural, as a specific appellative for God. Aside from Job and his friends (cf. Job 4:9; 10:2; *passim*), the plural form is by far the most common name for God. This name signifies the quintessence of all divine, transcendent, or heavenly powers.⁴⁵ Their antonym is *'ādāmâ*, "earthly" (*ʾādām*); *'elôah* is what humanity is not. Thus, the term emphasizes God's inhabitation of the heavenly sphere, focusing on his transcendence over human qualities — namely, his immortality and power.

The plural form *'elôahîm* with reference to Israel's God does not designate a countable plural, as it would in English (i.e., "G/gods"). In Hebrew grammar, unlike English grammar, the plural commonly has other uses than to indicate a countable plural number.⁴⁶ For example, it is used for abstractions (such as "wisdom," "youth," "virginity"). The plural is also used for appellatives whose referent is inherently large or complex (e.g., "face," "back"). Grammarians designate its use with *'elôahîm* and other nouns as an "intensive plural," a plural that designates a single animate as thoroughly characterized by the qualities of the noun. Therefore Leviathan, the sea monster, is in plural form (Ps. 74:13–14), and so is the land monster, Behemoth (Job. 40:15). When applied to deities, this intensive plural is sometimes referred to as the "honorific plural." In other words, the divine being is so thoroughly characterized by "God-ness" that only a plural is appropriate for his designation. This intensive plural of *'elôahîm* can be distinguished from its countable plural by its modifiers (such as verbs, adjectives). The former uses singular modifiers, the latter uses plural modifiers.

3. *Fear of God*

Although Job and his friends and Melchizedek seemingly do not know the name *I AM*, they nevertheless enjoy a covenantal relationship with God. This relationship, like that of the patriarchs before Abraham, is based on God's general revelations of his wisdom, power, and goodness in the creation and of his justice in the conscience (Rom. 1:18–32), not on Israel's special covenants. God commits himself to these elect saints — if we may judge from the life of Job — to put a protective hedge around them lest they perish. They in turn commit themselves to trusting God to do what is right and to behaving justly toward their neighbors — in other words, to covenant fidelity (piety and morality).

Others, such as the Philistine Abimelech (Gen. 20:1–18, esp. v. 11), “fear God” — that is to say, they obey their conscience and extend to their neighbors the right to life, spouses, property, and reputations. “Fear of God,” says Roger N. Whybray, refers to “a standard of moral conduct known and accepted by men in general.”⁴⁷ Although the term is not used of Joseph's Pharaoh, his just treatment of Joseph and his merciful treatment of Israel show that he fears God. On account of their morality, they too experience God's protection and blessing. However, without circumcision — the separating sign of God's unique covenants with Abraham's descendants who love God — they do not belong to the people of God. Nevertheless Abraham and Abimelech can talk about this God who rules the conscience, as do Joseph and the Pharaoh (Gen. 41:9, 16).

By contrast to these God-fearers, the Roman centurion Cornelius, who is both *eusebēs* (“profoundly reverent” with respect to God) and *phoboumon ton theon* (“and God-fearing”), is given a special revelation and the witness of Peter, leading to the baptism of the centurion and his relatives: the covenant sign of belonging to God's eternal people after the advent of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:1–48, esp. vv. 2–3, 47–48). Whereas Joseph talks to his Pharaoh about a common God (Gen. 41:9, 16), Moses does not assume that he and his Pharaoh can talk about the same God. Moses' Pharaoh is a tyrant, not a man who fears God. In short, the *Torah* identifies the God of Joseph with the God of his Pharaoh, who treated Israel justly and kindly; but the *Torah* opposes *I AM* to Moses' Pharaoh, who oppressed Israel.

4. *Clan Names*

“Fear [*paḥad*] of Isaac,” “Mighty One [*ʾabîr*] of Jacob” are clan names for God: “Fear” (*paḥad*) or “Terror” (Gen. 31:42; cf. 1 Sam. 11:7). Cross writes, “The terror-spreading numinous effect of ‘Isaac's *paḥad*’ represents a warranty

of an effective protection for this community, which is comprised under the name of ‘Isaac’.”⁴⁸ This ancient divine epithet becomes disseminated in the Ancient Near East. In “Mighty One of Jacob” (Gen. 49:24; Isa. 49:26; 60:16; Ps. 132:2, 5), *’abîr* designates war heroes among human beings (Ps. 76:5). The quality designated by this word is perceived to be particularly embodied in the strength of a bull (in Ugarit *ibr* means “bull”).

B. Names Used in the Deuteronomistic History

The Deuteronomist uses several names and epithets for God. Gerald T. Manley lists nine names that are used in Deuteronomy: *El*, *’Eloah*, *’Elyon*, *’Elohim* (“gods” or “God”), *I AM [YHWH]*, *Adonay*, *I AM*, *I AM God of (your, thy, our) fathers* and *I AM (your, thy, our) God*.⁴⁹ “God” is used in connection with “wonderment and awe.” Thus we read “the judgment is God’s” (1:17), “the voice of God ... out of the midst of the fire” (4:33), “the finger of God” (9:10), and so on. His epithets are “King” (33:5), “Rock” (32:4, 15), and “Rider of Clouds” (33:26).

I AM’s war title is *YHWH ’Adonay*, (traditionally, “LORD of Hosts”). The title is missing in Genesis—Judges and in postexilic narrative. It is first attested in 1 Samuel 1:3, fifteen other times in the Deuteronomistic history, and about 250 times in the preexilic and postexilic prophets. Scholars debate its meaning.⁵⁰ *Ṣēba’ôt* is the plural of *ṣābā’*, meaning the service “that one does not do of one’s own volition but that is required of one by a superior. As a rule it was service in war, but could also be in labor.” Accordingly, it can denote “military service,” “military campaign,” and “army (hosts).”

Some think that in the divine epithets *ṣēbā’ôt* is an intensive plural abstract like, e.g., *’eṣōt* (“[true] cunning”), *dē’îm* (“[profound] knowledge”). If so, the divine epithet means “I AM is Mighty/Almighty” (so TNIV). This interpretation can be supported by *kurios pantokrator* in the LXX. However, *ṣābā’* is a concrete rather than an abstract noun of quality. Moreover, in 1 Samuel 17:45 “the battle formations of the God of Israel” function as an apposition to *YHWH ṣb’t* validating the meaning “I AM [God] of Hosts/Armies.” This meaning also fits its association with the military function of the ark. The prophets, however, reinterpreted the word to refer to I AM calling into military service those hostile toward Israel, even as they reinterpreted the “Day of I AM” from referring to his victory through righteous Israel to referring to his victory over unrighteous Israel

(Amos).

Some want the title to also encompass the heavenly beings making up the heavenly household of I AM and/or all earthly and heavenly beings (cf. Deut. 4:15). However, this cosmological interpretation conflicts with the data. The Old Testament refers to these hosts as *šēbā'haššāmayim* (“host of heaven” = stars) to apply this meaning to I AM’s rule over the heavenly hosts, and never uses the divine epithet *šēbā’ôt* clearly in that context.⁵¹

The epithet *Ba'al* (“lord,” “owner,” “possessor”) is attested in the entire Semitic-speaking world and was attributed to a number of deities with personal names. From the middle of the second millennium the epithet was oriented more and more to function as a clearly defined type of divinity (“the storm god”) or for an individual name (e.g., Hadad). This collapse into one epithet for many deities encouraged the cities involved in international trade, especially in the West Semitic sphere, in their tendency to emphasize their common features as over against their particular traditions.

To judge from Israelite personal names, such as Merib-Baal (1 Chron. 8:34), it may be that at one time Israel also used the epithet *ba'al* in reference to *I AM*. But the characters in the Deuteronomistic history and the Deuteronomist himself never use this epithet for Israel’s covenant God. Baal and his local manifestations differed too radically to allow a common epithet for both. Although Israel’s cultus involved many similarities with Baal worship, such as in their sacrificial system, the pagan worship of the local manifestations of Ba'al, the *bē'alim* (“lords”; i.e., “the various gods of the peoples around them,” Judg. 2:11), involved lascivious sexual practices and other immoral practices. From Leviticus 18 and 20, Deuteronomy 7, the prophets, and the Ugaritic texts, one can discern that worship of Baal entailed degrading of the created order with regard to sex and home through ritual prostitution and child sacrifice. Moreover, Elijah struggled against the prophets of Baal not simply over what was the right religion, but over a right and just society as illustrated in the Naboth vineyard story (1 Kings 21).

C. Names Used in the Exilic and Postexilic Periods

The prophet Isaiah writes polemics against the Babylonian gods. None of the biblical writers of this period entertain the possibility of seeing Bel as the name under which the Babylonians worship the God of conscience. The Babylonians are cruel and tyrannical oppressors of Israel. However, Daniel, Ezra, and

Nehemiah appropriate to *I AM* the title “the God of heaven.” This was also the title of the Syrian high god and a title that other peoples in the Persian Empire gave to their chief god (cf. Ezra 1:2; 5:11–12; 6:9–10; 7:12, 23; Neh. 1:4–5; 2:4, 20; Dan. 2:18–19, 34, 44; cf. 5:23). Because this epithet implies God’s transcendence over all, pagan and covenant people could speak of the same God, and Daniel accuses Belshazzar of setting himself up against this God (5:23).

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah tolerate their Babylonian renamings to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan. 1:7) and they even accepted a Babylonian education in languages and literatures. Moreover, they were involved in the service of the Babylonian and Persian courts and accommodated themselves to the pagan culture to the extent that it did not entail breaking covenant with *I AM*, such as worshiping another god or eating food that was not *kosher* (Dan. 2:8–17; 3:1–29; 6:1–27). As for the reformers Ezra and Nehemiah, they restored apostates to the worship of *I AM* (Ezra 9:1–2) and to keeping the covenant (Neh. 9–10) and observing its Sabbath sign (Neh. 13:15–22).

D. Conclusion

In sum, the people of God are open to other religions to the extent that the belief and practices conform to Israel’s distinctive faith (i.e., ethical monotheism) and allow her religion to come to full flowering as *I AM*’s nature is more clearly grasped and his lordship more fully acknowledged. On the other hand, they reject beliefs and practices that turn their religion into something other than itself and lead to the ignoring of *I AM*’s nature and expectations.^{[52](#)}

THOUGHT QUESTION

Of what value is your suffering to God and to you? How do God's names encourage you in suffering? What are the dangers and advantages of living in a pluralistic society?

[1.](#) For a recent and good commentary on Exodus with an annotated bibliography of earlier commentaries, see Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

[2.](#) Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 24, italics his.

[3.](#) The narrator likely gaps (intentionally omits) the name of the pharaoh in the contest over who rules God's son so as to indicate that the title pertains not to an individual king but to a satanic institution.

[4.](#) Paul A. Wright, "Exodus 1–24 (A Canonical Study)" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Vienna, Austria, March 1993).

[5.](#) Ibid., 215. Note that apart from the four major transitions and introductions, Wright's chart within these four divisions differs somewhat from my divisions as given in the outline above.

[6.](#) Exodus in the Hebrew text begins with the conjunction "and," syntactically linking Genesis and Exodus.

[7.](#) After *I AM* makes his power known in the tenth plague, Pharaoh changes his mind about Israel as a source of blessing or curse. He says to Moses, after releasing Israel from his servitude, "Also bless me" (Exod. 12:32). But though he acknowledges that Israel is a source of blessing, he refuses to submit to the implications of that, namely, to bless Israel *ex animo*. Given the opportunity he will change his mind yet again to reenslave them (Exod. 14:5–9).

[8.](#) Wright, "Exodus 1–24," 186.

[9.](#) John Goldingay (*Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 329) insightfully comments on the perversity of Pharaoh's tactics. "Thus he seeks to turn work, designed to be a means of human beings' fulfilling God's purpose in the world, into a means of frustrating that purpose; to turn midwives, called to be agents of life, into agents of death; and to turn the Nile, Egypt's great natural source of life, into a place of

death.”

[10.](#) Noah’s ark in the flood saved the creation; Moses’ ark in the Nile saved Israel.

[11.](#) Pharaoh’s daughter identifies with the Hebrews without raising suspicion by investing *mšh*, a well-known element of Egyptian names (*ms[w]*, “child”), with its Hebrew meaning.

[12.](#) Possibly the original audience associated this event with the ancient legend of Sargon of Akkad (b. 2334 BC), a builder of a great empire, who survived at birth in a chest floating on the Euphrates. If so, they would have associated the birth of Moses with his forming a great nation.

[13.](#) Moses’ rejection by his own people and his reception by those who are not of his own people typifies the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders and his reception by the Gentiles.

[14.](#) Wright, “Exodus 1–24,” 191.

[15.](#) Ibid., 192.

[16.](#) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 39.

[17.](#) Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 217.

[18.](#) Paul M. Van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 117, cited in Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 216.

[19.](#) The narrator probably intends to compare Moses with Noah, because *tebâ* is used in the Bible only in Gen. 6–8 and Exod. 2:3, 5.

[20.](#) Wright, “Exodus 1–24,” 187.

[21.](#) Michael V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly, *ôṭ* Etiologies,” *RB* 81 (1974): 587–88.

[22.](#) William Sanford LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederick W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 134.

[23.](#) R. Abba, s.v. “Name,” *IDB*, vol. 3: 500–508; G. Hawthorne, s.v., “Name,” *ISBE*, vol. 3; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88), 48–83.

[24.](#) German scholars, who pronounce *j* as *y*, called the alleged document “J,” not “Y,” as would have been the case if source criticism had originated in England.

[25.](#) R. W. Moberly in *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), [chap. 2](#) and esp. 177, argues that the narrator of Genesis, though aware on the story level that the Lord first reveals his name Yahweh to Moses (Exod. 6:2–3), on the plot

level uses Yahweh to insist that God, who is worshiped by the patriarchs as El, El Shaddai, and the like, is indeed Yahweh. His theory of this change of the divine name in the shift from story to plot can be neither validated nor negated but seems unlikely to me. To be sure, Yahweh was probably added secondarily in some passages of Genesis such as 14:18, but these involve text critical problems. If, however, the narrator says the patriarchs worshiped in the name of YHWH (*qārāʾ bʾšēm YHWH*) when in fact they worshiped in another name (Gen. 4:26; 12:8), we are dealing with his integrity in reporting history. Would he mislead his audience on such a theologically sensitive issue as the name in which one worships without clarification? Elsewhere, when names are changed, the text informs us of such changes (e.g., Gen. 28:19). Moreover, the name of Moses' mother is Jochebed (*yôkebed*, Exod. 6:20; Num. 26:59), which probably means "Yahweh is glory." If so, Moses' family worshiped *Yahweh* before God revealed his name to Moses.

[26.](#) We need not defend here a break at 4:17 rather than at the viable alternative of 4:23.

[27.](#) Cf. Gideon (Judg. 6:11ff.), Saul (1 Sam. 9ff.), and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4ff.), but Moses' call is dissimilar because it extends over two chapters.

[28.](#) Waw+X+qatal form marks a new section in the narrative (*IBHS*, 650–51, §39.2.3a).

[29.](#) It should be properly translated as "the angel of the LORD." *malʾak* is definite, since it is in construct with a proper noun. BDB defines this term as a "theophanic" angel.

[30.](#) The LXX renders *malʾak yhw* by *angelos kuriou*, "angel of the Lord." Luke uses *angelos kuriou* for the angel Gabriel, who announces the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. One cannot readily associate the *angel of the Lord* in Luke's birth announcements with the one who announces the birth of Samson, because the name of that angel of the Lord is "beyond understanding." If they are identical, then the one who announces the birth of Christ can scarcely be the incarnate Christ.

[31.](#) *IBHS*, 322, §18.2g.

[32.](#) The latter meaning, which is often overlooked in translations, may find support in cognate Semitic languages that commonly share a similar philology with the Hebrew language. In Arabic *zkr* means both, as in Hebrew, and in Akkadian *zkr*, "to say, speak, mention, swear," is purely a verb of speaking.

[33.](#) H. Eising, *TDOT*, s.v. "*zākhār*," 4:66.

[34.](#) Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15* (NIDOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 458.

[35.](#) *IBHS*, 320, §18.2d.

[36.](#) Typically in the ancient Near East names are full sentences reduced to one word and/or a play on the birth situation.

[37.](#) Maimonides said, “His name is pronounced as it is written.” His point: God’s name is all consonants — *YHWH* — and cannot be pronounced. Until about AD 500 the Hebrew written text was mostly consonantal and the Hebrew oral tradition preserved the vocalization. In the case of *yhwh*, however, during the Second Temple period, scribes and rabbis read ^ʾ*dōnāy* (“LORD”) or *haššēm* (“the Name”) with the tetragrammaton, probably to be wary of attaching God’s name to something *šaw’* (“false,” see [chap. 15](#)). The combination of two traditions led to the mistaken reading “Jehovah.” In any case, as a result the oral reading of *yhwh* was lost. (Most of the Dead Sea Scrolls, out of reverence, write the tetragrammaton in the archaic Hebrew script, not the contemporary Aramaic script, just as some in the contemporary church retain “thee” and “thou” with reference to God.) Most scholars, but only a few contemporary English translations, depending on the shortened form of *Yah* (as in Elijah, “my God is Yah”), reconstruct the first syllable as *yah* and the second syllable, on the basis of Exod. 3:14, as *y/weh*. This historical reconstruction, however, is speculative because *yah* can be the old Qal prefix of the root *hy/wh*, but the form attested in first person is *eh*, whose equivalent in third person is *yih*, not *yah*. Since God in his providence did not preserve the pronunciation, I opt to translate, not transliterate, the tetragrammaton (*YHWH*) by “*I AM*,” and not by the scholarly speculative invention “Yahweh” (see preface).

[38.](#) Scholars and translators have offered various options for interpreting this name. Because of its ambiguity, some think the form is deliberately enigmatic to prevent magical manipulation. This explanation harkens back to the mythic notion that knowing the names of deities allows magicians to use incantation to control or manipulate them. But this is unlikely; a deliberate enigma would not reassure Moses and Sarah to throw themselves into the teeth of the dragon. The same objection calls into question the interpretations of “I am who I am” with the connotation, “What does it matter to you?” (C. Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. J. Rebel and S. Woudstra [Kampen: Kok, 1993–1999], 1.367), and of “They know very well who I am. What a question!” as Peter Enns puts it (Enns, *Exodus*, 102–3). Bruce Boston (“How Are Revelation and Revolution Related?” *Theology Today* 26 [July 1969]: 143) emphasizes the fully active sense of *hāyâ* in his interpretation: “The God of Israel is the one who ‘happens’ with his people, the one who, when he presents himself, does so as an event and in events.” The emphasis of this approach is that the name of God focuses on his actions. This may be so, but, as we have argued, the grammar supports the traditional interpretation of its having a stative sense. In fact, the preceding statement, “I am

with you” (*ʿhyehʿimmāk*) in the same historical and literary contexts validates the stative sense of *hyh* and calls into question omitting that notion. Moreover, the gloss “I will become what I will become” could have a transmogrifying sense, but God is unchangeable. The Septuagint glosses the sentence name in 3:14 simply by, “I am the Being” (*ho Ōn*). Indeed, God is the uniquely true Being, but it is somewhat unclear how this philosophical statement about God’s being provides Moses with the reassurance he is asking for. It seems too philosophical, too abstract, too Greek, not a Hebraic thought.

[39.](#) The Niphal signifies either passive (“I was not known”) or reflexive (“I did not make myself known”).

[40.](#) This discussion depends heavily on C. Eslinger, “Knowing the Lord: Exodus 6:3 in the Context of Genesis 1 – Exodus 15,” in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. de Regt, J. de Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 188–98.

[41.](#) Frank Moore Cross Jr., *TDOT*, 1.260, s.v. *ʿēl*.

[42.](#) *Ibid.*, 1.256 s.v. *ʿēl*.

[43.](#) Likewise, the patriarchs worshiped God in much the same way. For example, the Canaanites worshiped their fertility deities under sacred trees; so does Abraham, and it is at such sites that God reveals to him that he will have seed. But Abraham worships the Creator of heaven and earth, not a nature fertility deity, and his seed is destined to sanctify, not defile, the Land. The great tree of Moreh (i.e., Teacher) at Shechem probably designates a pagan site for oracles. At this site God revealed to Abraham that his pilgrimage from Mesopotamia to the Land that God would give him terminated here.

[44.](#) Cross, *TDOT*, 1.247, s.v. *ʿel*.

[45.](#) It is not clear how the meaning of *ēloah* is distinct from *el*. The significance of the *h* ending is unknown. Furthermore, *ʿellôah* *ʿelôhîm* can both be an indefinite or a definite noun. When it refers to a specific deity, it is “God” — capitalized. However, if it is referring to the essence of divinity, then it is translated “god” — uncapitalized.

[46.](#) For extensive documentation see *IBHS*, P. 7.4: 118–24. worships the Creator of heaven and earth, not a nature fertility deity, and his seed is destined to sanctify, not defile, the Land. The great tree of Moreh (i.e., Teacher) at Shechem probably designates a pagan site for oracles. At this site God revealed to Abraham that his pilgrimage from Mesopotamia to the Land that God would give him terminated here.

[47.](#) R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (London: SCM, 1965), 96. An ironclad distinction between “fear of God” and “fear of *I AM*” cannot be made, however, because some literary strata prefer

one name over the other, and because the line between them, consisting of their emotional and rational components, becomes attenuated. See Bruce K. Waltke, “The Fear of the Lord,” in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality Presented to James Houston*, ed. J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 17–33, esp. 28.

[48.](#) Cross, *TDOT*, 1.247, s.v. *’el*.

[49.](#) Gerald T. Manley, *The Book of the Law: Studies in the Date of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 37.

[50.](#) Grammarians differ whether a proper name can occur in the construct state (see J. A. Emerton, “New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Juntillet ‘Ajrud,” “ VT 94 [1982]). We need not decide that issue here, for the full name may be *YHWH ’l ohê š’bā’ôt* (I AM, God of Hosts — Amos 3:3; 4:13).

[51.](#) Cf. A. S. van de Woude, *THAT*, 2.1039–46, s.v. *šābā’*.

[52.](#) John Goldingay and Christopher J. H. Wright, “The LORD Our God. The LORD One”: The Old Testament and Religious Pluralism,” in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. A. D. Clarke and B. W. Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), 34–52.

Chapter 14

THE GIFT OF GOD AS DELIVERER AND WARRIOR

The most cruel [*sic*] war which God can make with men in this life is to leave them without that war which he came to bring.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.498

I. INTRODUCTION

In [chapter 13](#) we exegeted Exodus 1:1–6:27 and introduced the theme of Israel’s redemption as an integral part of their election to establish God’s kingdom to the remotest corners of our conflicted world. In this chapter we turn our attention to Exodus 6:28–18:27. The narrative recounts how *I AM* delivers his “son” (i.e., Israel) from being a slave of the implacable pharaoh and then preserves his son in the hostile wilderness. In this section we see that *I AM* decisively intervenes to establish his kingdom on earth when he destroys Egypt and frees and preserves his son to serve him instead of wicked Pharaoh. After that decisive intervention, the nation sings: “*I AM* will reign for ever and ever,” by which they mean—judging from the song that precedes it—God will rule the nations through Israel (Exod. 15:18). After God’s mighty deliverance of Israel, his excellency, Jethro, the priest of Midian, acknowledges *I AM* is God by words — “Praise be to *I AM*. ... Now I know that *I AM* is greater than all other gods” — and by the act of offering *I AM* a burnt offering (Exod. 18:9–12).

We begin by reflecting on the structure and theology of Exodus 6:28–18:27 and then develop the themes of God as deliverer and warrior in the biblical corpus.

II. STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY OF EXODUS 6:28–18:27

Once again, we turn to Paul Wright's dissertation on the book of Exodus, adopt and adapt his analysis of its structure and content, and reflect upon it theologically.¹ Wright divides the passage into two units: (1) Israel's Redemption from Egypt (6:28–13:16) and, (2) Preservation of the Redeemed in the Wilderness to Sinai (13:17–18:27).

I. Israel's Redemption from Egypt (6:28–13:16)

A. Introduction to the Plagues (6:28–7:13)

B. First Nine Plagues: *I AM*'s Might versus Pharaoh's Hard Heart (7:14–10:29)

C. Tenth Plague (11:1–12:30)

1. Despoiling the Egyptians (11:1–3)

2. Pharaoh Forewarned (11:4–10)

3. Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (12:1–28)

4. Execution of Tenth Plague (12:29–30)

D. The Exodus (12:31–13:16)²

1. From Rameses to Succoth (12:31–42)

2. Passover Restriction (12:43–50)

3. Consecration of Firstborn (13:1–16)

II. Preservation of the Redeemed in the Wilderness to Sinai (13:17–18:27)

A. Introduction (13:17–19)

B. From Succoth to Ethan: God as Guide (13:20–22)

C. From Etham to Pi Hahiroth and the Red Sea: God as Protector (14:1–15:20)

1. The Setting (14:1–14)

2. Glorification of *I AM* at the Red Sea (14:14–15:20)

a. Epic Prose Narrative (14:14–31)

b. Victory Song (15:1–21)

D. Survival and Testings of Fidelity (15:22–17:7)

1. Marah and Elim in Desert of Shur: Israel Tests God's Faithfulness

- (15:22–27)
- 2. Manna and Quail in Sin: God Tests Israel’s Obedience (16:1–36)
- 3. From Sin to Rephidim: Israel Tests God’s Fidelity (17:1–7)
- E. Israel Defeats Amalek by Moses’ Rod and Joshua’s Sword (17:8–16)
- F. Jethro Meets Moses and Worships *I AM* (18:1–12)
- G. Jethro Advises Moses to Appoint Judges: Transition to the Law (18:13–16)

The first unit, featuring the plagues and the exodus, is marked by Israel’s “wearing” the Passover as the sign that *I AM* has delivered them out of Egypt. The second unit, introduced by the theme of God’s leading his people in the wilderness (Exod. 13:17), follows the established form of an itinerary, marked by the keyword *nsns* (“to camp”) in 13:20; 15:22; 16:1; 17:1; and 19:1; and terminates at Sinai, forming a transition to the second half of the book.

A. Israel’s Redemption from Egypt (6:28–13:16)

1. Introduction to the Plagues (6:28–7:13)

I AM’s command to Moses to “tell ... everything I tell you” picks up the Exodus narrative interrupted by the genealogy in 6:14–27. In 6:13 God tells Moses to speak to Pharaoh about allowing him (i.e., Moses) to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses complains that he speaks with faltering lips and raises the question, “Why would Pharaoh listen to me?” To this *I AM* gives three answers: (1) He will make Moses like God to Pharaoh with Aaron as Moses’ prophet (7:1–2). In other words, Pharaoh in encountering Moses will be meeting the invisible God both face-to-face (Moses) and through a prophet (Aaron). (As in prophetic literature, no sharp distinction is made between “God” [i.e., Moses] and his “prophet” [i.e., Aaron].) (2) *I AM* will continue to harden Pharaoh’s heart in spite of his “miraculous signs and wonders” (7:3). (3) *I AM* will perform “mighty acts of judgment” (7:4) to bring out Israel’s divisions from Egypt and to make Pharaoh “know that I am *I AM*” (7:5). The miracles and plagues are proof of God’s presence and power with Israel—even in the land of Ham.

In 7:8–13 Moses performs before the pharaoh the miraculous sign of changing his staff into a snake. But the Egyptian magicians do the same through their arts, presumably by satanic power. In other words, as Pharaoh encounters “God” and

his “prophet,” so now “God” and his “prophet” encounter an antigod (Pharaoh) with his antiprophets (the Egyptian magicians). The outcome of the battle is presaged when Aaron’s staff-become-serpent swallows up all the magicians’ staffs. Moses and Aaron are more powerful than Pharaoh, his officials, and all their wise men and sorcerers. The real battle between “God” (i.e., Moses) and “god” (i.e., Pharaoh) is now ready to commence.

2. First Nine Plagues: I AM’s Might versus Pharaoh’s Hard Heart (7:14 -10:29)

The stated purpose of multiplying and intensifying the first nine plagues is that Egypt will know that *I AM* is *I AM* (Exod. 7:3–5). To display his awesome power, *I AM* hardens Pharaoh’s heart so that God’s might in redeeming his people from Egypt parallels his mighty acts in the creation of the world. Israel’s poets compare the two redemptions by depicting the creation in terms of *I AM*’s battle against Egypt (cf. Ps. 74:12–17). “God’s redemptive work in Egypt is to be regarded as of the same magnitude as was the creation of the cosmos (compare Deut. 4:20, 32–38),” says Wright.³

Form-critically, each episode of the ten plagues has three basic elements: intention, execution, and resulting effects. Structurally, Umberto Cassuto, Moshe Greenberg, and Nahum M. Sarna note a series of three sets of three plagues, growing in intensity with each set; the climactic tenth, the slaying of the firstborn, stands apart.⁴ Wright conveniently lays out the tertiary structure as in figure 14.1.

Cycle	Plague	Citation	Fore-warned	Time	Instruction	Agent
I	Blood	[Heb.] 7:14–25	Yes	Morning	Station yourself	Aaron
	Frogs	7:26–8:15	Yes	None	Go to Pharaoh	Aaron
	Lice	8:16–19	No	None	None	Aaron
II	Insects	8:20–28	Yes	Morning	Station yourself	God
	Pestilence	9:1–7	Yes	None	Go to Pharaoh	God
	Boils	9:8–12	No	None	None	Moses
III	Hail	9:13–35	Yes	Morning	Station yourself	Moses
	Locusts	10:1–20	Yes	None	Go to Pharaoh	Moses
	Darkness	10:21–29	No	None	None	Moses
Climax	Firstborn	11:1–8	Yes	None	None	God
		12:29–30				

Figure 14.1

The three sets in this structure⁵ have similar features. Each begins with God giving Pharaoh an opportunity to repent before striking him, continues with a warning to remember the preceding blow and a promise of a greater blow, and culminates in a third blow without warning. The three sets also serve to demonstrate progression. For example, the initial plague of each of the three sets (plagues 1, 4, and 7) signals progression in God's revelation of his power to Pharaoh: "By this you will know that I am *I AM*" (Exod. 7:17); "So that you will know that I, *I AM*, am in this land" (8:22b [18b]); "So you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth" (9:14). This progression in the knowledge of *I AM*'s power is matched by the escalating humbling of Pharaoh's magicians in plagues 3 and 6: "This is the finger of God" (8:19 [15]); "The magicians could not stand before Moses" (9:11); and Pharaoh's officials rebuke him after plague 8, "Do you not realize that Egypt is ruined?" (10:7).

Cycle 1 displays God's power in relation to his name (Exod. 7:17). Cycle 2 displays his power in relation to the land of Egypt (8:22 [18]). This set states explicitly that the plagues afflict only the Egyptians, not God's people, dwelling in Goshen. Cycle 3 displays God's power in relation to the whole earth (9:29), where *I AM* so displays his power that Pharaoh will know there is none like him in all the earth and that the earth belongs to *I AM*. By protecting the elect Israelites from the plagues, *I AM* shows that his power is discriminating and can be used judicially.

The paralleling and intensifying pattern of 3+3+3 keeps before the audience the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, the ironclad resolve of *I AM*, the greatness of his might, and his making of a separation between his people and Egypt. There are sixteen references in Exodus 7 alone to God hardening Pharaoh's heart (i.e., causing it to be impenitent).⁶ God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that it cannot move in a new and better direction; this best explains Pharaoh's irrational resistance to truth so obvious that even his sycophantic officials cannot deny it. After Pharaoh's attempted genocide of the people that has saved Egypt and made him the owner of the land, *I AM* determines to destroy him in such a way that God's unique might, enacted to deliver his people, will be unmistakably manifest to all.

God's hardening of Pharaoh to damnation illustrates his justice and wrath against a murderer and a cruel taskmaster, not a double predestination. In fact, Pharaoh himself confesses that he and his people are wicked and that *I AM* is righteous (Exod. 9:27). Though he concedes he has sinned (9:30), he does not fear *I AM*, and after the ninth plague, he explodes and throws "God" (i.e. Moses) out of his sight (10:28), setting the stage for the climactic tenth plague. Through

hardening Pharaoh's heart, the Moral Governor of the universe shows that he rules creation and history and deals with the creation according to his moral pleasure, determining how long he will extend his grace and varying the degrees and kinds of judgments he inflicts. Amazingly, God hardens Pharaoh's wicked heart by escalating his signs and wonders (Exod. 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:19 [15], 32 [28]; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). Signs and wonders that melt a tender heart (see 2 Kings 22:19; cf. Job 23:16) harden even more an already hard heart (Isa. 6:9–10). As an old saying puts it, "The same sun that melts wax hardens clay."

Christopher J. H. Wright summarizes the purpose of the plagues and the liberation to follow this way:

so that you may know there is no one like me in all the earth ...
that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth ...
so that you may know that the earth is the LORD'S (Exod. 9:14, 16, 29).⁷

3. Tenth Plague (11:1 -12:30)

The theme of despoiling the Egyptians interrupts the sequence from the ninth to the tenth plague (Exod. 11:1–3), and the festivals of Passover and of Unleavened Bread (12:1–28) interrupt the sequence between the warning that God will kill the firstborn of Egypt (11:4–8) and its execution (12:29–30).

a. Despoiling the Egyptians (11:1–3)

The theme of "despoiling the Egyptians" combines God's grace to the Israelites with his judgments upon the Egyptians (cf. Exod. 3:18–20 and 12:35–36). In other words, God's "wonders" in Egypt include both his awesome plagues of judgment upon the wicked nation and his freeing his innocent people from its tyranny (cf. 2 Chron. 20:25).

b. Pharaoh Forewarned (11:4–10)

Before Moses leaves Pharaoh's presence after the ninth plague, he gives Pharaoh a prophetic warning that the Egyptians will wail the loss of their

firstborn males of both animals and humans, from the lowest to the highest, but that among the Israelites there will be such calm that not even a dog will bark. The intention of the prophecy is that Pharaoh will know *I AM* distinguishes between the righteous elect and their unrighteous oppressors. But the Pharaoh asks for their blessing too late (Exod. 12:31).

c. Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (12:1–28)

The severity and universality of the tenth plague, its manner of accomplishment by a direct act of God instead of by Moses' staff, the breaking of Pharaoh's hard heart leading to Israel's commencement of a new way of life, and the unique celebration of the tenth plague as a lasting ordinance underscore the importance of the event in Old Testament theology. None can escape this final and decisive divine judgment on wickedness. No pharaoh, no deity, no status can provide protection. Not even Israel is exempt apart from the Passover blood, for they too have been unfaithful (Exod. 6:9; cf. Deut. 9:4–27). Deliverance rests solely on Israel's trusting God's Passover provision. Israel is delivered because a death that satisfies God's wrath has been made and applied by faith.

The episodic unit consists of *I AM*'s direct address to the Israelites stipulating how they are to celebrate the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (Exod. 12:1–28). The unit consists of a heading (vv. 1–2), a divine speech to Israel stipulating the objective facets of the feasts (vv. 3–20), and Israel's compliance with the divine instruction (vv. 21–28). The heading names Moses and Aaron as the mediators of the divine requirements. The divine speech consists of stipulations regulating the feasts (vv. 3–11, 14–20). The specifications regarding the Passover concern the selection of the Passover lamb (vv. 3–5), its slaughter (v. 6), the sprinkling of its blood (v. 7), the eating of the animal (vv. 8–10), and Israel's dress during the supper (v. 11). The sprinkled blood on the doorways of the Israelites' houses marks them so that they are spared from the tenth plague (vv. 12–13). Whereas the stipulations in verses 3–11 pertain to the night of the tenth plague, the stipulations in verses 14–20 pertain to future generations (v. 14). The celebration features eating *massd* ("unleavened bread"), and the stipulations are given in a chiastic order:⁸

A General stipulations (v. 15)

B First and seventh days (v. 16)

C Command to observe (v. 17)

B' Fourteen and twenty-first days (v. 18)

A' General stipulations (vv. 19–20)

The Passover symbolizes both animal and human deliverance, while the *maṣṣôt* (“Feast of Unleavened Bread”) pictures the flight and escape from Egypt. In other words, two activities are needed to depict the full significance of Israel’s deliverance and separation from Egypt. Similarly, the deliverance by the Passover lamb consists of two parts — both of which are to occur on the fourteenth day of the month: the slaughter and sprinkling of the lamb’s blood (Exod. 12:3–8); and the supper on that same night of the roasted lamb along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread while they are dressed as pilgrims ready for a journey (vv. 7–14). Thus, the Passover itself also requires two activities to depict its full significance. The Passover both saves Israel from death and sustains the pilgrim people destined for the Sworn Land.

The stipulations regarding the selection of the lamb pertain to its perfection: it is to be selected on the tenth day, and it is to be a year old male (because, unlike a female, it is without unclean blood) without physical defect. Corporately, its slaughter and sprinkled blood shows the Passover lamb is both substitutionary and propitiatory. It *nullifies* God’s wrath against sinful people because it *satisfies* God’s holiness. The supper that night shows it is sufficient for all the firstborn of an entire household and individually sufficient for each Israelite. But since it is their substitute for God’s divine wrath, it must be completely roasted, and whatever is not eaten must be burned with purifying fire.

The supper also shows that their salvation launches these Israelites on a pilgrim’s lifestyle. They eat bitter herbs to remind them of their bitter afflictions in Egypt (Exod. 1: 14) and unleavened bread to symbolize the haste with which they enter that pilgrimage. Moreover, they eat while dressed as pilgrims, with their loins girded to walk with God, their sandals on their feet, and their staffs in their hands (12:11).

The lasting ordinance features the *maṣṣâ*. It depicts for Israel: (1) their separation from Egypt; (2) more than that, their hasty separation before the bread could be leavened; (3) their not allowing themselves to be leavened by carrying it over from Egypt (1 Cor. 5:6–8); (4) their lack of preparation for their pilgrimage and so a walk of faith with God; (5) and their complete separation to God as they set out to worship God by accepting his covenant. In other words, Passover depicts both Israel’s salvation from judgment and sanctification by their complete separation from Egypt and setting apart of themselves to *I AM*.

Paul Wright comments, “Law is, then, the life of sanctification, the life of holiness.”⁹

d. Execution of the Tenth Plague (12:29 -30)

The plagues demonstrate that God faithfully executes his prophesied warning. The unrepentant Egyptians are without excuse for not repenting, and God is fully vindicated in his decisive and final judgment upon the wicked.

4. The Exodus (12:31 -13:16)

a. From Rameses to Succoth (12:31–42)

Passover celebrates redemption from sin and death and a hasty and complete separation from a life of enslavement to wickedness. It is the foundational event that not only enables the Israelites to enter into a covenant with God but also to serve his interests for the nation’s own benefit (Exod. 19–24). After the tenth plague, the stage is set to begin Israel’s pilgrimage with Pharaoh’s urgent commands, “Up! Leave ...!” and “Go, worship....” The Israelites provision themselves for the journey and for worship by taking their flocks and herds, as well as basic necessities such as cooking ware and clothing, and the plunder of silver and gold *I AM* disposed the Egyptians to give them (12:31–36). Then on the night of the Passover, under *I AM*’s vigil, the nation, including both its six hundred army divisions and a mixed multitude, took the dangerous first step of its pilgrimage, journeying from Rameses to Succoth (vv. 37–42).

b. Passover Restriction (12:43–50)

The mention of non-Israelites journeying with Israel (Exod. 12:38) may prompt the repetition of the Passover restrictions. Thus, it is made clear that only covenant (circumcised) members of Israel’s community are eligible to eat the Passover (vv. 43–49). These further restrictions of the one-day Passover that typifies redemption from Egypt (vv. 49–51) are clearly distinguished from the seven-day regulations of the Feast of Unleavened Bread that typifies Israel’s hasty and complete separation from Egypt to a new life of pilgrimage.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the two feasts are inseparable (13:1–10).

c. Consecration of Firstborn (13:1–16)

Furthermore, once the Israelites arrive in the Sworn Land, they must remind themselves that, apart from *I AM*'s gracious provision on the night of the Passover, none of their firstborn males are exempt from the judgment of death. To this end they are to offer to *I AM* both their firstborn animals as a whole burnt offering and their firstborn sons through redemption (Exod. 13:11–16). According to later legislation, the sons are redeemed through the life consecration of the Levites, who are chosen by God in place of the firstborn (Num. 3:11–13). The 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of Levites are redeemed at the price of five shekels (Num. 3:46–51).

B. Preservation of the Redeemed in the Wilderness to Sinai (13:17–18:27)

1. Introduction (13:17–19)

The one-day Passover celebrates deliverance from both slavery and a justly deserved death, while the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread celebrates separation from cruel bondage. Israel is freed from political bondage to enter into a new spiritual freedom — to serve *I AM* by accepting his covenant at Sinai, by walking in faith with him and by serving him to inherit the Sworn Land. Perseverance in a faith that demands both pilgrimage and covenant commitment is the prerequisite virtue that must be instilled and demonstrated between redemption and entrance into inheritance. Israel has become a pilgrim on a desert road to the Sworn Land, being guided and protected by their God: *I AM*. God does not allow them to be tested beyond their faith ability by immediately confronting them with the Philistines—which would have been the case had they taken the shorter route to the Sworn Land. Instead, he first spiritually fortifies them for battle and pilgrimage by their desert road itinerary (cf. Exod. 13:17–18). Carrying the bones of Joseph with them inculcates covenant fidelity to their ancestors and reminds them that God's promise of deliverance stretched back four centuries (v. 19).

The unit 13:20 to 18:27 is in the form of an itinerant journey that provides structure to the narrative: from Succoth to Etham on the edge of the desert (13:20–21); to Pi Hahiroth between Migdol and the Red Sea (13:22–15:21); into

the wilderness of Shur to Marah and on to Elim (15:22–27); to the Desert of Sin (16:1–36); to Rephidim (17:1–16); and finally to the Desert of Sinai (Exod. 18:1 — Num. 10:11). Form-critically, the wilderness itinerary stretches from Rameses and Succoth in Egypt (Exod. 12:37) to the Plains of Moab (Num. 22:1). In truth, like the *tôl'ê dôt*: of Genesis, the itinerary (see Num. 33:1–49) provides structure and a geographical/chronological progression to the narrative, while selective happenings provide the narrative with its theological freight. The events selected are of four types: (1) Israel's murmuring and God's aid; (2) the giving of the law at Sinai and scattered legal regulations; (3) the Balaam cycle; and (4) military conflicts. The itinerary and its happenings feature God as wonderful guide, mighty protector, miraculous provider, and holy ruler.

2. From Succoth to Etham: God as Guide (13:20–22)

At Etham, on the edge of the desert, Israel experiences God's guiding presence in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In this way, God leads his people constantly, day and night, toward the Sworn Land; they are not tourists sightseeing along the way. Sometimes hoping to arrive at a destination is better than the arrival, but this is not Israel's experience.

3. From Etham to Pi Hahiroth and the Red Sea: God as Protector (14:1 -15:20)

At the Red Sea, Israel experiences God as a caring warrior who protects them. The narration of Israel's unforgettable experience at the Red Sea consists of an introduction setting the stage for the battle (Exod. 14:1–14) and a celebration glorifying Israel's Warrior (vv. 15–18). Through *I AM*s nighttime protection of Israel from the rear (vv. 19–20) while they crossed the walled up sea (vv. 21–22) and his utter destruction of the Egyptian army in the heart of the sea (vv. 23–28), Israel learned to put their trust in *I AM* and in Moses (vv. 29–31).

a. The Setting (14:1–14)

God sets a trap to destroy the Egyptian army so that they can never threaten Israel again. By turning the people back toward Egypt, he makes it appear to Pharaoh as if Israel is without guidance; by leading Israel's army into what looks to be an inescapable trap in the desert, he makes it seem that they are without

protection. The ruse works, enticing Pharaoh to pursue the wandering pilgrims and to recapture and enslave them with his superior army and technology. His strategy involves all his troops as well as all six hundred of his war chariots (Exod. 14:1–9). Paradoxically, Israel’s walk with God appears confused and perplexing to others, but it is part of their continual march to their inheritance.

Seeing Pharaoh’s entire army bearing down on them for the kill, the Israelites blame Moses for their apparently certain fate (Exod. 14:10–12), but Moses fortifies them by his word, “I AM will fight for you; you need only to be still” (vv. 13–14). At this point Israel’s mighty Warrior does not fight *through* Israel, but as their sole champion, he fights *for* Israel. When he is done, Egypt will no longer be a threat to the pilgrim nation.

b. Glorification of *I AM* at the Red Sea (14:14–15:20)

The glorification of *I AM* as Warrior at the Red Sea is first narrated in epic prose (Exod. 14:1–30) and then confessed by Israel in a rousing victory song (15:1–18).¹¹ The word imagery of this climactic episode returns to that of the plagues in [chapters 7 – 10](#). The plagues against Egypt bear testimony to *I AM*’s might to *deliver* his people. His destruction of Egypt’s army at the Red Sea bears testimony to his might to *protect* them and to bring them to their inheritance. Wright links *I AM*’s power to deliver from death with his power to protect until the inheritance is achieved: “The might leading to redemption and deliverance is also at work to bring Israel into the promise of her inheritance: the land. The might of redemption is the power of *I AM*, and the power of *I AM* is what guarantees victory over the enemy and settlement in the land (15:9, 13–14, 16b, 17).”¹²

(1) Epic Prose Narrative (14:14 - 31)

Before detailing the two battle scenes of Israel’s crossing the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the sea, the narrator again states straightaway *I AM*’s reason as to why Israel must embrace this last darkness of Pharaoh’s hard heart: “The Egyptians will know that I am *I AM* when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen” (Exod. 14:15 - 17; see 7:3 - 5). The first scene consists of several partial scenes: the angel of *I AM*’s presence moving from being guide in front of Israel to being their protector from behind (14:18); the glory cloud giving light solely to the Israelites to make possible their

nighttime crossing of the sea (vv. 19 - 20); and the walling up of the sea by a mighty east wind when Moses stretched out his staff, *I AM*'s appendage of power (vv. 21–22). The drowning of Egypt's troops and horses in the sea also has several partial scenes: the army's pursuit into the walled sea (v. 23); *I AM*'s throwing the Egyptian army into confusion by making the wheels of their chariots come off (vv. 24–25); and the release of the sea, drowning the entire Egyptian army (vv. 23–28). As a result of this great salvation, the pilgrims are spiritually fortified to trust God and Moses to bring them to their inheritance (vv. 29–31).

(2) Victory Song (15:1–20)

What a sight to behold! Uprturned chariots litter the shores; riderless steeds neigh and nicker on the sandbar, their manes soiled and matted. Corpses resplendent with armor—Egypt's finest — sparkle beneath the foamy waves. On land a mass of ragtag emigrants and their herds stand, staring in awe. Then Moses' lone voice reverberates through the silence, shouting a song of jubilation; the crowd joins in the thunderous refrain: "*I AM* is a warrior; *I AM* is his name!" (Exod. 15:3).

Several provocative analyses of the song have been offered. Robert Alter finds three, more or less, equal strophes (Exod. 15:1b – 8, 9–11, 12–18). The penultimate lines of each, in his view, include the synonymous similes: "like a stone," "like lead," "as stone" (vv. 5, 10, 16). The last lines of each celebrate God's power and form a progression from God's power in battle to his might over all divine beings and finally to his ultimate, eternal sovereignty. The last strophe links the power of God's right hand in the recent past to shatter his enemies with his future power to guide and protect his pilgrims to his holy dwelling. Philistia, Edom, Moab, and Canaan will be filled with dread until "you will bring [your people] in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance" (v. 17).

4. Survival and Testings of Fidelity: God as Provider (15:22 -17:7)

The incidents connected with the next three stages of the itinerary pertain to events involving Israel's murmurings and God's provision: water at Marah and Elim in the Desert of Shur (Exod. 15:22–27); manna and quail in the Desert of

Sin (16:1–36); and water from the rock at Rephidim (17:1–7). On this journey Israel tests God and finds their covenant-keeping God to be a faithful provider, but he does not find similar faith in them. Instead, they are revealed to be unfaithful covenant keepers. Not only do they not trust him to bring them to the Sworn Land, but also some of them refuse to obey his commands. As ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties show, murmuring against a ruler is the beginning of sedition.¹³

a. Marah and Elim in Desert of Shur: Israel Tests God's Faithfulness (15:22–27)

Immediately after pausing to celebrate *I AM*'s victory over Egypt, Moses leads Israel into the Desert of Shur, where Israel finds no water for three days. Finally, they reach the pool at Marah, but the water is bitter. The people bitterly complain, and Moses cries out to God. Through a miracle God makes the water sweet and the people drink. Their next stop will be at the fruitful oasis at Elim (Exod. 15:22–27). The narrative follows a chiastic structure:¹⁴

- A Lack of water in wilderness of Shur (v. 22)
- B Water was bitter, undrinkable at Marah (v. 23)
- C People grumble (v. 24)
- C.' Moses cries to *I AM* who shows him a piece of wood (v. 25a)
- B' Water becomes sweet and drinkable (v. 25b) (healing depends on obedience [v. 26])
- A' Abundance of water and date palms at Elim (v. 27)

Paul Wright notes three theological lessons.¹⁵ First, whereas *I AM* leads Israel from Succoth into the desert, now Moses leads them into the desert of Shur. In other words, the people now recognize Moses as *I AM*'s appointed human leader. Second, whereas at the Red Sea they cried out to *I AM* (Exod. 14:10, 15), expressing to Moses their lack of faith when they complained they would die in the wilderness, now their grumbling against Moses signals their unbelief in *I AM*. Third, and most important, faith in *I AM* for healing, as in the healing of the bitter water, expresses itself in obedience with his commands and decrees. The abundant healing provisions at Elim certify this truth. The unity of God and Moses typifies the greater unity of the Father and the Son within the Trinity.

b. Manna and Quail in Sin: God Tests Israel's Obedience (16:1–36)

In the Desert of Sin (Exod. 16:1), the people, who had previously confessed in their song of victory that *I AM* would bring them to their inheritance, once again grumble against Moses and Aaron. This time their grumbling takes the form of questioning whether God has actually elected Moses and Aaron to lead them to the Sworn Land (vv. 2–4). *I AM* uses his provisional supply of manna to both authenticate Moses and Aaron and to test their obedience through commands concerning the manna. Specifically, *I AM* commands the people not to hoard the daily bread except on the eve of the Sabbath, when they are to gather twice as much manna so that they will not have to violate the Sabbath by collecting it on that day. Unfortunately, not all pass the test (16:20, 27–28). Nevertheless, though they are unfaithful, God remains faithful and provides their daily bread until they reach the land.

c. From Sin to Rephidim: Israel Tests God's Fidelity (17:1–7)

The third of Israel's murmurings and God's patient providing occurs at Rephidim, where, after following *I AM*'s command to travel there, the Israelites find no water. The scene is structured by another chiasm:^{[16](#)}

- A God leads by stages to Rephidim with no water (v. 1)
- B People quarrel with Moses (v. 2a)
- C Moses asks, why test God? (v. 2b)
- D People grumble and demand water (v. 3)
- C' Moses cries to *I AM* over their quarrel (v. 4)
- B' *I AM* issues an answer (vv. 5–6a) (Moses obeys [v. 6b])
- A' Name Rephidim changed to Testing and Quarreling (v. 7)

Israel quarrels with Moses over water, and they test God by asking, “Is *I AM* among us or not?” In other words, the people are asking whether their God has abandoned them to the perils of the desert — a grievous affront to his very nature. In response, *I AM* instructs Moses to re-create earlier scenes to empower faith. Moses then selects some elders who have led the people and had seen his initial miracles to assure the people that *I AM* has remembered his promissory

covenant (see Exod. 4:29–30); he takes up his rod-turned-snake, which in the first plague had turned the water of the Nile into blood (7:14–18). Then, as God stands before him, as he had done at Horeb, he instructs the faith-empowered Moses to strike the rock so that water will come out. The parenthetical remark once again makes the point: In spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness, as attested by changing the name of that place to Massah and Meribah (“Testing” and “Quarreling”), God remains faithful to the *obedient* leader of these unfaithful pilgrims.

5. Israel Defeats Amalek by Moses’ Rod and Joshua’s Sword (17:8–16)

The next scene also occurs at Rephidim and involves Moses’ rod, but the motif of murmuring shifts back to the motif of war. Thus, in this section on *I AM*’s protection of Israel in the wilderness, *I AM*’s victory through his appendage of Moses’ staff over the attacking Amalekites at Rephidim (Exod. 17:8–16) forms an inclusio with his victory over the attacking Egyptians at the sea (14:1–15:20). This scene also is structured by chiasm:^{[17](#)}

- A Amalek at war with Israel (v. 8)
- B Moses’ instructions to Joshua (v. 9)
- C Joshua smites Amalek (v. 10a)
- D Moses, Aaron, and Hur (v. 10b)
- E Moses’ arms (vv. 11–12a)
- D’ Moses, Aaron, and Hur (v. 12b)
- C’ Joshua smites Amalek (v. 13)
- B’ *I AM*’s instruction plus compliance (vv. 14–15)
- A’ *I AM* at war with Amalek (v. 16)

At the pivot of the chiasm, Moses lifts up his staff to *I AM* on top of the hill, enabling Joshua’s sword to prevail in the battle below. This scene marks the beginning of the transition of leadership of the next generation to Joshua. More important, it also marks a dispensational transition from *I AM*’s fighting *for* Israel as their lone Warrior to his fighting *through* Israel in their leader’s sword. For the first time, Israel’s army becomes engaged in war, but it cannot prevail apart from *I AM*, whose presence is represented by God’s appendage of power in Moses’ hand on top of the hill (see Exod. 4:1–2). Joshua must record the hilltop battle scene so that he and Israel will remember that *I AM* will fight against the

Amalekites through the generations until one day *I AM* exterminates them for their unprovoked aggression against the blessed and blessing nation (17:14). Moses builds an altar and calls it “*I AM* is my Banner” to remind the pilgrim nation that in future wars they cannot depend on *I AM*’s presence in Moses’ staff but must rally around *I AM* in sacrifice and prayer.

6. Jethro Meets Moses and Worships I AM (18:1 -12)

The pilgrims move on from Rephidim to the desert near Sinai, where the next two incidents, both involving Jethro, take place: His excellency, Jethro, along with Moses’ family, meets the returning Moses and worships *I AM* (Exod. 18:1–12), after which, Jethro, priest-king of Midian, advises Moses to appoint judges (18:13–16).

The penultimate incident of Jethro’s coming to meet Moses with Zipporah and Moses’ sons Gershom (i.e., “Resident Alien”) and Eliezer (i.e., “God Was My Helper” [i.e., “he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh”]) forms the closing frame around the section “The Redemption from Egypt and Preservation in the Wilderness.” The naming of Moses’ family in Exodus 18:2–4 completes the opening scenes of Moses flight to Midian, when he first attempted to deliver Israel (Exod. 2:11–21), and his return to Pharaoh’s court, where God protected him from Pharaoh (5:1). Brevard Childs notes that Jethro’s responses, upon hearing all that *I AM* has done — rejoicing, blessing, confessing, and offering sacrifice—follows the language of faith in Psalm 135.¹⁸ It also summarizes the narrative of *I AM*’s redemption of Israel from Egypt and his preservation of them in the wilderness.

7. Jethro Advises Moses to Appoint Judges: Transition to the Law (18:13 -16)

Jethro’s advice that Moses appoint judges to arbitrate according to his provisional commands and judgments forms the transition to the next section at Sinai, where God’s perpetual moral law, including its complete corpus of commands and judgments, will be revealed.

III. I AM AS DELIVERER

I AM's roles as deliverer, guide, provider, and warrior depend on his omniscience. Enslaved Israel needs a mighty deliverer to set them free to make pilgrimage to serve *I AM* in the Sworn Land. The pilgrims stand in need of provisions and protection as they journey through a hostile wilderness to a land that must first be dispossessed. Deliverance, guidance, provision, and protection are all aspects of Israel's salvation. In biblical terms, deliverance is freedom from oppression. Typically, it has two aspects: a political deliverance, emphasizing freedom from slavery and physical oppression, and a spiritual deliverance, emphasizing freedom from sin and death and a renewed relationship with God. Both aspects are in view in the biblical data.

A. Exodus of the Patriarchs from Egypt and Mesopotamia

The theme of God's deliverance, though not prominently displayed in the patriarchal material, is nevertheless present. First, God calls Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees. This is not a political deliverance, for Abraham is not in bondage or slavery. Rather, the call brings him out of his pagan culture and into a walk with God. In addition, Abraham typifies Israel's later political deliverance from Egypt when he and his wife Sarah travel to Egypt and end up as virtual captives, with Sarah in Pharaoh's harem. Their rescue by *I AM*, who brings a plague upon the Egyptians, foreshadows Israel's later deliverance from the same nation. Like his descendants, Abraham is delivered by God from this Egyptian oppression with great wealth as his plunder.

Likewise Jacob's uncle Laban oppresses him, reducing him to harsh labor (Gen. 31:36–55). Uncle and nephew match wits against each other; in the end, God blesses Jacob and physically delivers him from the hand of Laban. This is also an act of spiritual deliverance; the narrative on the household gods of Laban demonstrates that the pagan environment of Laban's home is dangerous. Like Abraham, Jacob is delivered out of a pagan land into the Sworn Land; and like Abraham, Jacob too exits the land of oppression with great wealth (Gen. 35:23–

27).

B. Exodus from Egypt

The signal act of deliverance in the Old Testament is Israel's exodus from Egypt. There the Israelites are in both political and spiritual servitude. The political aspect dominates, but as the book of Joshua documents, while in Egypt the people of God indulged in syncretistic practices and pagan worship (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 23:1–13). Hence, Israel is in need of spiritual deliverance just as much as political deliverance.

God calls Moses to rescue Israel from their bondage in Egypt to worship *I AM* on the mountain of *I AM* (Exod. 5:1–3; 15:17). They express their worship by ratifying his Book of the Covenant with its commands and judgments. The *telos* of God's physical and spiritual deliverance is worship that is expressed in holy living.

Israel's political and spiritual deliverance go hand in hand. This truth is frequently forgotten. On the one hand, liberation theologians who appeal to Israel's deliverance from oppression by emphasizing only the political and economic aspects miss the entire thrust of the Exodus narrative: Israel was delivered to worship *I AM* on the holy mountain sanctified by his presence. On the other hand, conservative theologians who do not address the need for salvation from political and economic oppression also miss the thrust of the Exodus narrative: Israel was delivered to live as a free people in their own land.

Israel's redemption from Egypt depends both on God's power through Moses' staff to destroy the Egyptians and through the Passover to save Israel from certain death. The slaying of the Passover lamb symbolizes a vicarious death on their behalf that enables them to escape God's wrath on Egypt. The eating of the Passover lamb symbolizes that the Passover sustains them. Other components of the supper, such as bitter herbs and unleavened bread and the wearing of pilgrim garb, symbolize their separation from Egypt with its bitter afflictions. In other words, the Lamb is substitutionary, sustaining, and sanctifying. The additional seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread symbolizes their hasty and complete separation from Egypt.

C. Exodus from Babylon

The hand of *I AM* lifts up Ezekiel, lands him in the middle of a valley full of very dry bones, and makes him walk round and round the open graveyard until he has his belly full of death. He then hears a voice from heaven: “Mortal, can these bones live?” and the mortal replies: “You alone know.” A prophet who does not restrict *I AM*’s resurrection power is fit to preach to dead bones and, by his preaching, to reunite the bones and cover skeletons with flesh until the full power of God’s spirit empowers his preaching to fill them with the breath of life. Ezekiel’s vision pictures the spiritual state of the Babylonian exiles, who are dead in cynicism and despair (Ezek. 37:11–12; cf. Isa. 40:27) but are revived to hope through God’s word and God’s spirit, a hope that lifts them from their graveyard in Babylon and lands them in the Sworn Land (see Ezek. 37:1–14).

To Israel’s great surprise and to the consternation of some, *I AM* anoints the uncircumcised Persian king Cyrus to provide the political context for their return. Cyrus becomes *I AM*’s Messiah and shepherd to set the exiles free and to authorize Jerusalem to be built and the foundations of *I AM*’s temple to be laid (cf. Isa. 44:24–45:13). The memoirs of the reformers Ezra and Nehemiah are framed by God’s sovereign grace, which initiates the restoration (Ezra 1:1) and brings it to closure (Neh. 12:43). The restored community begins about 535 BC and is brought to closure in 430 BC within the walls of what has now become the holy Jerusalem (see Neh. 11:1). Here they exist as a worshiping community full of joy, and their holiness spills over all the way to Beersheba and into Bethlehem (11:25–36; 12:43). However, the best is yet to come (cf. Neh. 9:32–37). But before his coming Israel must be punished seven times seventy years: a complete and full chastisement (Dan. 9:24–27).

The prophetic hope for both the political renewal of the Davidic dynasty and a spiritual renewal of a new covenant does not come to fruition upon their return from Babylon. Cyrus’s act does not effect spiritual transformation; for that, Isaiah speaks of another, a suffering servant who is to take away the sin of the people (Isa. 42:5–7; 43:22–24; 48:1–6; 49:1–9; 52:13–53:12), and Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant administered by the Spirit (Jer. 31:31–33). Only Jesus Christ, not Persian kings nor even Jewish reformers, can deliver Israel spiritually.

D. Exodus of the Church

Abraham’s exodus from Babylon and Egypt, Jacob’s exodus from Laban’s harsh labor in Aram, Israel’s exodus from Egypt at the beginning of their

national history, and their exodus from Babylon after they cease to exist as an independent political state typify the church's spiritual exodus from a world of sin and death under Satan's tyranny. The Old Testament festivals appointed by God are rich in theological content and in symbols that point to Jesus Christ, in whom the deeper significance of the festivals is fulfilled. For example, Paul exhorts the Corinthians: "Let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:8). Moreover, Jesus Christ and his church fulfill the prophetic hope of a glorious messianic age.

The New Testament church did not experience political liberation from Rome, for Christ came at his first advent to effect spiritual, not political, redemption. In the present age, Christ is delivering his people out of the satanic world system (Luke 9:28–43; Rom. 3:24; 6:1–3; Gal. 4:3–5) in order to worship God in the heavenly Mount Zion (Heb. 12:18–24). He accomplishes this through his becoming the reality typified by the Paschal Lamb (John 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18–19).¹⁹ When Jesus identifies the breaking of the Passover bread with his own body, he identifies himself with the Passover sacrifice and points to a new and better deliverance that he would win for his people. Jesus follows the Passover custom, explaining the elements of the meal but shifts the emphasis from the events of the exodus to a new commemoration centered on himself and his death—a death that achieves his disciples' exodus from an unbelieving world under God's wrath. He chooses the Passover bread, not the lamb, to commemorate his work, because it would be strange to kill a lamb when a once-for-all sacrifice has been made and an annual lamb is no longer needed to achieve redemption.

Significantly, to redeem the world from slavery, the Son of God wraps himself in a towel and offers himself as a slave to his disciples, while a little later he will wrap himself in a cross and offer himself as a slave to his Father. His own exodus from the world to return to his glory leads along a path that takes him through the trough of sacrifice, suffering, and death. In Luke 9:30, on the Mount of Transfiguration, he talks with Moses and Elijah of his death metaphorically as an "exodus." He also sends his Spirit, which baptizes his cross-bearing church into him (1 Cor. 10:1–4) and effects his indwelling presence as promised in the new covenant, and that presence is the seal, the down payment, of the promised life to come.

Further, Jesus likens himself to the wilderness manna (John 6). His death not only redeems his church from slavery but also sustains them on their journey to the Sworn Land. Israel's remembrance of the first exodus and the church's remembrance of the greater exodus that Christ provides enable each generation

of God's people to reactualize the events of their redemption. Oppression and dark powers opposed to God's people are ever present, but the sacramental feast of God's saving presence gives them hope, empowering them to complete the journey.

The present fulfillment is but a foretaste of the consummated political and spiritual deliverance and exodus that will take place at Christ's parousia when he will hand over his kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24). One day the people of God will sit down at the messianic banquet, which inaugurates the new age, the consummated kingdom of God. At that banquet he will drink the fruit of the vine anew with his disciples in the kingdom of God (Matt. 26:29). Before that banquet, the church will make its final exodus from the world to its heavenly destination by the rapture of God's living saints to meet their Lord in the air and by the resurrection of those who have died in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

IV. *I AM* AS WARRIOR

I AM's deliverance of Israel from Egypt could not be accomplished without the revelation of God's new role as a warrior, as foregrounded by Moses' victory song at the Red Sea. Prior to this, in Genesis, God creates the cosmos as an artist with an eye toward aesthetics — "he saw that it was good" — and a generous king ready to delegate authority to humankind to rule the good creation that sustains them. In ancient Near Eastern cosmology, creation is seen as a conflict of wills between the creator God and an antcreative deity (see p. 199). Psalm 77 probably borrows this mythical imagery, but not its theology, to depict *I AM* as winning a victory at the beginning over the primordial chaos, but Genesis 1 does not even hint at a clash of wills between God and matter. Its cosmogony presents the creation as the product of God's will and command. In the flood and the Tower of Babel stories, *I AM*'s judgment of the masses and his preservation of a remnant confirm his sovereignty as ruler over the cosmos and ruler of human history.

In the patriarchal narratives, God's focus narrows. Taking on the role of a tribal deity, he concerns himself with a singular family by providing security, opening barren wombs, playing matchmaker, and dealing with other such familial matters. However, in the book of Exodus, God's role changes significantly. Coincident with the revelation of the meaning and significance of his personal name as *I AM* (see [chap. 13](#) above), God takes on the status of a national deity with roles of deliverer, guide, provider, protector, and warrior. Here we focus on the latter, God as warrior.

The concept of *I AM* as warrior occupies a prominent position in Old Testament theology and should not be shelved.²⁰ Patrick Miller writes,

The conception of God as warrior played a fundamental role in the religious and military experience of Israel.... One can only go so far in describing the history of Israel, or its religion, or the theology of the Old Testament without encountering the wars of Yahweh. In prose and poetry, early and late material alike, the view that Yahweh fought for or against his people stands forth prominently. The centrality of that conviction and its historical, cultic, literary and theological ramifications can hardly be overestimated.²¹

A legitimate method of interpreting the Old Testament allows the rhetoric of the various inspired narrators to point to sound theology while rejecting any hermeneutical sleight of hand in order to rehabilitate the Old Testament passages to suit our modern sensibilities. An accredited method detects dispensational changes in God's role as warrior in the history of salvation.

A. Patriarchal Narratives

The patriarchs do not go to war to fulfill the promissory covenants. They lack the political power, the military might, and the divine authorization to conduct holy war. They do not fight to protect their matriarchs bearing the holy seed; nor do they fight for the land God promised them on oath. When Sarah is twice taken captive in the harem of pagan kings, Abraham does not resort to arms. And neither does Isaac for his beloved Rebekah. When strife develops between Abraham and Lot because the land could not sustain both, Abraham by faith gives up his rights, allowing Lot to make his choice first. Similarly, Isaac has to dig new wells to avoid conflict with his Philistine neighbors over property rights. When Levi and Simeon rashly draw the sword to uphold the honor of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34), Jacob expresses disapproval. For their brutal and wanton act of violence, they are rejected from the line of kingship. In sum, the patriarchs refuse to realize the promise by the sword but count on God to effect the promised nationhood, providing for both the seed and the land. They root their reality in the hope of a future when God will make good his promise. Their hope is realized in the dispensation of Joshua's sword.

The patriarchs, however, are not pacifists. Abraham arms himself to deliver his nephew Lot from imminent slavery at the hands of the four kings of Mesopotamia. Amazingly, though these four kings have just plundered five kings of Canaan, Abraham with his 318 retainers recapture the plunder, including his nephew. The patriarchs are pacifists when it comes to the promises of the covenant but not when it comes to justice. Isaac makes a treaty with Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and with Phicol, Abimelech's army commander, not to wage war (Gen. 26:26–31); and Jacob makes a peace treaty with Laban (Gen. 31:43–54). Obviously, the Philistine and the Aramean feared the patriarchs might wage war and win.

B. Exodus

God becomes the Warrior King in the book of Exodus. This radical change, reflected in the “new” revelation of God’s name as *I AM*, is demonstrated with vividness in his showdown with Pharaoh. Christian and nonChristian sensibilities commonly regard Israel’s joy at the misfortune of others—*Schadenfreude* (“damage joy”)—as expressed in Israel’s Song of the Sea and in some of David’s psalms, as an unworthy emotion. Citing several sources, Robert Fulford defends legitimate *Schadenfreude*?²² In 1852 Archbishop Richard C. Trench of Dublin, in his *The Study of Words*, wrote, “What a fearful thing is it that any language should have a word expressive of the pleasure which men feel at the calamities of others.” Even Arthur Schopenhauer, the nineteenth-century German philosopher and atheist, found it too dreadful to contemplate. Friedrich Nietzsche argues that malicious pleasure is illegitimate and makes one guilty because pleasure is derived from doing nothing. However, *Schadenfreude* is a dangerous emotion only when injustice is celebrated, not when justice is served—as is the case in Israel’s songs and in Woman Wisdom’s sermon at the city gate (Prov. 1:20–33). John Portmann, in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*, argues that justice is a virtue and so is the feeling of pleasure when we see lawbreakers brought low: “And it’s all to the good that we do, because this pleasure reflects our reverence for the law.... *Schadenfreude* is a corollary of justice.”²³

The triumph over Egypt is entirely *I AM*’s, for his deliverance does not depend on human strength. When Moses seeks to free his people in his own strength, God remains silent. When Moses recognizes the limits of his own strength, God calls him. In the plague incidents, Moses battles with Pharaoh as a prophet with a staff, not as a warrior imbued with physical strength and cunning. The same is true in the Red Sea crossing. Caught between the desert on either side, the Red Sea ahead of them and Pharaoh’s elite corps of chariots bearing down on them from the rear, Moses charges his own divisions: “[*I AM*] will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exod. 14:14). He then raises his staff, stretches his hand out over the sea, and the waters divide, providing God’s pilgrim nation passage through walls of water on dry ground. Instructively, God does not fight through Israelite arms; rather, he fights for, above, and apart from Israel. This battle becomes an important component of the paradigm for Israel’s future holy wars. Victory is achieved by faith in *I AM* of Hosts, and those hosts include the forces of his creation such as wind, water, and flood. *I AM* of Hosts single-handedly decimates the Egyptian army, the greatest military power in

Israel's known world. Thus, *I AM* is indeed a “Man of War” (’îš ’îš *milhāmā*, Exod. 15:3).

A major change in the disposition of holy war occurs about a month later when at Rephidim Israel is attacked by the Amalekites. But this time Moses does not direct the people to stand still and watch *I AM* fight for them. Instead, he commands Joshua to choose some men and fight. God demonstrates his new incarnation in real war by empowering Joshua to win only while Moses, symbolically on a hilltop, holds up his staff, which formerly by itself had decimated the Egyptians. With this God made the point that Israel's sword on behalf of justice depends fully on *I AM*. Israel must wield the sword, but they must do so through trust in *I AM* (cf. Ps. 149:6–9). Aaron and Hur are enlisted to hold up Moses' weary, staff-raising arms (Exod. 17:8–16). To make the point memorable for future generations, Moses records his mountaintop intervention and makes sure that Joshua hears it. Though fighting with a human sword, the victory belongs to *I AM* alone and is mediated by faith in him who is the Saint's Warrior.

This battle against the Amalekites shows that the divine Warrior now uses human partners with real swords. Just as God effects his covenants only through faithful human partners, so also he effects his military victories through faithful warriors. Like a true son, Israel must grow out of the magic years of its infancy to the spiritual maturity of an adult son who exercises his faith in the real world. In that world, the sword effects *I AM*'s justice, wrath, and grace without compromising the truth: the battle belongs to *I AM* (Ps. 45).

C. Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy provides the justification for Israel's holy war against the Canaanites. As Moses explains to his people: “It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, *I AM* your God will drive them out before you” (Deut. 9:5). As the Israelite army is poised to cross the Jordan River, *I AM* proclaims that the time of grace for the Canaanites is ended and the time for Joshua's sword has arrived. Canaanite iniquities have ripened into rotten fruit (cf. Gen. 15:16).

Leviticus 18:24–30 records that so abominable have the Canaanite practices become that the very land of Canaan is ready to vomit out its inhabitants. This ethical dimension, which undergirds Israel's conquest and settlement of the land,

is not jingoism. Unlike Hitler's Third Reich, Israel's dispossession of the Canaanite is not racial genocide or ethnic cleansing, as clearly shown by the narratives of Rahab and Achan. Rahab, though a Canaanite harlot, receives salvation along with her family when they prove faithful to *I AM* (Josh. 6), while Achan, a circumcised Judahite, is executed for his unfaithfulness to *I AM* (Josh. 7). Rather, Israel's dispossession of the Canaanites will be the expression of God's judgment on the Canaanites for their wicked practices.

Although Israel's conquest through the staff of Moses ends with their founder's death, faith ever remains an essential component of holy war. By faith in their God, Israel must dispossess from the land the seven Canaanite nations "larger and stronger" than they.²⁴ "Seven" symbolizes their complete number; none is excepted. To win the land they must fight by faith in *I AM*, not only in their own military might. *I AM* will use their swords and nature's hornets to dispossess his detestable enemies (Deut. 7:17–26). Moses anticipates the distant future when Israel's army will be led by a king, as well as the immediate future when they rally around Joshua. In that distant future, *I AM* will risk giving Israel a king to whom he will entrust military and political power. To save the king from temptation to abuse his power, Moses directs the king to renounce his own power by limiting the number of his warhorses, his treasury, and his political alliances through marriage. All nations strengthen themselves by increasing their armories, their defense budget, and their international alliances. But Israel's ideal king limits these well-known sources of national strength (Deut. 17:16–20).

True faith works. As the stories of Rahab and Achan illustrate, faithful obedience is the prerequisite for success in *Heilsgeschichte*. As instructed, Rahab gathers her household into her house and hangs the scarlet cord from the window, but Achan dishonors the Warrior by keeping some plunder for himself. The moral Governor of the universe will not place a greedy people at the head of the nations. He blesses the Israelites only as they sanctify the earth in keeping with the covenant obligations he imposes on them.

I AM aims through holy war not only to judge his enemies, but to train his king and his people to fight the fight of faith (Judg. 3:1–4). David proves to be that ideal king as his psalms teach. When David counts his troops, God disciplines his son, and David repents in his song for the dedication of Solomon's temple (Ps. 30).

Deuteronomy calls for restraint in the king's accumulation of power, a principle shared by Agur who is well aware that he cannot handle much wealth without denying *I AM* as the true Reality (Prov. 30:7–9). The Bible does not specify how much is too much, because it is a matter of the heart — the inner witness of conscience — not of legislated percentages. Living by faith, however,

is an alien notion in the world — almost as bizarre as running circles around the walls of Jericho.

In the economy of God's kingdom, one must be weak to be strong (2 Cor. 4; 12:10). Israel misses seeing the Messiah because they are looking in the wrong direction. They expect a Messiah that will rival Rome in pomp and power, not a crucified Messiah hanging on a Roman cross. They want human wealth and power for their security and significance, not the heavenly wealth and power that come from martyrdom and that alone endures and ultimately triumphs over evil.

D. Joshua

The book of Joshua fulfills the commands of Deuteronomy to enter and inherit the Sworn Land and together with Judges supplements the theme of *I AM* as warrior. In the book's first section, "Conquest and Compromise" (Josh. 1:1–12:24), the themes of the gift of *I AM* as warrior and his gift of land are so interrelated that one cannot reflect theologically on one apart from the other. Since Joshua is ultimately all about land, we delay our exegesis of its first section with theological reflections on both themes until we discuss the book as a whole in [chapter 18](#).

E. Judges

In the battles recorded in the book of Judges, *I AM* fights the wars by giving his Spirit to the charismatic military leaders, imbuing them with daring and strength (but not necessarily spiritual wisdom). *I AM* uses people of faith regardless of their number. Gideon has to learn to fight with only three hundred men (Judg. 7:1–8), but Joshua learns that he needs the entire army, not just an elite corps on whom he can depend.

As with Moses and Joshua, God uses the forces of nature — earthquake, hail, and storm—in the period of the Judges. Moreover, he again conducts psychological warfare, destroying the fighting spirit of the enemy, as Gideon realizes when he overhears the Midianites talking about their dreams in which they are defeated.

However, Israel is not relieved of its own obligation to make war in this formative period of its nationhood. Israel is called to be faithful and to trust God. Israelites are to volunteer for war duty (there is no standing army during the time

of tribal confederation). The Song of Deborah celebrates the tribes that go to war and castigates the tribes that stay home (Judg. 5:13–18). Israel’s heroes continue to employ tactics such as ambush (Judg. 3:12–30), night marches (16:1–3), and other military maneuvers (8:11). Faith and military shrewdness go hand in hand.

F. United Monarchy and Prophecy (1050–925 BC) (Samuel and Psalms)

In 1 Samuel 1:11, the term “*I AM* of Hosts” {*YHWH ʕēbāʾôt*} is used for the first time in the Bible (KJV, NRSV). The title serves as recognition that God is the Commander in Chief not only of Israel’s army but also of the pagan armies that march against Israel. The title occurs in connection with the installation of kingship when old Israel becomes fully mature.

Monarchy in the right hands blesses the nations but in the wrong hands enslaves (1 Sam. 8–12). Thus, it can prove to be a mixed blessing (see [chap. 24.II](#)). The placing of a nation’s full military might in the hands of one charismatic leader on the battlefield leads to military effectiveness and political stability but also to the potential for the abuse of power and the rejection of *I AM* as the Warrior King. Two parallel scenes demonstrate the forcefulness and the persuasive abilities of the king.

In the first scene, when the Levite in the book of Judges suffers the indignity of the rape and murder of his concubine at Gibeah, he cuts her up in pieces and sends her various parts to the twelve tribes. With this act he counts on the moral outrage of the people of God to bring about justice. In contrast, King Saul, in the book of 1 Samuel, responding to the Ammonite threat to Jabesh Gilead, cannot count on Israel’s moral outrage that their countrymen are threatened with having their right eyes gouged out. Instead, he incites them to battle by cutting an animal into pieces and proclaiming that the same will be done to anyone who refuses to fight. Thus, the charismatic king’s sword makes the argument.

But power corrupts. And accumulated power leads to pride that attempts to oust God’s rule. The temptation to usurp the role of God is almost irresistible for any human king. To defend against this usurpation of the divine role, God gifts a prophet and exalts his moral power over the king’s military power. The prophet, armed with God’s voice, has the authority to anoint, to rebuke, and finally to depose kings. Samuel, the first court prophet anoints Saul, rejects Saul, and anoints David. In the scramble for succession after David, the prophet Nathan awards the crown to Solomon, and faithful David obeys. Adonijah has the

support of David's former favorites — the great general Joab, the influential priest Abiathar, and other high officials — but fails in his bid because he lacks the support of Nathan (1 Kings 1). This proper relationship between king and prophet is affirmed by Jesus, who is baptized by John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets. As John the Baptist gives Jesus his prophetic anointing, he identifies Jesus as the greatest of the kings.

True prophets, like Samuel, subordinate the king to *I AM*'s commandments and the covenant he mediated to Israel through Moses (see [chap. 22.II.A.4.d](#)). Thus, the incarnation model of holy war from the time of Exodus continues. God fights for his people through the sword, but only as the king exercises the kind of faith David expresses in the Psalter: petition (Pss. 2–3), confidence (Pss. 11, 23), praise (Ps. 8), and obedience to the covenant (Pss. 15, 24). We will return to the theology of the king's book of holy war, the Psalter, in [chapter 30](#).

G. Early Divided Monarchy and Prophecy (925–760 BC)

1. Early Prophets versus the King

I AM turns against an apostate king from the beginning of the monarchy as evidenced by Samuel's rejection of Saul. Ahijah the prophet from Shiloh rends ten of Israel's tribes from Solomon's kingdom and inaugurates the northern kingdom under Jeroboam I (1 Kings 11:26–40). The book of Kings might be more aptly entitled the book of the Prophets — in the canon it is the last of the Former Prophets — for in salvation history *I AM*'s prophets install, rebuke, and depose Israel's kings. The Lord of Hosts begins to lead foreign armies against his anointed king as early as Rehoboam, when *I AM* abandons him to the Egyptian king Shishak's plunder of Jerusalem and its temple until Rehoboam and his officials repent (2 Chron. 12). As the commander of *I AM*'s army makes clear to Joshua, God is not necessarily on Israel's side (Josh. 5:13–14). It is up to Israel to get on God's side. According to the true prophet Micaiah ben Imlah, *I AM* allows a lying spirit from *I AM*'s court to lure Ahab into defeat in Ramoth Gilead (1 Kings 22). Elijah calls down fire on Ahaziah's three captains, each with a company of fifty men (2 Kings 1), and Elisha misleads Jehoram and Jehoshaphat into a defeat at the Moabite capital of Kir Hareseth (2 Kings 3:11–27).^{[25](#)}

In connection with the growing split between the state, represented by king, and the spiritual realm, represented by faithful prophets, there are signs of another nascent development in holy war. The preached word of the prophet, which at first supplements the king's sword, will eventually replace it entirely. The prophetic word will gradually replace Israel's army, and reliance on the power of the word will eventually overtake the might of arms. When the prophet Elijah is taken by the chariot of fire, Elisha, in anguish, cries out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (2 Kings 2:12). His plaintive cry reflects the recognition that the security of Israel depends on God's prophet, not on the king's army. Even Jehoash, the wicked king of Israel, comes to this understanding. At Elisha's deathbed, he too cries out: "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (2 Kings 13:14). Kings cannot establish God's rule apart from the prophetic word. This separation comes to fruition in the exile.

2. Naaman Incident (2 Kings 5)

The growing rift between the spiritual kingdom represented by prophets, their disciples, and the seven-thousand-strong remnant who refuse to worship the fertility deity Baal, and the apostate political state represented by the king, his officials, and the masses reaches a telling moment in the Naaman incident (see [chap. 30](#) below). Naaman, an Aramean general under Ben-Hadad II, has been plaguing Israel, but upon his healing by *I AM* through Elisha, he becomes a convert to the worship of *I AM*. Prior to this episode, *I AM* worship is identified with the physical covenant community who reside within the boundary of the Sworn Land. Thus, there is an unspoken expectation that Naaman, having converted, will Josephus-like reside in Israel and offer his military genius to the service of Ahab and Israel. Shockingly, this does not happen. With the prophet Elisha's approval, Naaman returns to Aram, retains his post as the Aramean general in the service of Ben-Hadad II, and worships *I AM* while standing on a load of dirt from Israel within the temple of the Syrian god Ramanu.²⁶ In other words, a worshiper of *I AM*, Israel's patron deity, heads the army that threatens Israel. Elisha's approval of this situation signals clearly that *I AM* has turned against his apostate nation. Naaman's first allegiance belongs to *I AM*'s ethical rule, not to faithless Israel.

H. Late Monarchy and Writing Prophets (760–586)

BC)

1. Day of I AM

In Late Monarchy (760–586), the term “Day of *I AM*” comes into prophetic parlance. The term emphasizes the experience of *I AM*’s character and usually points to a future comprehensive judgment by *I AM* on his enemies. By “comprehensive,” we mean war, but not only war — both war and *I AM*’s accompanying theophany. According to Amos, for example, it is a day of darkness, not light. To counter Israel’s jingoistic expectations, Amos (ca. 760 BC) turns the tables, proclaiming: “Woe to you who long for the day of *I AM*!” The instruments of Israel’s theocracy: corrupt magistrates, unholy priests, and false prophets have positioned themselves as *I AM*’s enemies and stand in contrast to the faithful remnant who will experience *I AM*’s salvation on that day when he wins glory for himself by defeating his enemies.²⁷ Amos’s dramatic proclamation reflects the turmoil in the spiritual and political life of Israel and Judah at the time when the Neo-Assyrian kings launch their imperial ambitions, eventually gobbling up Israel. Political instability and idol worship destroy the religious fabric of the nation of Israel. For Judah, though the Davidic dynasty remains in place, idolatry and social injustice signify that Israel no longer lives out her obligation to the covenant. By the end of the seventh century, *I AM* has abandoned even the house of David, and in 586 BC, defying the eternal security doctrine of the false prophets, he lays his temple to waste (cf. Mic. 3:9–12).

2. War and the Prophets

In the ancient Near East, broken temples and shattered idols are strewn across the landscape — mute evidence to defeated and dying gods. Every defeat of a nation represents the death throes of its national deity who is reduced to a pawn in the temple of the victorious god. The battlefield is the proving ground of a deity’s power: can a god protect his or her people and temples? A national deity who cannot protect his or her people obviously will not be worshiped as the supreme deity of the conquering nation; defeated gods eventually die.

As both Israel and Judah lose power, *I AM* seems fated for this graveyard of deities. Up to the rise of the neo-Assyrian empire, *I AM* has made himself known through carnal war on Israel’s behalf. Israel’s victory is identified as *I AM*’s victory, and the same goes for Israel’s defeat. Thus, by the accepted standards of

the ancient Near East, by waging war against Israel, *I AM* attempts suicide. *I AM*, however, resolves the tension between disciplining his people through their defeat and vindicating himself as the true God by waging war in a new way: by the prophetic word.

The writing prophets, giants of faith and passion, stand boldly before powerful kings, risking their very lives to do so. It is a new form of warfare against which the king's might cannot compete. Eschewing swords and arrows, these soldiers fight through their preached and written word — and what words they are! Sermons of judgment sear the souls of the hearers with fear and trembling. Sermons of compassion bleed the love of God for his wayward bride. The zenith of ethical monotheism is encapsulated in the magnificent words from these towering pillars of faith.

The ability of the writing prophets to predict the near and remote future is truly amazing. *I AM* even calls Cyrus by name beforehand and details how he will overthrow Babylon. Normally the Euphrates runs through Babylon, and in battle the gates under the city walls are shut to cause the river to run in a mote around the city. But, as Isaiah prophesies, Cyrus dries up the Euphrates by diverting it upstream into a swamp, leaving the gates under the city wall open, giving the Persians access into the city (Isa. 44:27–45:1). No foreign political or spiritual power can begin to compete with *I AM* in this new form of battle (Isa. 41:21–29). By the end of this historic period, God destroys both Israel and Judah through the prophetic word that empowers the enemy to vanquish apostate kings and an apostate nation, but the worship of *I AM* survives because of the effectiveness of the prophetic word. He appoints prophets like Jeremiah “over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:10). *I AM*'s word transcends the boundary of the Sworn Land as shown by the prophets' oracle against the nations (Isa. 13–23; Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 25–32). The word of God, effective as it is on the first day of creation, emerges transcendent, omnipresent, omnipotent.

For Israel, her army is obsolete. Resistance to the judgment of God is futile. Instead, the remnant are called to be courageous and withstand the trials. As the process of purification goes on, they must be patient as God cleanses away the unbelieving portions of the covenant people, leaving behind the “true” Israel, the righteous remnant. They must also wait and hope and trust in God's promise of a future that lies on the far side of the “Day of *I AM*”

I. Exile and Postexile

The dissociation between the spiritual kingdom of God and the physical kingdom of Israel, which begins with the divided monarchy, reaches a new stage in the exile. The signal event of this period is God's election and anointing of Cyrus as messiah (Isa. 45:1). In this act, the external marks of kingship (anointing, political power, military power) are transferred to a non-Davidic, non-*I AM*-believing Gentile. Cyrus unwittingly — and so the more ironically — becomes *I AM*'s slave to fight his wars for Israel's deliverance (Isa. 45:4). Instead of raising up a deliverer from within the covenant people, as in the preexilic situation, God hands the political fate of the people of Israel to the Gentile empires — Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. But *I AM* continues to rule. By his prophets he fells all of them (cf. Dan. 2, 7). The same prophetic word, however, also empowers the faithful remnant who preserve Israel and bring salvation to the nations. Ironically, Jonah brings salvation to Assyrians, who later become the rod in *I AM*'s hand to smash his sinful nation (Isa. 10:5–27).

During the exilic and postexilic periods, Isaiah outlines this new model of holy war: *I AM* hands over the military-political authority of kingship to Gentile emperors while investing spiritual authority in his prophets, culminating in his anonymous suffering slave, whose mouth is a sharpened sword (Isa. 42:1–7; 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). This model of holy war befits a spiritual, not political, kingdom, a kingdom that does not rely on territorial boundaries for its breadth, on military weapons for its security, on law codes for its justice. This new kingdom, described as, among other ways, administered by a new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34), will be a covenant of peace and an everlasting covenant (Ezek. 37:26). That brings us to the next dispensation in holy war, the inauguration and fulfillment of this new covenant in Christ (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 9:15; 12:24).

J. New Testament

1. Separation of Church and State

The separation between political and spiritual powers comes to its full fruition in the New Testament. *I AM*'s Messiah does not wield a carnal sword that cuts flesh but a sword that cuts hearts. *I AM* turns political and military power over to the state while turning spiritual power over to Jesus Christ, who conquers the real enemy behind the world powers. Jesus does not aim to overthrow Rome but

through his humiliation and death achieves a greater victory—he vanquishes sin and death. Under God’s authority, the state — be it a monarchy, a republic, a democracy, or something else — is ordained to bear the sword to establish political righteousness, to protect the innocent, and to prevent personal revenge (Rom. 12:17–13:7).

The state should resort to violence only to protect innocent human life. If a state militarizes through its police or army, the church has an obligation to speak to the legitimacy of that action and to be of spiritual support to those involved. Like the ancient prophets, Christians are to call upon the state to govern according to righteousness and justice as known by conscience (Rom. 13:5). They do so because they are motivated by love for God and for their neighbors. If as members of the state Christians are involved in military process through its police or army, they responsibly and justly protect the innocent neighbor. The apostle Paul commands Christians to serve the state, which is ordained for justice, by such activities as paying their taxes to enable the state to perform its mission (Rom. 13:6–7).²⁸ If the state in its military actions violates the Christian’s conscience, the Christian obeys God, who commands believers to love their neighbors and to serve righteousness, not the tyrant (cf. Acts 5:18–20).

2. The Church’s Spiritual Warfare

The church should never militarize, but rather suffer for righteousness, and even though wronged, turn the other cheek to the oppressor’s blows (Matt. 5:3–10, 38–42). Jesus gifts the church for spiritual warfare, not for military battle (Eph. 4:7–13). The New Testament never defines the mission of the church by conquest of land or money or people. Its mission is to encourage the free submission of souls to the will of God that recognizes the dignity of all human beings as bearers of God’s image. Carnal weapons are renounced (Matt. 26:50–56; 2 Cor. 10:4–5).

The church’s battleground is in the spiritual realm against the forces of Satan. Spiritual warfare is fought through putting on the full panoply of God’s own spiritual armor: righteousness as his breastplate; salvation as his helmet; zeal, his outer cloak (Isa. 59:17). In addition to these, the Christian buckles truth around his waist; takes up a shield of faith; shods his feet with the gospel of peace; and wields the sword of the Spirit, God’s words; and constantly prays in the Spirit (Eph. 6:10–18). The church fights with the outcome of victory never in doubt, because Christ has already conquered Satan and death.

3. The Church's Final Victory

Christ's victory leaves the church in anticipation of the time when he will make fully manifest in the temporal realm the righteousness and peace that is already the spiritual reality begun in his earthly ministry (Matt. 2:2; 4:23; 9:35; 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 16:16; 23:3; John 18:37) and continues today in the church (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 14:16–17; 1 Cor. 4:19–20; Col. 4:11). When Christ returns in glory (1 Cor. 15:50–58; Rev. 11:15) and the earth is regenerated, warfare will cease and peace will reign. The kingdom of God will finally be established universally as the prophets foretell and as Christ and his apostles proclaim (Mic. 4:1–5; Mal. 4; 1 Cor. 15:50–58; Rev. 11:15).

THOUGHT QUESTION

Should you as a Christian participate in your nation's military might? If so, would you kill its enemies? Would you be a conscientious objector? Would you have hidden Jews in your house during World War II?

[1.](#) Paul A. Wright, "Exodus 1–24 (A Canonical Study)" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Vienna, Austria, March 1993).

[2.](#) Wright (*ibid.*, 139–42) analyzes 12:31–13:16 as part of the tenth plague.

[3.](#) *Ibid.*, 194.

[4.](#) See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1974), 92–93; Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman, 1969), 169–82; and Nathan M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1936), 73–78. A wide consensus has been reached on escalating numerical structural series in Genesis 1 and in Job's twofold afflictions in the hands of Satan and the threefold dialogues. The writer has argued the same for Agur's numerical proverbs. Wright ("Exodus 1–24," 133) notes, "This schema of 3+3+3+1 appears to form the basis of the plague series found in the book of Revelation. Paralleling itself to the plagues in Exodus, Revelation takes on a similar framework in the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls, where the three sets of three have become three sets of seven culminating in the smiting of the nations."

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, 132.

[6.](#) Three synonymous verbs are used: *ḥzq*, *qšh*, and *kbd*.

[7.](#) C. J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 37.

[8.](#) P. A. Wright, "Exodus 1–24," 140.

[9.](#) *Ibid.*, 199.

[10.](#) R. Routledge explains: "In ancient times, the leaven that caused bread to rise was prepared by leaving dough lightened by grape and other juices in a warm place to ferment. Because this process took several days ... old leaven was preserved and added to successive batches of dough. The leaven thus provided a link with the past; the absence of leaven symbolised a break from the past and the desire for a new beginning" (R. L. Routledge, "Passover and Last Supper,"

TynBul 53, no. 2 [2002]: 209).

[11.](#) Frank M. Cross, “The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 112–44, esp. 121–23; D. N. Freedman, “Strophe and Meter in Exodus 15” in *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 187–227, esp. 187–95.

[12.](#) P. A. Wright, “Exodus 1–24,” 200.

[13.](#) See J. B. Pritchard, “Treaty of Suppiluliumas and Aziras of Amuru” (iii. lines 32–37), in *ANET*, 530.

[14.](#) P. A. Wright, “Exodus 1–24,” 146–47.

[15.](#) *Ibid.*, 146.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, 150.

[17.](#) P. A. Wright (*ibid.*) divides E into E (v. 11) and E’ (v. 12a).

[18.](#) B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 323.

[19.](#) Routledge (“Passover and Last Supper,” 204) notes that the Synoptic Gospels, though presenting the Last Supper as a Passover meal, emphasize only the bread and wine, not the other elements, such as the lamb and bitter herbs.

[20.](#) See Tremper Longman and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

[21.](#) Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 1.

[22.](#) Robert Fulford, “Schadenfreude: One of Life’s Guilty Pleasures,” *National Post*, November 29, 2003, A14.

[23.](#) John Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 200.

[24.](#) From this I understand the numbers of Israelite troops recorded in these accounts to be hyperbolic. K. L. Younger Jr., in *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, JSOTSup 98 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 209, documents that ancient military stories commonly use hyperbole. The point is that Israel has few men, thus giving the glory of victory to *I AM*: the Warrior.

[25.](#) TNIV is misleading in 3:19. The Hebrew text says “attack,” not “overthrow.” They attacked Kir Hareseth, but they did not overthrow it. Elisha is telling the truth but not the whole truth. *I AM*, with his hand upon Elisha, lures the wicked king and the forgetful king into their defeat. This time the kings are not lured into disaster by a lying spirit (1 Kings 22) but by *I AM*. It is unclear whether Elisha himself knows it is a halftruth. Prophets do not control the

prophetic word; *I AM* does.

[26.](#) Rimmon (“Pomegranate”) is a mocking parody in the Hebrew tradition for Ramanu, another name for Hadad, the storm god and chief deity in Aram.

[27.](#) In connection with the catastrophe of 587, “the day of *I AM*” becomes directed against Israel’s enemies: Babylon (i.e., Assyria, Isa. 13:6, 9); Egypt (Ezek. 30:3–4); and Edom (Obad. 15) but not exclusively (cf. Joel 1:15; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5 [3:23]). See Ernst Jenni, *TLOT*, s.v. “yôm,” 2:537–39.

[28.](#) Space restricts further discussion of the ethics of war. Paul Ramsey makes the case for “just war” theory: *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press [published for the Lilly Endowment Research program in Christianity and Politics], 1961); idem, “War and the New Morality,” *Reformed Journal* 18 (February 1968): 25–28; idem, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Scribner, 1968); idem, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Bishop’s Pastor Letter “In Defense of Creation”* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1988); L. W. Bilkes, *Theological Ethics and Holy Scripture* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1997).

Chapter 15

THE GIFT OF THE OLD COVENANT

The law imposed what it did not give. Grace gives what it imposes.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.522

I. INTRODUCTION

After Jethro's return to Midian, the Israelites finally arrive at the Desert of Sinai and camp there in front of Mount Sinai. The historical and theological importance of the happenings at this stopping place cannot be overemphasized. The narrator indicates that Israel has reached a major goal in their journey by noting that the pilgrims providentially arrive in the Desert of Sinai precisely three months after the exodus, on "the very day" (Exod. 19:1). At Mount Sinai Moses mediates God's word that seals God's covenant relationship with Israel and defines Israel as a nation set apart from the other nations. Israel's ratification of it empowers them to construct an earthly replica of heaven itself for the worship of their God.¹ No other nation is defined by its holiness or by its obedience to a moral law. The United States repealed its only constitutional moral law, "Thou shalt not drink."

The narrative recounting this historic moment in salvation history falls into two major divisions: God's covenant mediated by Moses (Exod. 19–Lev. 27) and the preparation of the first-generation army (Num. 1:1–9:14). The former—by far the more important—consists roughly of three parts: the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 19–24),² liturgical/cultic regulations (Exod. 25 – Lev. 10), and miscellaneous other laws to sanctify Israel (Lev. 11–27). The Book of the Covenant consists of the initiation of the covenant (Exod. 19:1–25), the laws of the covenant (Exod. 20:1–23:33), and the finalization of the covenant (Exod. 24:1–18).

Although Israel's moral constitution is unique, through the spread of Christianity the Ten Commandments, which state the essence of the Book of the Covenant, have shaped the fundamental values of cultures and civilizations. This is so because Christianity continues the salvation history of which the Ten Commandments are a critical component. Those modest ten "words" have served as the legal and moral foundation for the Western world and molded its culture.³ Tragically, formerly Christian nations are running away from them as fast as they can to form a more multicultural civilization, which by its very nature can only assert the absolute that there are no absolutes.

II. INITIATING THE COVENANT (EXOD. 19:1–25)

After the itinerary notice (Exod. 19:1–2), the chapter narrates the two-day preparation of the people to meet God on the third day (vv. 3–15) and the final preparations on the morning of the third day (vv. 16–24). Both preparations stress the need for total consecration. The framework for the scene of initiating the covenant is structured around the three cycles of ascents/descents of Moses. In the first two cycles spanning the two-day preparation, Moses meets with God on top of the mountain to receive instruction (vv. 3–6, 8b–13) and then descends to the people at its base for the people’s response (vv. 7–8a, 14–15). The third day begins with Moses at its base. He is then called to meet God on top of the mountain, where he receives the Book of the Covenant (vv. 20–24). The initiation begins and ends with Moses on top of the mountain receiving *I AM*’s instructions.

A. Cycle 1: Basis, Motivation, and Purpose of the Covenant (19:3–8)

As God’s chosen people by their descent from the patriarchs, Israel, “the house of Jacob,” is set apart for the privilege of entering into *I AM*’s covenant that Moses mediates. Their election, not their own merits, constitutes the sole basis for all that follows (Exod. 19:3; cf. Deut. 7:7–9; 9:1–6). In other words, the Torah is an outgrowth of their election through Abraham. Moreover, *I AM*, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, not humans, authors this holy covenant.

As for motivations for accepting the covenant, the first is gratitude for what *I AM* has done; namely, he redeemed them from Egypt and preserved them in the wilderness (v. 4; cf. Exod. 1–18). An enduring kingdom cannot be founded on the king’s naked power to inflict pain and pleasure from without but must be built on heartfelt love and gratitude from within (see also Exod. 20:1–2). Moreover, they are being asked to risk their lives by obeying *I AM*, and for that wholehearted commitment, Israel must count him totally trustworthy. His amazing track record since their founding empowers that faith. Once they accept the covenant, however, they must prove themselves faithful. *I AM* will bless and

punish them according to their obedience; nevertheless, they will remain his covenant people.

Second, Israel is to be different from the nations around them. The covenant defines Israel's uniqueness by its threefold intention, which can only be accomplished by Israel's obedience to the covenant's stipulations (19:5–6).⁴ The first intention is that it uniquely will transform Israel into *I AM*'s *šgullā* ("treasured possession"). *Šgullā* in 1 Chronicles 29:3 and Ecclesiastes 2:8 denotes a private royal fortune to be used according to the king's own discretion and interests in contradistinction to the general reserves needed for governing his realm (Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). In other words, Israel will be the King's "private property," personally owned for his personal use.⁵ Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word is found in covenant contexts, where it describes the worth of Israel as an object of divine choice.

The second intention is that obedience to the covenant uniquely transforms Israel into a kingdom of priests for the nations. The metaphor likens Israel's relationship to the world to that of a priest who serves society and mediates God's blessing by being set apart to him. "All Israel is a priesthood by virtue of its obedience to God's covenant."⁶ By their obedience they represent *I AM* to the nations and become the means of bringing the nations to turn to and trust *I AM* who teaches and protects them (cf. Deut. 4:5–8; Isa. 42:1–4; 44:3–5; 45:22; 49:6; 51:4–5). They mediate God's blessings to others according to the divine intention for Abraham and his seed to be a missional nation from the beginning (Gen. 12:3).

Finally, by Israel's obedience they uniquely become a holy nation, mirroring *I AM*'s character by their deeds and thereby sanctifying the world. They are to be holy as he is holy. By walking in *I AM*'s way, they show the world what *I AM* is like and how the living and only God behaves (cf. Gen. 18:19; cf. 2 Kings 17:15). These purposes are now being realized in the church: God's chosen people (Col. 3:12; 1 Peter 2:9–10).

The people in their free choice unanimously seal their covenant relationship with God by their "Amen": "We will do everything *I AM* has said" (Exod. 19:7–8). The giving of the covenant stipulations would be pointless without their free consent out of trust and gratitude and their intention to obey the stipulations. In truth, however, God must first regenerate their hearts to make this free consent. In Israel's world one can enter into a relationship with a deity only by pledging allegiance to the deity through the binding acceptance of his specific ordinances.⁷ God liberated the Israelites from Egypt for this worship service. By their pledge, they seal their covenant relationship with *I AM* to be what they

were called to be — a holy nation, his *s'gullâ*. Now they must live out the faith identification that God has granted them by their obedience. The same is true when they renew covenant at Moab (Deut. 26:16–19).

As in a marriage ceremony, there must be a mutual agreement, understood stipulations, and vows taken. Ancient Near Eastern covenant treaties invoke a curse for unfaithfulness to insure the faithfulness of the partners.⁸ At this point, as in a marriage ceremony, the covenant partners have said to one another, “I will,” vis-à-vis the contents of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20–23). In Exodus 24 they “vow” by splattering the blood of an animal sacrifice on both the symbols of *I AM* and on the people. The sacrifice of the animal may symbolize an implicit threat of death. In any case, the stipulations do not establish the relationship; obedience to them proves the loyalty and the love that seals a relationship that exists by faith.⁹ The salvation history that follows proves *I AM*s faithfulness and Israel’s unfaithfulness in their covenant relationship.

B. Cycle 2: Moses Distinguished and Israel Consecrated

The second cycle contains two divine speeches. The first states the manner in which *I AM* will appear to Moses. He will come to Israel on the third day in a dense cloud, allowing the people to overhear him speaking with Moses and thereby empowering them to trust Moses as his covenant mediator. Without faith in the messenger, they will put no credence in his message. The second divine speech instructs the nation how to prepare itself for meeting with God on the third day: to consecrate themselves, to wash their clothing, and to regard the holy mountain as off-limits to their original sinfulness. Moses and Joshua likewise had to take off their sandals to preserve the sanctity of *I AM*s space. None who walk on the earth can escape its impurities. So Israel must sanctify the sacred mountain as off-limits in order to preserve it from the inevitable contagion of their original sin. Upon his return to the people, Moses interprets “to consecrate them” to entail “abstain[ing] from sexual intercourse,” which, by the emission of semen, was regarded as making one ritually unclean, not sinful (Lev. 15:16; 1 Sam. 21:4). With the preliminary consecration complete, Israel is now ready for the third day.

C. Cycle 3: Moses and Aaron Distinguished (19:16–25)

The third cycle begins with the first rays of daylight on the third day. The scene consists of three episodes. First, God appears on the mountain in a theophany: thunder, lightning, and a dense cloud, along with a loud horn. Upon his descent the mountain itself quakes and is covered in smoke from its own fire. The theophany and sight is so awesome that the people tremble as Moses leads them to the base of the mountain where their mediator speaks to God (Exod. 19:16–19). Second, *I AM* summons Moses to ascend by himself only to return to repeat to the people that the mountain is off-limits to everyone else (vv. 20–23). Third, after his descent *I AM* summons Moses yet a second time that morning to ascend, but this time with Aaron. The striking contrast between the unique approaches of Moses and then of Aaron and the setting of the mountain as off-limits to the rest of the nation serves to exalt Moses as Israel's covenant mediator and Aaron as Israel's future priestly mediator through coming generations. The repetition underscores the need for Israel's absolute obedience and full consecration. The scene is now set for the giving of the Book of the Covenant, which because of its mediator is commonly called the Mosaic covenant or, because of its holy site, the Sinaitic covenant. Both names are somewhat misleading since its author is *I AM*.

III. THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT (EXOD. 20–24)

A. Introduction

1. *Form*

No other ancient Near Eastern religion attests a *b^erît* (“covenant”) between a god and his people outside of Israel.¹⁰ Formally, however, the Law given at Sinai, if reckoned in its entirety from Exodus 20 through Leviticus and in its covenant renewal on the plains of Moab, is a mixture of the forms of ancient Near Eastern laws from the third/early second millennium and of vassal treaties from the late second millennium.¹¹ Its elements are best profiled by noting the parallels with the vassal treaties the Hittite king authored and issued to his vassal kings.¹² These treaties include:

1. A preamble identifying the greatness of the author:

These are the words of the Sun Mursilis, the great king, the king of the Hatti land, the valiant, the favorite of the Storm-god, the son of Suppiluliumas, the great king, the king of the Hatti land, the valiant.

But how much greater the Author of the covenant: “I am the LORD your God” (Exod. 20:1; Deut. 5:23–27).

2. A historical prologue:

When your father died [Duppi Tessub], in accordance with your father’s word I did not drop you. Since your father had mentioned to me your name, I sought after you. To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father and took your brothers (and) sisters and the Amurru land in oath for you.

Delbert Hillers comments: “This history is the basis for your obligation. Parenthetically, if the history were to create any sense of obligation, it had to be substantially accurate.”¹³ The treaty finds its parallel in Exodus 20:2, “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (cf. Deut. 2:7; 4:32–38; contrast Exod. 20:8–11 with Deut. 5:12–15). Throughout the Old Testament covenant renewals are connected with celebrating Passover (2 Kings 23:21–23; 2 Chron. 30:1–27; 35:1–3; Ezra 6:19–22). When the Israelites teach their children the meaning of the covenant stipulations, they begin the lesson by reminding them that *I AM* redeemed them from Egypt and brought them to the land. The covenant is a matter of the heart — of trust, devotion, and obedience— not of imposed law. In other words, by definition it entails a circumcised heart.

3. Stipulations to advance the great kingdom:

But you, Duppi-Tessub, remain loyal toward the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, my sons (and) my grandsons forever!

The tribute that was imposed upon your grandfather and your father ... you shall present them likewise. Do not turn your eyes to anyone else! With my friend you shall be friend, and with my enemy you shall be enemy.

Other treaty stipulations include being loyal to the suzerain in war, returning political refugees to him, and abstaining from murmuring but reporting the name of anyone who does murmur. The stipulation finds its parallel in Exodus 20:3 and above all in Deuteronomy 6:5.

4. Provisions for deposit of text and for public reading:

A duplicate of this tablet has been deposited before the Sun-goddess of Arinna, because the Sun-goddess of Arinna regulates kingship and queenship. In the Mitanni land (a duplicate) has been deposited before Tessub.... At regular intervals shall they read it in the presence of the king of the Mitanni land and in the presence of the sons of the Hurri country.

This provision finds its parallel in Deuteronomy 10:1–5 and 31:9–13, 24–25, but not in Exodus.

5. Divine witnesses to the treaty: see Deuteronomy 30:19–20.

6. Blessings and curses: compare Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

The analogous similarity in the forms of these ancient Near Eastern treaties and the Sinaitic covenant validates John Calvin in separating the prologues in Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 5:6 from the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The indicative (declarative) mood of the

prologue (v. 2) and the imperative mood (vv. 3–17) pairs two different modes of verbal action, inviting the interpretation that the indicative mood (*Gabe*) provides the motivation for the imperative mood (*Ausgabe*). Marty Stevens writes, “The warrant in verse 2 extends to the rest of the commandments by serving as an introduction to and warrant for the mandated behavior of the people rescued by this God.”¹⁴ The prologue, which is gospel, is the basis for the law, the Ten Commandments. The gospel issues into right religion toward God and right ethics toward humanity, not into humanism and narcissistic egocentricity. Israel obeys the law on the basis of God’s authority, who claims her allegiance by his virtue, not on the basis of royal power to coerce her obedience, nor on the basis of custom in the popular *ethos*, “an irrational and anonymous process.”

2. Structure and Content

In the Hebrew Bible, as well as in Eastern Orthodoxy and in a wide Christian tradition, the first commandment is “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me,” and the second is “you shall not make for yourself an image....” But Roman Catholics and Lutherans run these two commands together into a single commandment and divide the commands not to covet your neighbor’s wife and not to covet your neighbor’s house into commands nine and ten respectively. According to the latter construction, the first commandment condemns false worship and the tenth commandment distinguishes wife from property.

Separating the first two commandments distinguishes between worshipping either Canaanite or foreign deities, who were thought of as powers that rule aspects of nature, and misrepresenting the character of true deity. According to this second command, God cannot be compared to anything that exists. These are distinct notions, whereas the command not to desire your neighbor’s property, whether wife or other aspects of a person’s household, contradicts the law of love for one’s neighbor. We therefore follow the Hebrew and Reformed traditions.

The first three commandments pertain to Israel’s relation to God, their King; the last six pertain to Israel’s relationship to neighbors. The fourth, to keep the Sabbath, is transition: keep the Sabbath to remember the Creator for the benefit of his creation. Moreover, the commands pertaining to God move from his absolute uniqueness (there is none like him) to his unique character (there is nothing like him) to his unique holiness (there is nothing false about him). The

first pertains to his being; the second and third pertain to tarnishing his character by images made by human hands and tarnishing his name by making falsehood with the human voice.

The fourth commandment prevents Israel from tarnishing God's memory as Creator-Ruler of the universe (Exod. 20:8–11) and as Israel's Redeemer (so Deut. 5:12–15). The two halves (1–4, 5–10) can be summed up by the abstraction to love God and to love neighbor as oneself. Love of neighbor depends on a prior love of God. As Calvin notes, the Ten Commandments serve the common good and uphold God's honor and social order. When put that way, it is obvious that they are eternal and transcend dispensations. The first four commandments provide a rationale as to why these actions are necessary and desirable. They are not a matter, as Seneca once put it, of "Tell me what I have to do ... I do not want to learn. I want to do."¹⁵

As for the social commandments, the command to honor parents comes first because they stand in God's stead, representing God's authority through the parents (cf. Lev. 19:32). The commandments follow a logic of moving from the greater wrong to the lesser: from murder (taking of life) to adultery (destroying a household), to theft (taking property from a household), to slander (destroying a reputation), to coveting (the inward desire to enrich oneself at the expense of a neighbor's household).

B. The Superiority of the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments are the first of a three-part section of the Mosaic law. Although all humans are equal before the law and breaking one law is reckoned as breaking the whole law, not all laws are created equal. The Ten Commandments are the most important teachings of the old covenant for several reasons.

1. Placement

The Ten Commandments are given first. Hebrew syntax and rhetorical style commonly place the main concept first and then elaborate upon it, as in Genesis 1:1–2:3 (see [chap. 7](#) above). The priority conferred by placement is hardly inconsequential. Biblical authors are careful to arrange their material for maximum impact. The call of Moses at the beginning of the book of Exodus sets the scene. God commands Moses to bring the people to the mountain to worship

God. This is the underlying driving force of the Exodus narrative — to reach the climactic moment at the mountain. The narrative traces the people of Israel from Egypt to the wilderness and finally to the Desert of Sinai. In all this, suspense is building. What will *I AM* do with his people at Sinai? How will he reveal himself? That the Ten Commandments were the first revelation at Mount Sinai places them in an unrivaled place. The form of the Ten Words/Commandments is apodictic (Exod. 20:1–17). They are spoken authoritatively by God as of absolute necessity. By contrast, the Book of the Covenant (20:18–23:33), which consists of “judgments” in the form of case laws and statutes, applies the broad principles of the Ten Words to specific life situations. No law code can be exhaustive so as to cover every controversy between people that inevitably arises; the laws are selected for their potential exemplary value.¹⁶

2. Better Form of Revelation

Only the Ten Commandments are given directly by God; the rest of the Law is mediated to them through Moses. Instructively, God’s word to Moses has priority over his words to prophets because to Moses he spoke directly face to face and clearly but to prophets he spoke indirectly through visions that needed interpretation (Num. 12:1–8). Two texts make a point to distinguish the Ten Commandments from the rest of the law by their different modes of revelation. Exodus 20:18–21 recounts the reaction of the people after God’s proclamation of the Ten Commandments:

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

This passage clearly indicates that the people, in fear of God’s presence, asked Moses to mediate the rest of the law. Similarly, Deuteronomy 5:23–32 also clarifies the distinction.

3. Deposited in the Ark

Only the Ten Commandments are deposited in the ark, which resides in the most holy place (Deut. 10:1–5). The tent-sanctuary is intended to be a replica of heaven itself so that the people might understand what heaven is like (Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:5; 9:23). In the heart of the temple, is the ark. Inside it, is the ten “words.” It is thus fair to speak of it as the eternal moral law of God, an expression of God himself. They are part of God’s identity, a central part of God’s self-revelation. God’s moral attributes are summarized in these ten “words.”¹⁷ They give insight to the heart and eternal character of God.

4. Not Limited to the Land

The Ten Commandments are not restricted to geography or history. Whereas the other laws were intended for Israel in the Sworn Land (Deut. 5:31), the Ten Commandments are not bound by time and space. Thus, the Ten Commandments cannot be relativized to culture. They apply to people of all nationalities and all time periods. They express God’s fundamental moral stance. Having said this, it is important to realize that the Ten Commandments alone do not offer a functional set of laws for governing a nation. The Ten Commandments require specific interpretation and application to each culture. The practical application of this is that the concept of theonomy, using the biblical laws for government today, is not feasible. The Ten Commandments serve only as foundation; the other laws are restricted to Israel in the Sworn Land. Moreover, it is important to recall that the Torah given at Sinai is part of the Primary History, all of which function as Torah to Israel (see [chap. 2](#) above).

5. Called “The Covenant” and the Foundation of the Canon

The Ten Commandments are referred to as “the covenant” (Deut. 4:13; 9:9, 11); it summarizes the intent and the spirit of the Mosaic covenant. With the people’s acceptance of the Ten Commandments, we have the beginning of the canon of Scripture. The Ten Commandments were spoken and then written as the inspired words of God, and the people acknowledged them as such. The canon was built on the foundation stones of the Ten Commandments, beginning with Book of the Covenant.¹⁸

6. Addressed Individually to Whole House of Israel

Finally, whereas the Book of the Covenant contains case law expressed in the impersonal third person pronoun and the liturgy is addressed to Moses, the Ten Commandments are addressed by the Creator of the universe and Ruler of all things personally to each individual within the whole house of Israel. The legislative “you shall [not]” is second person singular, not second person plural. In other words, the Ten Commandments establish intimacy between Israel’s King and each and every Israelite under his command.

C. Exegesis of the Ten Commandments

We have argued that the center of biblical theology is the message that God’s will be done on earth to his glory and that the most important expression of God’s will is the Ten Commandments. Accordingly, they merit extended theological reflection.

The Ten Commandments are divided into three categories. The first three pertain to God and worship; the last six pertain to people and charity; the fourth commandment is a transition. The commandment to keep Sabbath is to the Lord, but for the sake of humanity and the creation. It stands between the two sections.

The first four commandments are given with rationale, because they are distinctive laws unlike those of any other nations; they make Israel and their God unique.

The last six are stated without rationale. With perhaps the exception of the tenth, they are found in most cultures. No community that tolerates murder, theft, adultery, or the like can stand; it will be consumed by anarchy. The prohibition of these acts is part of the Moral Law written in the human conscience and thus given without rationale.

1. Commandments Pertaining to God (20:1–7)

a. The First Commandment: No Other Gods

As noted above, the preamble and the historical prologue frame how the Ten Commandments are to be understood: a response to God’s virtue, not to his threats.

The first commandment is a prohibition against preferring other gods over *I AM*. It comes first both numerically and conceptually: it is the first principle. The remaining commandments rest on this foundation: there is no other

authority than *I AM*. Martin Luther defined a god as that “to which your heart clings and entrusts itself” (*Larger Catechism*, “First Commandment”). The Canaanite and foreign gods in preexilic Israel were deities thought to be potent in connection with some aspect of nature (cf. Deut. 13:3). In the ancient Near East, the sustenance for life depended on the natural forces; drought or flood could devastate a land. Thus these people cultivated a worship of the forces of creation because they needed sustenance for life.¹⁹ In postexilic Israel, these nature deities give way to anything that gives a person life, security, and significance (cf. Ps. 49:6).

Today the food supply in North America is steadier, not as vulnerable to the whims of nature. But gods are still defined as what their worshipers depend on for life. Whatever gives people life, significance, and security is their god. Luther noted, “Whatever man loves, that is his god. For he carries it in his heart; he goes about with it night and day; he sleeps and wakes with it, be it what it may—wealth or self, pleasure or renown.” Calvin noted, “We all invent idols in infinite number.”²⁰ But there is a flip side to this prohibition. A command not to rely on other gods is an invitation to trust *I AM* and place one’s security and life in his hands.

The commandment is problematic, however, in that it seems tacitly to assume the existence of other gods. This commandment is ammunition for those who hold to the evolutionary model for the development of religion. They argue that human religion, including that of Israel’s true prophets, moved in distinct stages, evolving from animism to polytheism to henotheism to monotheism.

Henotheism is the worship of one god, the high god of a pantheon. Scholars argue that the first commandment reflects a pre-monotheistic stage of Israelite religion in which the existence of other gods is assumed but only one god is worshiped.²¹

Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between religious command and theological statements. For theological statements of whether other gods exist, we turn to Deuteronomy 4:39: “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.” Furthermore, Deuteronomy 32:17–21 identifies idol worship as bowing down to demons. Verse 17 reads “They sacrificed to demons, which are not God [*lōʾ-ʾēlōhîm*, “no-God”].” These declarative sentences serve as foundations for theological beliefs and doctrines.

On the other hand, religious commands deal with subjective reality. The truth is, regardless of the existence of other gods, human beings create and worship what is “no-God” (1 Cor. 8:4–8). As stated above, Calvin noted that the human

heart is a perpetual idol factory. Thus, rather than tacitly assuming the existence of other gods, the commandment assumes the depravity of the human race to create and worship their own gods. The religious command reflects the reality of the human situation but does not serve as a theological statement. Other passages teach monotheism unambiguously.

b. The Second Commandment: No Images of Deity

The second commandment is a proscription against making images (Heb. *pesel*). This technical term entails animism and voodoo. Animists do not distinguish between spirit and matter; thus the spirit is in the matter itself. In other words, the *pesel* has spiritual power inherent in it. Voodoo involves the understanding that similitude provides access for manipulation. Because the image of the deity is of a frozen, static form, it can be manipulated to serve its worshiper.

Thus, the common practice is to capture the living forces of nature, such as birds, animals, storms, sun, into a concrete, corporeal form. At this point it becomes the living force itself but in a form that can be controlled. That is what the second commandment means by an idol, a living representation of a life-force or a god. Today we use the word *idol* more broadly for any object of passionate devotion. This is a legitimate extension, but in truth, when invested with this extended meaning, there is little difference between the first two commandments.

The Hebrew grammar allows two possible interpretations to the commandment: the ambiguity pertains to the conjunction “and.” One may interpret it as a coordinating conjunction: “You shall not make for yourself an idol *and* a similitude of anything in heaven.” In this rendering, “and” links two separate and distinct commands: “You shall not make an idol, and you shall not make a similitude of anything.” This interpretation entails a proscription against any sort of art that produces an image or form: statues, drawings, and even photographs. Orthodox Jews interpret the commandment in this fashion. It explains why they do not allow picture taking. Similarly, branches of Islam follow this interpretation. Islamic art produces no representational art but is focused on calligraphy, architecture, literature, and geometric designs.

Others interpret “and” as having an explanatory sense: “and” links two ideas, but the latter is intended to clarify the meaning of the former. Thus, “similitude” helps clarify the meaning “idol.” The TNIV adopts this interpretation, translating the phrase, “an image in the form of anything.” I opt for this interpretation

because of other Torah data. It seems inconsistent that God would prohibit the making of a “similitude” of anything in creation and then proceed to command Moses to make shapes of heavenly beings. But he commands the shaping of cherubs as part of the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:17–20), of cups on the lampstand like almond flowers with buds and blossoms (Exod. 25:31–34), and so on.

The rest of the Bible is full of art. Solomon’s temple contained numerous shapes: pomegranates (1 Kings 7:18), bulls (v. 25), cherubim, lions, and palm trees (v. 36), and so on. These texts demonstrate that Israel at the time of King Solomon did not understand the second commandment as a prohibition against art. No prophet ever condemned the Israelites for engaging in artistic pursuits, and other biblical writers made no mention of a proscription against forms and images.

In practice the second commandment is not against art. In theory I would support the making of icons. Many make use of icons in their worship, and it serves as a wonderful expression of faith and art. The difficulty lies in the reality of human nature. The depraved nature of humanity craves a god we can see. Thus, the making of statues of God or icons may lead some to worship them instead of the deity they depict. Or they may seek to manipulate the statues or icons to get closer to God. The second commandment forbids these idolatrous practices.

Thus the Christian lives in tension. Art is allowed but has dangerous potentials. Evangelicals have not always resolved the tension in a thoughtful way. Some crouch in an anti-Catholic stance, avoiding images and art forms inconsistently. When I was growing up, my church did not allow statues, but we had flannelgraph images of Jesus in Sunday school. It seemed to me that the difference between us and Roman Catholics was that the Catholics had good art and we had bad art. It is high time to think through the issues of Christianity and the arts, unblinded by sectarian zeal.

The rationale given for the first two commandments is “I, *I AM* your God, am a jealous God.” The word for “jealous” has two meanings in the Old Testament. “zeal for one’s personal property” or “a zeal for another’s property.” The former is appropriate and healthy; the latter is wrong.

In modern English the word *jealousy* commonly connotes an irrational, paranoid fear. It is a manner of perception of one who lives in fear of not fully possessing one’s property; it is a perception that does not correspond to reality. Nevertheless, there is also a healthy jealousy: if a person cheats on his or her spouse, the spouse should be naturally and rightly jealous. If the spouse does not respond to infidelity with jealousy, we can rightly assume that he or she does not

truly love the cheating person. In a similar way, God demonstrates healthy jealousy in his zeal for his people. He cares for his particular possession. When this property is given to some other deity, he responds vigorously (1 Cor. 10:22; James 4:5).

The consequence of breaking this commandment is that God visits the iniquity of the father on the children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren. The point of this is that the punishment is directed at the father who lives to see how his sin is worked out among his descendants. In other words, God's punishment is not immediately retributive, but he teaches the man a lesson in "reaping what you sow," allowing him to observe his wickedness worked out in multigenerations, ending his life in despair, for he knows that his life and seed will result in ruins. An example of this is Eli, who lived just long enough to see God's punishment upon his sons before his own death.

However, the idea of punishing the children for the sins of the father seems a direct contradiction to Ezekiel 18:20: "The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them" (TNIV; cf. Deut. 24:16). The entire [chapter 18](#) of Ezekiel deals with the question, "Why does God punish us (who are in exile) for the sins of our fathers?" Ezekiel's answer is that God does not punish children for the sins of their parents. This conclusion is difficult to reconcile with the Ten Commandments.

The answer lies in the phrase "of those who hate me." As we have seen in the discussion on the first commandment, these commands are not theological statements. Instead, they take into account the reality of human nature. Children tend to grow up in the sins of their parents, for they copy the attitudes and behavior of their parents. Thomas Reid noted, "The wise Author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon this evidence [human testimony in matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion] before we can give a reason for doing so. This, indeed, puts our judgment almost entirely in the power of those who are about us in the first period of life."²² This working out of sin, similar to the development from Cain to Lamech, is likely to result in increased sin and violence. Thus, God's punishment is on the line that continues the sin of the father. It is visited upon the children both for their sin as well as to show to the father the consequences of his actions.

Nevertheless, grace is inherent in this punishment. The apostasy is being passed on to the third and fourth generations. God's judgment is not said to continue after the life of the parent who lives long enough to see his or her sin bear its bitter fruit. In contrast, God does not interdict the process of faith being

passed on through the generations. He promises to do *ḥesed* (“covenant faithfulness”) to the thousandth generation of those who love him. Assuming a generation is twenty-five years, there are four generations per century and forty per millennium. Moses lived three millennia ago, a mere 120 generations prior to this living generation. “To a thousand generations” is a metaphor for everlasting kindness and grace.

c. The Third Commandment: Do Not Misuse God’s Name

In the third commandment — “you shall not misuse the name of *I AM*” — the operative word is *šāw* (KJV, “in vain”; cf. Lev. 24:15). The commandment is probably elliptical for “you shall not lift up the name of [or, lift up your hand and speak the name of] *I AM* your God falsely or frivolously.”²³ *šāw* is used in biblical Hebrew in several ways: to denote to be false or deceitful with respect to speaking (Deut. 5:20 in reference to being a false witness against a neighbor; Exod. 23:1 in reference to a false report or rumor); with respect to being false in worship (Isa. 1:13, which discusses a false tribute to God where the people hold to a form of worship, but their heart is not there); and with respect to being false in prophecy (Ezek. 13:3–7, which refers to false prophets who claim to have seen a vision, but there is no reality to what they have seen).²⁴ Herbert Huffmon argues from both biblical and extrabiblical evidence that the commandment prohibits false or frivolous swearing. “The focus is on not making God an accomplice, as it were to one’s falseness, whether of intent or of performance.”²⁵

Although this narrow interpretation is certain, a wider interpretation from the other uses of *šāw* is possible. To take God’s name to “falsehood” is to proclaim something false in the name of God. Churches that proclaim false theology are guilty of breaking this commandment, for they associate God’s name with false speech. Christians who engage in rituals of church attendance and tithing without the reality of life in Christ are taking his name to what is false, for they engage in false worship. Christians who claim to have heard the word of God but have not are false prophets, taking his name to what is deceitful.

šāw is also used with reference to malevolent actions. Job 31:5 talks about walking in “falsehood,” or emptiness, and working with thieves. In this sense, malevolent actions are “empty” actions. Those who use Christian cause to justify barbaric actions have taken God’s name to “falsehood.” The history of the

church is filled with those who use the name of God for harm instead of good, for destruction instead of edification. Today wars are still waged in the name of God, who neither commissioned them nor sanctioned them. Humans rape, pillage, and murder in the name of the one who is called the Prince of Peace. At the time of ultimate justice, God will not hold them guiltless.

Closer to home, those in Christian ministry are often in danger of taking God's name to what is false. Some preachers use God's name to enrich themselves, pretending to minister to the people of God but in actuality defrauding them. Other Christians use the name of God to further their own pet projects, claiming that they have seen visions and received words from God when they have not. All of these are practical applications of the third commandment.

Third, the commandment prohibits the application of God's name to what is futile, purposeless — taking his name to vanity: an increasingly acceptable sin in Western culture. Many people do not use God's name with evil intent, but they do take his name to triviality. God's name is invoked for no purpose; it is seen as irrelevant. Worse yet, it becomes the butt of jokes and derision.

We should not throw around the phrase “for God's sake” or “for Christ's sake.” We should use it only if something really is for God's sake and for Christ's sake. I am bothered by people who toss around the word “Hallelujah!” and do not really mean to praise God. Such words can be bandied about frivolously, and God's name is taken to what is vain, empty, trivial.

In Deuteronomy 28:58 Moses calls God's name “this glorious and awesome name—I AM your God.” We are to hold his name in awe and reverence. It is not given for our manipulation, to justify our actions. It is not to be used without purpose, serving as fodder for jokes and flippant remarks. God will not hold guiltless anyone who misuses his name.

2. Transition: The Fourth Commandment: Sabbath

a. Exegesis

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” As with the other commandments, the Book of the Covenant codified, not inaugurated, Israel's Sabbath observance (cf. Exod. 16:23); indeed, the practice is as old as creation. The creation narrative recounts three acts of God on the seventh day: rested, blessed, sanctified. In other words, he ceased from work, used the day as an instrument of life, and set it apart to himself.

This — the longest — commandment (vv. 8–11) consists of the command to remember the Sabbath by making it holy²⁶ (v. 8), by refraining from work (vv. 9–10), and by motivation (v. 11). “Remember” denotes an active relationship to the object of memory that exceeds a simple thought process. Memory awakens a past event to realization because of its present significance. “Remember” connotes consciously to “remember” oneself to the object (see Gen. 8:1). *Šabbat* in the phrase *yôm haššabbāt* (“Sabbath day”) is debatably related to the verb *šābat*, “to cease.”²⁷ “To make holy” connotes to cease work in order to set the day aside for *I AM*. Nevertheless, the priests offer sacrifices (Num. 28:9; Matt. 12:5) and circumcise infants on the Sabbath (John 7:22), and Israel’s army marches on this holy day (Josh. 6:3–4). Although observing the Sabbath is not connected with stated religious practices in the Old Testament, aside from being observed at the temple in connection with other holidays (e.g., Isa. 1:13; Lam. 2:6), by the time of the New Testament, the Scriptures are read and argued on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16–20; Acts 13:13–45; 15:21; 17:2). The first formulation of the covenant based the commandment on God’s creative action of working six days and resting on the seventh (Gen. 1:1–2:3; cf. Exod. 16:21–31) and his making it holy. As the Creator sanctified the day at the creation, so Israel should remember to set it apart repeatedly to the Creator. In other words, the order of creation stands behind Sabbath observance; *I AM* built it into the very structure of his universe.

The fourth commandment is a transition: it is holy to God, but it is for humans to enter into eternal rest with him.

b. Rationale

Moses gives two reasons for keeping Sabbath. First, at Sinai (Exod. 20:8–11), the founder of the covenant nation called on Israel to remember the Sabbath because God rested on the seventh day. By ceasing the work of our agendas on the seventh day we enter into the holy sphere of God. By Sabbath observance we permit the designs of God to break through on our own. It is a regular reminder to stay attuned to sacred time and a sacred realm. By changing the day for Sabbath observance we accommodate God’s agenda to ours. But God chose a particular day to force us to permit his design to have priority over ours. Hence, the order of creation is the justification of Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a time to celebrate and enjoy what has been done the previous six days. It is a reminder that God does not value humans by their ability to produce. We are not machines. We have worth apart from what we produce. It is

a difficult lesson. In an age of increasing global competition, humans are objectified for their productivity in the name of economic efficiency. For the sake of the economy, humanity is pressed to work harder, sell more, and consume more. “Sanctification of time” and “contemplation of the eternal sphere” are foreign phrases, inexplicable to secular economists. They do not compute with corporate accountants. As a result, many people in the United States are materially prosperous, yet living below the poverty level in terms of time for socialization.

To the many harried men and women of this society, Sabbath is a luxury that few think they can afford. Yet we can scarcely afford not to. God’s command is that on the seventh day we cease from work, cease from producing, cease from being participants in the functioning of the economy. We learn that we are not cogs in the machine. Instead, we emulate the God who works six days and rests on the seventh.

Sabbath benefits the individual, but it is an act of grace for the individual to others. By virtue of resting, one takes the pressure off numerous others to work. A master who rests, offers rest to the slaves and servants. A boss who rests takes pressure off the workers. In this light, God’s rest on the seventh day is an additional act of grace, giving sanction for all of creation to rest as well.

The commandment applies to the rest of creation as well, namely, animals. Animals need rest, yet our modern technology and our efficiency have reduced animals to purely their function, making chickens into egg factories and cows into milk factories,²⁸ bearing witness to human greed in their sovereignty over the creation. This use of human ingenuity violates the fourth commandment.²⁹

The rabbis, on the other hand, multiplied Sabbath regulations, making Sabbath observance a heavy burden on the people. But Jesus as Lord over the Sabbath releases the people from this heavy burden, teaching that the Sabbath is meant for people, not people for the Sabbath, a time to heal and to do good (Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–28; John 5:9–15).

Moses’ second reason for keeping Sabbath is disclosed in Deuteronomy 5:12–15. On the plains of Moab Moses called on Israel to observe Sabbath in order to remember that they were slaves in Egypt but that the mighty Lord has redeemed them from servitude into rest. Whereas the original commandment was grounded in the order of creation and had humanitarian concerns, in the later renewal of the covenant, it was grounded in the order of redemption and had a theological purpose. Sabbath serves as a lived-out sign, an active reminder. Each time an Israelite rests on the seventh day, he asserts his status as a free person, remembers his former bondage, and acknowledges *I AM* as the God who

redeemed him. Today the Sabbath's typical significance has been fulfilled in Christ (Col. 2:16–17). Christians remember their bondage and slavery to sin as well as their redemption through Christ's blood on the cross. Through him they find rest. Hence, the sign of the new covenant is the cup, the blood that achieved salvation.

The Greeks called the passing of sequential moments *chronos* — the inexorable cycle of days, months, and years. But biblical Greek gives another word — *kairos*— which refers to the arena for God's decisive actions that transform *chronos*. Exodus relates Sabbath observance to *chronos*; Deuteronomy relates it to *kairos*.

Elsewhere in Scripture we learn other reasons for keeping the Sabbath holy. A third reason is that the Sabbath is the sign that the Creator has set Israel apart for a special covenant relationship with him (Exod. 31:12–17):

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.

“ ‘Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.’”

Every covenant has a sign associated with it. God's covenant with Noah involved hanging up the bow of the rainbow as a promise that he would not wage war against the earth with water again. In the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision was the sign that the seed was set apart, holy to God. The Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant. When others ask an Israelite why he does not work on the seventh day, he answers that he is in covenant with the Creator, who also rests on the seventh day. It is a reminder of his people's past as slaves in Egypt and a hope of the future rest with God. In the rabbinic literature, circumcision, dietary practices, and Sabbath observance become the distinctive marks of Judaism.

A fourth reason for Sabbath observance is that it reminds Israel again and

again that God completed his work. As he consummated his work in creation, he will bring to perfection his work in history through his elected people. He who calls Israel to bring salvation will not fail (cf. Isa. 45; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 12:2).

Fifth, by observing the Sabbath, Israel confesses regularly that their God is Lord of all. He made the Sabbath to celebrate his rest “from all the work of creating that he had done” (Gen. 2:3). Meredith Kline summarizes, “Observance of the Sabbath by man is thus a confession that Yahweh is Lord and Lord of all lords. Sabbath-keeping expresses man’s commitment to the service of Yahweh.”³⁰

Sixth, in the book of Hebrews the Sabbath rest gives concrete expression to the church’s realized eschatology (Heb. 4:1–11). The Sabbath rest gives saints the sure hope that as God entered his rest after his working for six days, they too will cease from their labors and enter an eternal rest after their fleeting days. Christians by faith already enter that rest. Jonathan Wilson says, “When we keep Sabbath by resting from our labors, we acknowledge that our life ... is sustained by God. We rest from our labors because we know that our hope is in Yahweh, not in our labors. Sabbath rest also reflects our larger hope in Yahweh for the sustenance of creation and for the completion of redemption.”³¹

Seventh, we can infer from the creation narrative that the Sabbath is a day to recognize and celebrate the significance of time. We are not just creatures of space but also creatures of time. Abraham Heschel observes,

Technical civilization is man’s conquest of space. It is triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to *have* more does not mean to *be* more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.³²

Participating in God’s rest gives us significance as we reflect on what we have done and allows us to participate in something eternal. Heschel argues,

The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In a religious experience, for example, it is not a thing that imposes itself on man but a spiritual presence. What is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass. A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. Spiritual life begins to decay

when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time.

Our intention is not to deprecate the world of space. To disparage space and the blessing of things of space, is to disparage the works of creation.... The world cannot be seen exclusively *sub specie temporis*. Time and space are interrelated.... What we plead against is man's unconditional surrender to space, his enslavement to things. We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things.³³

Religious people who see Sabbath rest as a religious obligation miss its meaning.

c. Sabbath in the New Covenant

In Colossians 2:16–17 the apostle Paul argues, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” Christ is the fulfillment of Sabbath. In him we remember our bondage and slavery to sin as well as our redemption through the blood on the cross. Through Jesus Christ we find rest.

Yet because Christ fulfills the typical aspect of the Sabbath, he does not render Sabbath keeping irrelevant. Although the people of God are no longer distinctive by their Sabbath keeping, most of the reasons for keeping the Sabbath are still valid. Though we are not under law—and the Bible does not command a Christian to keep a Sabbath—it is in our hearts to set apart a day, sanctifying it for worship and reflection. A person who feels inclined to work seven days a week should examine what god he or she worships.

Sabbath makes sense for Christians, for it is a practical necessity for the church to select one day for collaborative worship. However, just as Passover was replaced by the Lord's Supper and circumcision by baptism, the seventh day's functions are fulfilled on the first day of the week as we commemorate Christ's resurrection from the dead. In the New Testament the celebration of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week reminds Christians of their special relationship with God. Just as Passover was replaced by the Lord's Supper and circumcision by baptism, believers in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ gathered together on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10). They do so to break bread and to read, teach, and study Scriptures (John 20:1, 19–23; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), to commemorate the resurrection of their Lord on that day.

Ignatius (who was martyred between 98 and 117 AD) proclaimed, “Those who lived in ancient ways [i.e., Christian prophets] attained new hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but observing the Lord’s Day, on which our life too rose through him and his death.”³⁴

But it is important to remind ourselves again that Sabbath is no longer a requirement. Controversies about Sabbath would be quickly extinguished if we understood that each person has to decide how he or she will worship God. Worship is a spiritual service that reflects the inner reality of the person and is beyond the judgment of others.

3. Commandments Pertaining to Humanity

a. The Fifth Commandment: Honor Your Parents

The commandment to honor parents heads the list of “love your neighbor” commands, for parents are God’s mouth in the family (see above). Sigmund Freud has shown the immense importance of a right relationship between parents and children for the psychological health of the individual and of the family. The Torah exacts the most severe penalties for a child’s unwillingness to yield to the discipline of his parents (Deut. 21:18–21). A rebellious child has no place in the community of God’s people.

This commandment, like the fourth, is prescriptive, not prohibitive as are the other eight (see also Lev. 19:32), and uniquely has a promise as its motivation (cf. Exod. 21:15; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 21:18–21). Its operative word is *kābbed* (“honor”), which is derived from the root *kbd* (in Qal, “to be heavy,” with a potentially derivative positive notion being rich and well respected). In Piel *kbd* means “to honor” (i.e., “to lend someone weight”)³⁵ or “to acknowledge someone as weighty.”³⁶ So then, to honor one’s parents is to esteem them as having value. By esteeming them as having value, one also confers upon them value in the community. Acknowledging their honor and giving them honor go hand in hand. The English idiom of counting someone as a “heavyweight” is similar, not indicating physical size but importance or weightiness in the community. “To honor” exalts the object. The term is used frequently in worship (Ps. 86:9; NIV “glory”), and its probable parallel in Leviticus 19:3 is “to fear, to reverence” (*tîrā’û*) father and mother, a term otherwise reserved for God.

The fifth commandment is addressed both to the young and immature and to the adult and mature. With regard to the latter, the commandment invests their

aged parents — who may no longer have financial worth and have become a liability— with dignity and honor. The Book of the Covenant mandates the death sentence for anyone who either strikes father or mother (Exod. 21:15) or curses them (Exod. 21:17; i.e., regards them as items to be disposed of).

Honoring someone involves a heart attitude. To illustrate, my wife and I began our home with two sets of dishes—an inexpensive set that our children learned to wash and dry and the fine china we received on our wedding day. We have been married more than fifty years, and I still remember the day we broke a china saucer. That china never goes through the dishwasher; it is hand-washed carefully and tenderly. To honor parents is to have this similar heart attitude; it means to esteem them as precious.

And there are good reasons to esteem our parents. They have authority given by God. In a covenant community, parents mediate the life of God to their children. They explain God's laws and encourage faith among the children (see, e.g., Deut. 6:6–7; Prov. 1:8–9). They are to be esteemed as the origin of physical life and spiritual life within the covenant home (see discussion of the second commandment above).

This commandment has several practical implications. First, to honor parents involves taking care of them (cf. Exod. 21:15, 17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 27:16; Prov. 19:26). Jesus applies the commandment to caring for parents, in Matthew 15. Some Jews in that day were neglecting their parents by declaring that their wealth was dedicated to God. This practice was sanctioned by their oral laws, which say that money dedicated to God cannot be used for other purposes. Jesus attacks this hypocrisy, pointing out that it is God's law that one should honor his or her parents. It is an outrage to suggest that one can serve God at the expense of his or her parents.

It is not always possible to be a financial support for one's parents. When I was a student, I had more financial need than my parents had, but I took steps to take care of their emotional needs: I wrote them faithfully every week as a way to show my esteem for them. Each family, however, must decide whether it is in the best interests of a parent who is not able to cope with the normal demands of life to live in one's own home or in a nursing home. On the one hand, living at home allows the parent to share life with the grandchildren, and the generations can mutually enrich one another. On the other hand, if visited frequently with love, the latter alternative may better preserve the incapacitated parent's dignity and health.

Paul interprets the commandment to mean children should obey their parents (Eph. 6:1–3). This interpretation is in keeping with Israel's wisdom tradition (Prov. 1:8–9; 10:1; 15:5). The pagan cultures of Paul's day and of ours are

marked by children's disobedience to their parents, placing them under God's judgment (Rom. 1:30; 2 Tim. 3:2). "The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures" (Prov. 30:17).

Nevertheless, the command raises two questions: How long are children under parental authority, and are children to obey ungodly parents? With regard to the former, two ideas need to be held in tension. The first is that as long as one lives in the parents' home, that person is under the authority of the parent (cf. Num. 30). In the patriarchal society of the Old Testament, the children remained under the patriarch's authority as long as the patriarch lived (cf. Gen. 42–43), but the New Testament does not reinforce that social structure. On the other hand, as persons mature, they come to stages or rites of passage where they take on their own accountability and decision making. Godly parents seek the well-being of their children first, not their own selfish interests. In that love they know when to allow their children more freedom to grow into full maturity.

With regard to the second question, note first that Jesus put allegiance to himself before allegiance to parents (Matt. 8:20–21; Mark 1:20). Burying one's parents was one of the strictest obligations in Jewish society, but Jesus demands a greater allegiance to himself. Note also that the commandment is addressed to young and old alike. By their comportment, adults give a model to children on submitting to authority. The commandment entails parents who, like God, have authority by virtue, not force. It does not have in view parents who tyrannize their children. God's authority does not stand behind vice.

Paul and the wisdom tradition have in mind godly parents who themselves live under God's rule (Deut. 6:5–8; Prov. 4:1–9), not ungodly parents who rebel against God's authority. As God's representatives, not as rebels against God, they are to be revered. In maturing a child may come to the realization that he or she must obey God, not a parent who perverts his or her God-given authority (Acts 4:19). Presumably as a duty of religious worship and a pure conscience supersede the rights of the state, true worship and a pure conscience also supersede the authority of parents. Samuel shepherded Saul from under Kish's authority to be fathered by the prophet (1 Sam. 9:1–27; 10:9–16).

b. The Sixth Commandment: Do Not Take Innocent Life

The commandment *lō' tiršah* (from the root *ršh*, traditionally "kill") codifies the earlier command in Genesis 9:6 (cf. Exod. 21:12; Lev. 19:17 [cf. Matt. 5:21–

22]; Deut. 27:24). The command begins a series of the shortest formulations within the Decalogue.

The operative word is *rāṣah*. Several Hebrew words belong to the semantic domain of “kill”: *ṭābah* (“butcher” [an animal]); *hikkâ* (“strike or kill as in a battle”); *hēmîṭ* (“put to death”); *zābah* (“kill animal for sacrifice”); *hārag* (“kill in general”) and *qāṭal*, its Aramaic equivalent. But *rāṣah* means specifically “to take innocent life” (Num. 35:6):³⁷ “to murder” if intentionally (vv. 20–21), “to commit manslaughter,” if unintentionally (v. 25).³⁸ Even though unintentional, the one found guilty of manslaughter must stay in a city of refuge until the death of a high priest. Homicidal blood must be paid for by a compensatory death that satisfies God (see Gen. 9:6).

The understanding of this word prevents the seeming inconsistency between this commandment and God’s sanction of capital punishment (Gen. 9:6; Exod. 21:23–25; Luke 3:14; Rom. 13:3; 1 Peter 2:14). Suffice it here to note that the sixth commandment cannot be used as an argument against capital punishment. The Mosaic law is consistent in asserting that capital punishment is a form of justice sanctioned by God (see [chap. 11](#).II.E). The prohibition against the taking of innocent life obviously does not apply.³⁹

Nevertheless, there are extensive areas where this commandment does apply. In the Mosaic law, the protection of innocent life extends to modern legal categories of negligence. For example, Mosaic law includes provision for building a parapet around the roof of a house so that people do not fall off the roof. Not building the parapet would be considered a violation of this commandment, for failure to do so would jeopardize innocent lives.

Another example is the case of the habitually goring ox. If the owner of an ox does not properly restrain an ox that is prone to gore a human being, the owner is held accountable for murder, liable to pay with his own life.

Negligence that threatens another’s life is considered a violation of this commandment. In our day there are numerous practical applications: having brakes in good condition demonstrates concern for life. Not driving when one gets too old to see or react properly protects others. Drinking and driving is an irresponsible act that directly violates this commandment.

Aside from negligence, the sixth commandment is deeply relevant in this age. Where humanity has overthrown God, humans are left without dignity and significance. After all, without God, we are only animals, perhaps top dogs on the evolutionary ladder, but animals nevertheless. The law of the jungle applies: survival of the fittest. The unfit, the weak, the helpless, the dying are therefore expendable in the survival of the species (see [chap. 9](#)).

The “death of God” in the nineteenth century led to the death of human dignity in the twentieth. Experimentation on and sterilization of the mentally handicapped were government policies in numerous so-called Christian nations. Eugenics was practiced; humans were bred like thoroughbreds. Millions perished under the Communists’ social reengineering, expendable lives for the “good” of the society.

Today society rages over issues that go straight to the heart of the sixth commandment: abortion, euthanasia, the use of human embryos for stem-cell research, and doctor-assisted suicide. Christians oppose these modern “solutions” because we firmly hold that each individual is made in the image of God, with the dignity and significance that entails.⁴⁰

We must not take innocent lives. Doing so is a usurpation of God’s sovereignty, for he gives life and takes it away. God proclaims life to be an unqualified good, not contingent on the conditions of convenience or painlessness. It is heartless not to protect weak unborn children who are unable to protect themselves. It is an abomination to kill the elderly, the sick, and the dying. The righteous seek their refuge in *I AM* even at the time of death (Prov. 14:32).

c. The Seventh Commandment: Do not Commit Adultery

Marriage is an exclusive relationship in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in covenant for life and, on the basis of solemn vows, become “one flesh” physically (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 19:4–6). The seventh commandment, “Do not commit adultery” (*lō’ tina’ap*), protects this relationship by proscribing anyone from coming between the spouses (cf. Deut. 23:7). Abimelech regarded adultery as a great sin (Gen. 20:9) and Joseph called it a “wicked thing” (Gen. 39:9). Job links adulterers with murderers and thieves (Job 24:13–17); Jeremiah regarded adultery as an outrage (Jer. 29:23; cf. 9:1–3). Solomon says the adulterer has no sense (Prov. 6:32; cf. 2:15–19; 5:1–23; 6:20–35; 7:1–27). The list of unlawful sexual relationships in Leviticus 18, drawn up as a treatise against Canaanite sexual practices, expands the sixth commandment to protect Israel’s purity by excluding coitus outside the bonds of marriage. An adulterer has no right to recite God’s covenant (Ps. 50:18). David would have lost his life and his kingdom for his adultery with Bathsheba had he not repented (2 Sam. 10–12; Ps. 51).

The commandment does not, however, prohibit polygamy, premarital sex, or

divorce; those issues are dealt with in other texts. Although polygamy is not according to the order of creation (God gave Adam one, not more than one, wife), the Old Testament does not prohibit it. It was customarily practiced without divine censure by heroes of the faith, including Abraham, Jacob, and David. Probably this less than ideal state was tolerated, like divorce, because of the hardness of the human heart (i.e., a way to mitigate the damages caused by sin; Matt. 19:8–9). The Old Testament, however, forbids having a harem. The idea that a man can use a woman solely for his sensual pleasure is antithetical to the fundamental belief in the dignity of all human beings as being in the image of God. A woman, even a second or third wife, must have access to proper food and clothing and not be denied her marital rights (Exod. 21:10–11). In other words, her husband must supply her physical support and share his conjugal love with her. We should assume the husband has the same rights from his wife. Meeting both her physical needs with money and her emotional need as in conjugal love will limit a person's number of spouses.⁴¹ In the New Testament polygamy disqualifies a man from being given leadership in the church (1 Tim. 3:2).

If a couple engage in premarital sex, they are required to marry unless the father of the woman expressly forbids it; in either case, the male must pay the bride-price (Exod. 22:16–17; Deut. 22:28–29). They are not put to death, as is the case with adulterers (Deut. 22:22). The understanding is that the privilege of sex entails the responsibility of marriage and family and establishing a home. The creation order affirms that in connection with sex a man is to leave his family, cling to his wife, and become one flesh with her.

God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), yet because of the hardness of the human heart, he provided a procedure that protected the covenant home (Deut. 24:1–4). Rabbi Hillel interprets the divorce requirement loosely, taking “something indecent” to refer both to sexual immorality and to any other reason. Rabbi Shammai restricted its interpretation to sexual immorality. More probably, “something indecent” refers to immorality that destroys the holiness of the home. To protect the sanctity of the home, if a husband found his wife behaving immorally, he could divorce her. The expression “indecent” occurs elsewhere only in connection with providing a privy outside the war camp to protect the camp's holiness (Deut. 23:12–14). Accordingly, we may suppose that a man could divorce his wife if he found that she defiled the holiness of his home for which he was responsible. The divorcee was protected, however, from a frivolous use of this provision by disallowing the husband to later remarry her. If a Christian is deserted by an unbelieving partner, he or she may remarry (1 Cor.

7:15).⁴²

d. The Eighth Commandment: Do Not Steal

“Do not steal” (*lōʾ tignōb*) is stated absolutely, thereby disallowing the kidnapping of a person (Exod. 21:16; Deut. 24:7), the misappropriation of property (Exod. 22:3), and fraudulent trade practices (Deut. 25:13). The prohibition against stealing is at the same time a protection against being stolen from. God’s zeal for his personal property (see above) is the foundation for this commandment. Each person has the right to his or her own personal property. The Book of the Covenant establishes absolute justice in this regard; the thief must experience the full extent of the hurt he caused. Thus, in Exodus 22, if one loses an animal for which he accepted responsibility, he must restore the animal. But if he stole the animal, then he must restore it twofold: one animal to establish the *status quo ante* and another to experience the pain of loss he intended to inflict upon the other. If he stole the animal and then ate it, he must restore it four-or fivefold to ensure that the wronged party is fully compensated for the damage done to him. Imagine applying this sort of justice to politicians who by their “pork” bills secure other people’s money to get votes, or to lobbyists who inveigle legislators to advantage some while disadvantaging others, or to sales people who deceive their neighbors to sell their products or services, or to CEOs and union leaders who put their own gain above the best interests of the workers.

e. The Ninth Commandment: Do Not Bear False Witness

The command *lō ta^{ca}neh b^{er}ē^{ca}kā ʿēd šāqer*, “Do not testify falsely against your neighbor,” is meant to guard a “neighbor” against the threat of false accusation. The commandment is similar to the third; there is no significance difference between *šāw’* and *šeqer*. But whereas the third protects the reputation of God’s name, the ninth protects the neighbor’s reputation. This command seeks to uphold truth (Exod. 18:13–23; Deut. 16:19–20). Walter Brueggemann insightfully comments that

the courts are seen to be crucial, because in social disputes that relate to political, economic matters, it is the capacity and responsibility of the court

to *determine, limit, and shape reality*. And therefore if power and interest can intrude upon truth—by way of influence, manipulation, or bribe — then truth has no chance. It is reduced to power, and the powerless are then easily and predictably exploited.... The commandment guarantees that *reality* is not an innocent product of *power*. The future of humanity is not open to endless “reconstruction” by those who have the capacity to do so, but must adhere to what is “on the ground.”⁴³

In other words, Israel’s courts aim to shape epistemological knowledge to conform to ontological knowledge.

The reality shaped in court can be a matter of life and death. Many passages in Proverbs (12:17; 14:25; 19:5, 9, 28; 21:28; 24:28; 29:24) are concerned with the carriage or miscarriage of justice, which depends on the truthfulness of the witnesses (cf. 1 Kings 21). Most envision the giving of false testimony against the innocent and on behalf of the guilty (see Deut. 1:16), but a truthful witness saves lives (Prov. 14:25) and the faithful should rescue those being led away to death (Prov. 24:11–12).⁴⁴ In ancient Israel a large number of accusations carried a death penalty, but the accused could be convicted only on the testimony of two or three witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deut. 19:15). A false witness should have done to him as he intended to do to his neighbor (Deut. 19:19).

The Ten Commandments teach us to bestow on others four fundamental rights: (1) right to life (Do not murder); (2) right to home (Do not commit adultery); (3) right to property (Do not steal); and (4) right to reputation (Do not bear false witness). However, the American mind-set “I know my rights, and I’ll fight for them” is not God’s intention here. God’s kingdom is based on bestowing rights on others, not on insisting on the same rights for oneself. Jesus, incarnate God and our supreme example, gave up his rights to life, property, home, and reputation. Similarly, he calls upon his disciples to give up their rights in order to serve and love others for the sake of the gospel.

One of the most fragile aspects of a person’s life requiring protection is his or her reputation, yet it is also the aspect most at risk by the abuse of others. Politicians seek to destroy one another in negative campaigning; gossip columnists feed off calumny; and in Christian living rooms, reputations are tarnished or destroyed over cups of coffee served in fine china with dessert. These *de facto* courtrooms are conducted without due process of law. Accusations are made; hearsay allowed; slander, perjury, and libelous comments uttered without objection. No evidence, no defense.

As Christians we must refuse to participate in or to tolerate any conversation in which a person is being defamed or accused without the person being there to

defend himself. It is wrong to pass along hearsay in any form, even as prayer requests or pastoral concerns. More than merely not participating, it is up to Christians to stop rumors and those who spread them in their tracks.

f. The Tenth Commandment: Do Not Covet

“Covet” (Heb. *ḥāmāḏ*) designates entertaining a desire to possess what another person has. The command is uniquely and emphatically repeated twice: It begins with a specific list of what the heart typically covets (a neighbor’s house or spouse) and then a general prohibition.⁴⁵ The command entails two aspects. First, the depraved heart spontaneously desires another’s possession; this involuntary desire is not an overt sin. Second, the desire goes unchecked and entertained in the imagination; this unwillingness to immediately check the desire is sin (James 1:13–15). The spontaneous desire must be confessed and renounced immediately (Prov. 28:13). The commandment prohibits at its source volitional desire that leads to the infraction of the other commandments (cf. Rom. 7:7–11). Adultery, for example, originates in the coveting eye, and “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim. 6:10).

The commandment pertains to cherishing the lust for something desirable, not to the act itself. Christopher Wright notes:

It prohibited something which could also be “realized” in practical deed without necessarily breaking the law. It was (and remains) possible to fulfill a covetous desire without doing anything technically illegal. The Tenth Commandment, therefore, provides that radical thrust to the Decalogue which distinguishes it from mere legislation, for it indicates that, while having done nothing illegal by human standards, a person can nevertheless be morally guilty before God.⁴⁶

The commandment points out the weakness of the Torah, which is helpless to change the depravity of the human heart as Paul testified from his own lament in Romans 7. One may strive and keep outward commandments pertaining to human relationship, as indeed the rich young ruler did (Mark 10:17–31), but the tenth commandment shows up the futility of trying to attain righteousness by keeping the Torah. Indeed, a Torah that cannot effect righteousness is doubly painful, for it both frustrates and condemns. Thus, the Ten Commandments

anticipates an expectation for a new covenant, a covenant that will effect righteousness in the heart.

D. The “Judgments” (Exod. 20:18–23:33)

The second part of the Book of the Covenant, the “Judgments” (*mišpāṭîm*), consists of a prologue (20:18–26), the “judgments” (21:1–23:19), and an epilogue (23:20–33).

1. Prologue (20:18–26)

The prologue consists of a transition from the awesome theophany by which God spoke the Ten Words versus the more indirect manner in which he will mediate the judgments through Moses (Deut. 5:22–32). By the theophany and direct speaking, *I AM* instilled awe in the people to obey him, and by distinguishing Moses, he qualified him to fulfill his role as God’s mediator of the rest of the Torah with the full approval of the people. In this way God will speak to Moses alone, distinguishing the immediacy of God speaking the Ten Words from the mediating of the “judgments” through Moses (Exod. 20:18–21). In other words, unlike the Ten Commandments, the judgments are mediated through Moses’ personality. This may help explain the number of striking parallels between the “judgments” and the Code of Hammurapi (*CH*, ca. 1850–1750 BC), beside the fact of the similarities in culture.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, although Hammurapi’s (or Hammurabi’s) Code was promulgated under the authority of Shamash, “god” of justice, his legislation took little notice of the ethical and spiritual principles provided by the Ten Commandments that introduce the judgments. Moreover, Hammurapi’s Code placed a lower value on human life than the Book of the Covenant. Also, in Hammurapi’s Code, unlike the Mosaic Torah, people are not considered equal: if a citizen hurts a person who is not a citizen, he has to pay a fine, but if he hurts an official, he is to be punished with an equal injury.⁴⁸

The second part of the prologue presents laws concerning idols (Exod. 20:22–23) and altars (vv. 24–25). The altar in view is temporary until the Tent-Sanctuary is built. The idol law obviously functions to link the judgments with the first three commandments that cast their shadow over the Decalogue. Following the idol law, the altar law, which pertains to the worship of *I AM* and

the honor of his name, also falls under the rubric of the first three commandments. These altars were to be built only where God revealed himself (lit., “I will cause my name to be mentioned”). They were shown to be *I AM*’s altars by their being made of fieldstones, as they came from the hand of the Creator, not from the hand of a stone mason. God’s altars were to be made without steps to avoid any association with fertility.

2. Judgments (21:1–23:19)

The superscription in 21:1 obviously introduces the bulk of *mišpāṭim* (“judgments,” “law,” “ordinances”). The Decalogue gives these laws a covenantal context, and their content extends the Decalogue to specific cases. As the listing of the laws in note 27 above shows, they pertain primarily to social and civil matters: slaves (21:2–11); personal injuries (21:12–36); protection of property (22:1–15); and social responsibilities, which conclude with social responsibilities to God (22:16–31); and laws of justice and mercy (23:1–9). They conclude, however, with cultic regulations: Sabbath-laws with a focus on humanitarian concerns (23:10–13) and the three annual festivals (23:14–19).

Formally, the judgments consist of casuistic (i.e., case laws, 21:2–22:16) and apodictic laws (22:17–23:19).⁴⁹ A. G. Alt argued convincingly, though too simplistically, that the casuistic formulation of the conditional form had its setting in the secular case law of the ancient Near East, whereas the apodictic formulation of the direct imperative arose out of the setting of Israel’s unique covenant with *I AM*.

3. Epilogue (23:20–33)

I AM draws the Book of the Covenant to conclusion with the promise that he will send an angel as his plenipotentiary to enable Israel to complete their itinerary to the Sworn Land. But his presence and protection are conditioned on Israel’s obedience to *I AM*’s instructions (23:20–22). Once in the land, Israel’s Warrior will continue to be with them to protect them as he drives out the Canaanites at an appropriate rate to enable Israel to sanctify the land by ridding it of its false gods and by establishing the worship of their holy and true God. Hence, the epilogue draws the Book of the Covenant to a fitting conclusion. The God who redeemed them out of Egypt, preserved them through the wilderness, and made them his unique people by his covenant, will now complete their

mission of entering the land. From now on, however, Israel's destiny is bound to the discipline of *I AM*'s Ten Words and his judgments.

E. Sealing of the Covenant (24:1–18)

Exodus 24 narrates two episodes (vv. 1–11 and 12–18). The first begins with *I AM* instructing Moses and Aaron to return up to him again, after the people have sealed the covenant, but this time they are to be accompanied by Nadab and Abihu and seventy elders. Moses, Aaron the priest, Aaron's two sons, and the full representative number of Israel ascend the mountain to celebrate their new relationship with *I AM* (24:10–11). But since no one else may ascend with them and only Moses may approach *I AM* (24:1–2), neither God's holiness nor Moses' exaltation as the covenant mediator is compromised. The instruction is realized in vv. 9–10, making a frame around the sealing of the covenant between God's mediator and the people. The ratifying of the covenant and the offering of blood, we may assume, provided the basis for this new relationship of Israel with God that now obviously exists.

Upon the descent, Moses tells the people the stipulations, and they again say "Amen" (Exod. 24:3, 7; see 19:8), but this time fully understanding what they are committing themselves to in accepting their role as *I AM*'s unique possession among the nations (v. 3). To finalize the content, Moses writes down the whole Book of the Covenant (v. 4a).

The ceremony that seals the covenant involves building an altar that represents *I AM* and setting up twelve stones that represent Israel (Exod. 24:4b – 5). It also involves sprinkling half the blood of young bulls that have been sacrificed as "fellowship offerings" on the altar and the other half on the priestly people (Exod. 24:5–6, 8; cf. Lev. 8:30). The latter is called "the blood of the covenant" because it effects the covenant relationship by cleansing the recipients from sin. Blood is not applied, however, until the people again agree to obey the covenant stipulations (24:7). Thus, by Israel's commitment and by the cleansing blood for the elect, they are sanctified to God's service.

The second episode occurs presumably after Israel's representative party descends from the mountain. Moses again ascends by himself into *I AM*'s glory cloud, which looks like consuming fire on top of the mountain (see Exod. 3:2–3), to receive over the next forty days the instructions on how God is to be worshiped. Hence, the episode forms a transition to the second section of the Torah after the Book of the Covenant (see [chap. 16](#) below).

IV. RELATIONSHIP OF OLD AND NEW COVENANTS (JER. 31:31–34)

A. Introduction

The Sinai covenant is part and parcel of an unfolding covenant relationship between *I AM* and his people. By ratifying it, Israel sealed its covenant relationship with *I AM* in the Abrahamic covenant. The House of David realizes the blessings of *I AM*'s covenant with it by keeping the Sinai covenant. As we shall see, the new covenant assumes the content of at least the Ten Commandments.⁵⁰

Moreover, the Book of the Covenant pertains to a personal relationship with God. Deriving from the heart of God, its stipulations, including those dealing with human relations, belong in the sacral realm. As noted, strictly speaking the Ten Commandments are not laws; they do not contain penalties, though the infraction of similar but more specific regulations in the judgments carry the death penalty (Exod. 21:12, 14–17; 22:19; 31:12–14). Rather, they set forth God's essential moral ideals for Israel's social well-being.

The covenant's laws express and mirror God's holy and moral character. By the laws' very nature then, they are eternal (James 2:10–11). The Torah's substance is consistent with the order of creation and is eternal: "Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law" (Matt. 5:18). Jesus rejected the legalism of Judaism (Matt. 9:12–13; 23:27–28; Luke 16:15; 18:9) and abolished some ceremonial laws such as dietary restrictions (Mark 7:14–19), but he upheld the old covenant (Matt. 5:19, 21–24, 27–32, 43–48; 23:24; Mark 7:1–13; 10:17–22), simplifying its complexities to two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40).⁵¹ By his obedient life and death, Jesus fulfilled the Torah and the Prophets (Matt. 5:18; Luke 24:44).

The law serves three purposes: pedagogical, civil and moral. Pedagogically, the Sinai covenant makes sinners realize how lost they truly are apart from God's saving grace through his Spirit (Acts 15:10; Rom. 7:7–13; Gal. 5:1).

Moses clearly states that the law requires perfect obedience to receive its blessings (Lev. 18:5). The Old Testament is a masterpiece of indirection that demands theological reflection to derive its theology. Israel should have reflected from its own history that only God's grace to regenerate their hearts to trust his promises, to love him, and to commit themselves to his provisional sacrifices can give them eternal life, not their own resolve and efforts to keep the law (Deut. 30:1–10; Josh. 24:19–24; Rom 10:5).⁵² For the ungodly and the unholy, the holy Torah defines sin, condemns the people as sinners, and points them to salvation in Christ (cf. 1 Tim. 1:8–11). As for its civil value, it restrains sin. The human conscience approves its civil value. Conscience and law work together to produce the fear of God (see [chap. 13](#).IV.A.3).

As for its moral value, the law gives saints understanding and is a lamp to their feet (Ps. 119:97, 103–5). Paul likewise upholds their moral content: they are holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). The apostle to the Gentiles regards his doctrine of justification by faith — and not by Torah-keeping — as upholding and not annulling the Torah (Rom. 3:31). In his inner man he delights in the Torah (Rom. 7:22). Paul cites the Mosaic Torah as authoritative warrant for his ethical judgments (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:9; Eph. 6:1–2). Following his Lord, he holds that the Torah of love fulfills, not supplants, them (Rom. 13:10).⁵³ John P. Burgess writes, “In Reformed thinking, a life that is grasped by God's grace in Christ seeks the orders, structures, and forms (that is, law) that make life before God and life in human society possible. Law — if truly God's law — is grace-filled; it is life-giving.”⁵⁴

The Sinai covenant expresses in concrete terms what we intend when we pray: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In other words, the Sinai covenant is an essential part of the irrupting of God's kingdom. By its terms unbelievers will be judged and the faithful rewarded to God's eternal glory.

But the Sinai covenant has a glaring weakness: Israel attempted to keep it by their own resolve. Many Jews regard it as a covenant of works. But if the covenant of works failed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, how much more will the Sinai covenant fail by human resolve in defiled Canaan. The covenant mediated by Moses was doomed to failure from the start, as foreseen already by Moses (Deut. 30:1–3) and Joshua (24:14–27). The nation's founders knew from experience that Israel was stiff-necked and by nature unfaithful and therefore unable to keep their resolve. Throughout Israel's history, the broken covenant had to be ratified again and again. In fact, while Moses was still on the mount receiving instructions for the proper worship of *I AM*, Aaron the high priest led Israel into the worship of a golden calf (Exod. 32–34). Moses immediately

applied the covenant curses by killing a number of Israelites (Exod. 32:26–28). He ratified the covenant again on the plains of Moab (Deut. 29), as Joshua also did at Shechem (Josh. 23–24). Even after the exile, Ezra and Nehemiah again ratified the covenant. In each instance, while retaining the Ten Commandments, they slightly modified the judgments to Israel's changed historical situations without altering their intention. In sum, Israel, born into original sin, broke the law not to covet. Torah by itself cannot break the human cycle of sinning. God must regenerate each person to empower him or her to keep the law. A common memory, history, and resolve could not save Israel.

The prophets, beginning with Moses but especially those who experienced the exile, envisioned a new, not a replacement, covenant for all Israel, one that depended entirely on God, who by nature is eternally faithful. Moses, in his final sermon in connection with the Sinaitic covenant, predicted that after Israel returned from exile, "I AM your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.... You will again obey *I AM* and follow all his commands I am giving you today" (Deut. 30:6–8). The prophets of the exile labeled this anticipated new covenant in various ways, such as an "everlasting covenant" (Isa. 55:3; 61:8); a "covenant of peace" (Ezek. 34:25; 37:26). Jeremiah's label "a new covenant" won out as the cipher for this new arrangement (Jer. 31:31–34). This text is the longest Old Testament passage cited in the New Testament (Heb. 8:8–12), giving the two halves of the Christian canon their titles.

The Israel of God always depended on their God for their salvation. For the regenerate heart the covenant's stipulations are a delight and joy gladly accepted with great blessing (Josh. 1:8–9; Pss. 1; 112:1; 119:14, 16, 47–48, 97–113, 127–28, 163–67), neither a galling bondage as they are to rebels (Ps. 2:1–3) nor a source of killing frustration, a sword, as they are to Jews and others who try to obtain God's favor by keeping them without the empowerment of God's Spirit.

B. Continuities between the Old and New Covenants

This new covenant has significant continuities with the old (i.e., Sinaitic) covenant. First, both are given to the "house of Israel" and the "house of Judah" (Exod. 19:3, TNIV "house of Jacob"; Jer. 31:31). While the prophet had in mind Abraham's ethnic descendants, the apostles reinterpreted Israel as the church, which includes Jews and Gentiles, by their baptism into Christ, the true seed of Abraham (Eph. 2:11–22; Gal. 3:29; 6:15; 1 Peter 2:9–10 [cf. Exod. 19:6; Deut.

7:6]). Second, as the institution of the old covenant followed the redemption from Egypt, so the formulation of the new covenant would follow Israel's redemption from Babylon (Jer. 30–31; esp. 31:2). Third, both took effect only after death (i.e., the death of bulls and the death of Christ). In that sense the covenant is like a will that takes effect only after the death of the one who makes the will (Heb. 9:16–17).

The fourth and most important continuity between the covenants is that the substance of the new is essentially unchanged from the original, ratified covenant: “I will put my Torah in their minds and write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33), presumably a reference to the Torah God gave Israel on Mount Sinai, especially the Decalogue. How could it be otherwise? *I AM*'s covenant stipulations stem from God's heart, from his unchanging nature, and so their principles are absolute and eternal, though their application may change and be relative. That is why the regenerate, the Israel of God who have the Torah written on their hearts, know *I AM* (v. 34). “Know *I AM*” refers to the finding of what is sought and the resulting state of having internalized it. By internalizing the Torah of God, one knows the God who authored it (cf. Prov. 2:1–5). Knowing God entails exercising his kindness, justice, and righteousness (Jer. 9:23–24).

C. Superiority of the New Covenant to the Old Covenant

The marked superiority of the new covenant administration inaugurated by Christ is so much greater than the administration of the old covenant inaugurated for Israel by Moses that it is better to speak with Jeremiah and the writer of Hebrews of the former administration as the old covenant and of the new administration as the new covenant, rather than as first covenant and second covenant, which are John Goldingay's preferred terms.⁵⁵ Although the differences in their administration paradoxically also point to the similarities between the old and new administrations, they give the latter so much more glory that the glory of the former is as invisible as a lit lightbulb in bright sunlight.⁵⁶

As we just noted, both covenants are effected after Israel's redemption, first from Egypt and then from Babylon. But that similarity obscures an important difference. Under the old covenant arrangement, Israel was redeemed from Egypt and three months later accepted the old covenant; likewise the new

covenant was not effected until Christ's death, centuries after Israel's return from exile. But that diachronic situation does not exist in the new covenant administration. Redemption from sin and death, which was typified by Israel's redemption from slavery and death in Egypt, and the empowering of the new covenant administration occur synchronously with faith (Rom. 7:12; 8:9).

More important, compare and contrast their mediators. Moses, who mediated the old covenant, was highly exalted above the rest of Israel by his unique proximity to the holy God, but he was still only a faithful slave in God's house, whereas Christ, who mediates the new covenant, is God's faithful Son who rules over his house (Heb. 3:1–6). Moses built a replica of God's heavenly temple, but Christ ministers within the heavenly reality (Heb. 8:5–6). How great is the Mediator of the new covenant!

Consider too the media and the instruments used in writing the covenants. God wrote the Ten Commandments on rock to show the permanency of its stipulations, and it was later written on parchment with ink. But Christ, through his administration of the Holy Spirit, writes the covenant on the "tablets of the heart," changing human nature — and that makes all the difference between the ability to keep his laws. Saints with the Torah written on their hearts show to all that they are "letters written by Christ" (2 Cor. 3:3).

An external covenant, though holy, spiritual, and good, cannot in itself effect the regeneration of the human heart. Only the Spirit of God can effect a birth from above that revitalizes a person by implanting within him or her a new desire, purpose, and moral ability empowered by the Spirit (John 3:1–8). In other words, the sanction of the old covenant depended on depraved human nature, whereas the new depends on the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 7–8). Consequently, as N. T. Wright notes: "The all-important distinction is not between outward and inward, or between earning grace and expressing it, but between that outer *and* inner state which is evil all through ... and that outer *and* inner state which is being renewed all through."⁵⁷

In that connection, the old covenant depended on Israel's promise to keep the covenant's laws, but the new covenant is based on God's will to implant those laws on the heart. This switching of the obligee from unfaithful Israel to the faithful God in connection with regeneration is such a great transaction that God put aside forever the former mode of administering his covenant and made the latter mode of its administration eternal (Heb. 8:6–13). In other words, the best of all worlds is now possible.

When Moses exhorted Israel to write the covenant commandments on the heart, surely he did not mock them with a command they could not perform. The godly, like David, recognized their inability to circumcise their own hearts, and,

like David, asked of God, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ... and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Ps. 51:10–12). In other words, the provisions of the new covenant were always available to true Israel, but it was not God’s mode of administering old Israel as a nation.

In the course of Israel’s history, true Israel became a remnant within Israel. In Elijah’s day God retained only seven thousand in Israel whose knees had not bowed down to Baal — they were no more than God’s whisper (1 Kings 19:9b – 18, esp. 12, 18) albeit a perfect and full number. Israel’s hope of restoration depended on a faithful remnant who gave birth to the Messiah and who, after Pentecost, became thousands (Mic. 4–5, esp. 5:3). As a result, there was an external Israel that was united by descent from Abraham, a common history, a common identity as the people of God, and a common memory in contradistinction to a true Israel that, in addition to being united in all of these ways, was also united by their regeneration.

The new covenant is superior to the old in its effects on sinners. The old covenant condemned sinners and sanctified saints: “I [Paul] would not have known what coveting really was if the Torah had not said, ‘Do not covet.’ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from Torah, sin is dead” (Rom. 7:7–8). The new covenant stands in contrast with its gracious offer that God forgives sin on the basis of the perfect sacrifice of Christ and enables the faithful to know God and enter the sacred realm of life: “If the ministry [of the old covenant] that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry [of the new covenant] that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” (2 Cor. 3:9–11). This new experience of forgiveness in connection with a new obedience to the law entails a new relationship with God.

The new covenant is also superior to the old in its effects on the people of God, God’s heirs. The old covenant treated Israel, though God’s heir, as a child in need of a tutor, making him, though a son, no better than a slave. But the new covenant treats God’s heir as an adult with the full rights of being God’s son (Gal. 4:1–7).

Finally — and we saved the best for last — the old covenant was put into effect by sprinkling the blood of bulls on the altar and on the people, but the blood of bulls could never take away sin (Heb. 10:11). Their blood only foreshadowed the blood of Christ that effects the new covenant. Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of this symbolism when he offered the cup at the

supper, saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Christ’s vicarious death and cleansing blood satisfied God, enabling him to uphold his justice while extending mercy and forgiveness to Israel for breaking the old covenant. This is the reason he is the mediator of the new covenant. By counting Christ trustworthy in his active obedience to achieve righteousness and in his death to make atonement for sin, one enters into this new covenant relationship with God (Heb. 9:11–12). The blessings of the new covenant arrangement — that unlike the old, the new cannot fail — can be traced to the grace mediated by the righteous Servant who through his once-for-all sacrifice secured the covenant blessings for his people (Isa. 42:6; 53:4–5, 8, 10–12; Heb. 8:6–13; 9:12–15; 10:1–4, 10–18). In sum, as Vern Poythress notes, “Jesus does not assert merely a static continuation of the force of the law, but rather a dynamic advance — in fact, the definitive fulfillment.”⁵⁸

Here is a handy chart of the differences in the administrations of the covenant.

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>	<i>Texts</i>
Chronology	Diachronic	Synchronic	Rom. 8:9
Mediator	Moses	Christ	Heb. 3:1–6; 8:5–6
Medium	Rock	Heart	2 Cor. 3:3
Instrument	Ink	Spirit	2 Cor. 3:3
Obligees	Israel	God	Heb. 8:6
Sanction	“Flesh”	“Spirit”	Rom. 7–8
Duration	Temporary	Eternal	2 Cor. 3:12ff.
Effect on sinner	Condemnation	Righteousness	Rom. 7:12; 2 Cor. 3:9
Effect on “heirs”	Sanctification/ Child	Sanctification/Adult son	Gal. 4:1–7
Sacrifice	Animals	Christ	Luke 22:20

D. The Realizations of the New Covenant

Most prophecies about Israel’s golden age beyond the exile are best explained according to what theologians call “realized eschatology.” By this they mean the salvation prophecy has both an already fulfillment and a not-yet consummation.

1. Inauguration

Poythress says, “Jesus demanded of, offered to, his hearers that renewal of heart which characterized them as the restored people of YHWH.”⁵⁹ By his death, Christ inaugurated the new covenant, and in that sense brought it to realization, but he did not bring it as yet to its *full* realization. Unquestionably, the church presently lives under its administration as the many New Testament texts cited above demonstrate.

2. Continuation

As more and more Jews come to faith in Christ, they enlarge true Israel and so are being incorporated into the church and into the New Testament’s gracious provisions of forgiveness, regeneration, and knowing God. Ultimately the full number of elect Jews will experience the covenant (Rom. 11:25–32).

In Matthew 13 Jesus Christ reveals to his disciples “mysteries [Gk. *mystēria*; TNIV ‘secrets’] of the kingdom of heaven [i.e., of God]” (v. 11). *Mysteria* refers to truths about the kingdom of God that were not revealed to the prophets. The Lord Jesus reveals these truths in parables so that only the church, as represented by the disciples — not the Jewish establishment—will understand them. In these parables he clarifies new truths about the kingdom of God (i.e., the church; cf. Matt. 16:18) between the inauguration of the new covenant at his death and its consummation at his second advent.

The first parable, the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–23), reveals that only a fraction of those who outwardly accept Jesus Christ as Messiah persevere and bear good fruit (i.e., love of God and of others). The second parable, the parable of the weeds (vv. 24–30), reveals that at present good seed (the people of God’s kingdom) and weeds (the people of Satan’s kingdom) coexist in the world, growing together until the final judgment at the end of the age, when the weeds will be burned and the wheat will be saved. The Lord’s final parable, the parable of the net (vv. 47–50), climactically clarifies that the visible kingdom of God consists of good and bad fish that are caught in the same net and not separated from one another until the end of the age.

Consequently, the new covenant administration includes both true (regenerate) and nominal (unregenerate) followers of Jesus Christ. The latter fall away because they lack the root of regeneration and the eternal life that perseveres and prevails over temptation. The apostles confront this reality in their letters to the churches (cf. 1 Cor. 15:2; Gal. 1:6–9; Heb. 6:4–6; 10:26–39; 1 John 2:3–6, 19; Rev. 2:14, 20–23; 3:1–5; 16). In other words, true believers and nominal believers can be found in both the old and new covenant

administrations. The former receive covenant blessing; the latter, covenant curses.⁶⁰ Some of the Israel of God in both administrations “backslide.” Like David when he fell into gross sin, they act out of character, violate their true nature, and feel deeply miserable until they repent of their sin, humble themselves under God’s mighty hand, and once again live out their true selves. The *Spirit of the Reformation Bible* says it well:

Although much has been accomplished by Christ already (i.e., before his return in glory to establish the new covenant in its fullness), our situation as individuals and groups is much like that during the old covenant (1 Cor. 10:1–11). As believers today it is still possible for us to be part of the visible church (the new covenant community) and break covenant so severely that we receive the judgment or discipline of God (see Heb. 10:29).⁶¹

Because professing Christians, both the unregenerate and regenerate, may fall into gross sin, in truth, as Paul puts it, “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). Paul here describes the church in terms derived from Numbers 16:5 (LXX). In that Old Testament context, these words indicate that God distinguishes within the nation of Israel between faithful Israel (i.e., those who followed Moses) and unfaithful Israel (i.e., those who followed Korah in his rebellion). In other words, because the new covenant administration is internal, the visible church includes people who confess Christ but are in truth unregenerate. Jesus prophesied this situation, and church history validates him.

Paradoxically, as the marvelous effects of the new covenant expand in church history, heresies wax and wane, but the church continues to grow just as a mustard seed grows into a tree (Matt. 13:31–32). Paul predicted heresy and immorality “in the last days,” in which he included his own time (2 Tim. 3:1–5). Today we observe the unprecedented heresy of ordaining lesbian bishops in the visible church. “But they will not get very far because, as in the case of [Jannes and Jambres who opposed Moses], their folly will be clear to everyone” (2 Tim. 3:9).

In short, one must distinguish between the new covenant, which is an internal, invisible covenant God effected on the hearts of the faithful, and the church, which is outwardly administered by the new covenant replacement of the old covenant. The former pertains to the internal baptism by the Holy Spirit and a sacramental eating of the Lord’s Supper; the latter pertains to water baptism and visibly eating the Lord’s Supper.

3. Consummation

The covenant promise that “all will know me” within the house of Israel and within the house of Judah, including Jews and Gentiles, will be consummated with the regeneration of the entire creation. At that time, when Christ’s rule extends universally (Ps. 72), he will uproot the weeds and burn them up but preserve the wheat, and he will preserve the good fish but burn up the bad fish (Matt. 13:36–43, 47–52). In sum, what Christ inaugurated at the cross and what the church continues to experience in mixture, will be consummated in purity at his second coming. Jesus “came to realize the full measure of the intent and purpose of the law and the prophets. He came to complete, to consummate, to bring to full fruition and perfect fulfillment the law and the prophets.”⁶²

THOUGHT QUESTION

What roles should the Ten Commandments play in your life and in a pluralistic society? How should those roles be played out (i.e., realized)?

1. The traditional rendering of *tôrâ* by “*lex*” (Augustine), “*Gesetz*” (Luther), and “Law” (English versions) is misleading, for the sense of law in the Western world derives from the Roman world. *Law* in our world denotes an impersonal code of conduct and actions recognized as binding and enforced through penalties by a controlling authority. But *tôrâ* in the Hebrew Bible means primarily “catechistic teaching,” which gives the elect nation instruction and guidance and is its constitution. The Ten Commandments, for example, have no penalties attached directly to each of them. The term is so rich in meaning that it is best transliterated. From form-critical analyses of laws, treaties, and covenants of the ancient Near East from the third millennium BC (ca. 2500–2300) to early first millennium BC (900–650) and from sociological considerations, Kenneth A. Kitchen (*On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 283–307) argues helpfully that Moses mediated the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus – Leviticus) and its renewal (Deuteronomy). He also notes that these two covenants are in fact a triptych of laws (regulates relations between members of a group within the group), treaties (regulates relations between the members of two groups politically distinct [or, with vassals, originally so]), and covenants (regulates relations between a group and its ruling deity). “It is thus ‘religious’ in serving its deity through worship; social in that the mandatory content of the covenant rules for practical living (law); and political in that the deity has the role of exclusive sovereign over the group” (289).

2. Strictly speaking, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17) should be viewed as only part of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:18–24:18).

3. Moses holding the Ten Commandments with other jurists looking on stands in the center of the frieze over the entrance of the Supreme Court of the United States. Symbols of the Ten Commandments are found throughout the courtroom.

4. “To keep covenant” denotes fidelity and devotion, not perfection (v. 5; cf. Gen. 17:9–12; 1 Kings 11:11; Pss. 78:10; 103:18; 132:12; Ezek. 17:14).

5. The Akkadian cognate *sikiltu* refers to what is owned personally or what

has been carefully put aside for personal use. It has the same sense as the Hebrew *s^egullâ* and designates the relationship of a Canaanite vassal king to the Hittite king. “It is thus a term which is used in the important sphere of suzerain/vassal relationships” (William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1984], 85).

[6.](#) G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane, and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 339.

[7.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. David M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962–65), 1:192.

[8.](#) E. S. Gerstenberger, “Covenant and Commandment,” *JBL* 84, no. 1 (1965): 45; S. Gevirtz, “West-Semitic Curses and the Problem of the Origins of Hebrew Torah,” *VT* 11, no. 2 (1961): 140.

[9.](#) Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:415–16; Walter J. Kaiser Jr., “Leviticus 18:5 and Paul: Do This and You Shall Live (Eternally?),” *JETS* 14 (Winter 1971): 22; W. L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 25 (January 1963): 77–87

[10.](#) D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963).

[11.](#) Kenneth A. Kitchen, “The Fall and Rise of Covenant, Torah and Treaty,” *TynBul* 40, no. 1 (1989): 118–35.

[12.](#) See the groundbreaking studies of E. Bickerman, “Couper une alliance,” *Archives d’histoire du droit oriental* (1950–51), 133–56; George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh Biblical Colloquium, 1955 = *BA* 17, 26ff., 49ff.); K. Baltzer, *Das Bundesformular. Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum alten und neuen Testament*, 4 (Neukirchen, 1960); McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*.

[13.](#) Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), 31.

[14.](#) M. Stevens, “The Obedience of Trust: Recovering the Law as Gift,” in William P. Brown, ed., *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 135.

[15.](#) Cited by David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 7.

[16.](#) Eternal principles must be abstracted from the laws, stated, and then applied to new situations. In our family devotions we read, “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof “ (Deut. 22:8). I

asked our children if we should put a parapet around the roof of our house, and they responded that we should. But when I pointed out that our roof was slanted for the removal of rain and snow and that no one could live on it, in contrast to Palestinian rooftops, the children decided we should not build a parapet. When I asked, “So what does the Torah mean today?” my nineyear-old responded, “It means we should have good brakes on our car to protect the lives of others.” Somehow his mind had the capacity to abstract the principle of “You shall not commit manslaughter” from the biblical rooftop ruling and apply it to a contemporary situation, but I confess I do not know how to prove or to falsify his intuitive logic.

[17.](#) “Word” (*dabār*) in Hebrew denotes what the English language calls “a grammatical sentence.”

[18.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “How We Got Our Old Testament,” *Crux* 30/4 (1997): 12–19; idem, *Christian History* 43 (1994). This canon is assumed in Deut. 4:12–14; 5:22; 9:9–17; 10:1–5.

[19.](#) See Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 35–95.

[20.](#) John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 66. “Scarcely a single person has ever been found who did not fashion for himself an idol or specter in place of God. Surely, just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind” (*Institutes*, 1.5.12).

[21.](#) Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 414.

[22.](#) Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, in *Thomas Reid’s Inquiry and Essays*, ed. R. E. Beanblossom and K Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 281.

[23.](#) Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Fundamental Code Illustrated: The Third Commandment,” in Brown, *The Ten Commandments*, 207.

[24.](#) Some wrongly interpret the commandment to prohibit the practice of using the name of God in a magic spell or witchcraft (M. E. Andrew, “Using god: Exodus xx.7,” *Exp Tim* 74 [1962-63]; A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus* [Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1908], 117).

[25.](#) Huffmon, “The Fundamental Code Illustrated,” 211.

[26.](#) Qaddeš is a factitive *Piel* (IBHS, 401, §24.2e).

[27.](#) HALOT, s.v. “*shabat, shabbat*,” 4:1407, 1411; F. Stolz, TLOT, s.v. “*shabat, shabbat*,” 3:1297–1302.

[28.](#) A member of my former church was a chicken farmer, and he took me for a tour of his chicken coop turned chicken actory. The facility extended to the horizon and beyond, seemingly boundless in its testimony to human technology.

As I walked into the building, I was awed. Chicken coops were lined up side by side, one on top of another as far as my eyes could see. Each coop was 3.5 feet by 3 feet, housing five chickens packed in tight quarters. Many of the chickens had bare spots where their feathers were scratched off by the other chickens. The lights were on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, producing an artificial environment in which the chickens produced eggs at maximum efficiency. He justified the situation by noting how well they were fed but not noting that this was done for more and better eggs, not for the good of the chicken (Prov. 12:10).

[29.](#) A friend of mine raises free-range chickens. He gave me documentation showing that eggs produced by free-range chickens have less cholesterol than eggs produced under the stress of factory conditions. When I read that, I said, “Hooray for God, and hooray for the chickens!” My sentiment on this subject extends to the environment as well. Christians ought to be in the lead in preserving earth’s ecology. Christians, more than any others, have the best reasons to take care of the planet, for this is our first calling. Tragically, many of God’s people have given higher priority to efficiency and profits.

[30.](#) Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2000), 39.

[31.](#) Jonathan R. Wilson, *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith, Hope and Love in Uncertain Times* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 129.

[32.](#) Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 3.

[33.](#) Ibid., 6.

[34.](#) [Chapter 9](#) of the letter to the Magnesians in *Apostolic Fathers*, trans. E. J. Goodspeed (London: Independent Press, 1950), 215.

[35.](#) A factitive Piel (*IBHS*, 400–402, §24.2e).

[36.](#) A “psychological/linguistic” factitive (“delocutiveestimative”) Piel (*IBHS*, 402–4, §2).

[37.](#) The word is defined through other usage.

[38.](#) The word is used in both senses in Num. 35.

[39.](#) For the “just war” tradition, see Gary M. Simpson, “Thou Shalt Not Kill — The First Commandment of the Just War Tradition,” in Brown, *The Ten Commandments*.

[40.](#) See J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for Christian Life*, trans. N. D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 207–42.

[41.](#) According to David Instone-Brewer (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* [Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003],

[42.](#) See John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 45–81.

[43.](#) Walter Brueggemann, “Truth Telling as Subversive Obedience,” in Brown, *The Ten Commandments*, 293.

[44.](#) This proverb should not be used to justify bombing abortion clinics or shooting abortionists. Those clinics and doctors operate within the legal framework that sanctions and protects them. Logically, if someone were to be shot, it should be the chief justice, but no one in his right mind advocates that solution. To rescue the unborn, every effort should be made to appoint justices who will protect them, while recognizing that even those who do sanction abortion are appointed by God to prevent vigilantism and anarchy.

[45.](#) Here we follow the more common numeration of the Decalogue, which regards the two commands in Exod. 20:17 as a single command. For other views see E. Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective: A Tradition-Historical Approach*, trans. D. Bourke (London: SCM Press, 1968), 1–13.

[46.](#) Christopher J. H. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land, and Prosperity in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1990), 138.

[47.](#) Parallels include release of slaves (Exod. 21:12–21; CH §117); stipulation on female slaves (Exod. 21:7–11; CH §§170–71, 119); homicide (murder) (Exod. 21:12); unintentional homicide (Exod. 21:13–14; CH §207); relation to parents (Exod. 21:15, 17; CH §§195, 193); kidnapping (Exod. 21:16; CH §14); minor bodily injury (Exod. 21:13–19; CH §206); injury to slaves (Exod. 21:20–21, 26–27; CH §199); miscarriage (Exod. 21:22–23; CH §§209–14); serious bodily injury (Exod. 21:24–25; CH §§196, 197, 200); goring ox (Exod. 21:28–31, 35–36; CH §§250, 251); goring ox and slave (Exod. 21:32; CH §252); accidental death of animal (Exod. 21:33; CH §252); theft of animal (Exod. 22:1 [21:37]; 22:2, 3 [22:1, 2]; CH §§8, 22–23); breaking in and stealing (Exod. 22:2 [22:1]; CH §§21, 25); grazing violations (Exod. 22:5 [4]; CH §§57, 58); fire damage to field (Exod. 22:6 [5]); stipulations for deposits (Exod. 22:7–13 [6–12]; CH §§120–26, 263, 266–67, 244); borrowing (Exod. 22:14, 15 [13, 14], cf. CH §§245–46); seduction of unengaged maiden (Exod. 22:16, 17 [15, 16]; CH §2); sodomy (Exod. 22:19); court procedures (Exod. 23:1–3, 6–8; CH §§3–5).

[48.](#) Code of Hammurapi, CH 196–99.

[49.](#) Case law is a collection of decisions made by judges in actual cases that establish a precedent, a new legal principle. These rulings are then applied to other cases that share something in common with the case that established the principle.

[50.](#) In church history (according to George Lindbeck, “Martin Luther and the

Rabbinic Mind,” in Brown, *The Ten Commandments*, 61–67), Luther’s *Kontroversstheologische* (“controversial-theological”) writings emphasize that Christians must be free from the law (*lex* or *Gesetz*). The law in its *usus civilis* (“lack of moral freedom” vis-à-vis demands) is socially necessary but individually corrupting. This is so because it makes the individuals more sinful by making them hypocritical. In its *usus theologicus* the law reveals sins and God’s terrifying accusations, but also reveals to the exposed sinners their need for salvation. Christ frees the Christian from this coercive and accusatory law. In the Lutheran catechisms, however, the Mosaic law is not called *lex* or *Gesetz* but teaching (*doctrina*, *praecetum*, *Bebot*, and *mandatum*). Here Luther praises the law as a complete guide for human life. It inculcates “fear, love and trust in God in all things” and thus tells us how all the other commandments are to be obeyed. Luther’s negative assessment of the law in *Kontroversstheologische* also marks historic dispensationalism. Both tend to pit law and works against gospel and grace. Calvinism, by contrast, emphasizes the third use of the law. In his view the law is God’s gracious gift to his people in both dispensations, mirrors God’s moral nature, and points the way to life. In his view the *usus pedagogicus* is due to human depravity, not to a weakness in the law in contrast to the gospel (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 256; see also *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.7.4; 2.7.7). In Reformed theology (WCF 19) the moral Law codifies the eternal moral law, known already to Adam in conscience and earlier revelations. In this system of theology the law is still of “great use” to believers and unbelievers because it “directs them to and binds them to walk accordingly.... It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions.” Reformed theology also distinguishes between the eternal moral law, the historically conditioned, judicial law for Israel’s courts and the typical ceremonial law for the house of God. The exegesis above on Exodus 20–24 exegetically establishes the distinction in Exod. 20:1–17 and 20:18–23:23. The next chapter features the liturgical laws to guide the priests at the house of God (Exodus 25 – Leviticus). Deuteronomy ([chap. 17](#)) is preached Law and guarantees, along with other legislations, that should Israel’s judicial and liturgical leaders fail, *I AM* will uphold his law.

[51.](#) Reginald H. Fuller, “The Decalogue in the New Testament,” in Brown, *The Ten Commandments*, 33–44.

[52.](#) See Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 368–70.

[53.](#) For Jesus as the embodiment of the law and as the new and greater Moses, see *ibid.*, 89–93.

[54.](#) J. P. Burgess, “Reformed Explication of the Ten Commandments,” in

Brown, *The Ten Commandments*, 98.

[55.](#) John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[56.](#) See also Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 362–67.

[57.](#) N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 283.

[58.](#) Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 265.

[59.](#) Ibid.

[60.](#) On the certainty of judgment against hypocrisy within the church, see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 105–9.

[61.](#) *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, ed. Richard L. Pratt Jr. *et al.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1253.

[62.](#) Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 150.

Chapter 16

THE GIFT OF LITURGY

The type has been made according to the truth, and truth has been recognized according to the type.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 10.673

I. INTRODUCTION

Most Bible readers make at least one attempt in their lives to read the Bible cover to cover. The enterprise is surprisingly successful at the beginning as they are engaged by the irruption of God's kingdom in overcoming the primordial darkness, the Fall, the Flood, a hostile and powerful pharaoh, the Red Sea, and a terrible wilderness. In these stories the author proves himself as having a flair for the dramatic. From the creation to the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea and Israel's survival in the wilderness, the author enthralls his readers with action and conflict. The readers are carried along by the smooth-flowing narrative to the feet of Mount Sinai (Horeb) but are then unexpectedly dumped into an incomprehensible heap of case laws and curtain measurements. It is like reading *Moby Dick*, a thrilling narrative interrupted by a taxonomy of whale species.

This is so because the itinerary of Israel's pilgrimage from Egypt to Canaan is interrupted between Exodus 19:25 and 20:18 to splice in the Ten Commandments (20:1–17), then between 20:21 and 24:1 to splice in the judgments (20:22–23:33), and finally between Exodus 24:18 and Numbers 10:11 to splice in instructions regarding liturgy (Exod. 25:1–Lev. 27:34) and preparations for the rest of the journey (Num. 1:1–10:10). More laws are given between Sinai and Moab, and the covenant is renewed and brought up to date in Deuteronomy. As L. D. Hawk, assistant professor of religion at Centenary College of Louisiana, says, "The Red Sea and the Jordan constitute geographical boundaries which take Israel into and out of the desert but also signify the beginning and end of Israel's constitution as a coherent people."¹

This chapter aims to make sense of the instructions regarding the liturgy. It may not make the text a lot more palatable to read, but hopefully it will make it more understandable. The aim is to analyze these laws into an understandable skeleton upon which its various aspects may hang according to this outline:

II. Sinai Foreshadows the Tabernacle

III. The Concept of Liturgy

IV. Liturgy and Ethics

V. Structure and Content of Israel's Liturgical Regulations

VI. Functions of the Liturgy

A. Separating

B. Symbolic

C. Typical

D. Sacramental

E. Artistic

VII. Aspects of the Cultus

A. Sacred Site

B. Sacred Objects

C. Sacred Personnel

D. Sacred Seasons

E. Sacred Institutions

1. Offerings and Sacrifices

a. Terms for what is offered on the altar

b. General Regulations for Sacrifice

c. Compensatory Sacrifice

d. Cleansing Rituals

2. Laws of Purity and Holiness

VIII. Basis of the *I AM*'s Presence: His Grace (Exod. 32–34)

A. Setting I and Dialogue

B. Setting II and Dialogue

C. Setting III and Dialogue

D. Setting IV and Dialogue

IX. Development of Theme

A. Liturgy Before Moses

B. The Mosaic Liturgy

C. Davidic Modifications

D. Prophetic Modifications

E. New Testament Modifications

II. SINAI FORESHADOWS THE TABERNACLE

The scene that initiates the covenant at Sinai in Exodus 19 (see [chap. 15](#)) foreshadows the instructions regarding Israel's continuing worship of God at his tabernacle — a luxurious tent that is analogous to the mobile palace of an Egyptian king.² Goldingay insightfully observes, “The description of YHWH's appearing in the dwelling exactly corresponds to the description of YHWH's appearing on the mountain.”³ Sinai teaches that God is immanent on the symbolic mountain (Exod. 19:3) and yet transcendent, for he descends to it in a smoky, dense cloud and fire, with an awesome shaking of the mountain and an ear-shattering trumpet blast (Exod. 19:9, II, 16, 18–19; 20:21). Likewise, the transcendent God descends to his royal tent with cloud and fire (Exod. 40:34–38) in the midst of his pilgrim people, who also live in portable tents. In other words, the house of God on earth represents the transcendent God as present with his people, guaranteeing them protection and prosperity. At Sinai his presence is veiled in smoke and at the tabernacle his presence is veiled in the smoke of incense (Exod. 30:1–10). The people respond to God's Sinai epiphany in smoke and fire with a desire and a reluctance to meet God, with trust and trembling (19:16–17).

To resolve the tense meeting between the awesome and holy God and his unholy subjects at Sinai, God demands that the people meet him at the appointed time (Exod. 19:11); that Moses consecrate the people for that meeting; that he bar them from even touching the mountain (vv. 10–15, 23); that Moses go up and down the mountain to mediate his Torah (vv. 20–21); and that Aaron also ascend the mountain as the people's representative (v. 24). Likewise God preserves his holiness at the tabernacle by appointing sacred times for meeting him, a priestly caste to enter his dwelling and sacred rituals for consecrating the priests and the people to worship him. A key term in the tabernacle liturgy is *bādal*, “to make a distinction [between holy and the common]” (Lev. 10:10; 11:47; 20:24, 25 [2x]; 20:26; Num. 8:14; 16:9).⁴

After the covenant is sealed, Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the elders climb the mountain, see God, and eat and drink in his presence (Exod. 24:9–11). At the tabernacle — the replica of heaven (Exod. 25:9; Heb. 9:23–24) — all the faithful may fellowship with *I AM* at his altar. In sum, *I AM* is in the

world but not of it, and his holy people, though on earth, in a type ascend to heaven. In other words, according to the place and conditions that God chooses, he and his chosen people enjoy rich communion together. This is the point of liturgy.

III. THE CONCEPT OF LITURGY

The academic term for the subject of this chapter is *cultus*. In popular usage, however, *cult* refers to a religion that is regarded by the mainstream of a culture's religion as unorthodox and/or spurious. To many it refers to an off-the-wall religious sect, usually led by a charismatic, egomaniacal leader, and sometimes ending in mass suicide. Biblical theologians, however, use the term for the external expression of religion. Although we could have used *worship*, that term may refer exclusively to the inward, spiritual veneration of God, not exclusively to the rites of worship. Many use the term *ceremonial* to denote prescribed forms that are strictly adhered to, but that word often connotes a rite performed only formally with no deep significance, or a stiff, restrained, old-fashioned behavior. Although we may occasionally use these other terms, we will mostly use *liturgy* for the rites God prescribed for Israel's worship. The following definitions of *liturgy/cultus*, as articulated by a few of the preeminent scholars in the field, point to the subject of this chapter.

According to Sigmund Mowinckel, "Cult or ritual may be defined as the socially established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and communion of the deity with the congregation is established, developed, and brought to its ultimate goal."⁵ Similarly, Walther Eichrodt argues that "the term 'cultus' should be taken to mean the expression of religious experience in concrete external actions performed within the congregation or community, preferably by officially appointed exponents and in set forms."⁶ Kurt Goldammer gets beyond the two previous scholars, defining cultus in terms of an individual's internal understanding of the structured activities.⁷ Martin Buss essentially agrees: "Cult is a pattern of facts which have a reasonable connection with each other in the mind and attitude of the person who stands within it."⁸

Broadly, then, liturgy or cultus may be summarized as religious communion through:

1. *Material over against spiritual feelings.* Religion has two aspects, what one feels in one's heart — the religious impulse — and what one does in community physically and temporally. Liturgy focuses on the material aspect of religion. To be sure worship may be didactic and therapeutic, but that is serendipitous, not its purpose. Liturgy enables and enacts a meeting of the whole person with God,

who has a real dwelling place.

2. *Community over against an individual.* A person's religion is personal; his or her experiences and impulses are unseen and unfelt by others. However, the liturgy is practiced in community, within a group of people.

3. *Form over against the spontaneous.* As soon as the practice of religion involves more than one person, the question of form must be answered. The minimal requirements for community practice of worship are time and place. In addition, the frequency of worship needs to be established.

4. *Integrated over ideational approach.* By "ideational" I mean the act of forming or entertaining ideas or thoughts of objects not immediately present to the senses. Liturgy aims to lead participants into a religious experience. Those who understand the structure of the liturgy are engaged both emotionally and cognitively.

The question of how much form and spontaneity to incorporate into the community's liturgy is difficult to answer. The Old Testament liturgy is highly regulated; precise rules govern the sacred site, sacred personnel, sacred seasons and rituals, *etc.* In practice, however, they are not always followed, albeit sometimes with divine approval. The New Testament provides fewer regulations and seems to argue for a less defined liturgy. From the very beginning of church history, there were two Christian denominations: the Jewish, under James' leadership centered in Jerusalem, and the Hellenist, under Paul's leadership and scattered throughout the Hellenistic world. The Jewish preferred to retain their Jewish liturgical or ceremonial practices; the Hellenist preferred not to retain these customs. James, the half brother of the Lord, resolved the tension for their common worship by counseling that the Hellenist consider the scruples of Jewish Christians and not offend them by eating food sacrificed to idols, by eating the meat of strangled animals, or by consuming blood. Beyond these Jewish scruples, they were to abstain from sexual immorality, which was prevalent in pagan societies (Acts 15:12–21). But all the apostles and elders agreed that salvation must not be conditioned by conforming one's life to the Jewish ceremonial laws and that the Hellenists should not be asked to observe Jewish ceremonial laws.

This freedom of groups to adopt their own style of worship allows each individual to find a community where he or she best experiences communion with God. Some find that liturgy stifles spontaneity and enthusiasm and serves as an obstacle to the internal religious experience. Others enjoy freedom within liturgy because they feel more at ease, not confused about what is to happen. The wide variety of liturgies testify to the different approaches Christians take in community worship. The New Testament sanctions this openness to variety.

IV. LITURGY AND ETHICS

Although from a reader's perspective it is difficult to piece together the narrative and liturgy as sketched above in the introduction, from the narrator's point of view their connection is theologically vital. Israel came to Sinai to worship God and to learn how to worship God. Piety (i.e., the first three commandments of the Ten Commandments), the transitional commands to keep Sabbath and honor parents (four and five), and social ethics (the last six commandments) — with their elaboration in the judgments — and liturgy together form the sound spiritual basis for worship. Nevertheless, the narrative underscores that the instructions regarding liturgy are not part of the Book of the Covenant. Moses ascended the mountain to receive the liturgical stipulations only after Israel at the base of the mountain sealed the covenant by their words of commitment to keep the Book of the Covenant and by cleansing blood. And God allowed the preparations for the liturgy and for Israel's continued journey to the Sworn Land to continue only after the broken covenant had been renewed. The message that piety and ethics have priority over external expressions of religion is not a prophetic innovation in salvation history, as often alleged, but is embedded in the Torah's narrative.

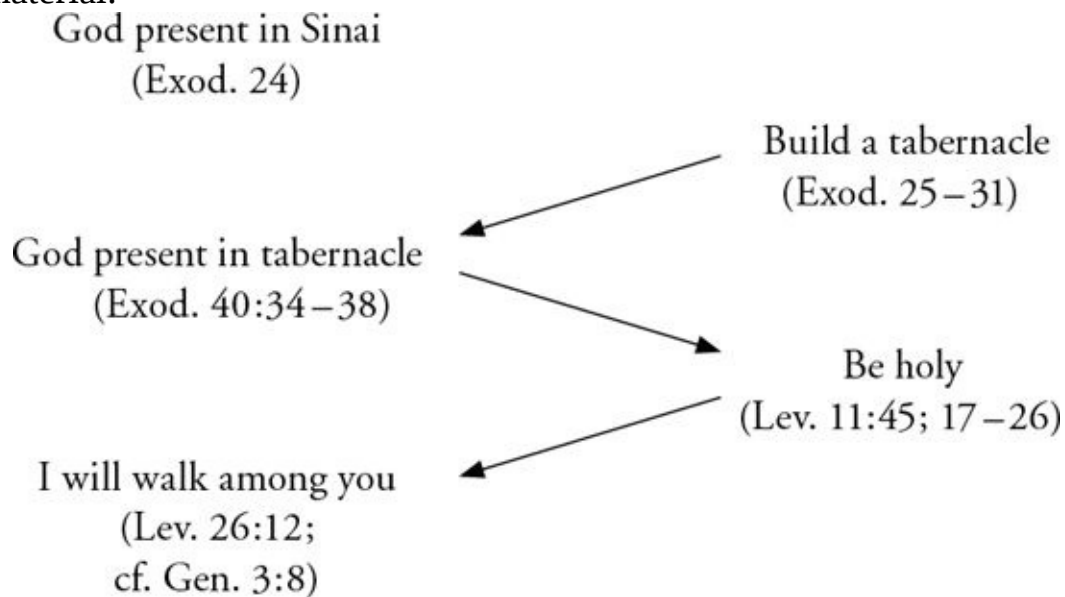
That is why I did not use Georg Hegel's definition of *cultus*. Buss helpfully summarizes this as “the participation of finite existence in essential being (i.e., the realization and enjoyment of true reality).”⁹ Hegel put it this way: “essential being” or “true reality” connotes a higher realm in which humans are *natural* participants. So the function of liturgy or *cultus* becomes a process whereby through this subjective sensibility humanity is brought into a fuller manifestation of its true nature. In this view a person enters into the *true* realm mystically, finding his or her true self. This definition, however, does not take into account sin. In the Old Testament, an individual does not enter into the heavenly court lightly or as a matter of right. Instead, there are barriers inherent in the Israelite religion that take sin into account. This tension between *I AM* and his worshipers is resolved through the covenant and the liturgy. Only covenant faithfulness and heartfelt participation in the liturgy allow participation in worship. That sacred sphere is not the human sphere. The sacred sphere contains all of God's holiness and transcendence, which is thoroughly nonhuman. Entrance into that sacred realm is not automatic as a matter of rights for sinful human beings. They do not

belong except through faithfulness to the covenant, whether administered in the old or new ways, and spiritual performance of the prescribed liturgy, whereby in part the worshiper is “de-sinned.” In other words, ethics and God’s prescribed liturgy lie at the center of Israel’s worship.

A problem inherent in any liturgy is that it tempts humanity to rigidity and manipulation. Given to magical rituals and voodoo incantations, some worshipers throughout history have turned religion into a way to get what they want from God. Others have assumed that God is interested only in the proper execution of religious procedures without a corresponding life that is attentive to God. These problems were anticipated by the narrator, and so he presented the liturgical material in a narrative context that emphasized the centrality of ethics. Through various narrative and rhetorical techniques, the author asserts the foundational nature of ethics in relation to liturgy. Liturgy without covenant fidelity is worthless. *I AM*’s prophets liken rebellion against the covenant that is papered over with liturgy to the sin of divination (1 Sam. 15:22–23; cf. Isa. 1:11–15; Jer. 7:22–23; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Matt. 12:7; Mark 12:33; Heb. 10:6–9).

V. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF ISRAEL'S LITURGICAL REGULATIONS

The chief reason for Israel's liturgy is that God will dwell among and be present with his chosen people. The structure of Exodus 25 through Leviticus, the chief texts on Israel's liturgy, sustains that thesis. Here is a schematic outline of the material:



Moreover, as Paul House, citing Elmer Martens, notes, “Every ... detail about the worship center and priesthood derive from this theme [that God dwells among his people].”¹⁰ That theme entails God's concern for communion with his sinful people while protecting his holiness.

The inauguration of the covenant established *I AM*'s rule over Israel. Accordingly, he gave instructions for building his residence: the tabernacle (a royal tent of meeting), in the midst of his pilgrim people (Exod. 25:1–40:38). The narrative divides these chapters into three divisions: (1) instructions for the building and furnishing of the tabernacle and the service of the priests within it (25:1–31:18);¹¹ (2) the golden calf episode, wherein Israel breaks covenant then finds God's forgiveness and God renews the covenant (32:1–34:35); and (3) the actual construction of the tabernacle (35:1–40:38). The tabernacle regulations (25:1–40:38) can be analyzed thus:¹²

- I. Instructions Concerning the Tabernacle (25:1 - 31:18)
 - A. The Tabernacle and Its Priests (25:1 - 30:10)
 - 1. The Tabernacle and Its Furnishings (25:1 - 27:19)
 - a. Collection of Materials (25:1 - 9)
 - b. Ark (25:10 - 22)
 - c. Table (25:23 - 30)
 - d. Gold Lampstand (25:31 - 40)
 - e. Tabernacle Structure (26:1 - 37)
 - f. Altar (27:1–8)
 - g. Courtyard (27:9–19)
 - 2. Priests and Their Services (27:20–30:10)
 - a. Collection of Oil (27:20–21)
 - b. Priestly Garments (28:1–43)
 - c. Consecration of Priests (29:1–46)
 - d. The Altar of Incense (30:1–10)
 - B. Atonement Money (30:11–16)
 - C. Bronze Basin (30:17–21)
 - D. Anointing Oil (30:22–33)
 - E. Incense (30:34–38)
 - F. Appointment of Craftsmen (31:1–11)
 - G. Sabbath Observance (31:12–18)
- II. Israel's Failure and God's Forgiveness (32:1–34:35)
 - A. Israel's Violation and Moses' Intercession (32:1–29)
 - B. God's Threat and Moses' Intercession (32:30–33:23)
 - C. Renewal of the Covenant (34:1–35)
- III. Construction of the Tabernacle (35:1–40:38)
 - A. Preparations (35:1–36:7)
 - 1. Call to Contribute (35:1–19)
 - 2. Israel's Offerings (35:20–29)
 - 3. Craftsmen (35:30–36:7)
 - B. Construction (36:8–39:43)
 - 1. Tabernacle (36:8–38)
 - 2. Furnishings (37:1–38:8)
 - 3. Courtyard (38:9–20)
 - 4. Summary of Amounts (38:21–31)
 - 5. Priestly Garments (39:1–31)
 - 6. Moses' Blessing (39:32–43)
 - C. Erection of the Tabernacle (40:1–38)
 - 1. Tabernacle Built (40:1–33)

2. Glory Cloud in the Tabernacle (40:34–38)

Exodus draws to a conclusion with the glory cloud that was formerly on top of the mountain settled upon the tabernacle at the base of the mountain (40:34–35), and Leviticus opens with *I AM* calling to Moses and speaking to him from the Tent of Meeting with instructions on how to “draw near” (*qrb*) to *I AM*. The verb *qrb* means “to come close enough to the object to see it, to speak to it, or even to touch it.” This intimacy with God can be attained by *qorbān*, an offering that is “brought near,” “brings near,” or “allows one to remain near.” Probably the last two senses are intended. None could approach God without a *qorbān* except upon threat of death (see Lev. 16:2–3). Paul Wright comments, “Hence it is the dwelling of God, His immanency or nearness (Exod. 25:8) as it relates to sin and holiness (Lev. 16) that is carried over through the tabernacle into the Book of Leviticus as its main theme.”¹³

The structure of that book can be analyzed thus:

- I. Laws of Sacrifice ([chaps. 1–7](#))
 - A. Instructions for the Laity ([chaps. 1–5](#))
 - 1. Burnt Offering ([chap. 1](#))
 - 2. Grain Offering ([chap. 2](#))
 - 3. Peace Offering ([chap. 3](#))
 - 4. Sin Offering (4:1–5:13)
 - 5. Guilt Offering (5:14–6:7 [Heb. 5:26])
 - B. Instructions for the Priests (6:8 [Heb. 6:1] – 7:36)
 - 1. Burnt Offering (6:8–13 [Heb. 6:1–6])
 - 2. Grain Offering (6:14–18 [Heb. 6:7–11])
 - 3. Ordination Offering (6:19–23 [Heb. 6:12–16])
 - 4. Sin Offering (6:24–30 [Heb. 6:17–23])
 - 5. Guilt Offering (7:1–10)
 - 6. Peace Offering (7:11–36)
 - C. Summary (7:37–38)
- II. Installation of the Priesthood ([chaps. 8–10](#))
 - A. Moses Begins the Ceremonies ([chap. 8](#))
 - B. Aaron and His Sons Complete the Ceremonies ([chap. 9](#))
 - C. Aaron’s Sons Violate the Ceremonies ([chap. 10](#))
- III. Uncleaness and Its Treatment ([chaps. 11–16](#))
 - A. Unclean Animals ([chap. 11](#))
 - B. Uncleaness of Childbirth ([chap. 12](#))
 - C. Unclean Diseases and Mildew ([chaps. 13–14](#))

- D. Unclean Discharges ([chap. 15](#))
- E. Day of Atonement ([chap. 16](#))
- IV. Holiness Code ([chaps. 17–26](#))
- V. Votive Gifts (Vows/Tithes) ([chap. 27](#))

VI. FUNCTIONS OF THE LITURGY

In connection with enabling the holy God to be present with his sinful people so that they might commune with one another, liturgy serves at least five other broad purposes: separating, symbolic, typical, sacramental, and artistic.

A. Separating

The rite of pledging allegiance to the American flag identifies an American; Scots identify their clan membership by their plaids; and the union jack distinguishes a ship as British. Rites mark one's membership in a religious community. The rites of circumcision, Passover, and Sabbath mark a Jew; baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit marks the entrance into the Christian community; and eating the Lord's Supper shows participation in Christ by spiritually eating his body and drinking his blood. In short, the liturgy provides a visible distinction between those that belong to the covenant from the rest of the world.¹⁴

Observing rites not only separates the faithful from the unbeliever but also safeguards them from assimilation into the world around them. Walter Brueggemann comments on Jacob's purification ceremony before his ascent to Bethel (Gen. 35:1–15): "Israel must find a way to stay in the land with the Canaanites and yet practice faithfulness. The way chosen to do this without either destructiveness or accommodation is by way of *radical symbolization*. Israel engages in dramatic ritual activity as a mode of faithfulness."¹⁵ Philip Carrington suggests that in the Christian tradition, this same disengagement is enacted in the sacrament of baptism (cf. Eph. 4:22–25; Col. 3:7–8; James 1:21; 1 Peter 2:1).¹⁶ To retain purity from the sensuality at Corinth, Paul took a Nazirite vow. To retain purity on an aircraft carrier, my brother, Henry, prayed beside his bunk every night.

B. Symbolic

Within the wilderness tabernacle and later the Jerusalem temple, although removed from the human eye, God sits between the two cherubim, and his feet rest upon the ark, God's throne (1 Sam. 4:4; 1 Chron. 13:6) or footstool (1 Chron. 28:2; Ps. 99:5). Priests attend to his worship. They place loaves of bread on a table that also supports the vessels with drink (Exod. 25:29; 37:16), which only the priests can eat and drink. Opposite the table, they light the almond-shape lampstand with seven branches.

These elements of liturgy are palpable symbols of spiritual realities. They serve as visible portrayals of vital religious experiences, giving outward manifestations of the deepest human affections in worship. Therefore, the liturgy reflects the spiritual movement from the inner being of a worshiper through his outward behavior toward God and reaching into the very heart of God. Rising smoke symbolizes prayer ascending to the presence of God, and raising one's hands symbolizes human needs before God and an openness to receive from him answers to prayers. Without openness to God, one cannot experience the joy of the Lord.

But liturgy is not a one-way street. While some aspects of the liturgy communicate the inner aspirations of humanity toward God, other liturgical acts and symbols communicate the heart of God — through them he touches the human heart. For example, the ark of the covenant symbolizes God's moral rule and sovereignty. It is symbolically his footstool, a physical metaphor asserting that everything is "under his feet." The cherubim symbolically protect his holiness and sanctity against the profane. The symbolism of other aspects of the tabernacle are discussed below (see VII.A). Liturgy, along with words, facilitates spiritual intimacy between the covenant partners: God and Israel. The liturgy, unlike its pagan counterparts, is not a crass ritual to supply a finite God's needs.

Perhaps the priest's eating the bread of his presence shows Israel's dependence on God. They owe their food to God, and they in turn dedicate themselves to him. The almond-shaped lamp stand symbolizes new life — the almond tree blossomed in late January before other trees. Seven symbolizes perfection, and the light it gives perhaps speaks of Israel's glory in the light of God's glory.

C. Typical

Whereas symbols work on the synchronic level, the idea of *type* works on the diachronic level (see [chap. 5](#)); that is, the unveiling of time gives meaning to the

concept of type. Simply put, type is a portrayal or shadow of what will become fully actualized in the future. A person, an action, an event, an institution—in short, any element of the liturgy — can, but not necessarily does, serve typical functions.

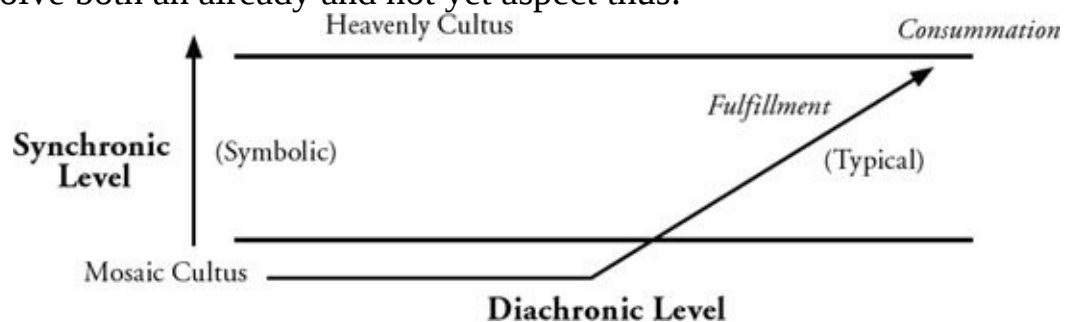
The liturgy revealed in Exodus and Leviticus works on both the synchronic and diachronic level. Synchronically, the liturgy is a symbol, a copy, of the heavenly reality. Exodus 25:9 speaks of the pattern¹⁷ God showed Moses, implying, according to the author of Hebrews (9:23–24), that liturgical objects are an earthly copy of the heavenly court.¹⁸ Thus, the Mosaic liturgy allows the human partner to worship God through an earthly version of what is reality in heaven, but that earthly copy in the course of salvation history gives way to what will become fully actualized for the people of God. This process of actualization occurs in two steps: (1) fulfillment, and (2) consummation.

Salvation history is moving toward an eschaton when humans will participate in that heavenly realm. The church will enter the scene described by the apostle John in Revelation 21–22. It is the ultimate reality of seeing God, being with God, and worshipping God, an experience of which Moses and Aaron and the elders on Mount Sinai had a foretaste. Christ inaugurated this reality and pioneered the way to its consummation and so has already fulfilled and consummated what the liturgy anticipated, but his church, while fulfilling the liturgy by its baptism into Christ, has not yet consummated the reality to which the liturgy points. At present the church serves as priest in a spiritual temple, offering up herself and her praise as living sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:4–10; Eph. 2:21; Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15).

In other words, the Mosaic liturgy is fulfilled in Christ today. Through him and with him, we are seated in the heavenlies (Col. 3); we have become citizens of heaven and live on earth as heavenly people (Phil. 3:20–21). However, we have an in-between existence because we physically live in this fallen world. The liturgy will be fully consummated in the new heaven and new earth. In connection with the institution of the old covenant as the means of administering to people, God brought Moses and Israel's elders into a fellowship meal with him in his presence (Exod. 24:11). So also the Son of God, in the institution of the new covenant as the means of administering grace, brings the apostles, the representatives of the church, into a fellowship meal with him; so does the church in celebrating the Lord's supper (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). This meal in turn foreshadows the future wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:5–10). We live now in fellowship with him, and that fellowship guarantees our hope to be with him in his heavenly presence.

Through its regulations regarding the sanctuary, the priesthood, the offerings, the holiness code, and so on, the Mosaic liturgy provides a picture of the coming Messiah, for example, his role as a prophet, priest, and sacrifice pleasing to God. Later liturgical material in the Primary History presents foreshadows of Christ's role as prophet, priest, and king. The sacrificial system, priesthood, and system of festivals and feasts all provide foundational information that help us to appreciate what Christ did in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Without the Mosaic liturgy laying the foundation, Christ's work would be incomprehensible, lacking the necessary interpretive framework.

We can diagram the synchronic-symbolic axis and the diachronic-typical axis that involve both an already and not yet aspect thus:



D. Sacramental

The symbolic and typical functions of the liturgy operate more on the cognitive level. The next two functions, the sacramental and artistic, like the separating function, operate at the same time more on the emotional level — that combination of human will and passion, the center of being. We understand what symbolism and typology communicate, but the sacramental function in connection with words that accompany the liturgy enables us to feel and to participate spiritually in the reality being portrayed. As sensual beings, we also worship God through our senses — the taste buds and the nose are involved in the Passover Feast. As Christians, we feed on Christ, thus participating in his death and resurrection. This spiritual grace and union is not conferred by any power within the tangible properties of the liturgy, nor does its efficacy depend on the piety of the officials who perform the liturgy. Rather, its benefits are conferred by the work of the Spirit in conjunction with the words that authorize the rite and state its promised benefits.

E. Artistic

Artistry evokes an emotional response. By this I do not mean that it is emotional manipulation. Rather, it is the delight and insights we experience when we see and/or hear beauty. Although in a symbolic wilderness, the art of the tabernacle — or today in a church building—moves God’s people beyond words. David, the Mozart of his day, transformed worship into awesome opera. Great buildings awe and inspire us. Beauty and aesthetics, gifts from God and his delight, speak to the depth of our beings and ennoble us. Psalm 48 opens with the assertion “Beautiful is Zion’s eminence, the joy of the whole earth” (v. 2 [3]), and ends with the admonition: “Walk about Zion, encircle her site, count her towers! Examine her ramparts! Pass between her palaces! Do this to tell future generations” (vv. 13–14, translation mine). In other words, touch it, feel it, count it — “experience God.”

The artistic function of liturgy has not escaped secular notice. On a tour through the campus of the University of Washington, I noted the architecture of its main library — a replica of a cathedral with three arches and three doors. There are also statues, visages of Voltaire, Rousseau, and other rationalists. It is a cathedral, a place of worship. But the god is Human Reason, its worldview is that of the Enlightenment, its prophets are atheists, its bible is Nature, and sanctification is by elitist learning. The function of this monumental architecture is unmistakable: to baptize students in the cult of Secular Enlightenment.

F. Ethical

From the other purposes described, it can be inferred — not surprisingly — that the ethics of the eternal moral law inform the liturgy. Repeatedly the detailed liturgical regulations are presented as “*I AM* spoke to Moses.” The Author of Israel’s liturgy is also the Author of the written eternal, moral law and its judgments in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20–24). Exodus 24 deliberately interfaces the two kinds of law as occurring in connection with one another. Spliced between *I AM*’s command that Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihum, and seventy of the elders of Israel are to come up to meet *I AM* on Mount Sinai (24:1–3, 9–18), *I AM* and Israel enact the religious and ethical aspects of the Sinai covenant. In other words, though the liturgy is a distinct aspect of the Sinai covenant, it also part of that covenant.

The liturgy reinforces the Ten Commandments and Book of the Covenant

commands. According to Jacob Milgrom, “Underlying the rituals, the careful reader will find an intricate web of values that propose to model how we should relate to God and to one another.”¹⁹ For example, the cereal offering shows God’s concern for the poor to enjoy his fellowship; the purification rituals de-sin Israel corporately and individually for their sins against God and their violation of their neighbor; the quotidian Sabbath keeping becomes a sign of the covenant (Exod. 31:12–18); the sacrifice of the red cow teaches that they belong to the God of life, not to death; and the dietary laws teach Israel to be pure, unmixed with the world (Lev. 11).

In short, Israel’s rituals ensconce her theology and her ethical values.

VII. ASPECTS OF THE CULTUS

The liturgy involves sacred sites, objects, personnel, seasons, and institutions.

A. Sacred Site

The tabernacle symbolizes that God is with us; it is the place where God and his people uniquely meet in holy communion (Exod. 29:42–45). More specifically, according to Craig Koester, it functions as a place of revelation, the place where sacrifices are offered and atonement made to make his presence possible, and a sign of his covenant faithfulness.²⁰

God's luxurious tent sanctuary consisted of a set of gold-covered acacia wood frames linked together to form a rectangular structure 15 feet wide by 45 feet long. Over this structure were draped successively —as viewed from the inside out — cloth engraved with cherubim; skins of goat hair (typical of tents); ram skins dyed red; and finally fine leather. The sanctuary had two rooms separated by a curtain: the Most Holy Place (15 feet square) and the Holy Place (30 feet long). Around the sanctuary was a courtyard 30 feet wide by 150 feet long.

The regulations in Exodus 25–40 pertain entirely to building God's residence that he might dwell among them (29:46) and the priestly service in consecrating it, maintaining it, and decontaminating it. The tabernacle concretely expresses the unfathomable mystery of God's omnipresence (i.e., his existing in all places at all times [Ps. 139:7–10; Jer. 23:23–24; Acts 17:24–28]), and his immanence (i.e., his unique presence vis-à-vis special interests on earth where mortals may approach him). Solomon expressed this mystery at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). None, including Satan, can escape God's omnipresence (Ps. 139:5–6).

I AM's presence in an earthly residence expresses his specific attention to the needs and cares of the worshipers gathered at that site, making it the axis between heaven and earth (Gen. 31:3; 2 Chron. 13:12; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 28:20).

As God's presence is paradoxically both spatially ubiquitous and immanent, it is also paradoxically both temporally permanent and intermittent. When he withdraws his presence from his sinful people, he abandons them temporarily to their own devices (2 Chron. 12:5; Ezek. 29:5). The ark, symbolizing the throne of the invisible God, expresses his abiding presence, while the tent reflects God's intermittent presence. This fits our experience. We experience God intermittently, yet we know that he abides with us permanently in all situations.

Sometimes God's residence is referred to as a "sanctuary" (lit., "holy place"). This broader term refers to any place where God is present in a special way. The movement of the tabernacle—always equipped with poles for the ready — illustrates that God's presence determines the location of the sacred sites, not the other way around. As the people wandered in the wilderness, wherever God's glory cloud moved, the cloud indicated a new location for the sacred site (Exod. 40:36–38). This site was then marked by the placement of the altar.

All the Israelites participated in providing freewill offerings from their own treasures for the material support of God's residence, and only the finest minerals, fabrics, leathers, wood, oil, incense, and semiprecious stones would do in this portable tent palace. The regulations for its furnishings are presented from *I AM's* point of view, moving outwardly from the Most Holy Place, which houses the ark, his throne, to the Holy Place with its table of the bread of the Presence and its lampstand. Moving to the courtyard, one half of it holds God's royal tent, while the other half provides space for the people to gather and offer their sacrifices.

God spiritually empowered gifted craftsmen, such as Bezalel and Oholiab, to construct the sanctuary.

In other words, the liturgy makes place matter. Jonathan Hill notes, "The God of the Christians is not some remote, spiritual reality to be discovered by turning away from the world. That was the God of the Platonists. The God of the Christians, by contrast, acts in time and space: his power and his love are encountered by particular people at particular times in particular places."²¹

B. Sacred Objects

While the tabernacle or sanctuary represents the dwelling of God in the midst of his people,²² its curtains represent his holiness and protect the sanctuary against unauthorized intrusion. All the objects within God's house are consecrated with perfumed oil. Starting with the throne room, the Most Holy

Place, the ark contains the *ʿēdūt*, the written expression of God's will — that is to say, the Decalogue — the covenant Israel sealed at Sinai.²³ In other words, the terms laid down for their relationship to *I AM* are central to Israel's worship and never apart from it. It also contains a pot of manna, which memorializes God's provision in the wilderness, and Aaron's budding rod, which memorializes his election to serve there (Exod. 16:33; 25:16; Num. 17:10; Deut. 10:1–5; Heb. 9:4). Its cover is viewed as the royal footstool of *I AM* (1 Chron. 28:2). The blood sprinkled on the ark's cover once a year transforms the throne into a mercy seat. At this "atonement cover," the place of mediation, God promises Moses, "I will meet with you" (Exod. 25:22). *I AM* is "enthroned between the cherubim" (1 Sam. 4:4; see Exod. 29:43–46; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Pss. 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16). The cherubim are connected with the throne as its guardians and/or bearers. In other cultures cherubim are minor deities protective of palaces and temple; in Israel they symbolized angelic guardians of the invisible throne of God.²⁴

Moving to the Holy Place, the table with its twelve loaves symbolizes God's presence with the twelve tribes. Perhaps the priest's eating the bread of his presence shows Israel's dependence on God. They owe their food to God, and they in turn dedicate themselves to him. In any case, the plate and cups represent *I AM*'s presence as at a feast, eating and drinking with the tribes. Jesus adopts this well-understood concept in his parable of the eschatological banquet. The final fulfillment of the temple is to be a banqueting table with God as the host (Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–23; Rev. 19:9).

Opposite the table of the bread of the Presence stands the lampstand. Though functional, to judge from the other features of the sanctuary, it too is symbolic. The almond-shaped stand symbolizes new life: the almond tree blossomed in late January before other trees. The lampstand's seven branches probably symbolize the complete light of his presence, and the light it gives perhaps speaks of Israel's glory in the light of God's glory. Each branch ends in a leafy base of a bud from which open the petals of a flower. This motif appears four times on the trunk (Exod. 25:34) and three times on each branch (v. 33). This symbol of fruitfulness, together with the motif of cherubim, links the tabernacle with the Garden of Eden, suggesting paradise. In Zechariah's vision the oil of the lampstand symbolizes the anointing of the Spirit (Zech. 4:6, 12–14). John saw Jesus ministering among the lampstands (representing the churches) of the heavenly sanctuary (Rev. 1:12, 20).

Outside the sanctuary is a courtyard where people gather; in it stands the bronze basin for priestly washings and the bronze altar for sacrifice. As we shall

see below (IX.A), in addition to other aspects of liturgy, sacred objects symbolizing God's presence existed before the Mosaic liturgical regulations. For example, Moses' shepherd's rod did not become part of Israel's liturgy, but it was a sacred rod turned royal scepter. That transformation symbolized that God is the Shepherd-King who cares for his people, the flock of his pasture. Through that scepter Moses conquered Egypt, the foremost superpower in Israel's world. Moreover, through it God extended his reign to the natural realm, as demonstrated by the rod-mace that brought on the ten plagues that devastated Egypt.

C. Sacred Personnel

The priests as mediators between God and his people have two functions: as teachers they teach God's revelation (Lev. 10:10–11), and as sacred personnel they facilitate the encounter between God and his people in liturgy, such as offering sacrifices to atone for sins.

Aaron and his sons serve God by maintaining the purity of the sanctuary through washings and sacrifices and through its proper maintenance, such as replacing the bread on the table and trimming the lamps. They wear costly, sacred garments to give them dignity and honor: an ephod with its breastpiece, robe, tunic, turban, and sash. The ephod is made from costly material and reaches from the breast to the hips. It has shoulder straps with two onyx stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes. In other words, God and his people, bound in mutual communion through their mediator, meet in his throne room. The breastpiece is a single piece of fabric folded double to form a square pouch. It has gemstones on its front bearing the names of the twelve tribes into God's very presence, and it holds the Urim and Thummim, which mean "lights" and "perfection" and begin with the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. They were used to receive oracles from God (Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; 1 Sam. 23:6–13; 28:6; Ezra 2:63), but we do not know what they looked like or how they worked. In any case, the priest bears the names of the tribes and the means of making decisions upon his heart when he appears before *I AM*. Under the ephod he wears a blue robe, the robe of people of high social standing (1 Sam. 18:4; 24:4). Bells around the hem identify and protect him when he enters a zone of sanctity. The Levites assist the priests in their ministries.

Before entering the sanctuary, however, Aaron and his sons have to be consecrated (i.e., made holy) by ceremonial washing with water and by applying

sacrificial blood to the right earlobe, thumb, and big toe (extremities *pars pro toto*). By laying hands on the sacrificial animal, they symbolize their personal identification and substitution in this sin offering. The ritual is repeated for seven days, signifying their complete sanctification. A plate of pure gold with the words “Holy to *I AM*” is fastened to Aaron’s turban, identifying him as set apart to mediate between *I AM* and the people.

An altar of incense is stationed before the veil at the entrance to the Most Holy Place. The high priest lights it morning and evening so that its fragrant smoke covers the mercy seat and protects him from God’s divine holiness as he tends the lamps in the morning and lights them again in the evening. A bronze water basin, which is made from the mirrors of the women, stands between the courtyard altar and the Tent of Meeting. The priest’s neglecting to wash makes him liable to death.

D. Sacred Seasons

When is God in residence to meet with his people through the mediation of their representative priest? There are two answers. God is always present in his dwelling (cf. “before *I AM*” in Exod. 27:21; 29:23), yet on special occasions and set times God comes down to the Tent of Meeting to meet his people (cf. Exod. 34:23; Num. 11:17, 25; 12:5; Deut. 31:11). God’s transcendence and immanence, his ubiquity and unique presence, shroud God in mystery. Nevertheless, Christian experience confirms that we experience God constantly and universally and yet at unique times and/or in unique places.

When is the right time to call upon God? Again, there are two answers. One is defined by the Greek concept *chronos*: regularized time for worship as determined by the order of creation; the other by *kairos*: decisive time, as determined by the order of redemptive history.²⁵ God created the astral bodies to write into the order of creation the time for Israel to commune with him. *Chronos* includes daily prayer marked by the rising and setting of the sun. Two lambs are offered daily at the temple. One is part of the morning prayer that begins temple ritual, and the other one ends temple ritual. The weekly Sabbath requires the changing of the showbread, and it also serves as an occasion for special prayers. The new moon festival is monthly, according to the human calendar, and there are three annual festivals (Exod. 23:14–17; 34:23; Deut. 16:16).

The annual festivals, marked by transitions from rainy to dry seasons,

correspond with agricultural festivals in the other ancient Near Eastern religions. In a predominantly agricultural setting, festivals revolve around harvest times: barley, wheat, grapes, and olives. The Mosaic legislation, however, transforms the sacred season from the order of creation into the order of history. The spring barley festival commemorates the Passover and Israel's redemption from Egypt. Israel's new year corresponds with their new beginning as a nation. The Feast of Weeks, also called the Feast of Harvest and the Day of Firstfruits, coincides with the later wheat harvest and marks the end of the grain harvest fifty days after the Sabbath that begins Passover. Finally, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (*Succoth*), also called the Feast of Ingathering, on the fifteenth to the twenty-second of the seventh month, coincides with the harvesting of grapes and olives in the fall and reminds Israel of their wilderness pilgrimage when they lived in booths. The Day of Atonement (*yôm hakkippôrim*) on the tenth of that month signifies cleansing for the people from the sin of the past year and renewed mercies for the new year. Later *rôš haššānâ* (New Year) was marked in the seventh month.

Festivals help the covenant community remember great events of the past and in addition, in a way that is hard to describe, reenact them or make them real once more for later generations. This is what happens at Passover and in eating of the Lord's Supper. For Israel, Passover remembers the single most important defining event in Israel's history—its birth, and in eating the Passover supper the community “remembered” itself to that event. For the church, in the Lord's Supper it remembers the death of Jesus and “remembers” itself to the new covenant that his death effected.

Every seventh year the land must lie fallow, and only what grows by itself may be consumed (Lev. 25:6). As Israel depended on God for manna in the wilderness, they must depend on God to provide enough growth in the sixth year to survive for three years — the sixth year, the year of rest, and the eighth year of planting for the following year (vv. 18–22). Further, every fiftieth year, in addition to allowing the land to lie fallow, Israel must celebrate the year of Jubilee, in which they proclaim liberty throughout the land to all inhabitants: debts are forgiven, indentured slaves released, and ancestral lands are returned to their original owners (vv. 8–28).

Turning from *chronos* liturgy to *krisis* liturgy, in his prayer dedicating the temple Solomon outlines crises bringing people to the temple to pray: famine, epidemic, and war. In these times, the people of Israel may come before God, confessing their sins and offering sacrifices (1 Kings 8).

E. Sacred Institutions

Sacred institutions and rituals were to be practiced by the Israelites as part of their liturgy—for example, circumcision (see [chap. 12](#) above), sacrifices, feasts, pilgrimages, processions, and songs. In some of these sacred institutions, the dividing line between public (temple) and private (home) is blurred. Passover is celebrated at the temple, but the meal is eaten at home. Circumcision is a family matter, but it is performed at the temple. This lack of clear dividing line between the public and the private suggests that there should not be a radical divorce between the home and the temple. Instead, home and temple ought to serve as extensions of one another. The sacrificial system involved daily and monthly burnt offerings (Num. 28:1–29:40), plus a variety of personal sacrifices.

1. Offerings and Sacrifices

a. Terms for What Is Offered on the Altar

In biblical Hebrew there are eleven different terms, each having a precise meaning, usually glossed by two English words, “offering” and “sacrifice.”

1. *qōrbān*: “offering” (see above).

2. *minḥā*: “gift.” *Minḥā*, which derives from the verb *mnḥ* (“to give”) refers in noncultic contexts to either a “gift” or “present” between people (cf. Gen. 32:20–22 [21–22]; 33:10) or, as a specialized term, a tribute to a superior (Judg. 3:15, 17, 18). In cultic contexts it refers to a gift to God (Gen. 4:3–5) or serves as a specialized term for grain offering (i.e., from crops rather than flocks/herds [Lev. 2]). Whether the gift is gold, incense, animals, meat, or crops, it must be of such quantity and quality that it honors and pleases the beneficiary.

3. *zēbāḥ*: “fellowship sacrifice.” *Zēbāḥ* refers to a sacrifice of slaughtered sheep, goats, or cattle to create communion between God to whom the sacrifice is made and the partners of the sacrifice, and communion between the partners themselves as they eat together.

4. *ʿōlā*: “burnt offering.” *ʿōlā* (from the verb “to go up, ascend”) indicates the complete burning up of an animal from the herd or flock (including the entrails) except for its hide, which went to the priest as a stipend for his service. In the case of a bird, the priest removed the crop with its contents, and there was no stipend. It is translated “burnt offering” because it refers to the “ascending of the offering” up to *I AM* in smoke by means of its incineration on the altar.

5. *kālîl* (“whole,” “complete”). *šōlâ* and *kālîl* are complementary terms, the former referring to the manner of offering and the latter to the extent of it. The burnt offering was used as part of an overall ritual process of purging the tabernacle and making atonement (Lev. 1:4; 9:7; 16:3, 24). Scholars differ on the manner and degree to which the burnt offering atones. Probably it was the primary means of atonement on solitary altars before the advent of the tabernacle when “it became imperative to devise specific sacrifices [sin and guilt offerings] to purge the sacred house and its sancta of their contamination and desecration.”²⁶ Richard Averbeck comments, “In other words, outside of the sanctuary complex itself, the burnt and peace offering worship system provided the substantial ritual context of worship at the solitary altars and on the high places.”²⁷

6. *šelem/šēlāmîm*: “peace offering.” The singular form *šelem* occurs only once; the plural *šēlāmîm* eighty-six times. Averbeck says, “The primary focus of this particular offering seems to be the communal celebration supplied by the meat of the offering. It was the fellowship or communion offering that indicated and enacted the fact that there was peace between God and his people and that the person, family, or community was, therefore, in a state of well-being.”²⁸ Peace offerings had an important part in the inauguration of the tabernacle (Lev. 9:4, 18, 22), and Solomon offered a multitude at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:63–64). Hezekiah and Manasseh offered them at their rededication of the temple (2 Chron. 30:22; 31:2; 33:16). The fact that God dwelt among the people in the tabernacle/temple and wanted to have a relationship with them was basic to the Sinai prescriptions. Although the peace offering fat was offered to *I AM* (Lev. 3:16b – 17; 7:22–27), its distinctive feature was that all the people had the opportunity of this close communion (Lev. 3:1–2; 7:1–21). Since it signified that all was well, it always came last in any series of offerings (see 9:8, 12, 15–17). The priest splashed its blood against the altar on all sides, and it had atoning efficacy. Leviticus 17:11 gives the rationale of blood atonement specifically in the context of peace offerings: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (cf. v. 14; Gen. 9:4–5).

Leviticus 7:11–34 deals with three various rationales for the peace offering:

7. *tôdâ*, the thanksgiving peace offering (vv. 12–15), included words that acknowledge what *I AM* had done for the worshiper along with the sacrifice, was to be eaten on the first day and the other two on the first and second days. Averbeck suggests, “The eating of the whole thing on a single day may ... have given the occasion a higher degree of intensity in worship celebration and may

have encouraged more sharing of the feast with others outside of the family or clan, sort of community celebration.”²⁹

8. *neder*, the votive peace offering (vv. 16–18) designates the payment of a promissory vow to *I AM* to gain his help in a difficult or troubling situation.

9. *nēdābâ*, the freewill peace offering, could be suited to any occasion and attitude of worship before *I AM*. A consecration peace offering was offered only for the installation of priests in their office (Exod. 29:19–34; Lev. 7:37; 8:22–33).

The other offerings:

10. *ḥattāʾt*: “sin offering.” *Ḥattāʾt* was the primary blood atonement offering in the sanctuary system of offerings (Exod. 29:14; cf. Lev. 8:2, 14). Moral evil is both a relational/legal breach and pollution. The sin offering addresses both: the standing and the state of *I AM*’s people. The sin offering provided the sinner not only freedom from condemnation but also healing of character³⁰ and, at the same time, purified the tabernacle/temple, which might have been contaminated by the sin. The legislation begins, “Anyone who sins unintentionally (*šgāgâ*) ...” (Lev. 4:2; cf. 22, 27; 5:15, 18; 22:14; Num. 15:22, 24–29). Jacob Milgrom-thinks the sin offering only treated sins that were committed by mistake or in ignorance, but Averbeck argues *šgāgâ* means basically “in error” in the sense of straying from a command: “Although it can also mean that the error was unintentional or inadvertent (see, e.g., Num. 35:11, 15, 22–23; Josh. 20:3, 9), this is not necessarily the case (see 1 Sam. 26:21; Eccl. 5:6).”³¹ NIV omits and TNIV questionably glosses *ô* (“or”) at the beginning of 4:28, which distinguishes between a sin committed in *šgāgâ* from one in which the person becomes aware of it only later.

11. *ʾāšām*: “guilt offering.” The priests are to be concerned with two major dichotomies: the distinction between the holy and common and between the pure and the impure (see Lev. 10:10). Building on Milgrom’s study, Averbeck draws the plausible conclusion that, on the one hand, the *ʾāšām* (“guilt offering”) made atonement for the desecration (i.e., changing the status of a person or thing from the holy to the common) of the *sancta* (holy things). On the other hand, the *ḥattāʾt* (“sin offering”) made atonement for the contamination of something (i.e., changing its condition from pure to impure). In other words, the guilt offering provided for the consecration of someone or something and the sin offering for the purification of something.

Leviticus 6:1–7 [5:20–26] deals with a culprit who misused God’s name in a trial to deny his violation of another person’s property, but the court resolved the matter in favor of the culprit, not the plaintiff. In that case the culprit, who later

felt guilty for his crime, had to make reparation by restoring to the plaintiff the violated property plus 20 percent of its value and by offering to I AM a ram for desecrating the *sancta* (Lev. 6:1–4 [5:20–26]).³² Isaiah prophesied that the suffering servant, who finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ, will provide an *ʾāšām* for his people and after his resurrection will see those whom he made righteous (Isa. 52:13–53:12, esp. vv. 10–12).³³

b. General Regulations for Sacrifice

Space restrictions do not allow a detailed description of the regulations of each offering, but some universal regulations can be observed.

(1) Best

What is placed on the altar has to be the best. *Bikkûrîm* (“firstfruits”) does not refer to any specific type of thing placed on the altar; rather, it is a description of the quality of the offering: the choicest of fruits, the firstborn. Why fat is considered the best part of the animal is not clear. Fat may indicate an investment in the animal, taking care of it and feeding it in the best pastures, and/or it may indicate the choicest part of the animal.³⁴

(2) Accurate

The sacrifice must be performed in strict conformity to prescribed practices. Leviticus 9 emphasizes by repetition that Aaron and his sons did exactly — “in the prescribed way” — what Moses commanded them to do as they began their ministry in the tabernacle. I AM expressed his approval by sending out fire from his presence within the tabernacle to consume what they had offered on the altar. But the failure of the Aaronic priesthood throughout its history became immediately apparent when Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized incense fire. Fire again came out from I AM’s presence, but this time it consumed the derelict priests. Leviticus 10 begins with the sin and death of Nadab and Abihu and closes with the violations of Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s next two sons, but theirs was excusable, for they were mourning the loss of their brothers. The prescribed liturgy is the face of God to the world. Playing fast and loose with God’s prescribed practices is to show disrespect for God’s honor and dignity.

(3) Representative

The sacrifice represents life. The bread that is offered represents the crops that the worshiper harvested. The blood shed at the altar represents the animals the worshiper raised. The sacrifice offered symbolizes the owner's life and God's ownership and sovereignty over all.

c. Compensatory Sacrifice

A lamb was also offered on the altar to compensate *I AM* for the firstborn son due to him as the Creator (see above).

d. Cleansing Rituals

Cleansing rituals involving water and blood were also required in connection with skin diseases or mildew (Lev. 14) and with coming in contact with a dead body. The ceremonies cleansed and restored the individual to the community of the people of God. The skin disease represents the process of dying, and the corpse obviously represents death. Restoration in the case of a skin disease involved two birds, one of which was killed over water and its blood used to purify the person who had been infected. The bird's death portrayed the end of life outside the camp. The other bird was set free. Its flight to freedom pictured and psychologically enabled the person's liberation from the effects of the disease.

In the case of contact with a corpse, a red heifer that was without defect or blemish was to be taken outside the camp and killed (cf. Heb. 13:11–13), after which a prescribed ritual involving water was followed (Num. 19). The requirements for ritual cleansing from death remind the Israelites that they do not belong to the realm of sickness and death, but to the realm of life. They are in the presence of the living God, where life is marked by wholeness, not sickness and death. If a person refused the ritual that symbolically transferred him from the realm of death into the realm of life and into the presence of the living God, he was “cut off” (i.e., was placed under the curses of the covenant, with [Exod. 31:14–15] and/or without human agency [Lev. 18:29; 20:22]).

Cleansing from Israel's sin occurred on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). On that day the tabernacle and its objects, the priests and the people were entirely “de-sinned.” The priestly ritual included confession of all Israel's sin and vicarious sacrifices involving both the laying on of the priest's hand on a scapegoat that carried all their sins away into a solitary place in the desert, where presumably it could not survive, and the offering up of a burnt offering for

himself and for the people. “Then before *I AM* you will be clean from all your sins” (16:30).

The basis for the notion of transference through sacrifice does not lie in magic but in God’s grace and will that his justice/purity and mercy may kiss one another in the human psyche.

2. Laws of Purity and Holiness

The laws of purity and of holiness are primarily found in Leviticus 11–15 and 17–26 respectively. The Hebrew word *ṭāhōr* (traditionally, “clean”) indicates ritual purity. Purity/“clean” does not refer to hygiene but is contrasted with mixed or mongrel. Pure incense has no wood mixed in; pure gold is without alloys; and pure animals are like our thoroughbred horses. Israelites were not allowed to eat a monkey because it walked with its hands and feet; they could eat an insect that had wings and jointed legs used for hopping but not an insect with wings and straight legs. The Israelites were commanded not to mix seeds or crops and not to mix different types of cloth in sewing. Therefore, the theme of purity was worked into the everyday life of the Israelites and safeguarded them from mixing their human seed with pagans. These purity laws inculcated the notion of holiness so that Israel would learn that they were to be a pure people, set apart for God.³⁵

The Israelites also learned that holiness was defined in spatial degrees from God: regions closer to God are holier than those remote from him. The following chart represents these degrees:

<i>Less Holy</i>	<i>Holier</i>	<i>Holiest</i>
Land	Jerusalem	Most Holy Place
Gentiles	Israel	Priest
All animals	Pure	Choicest

Within these spheres there are also degrees of holiness. So within the land the uncultivated land with its wild animals is less holy than the cultivated fields, and Jerusalem is the holiest city because the temple is there. The temple area with its various courts is also marked by degrees of holiness, and curtains separate the courtyard from the Holy Place and that from the Most Holy Place. In everyday life, Israel is reminded of the holiness of their God. In Leviticus 17–26 no significant area of life escapes God’s call of his chosen people to holiness:

their worship (17:1–16) and their sexual practices — no sexual relationships with close relatives, no adultery, no child sacrifice, no homosexuality, and no bestiality (18:1–30) — distinguish them from the depraved nations they are to dispossess. The basis for this call to holiness is that God is holy and Israel must emulate him (19:1–37). This holiness expresses itself in keeping the Ten Commandments, the last six of which can be summed up in “love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). God punishes infractions of his holiness, for, as House insightfully comments, “otherwise God’s imperatives devolve into God’s preferences.”^{[36](#)}

VIII. BASIS OF IAMS PRESENCE: HIS GRACE (EXOD. 32–34)³⁷

The golden calf episode is framed by a reiteration of Sabbath stipulations (Exod. 31:12–17; 35:1–3). The first Sabbath passage is preceded by God's choice of Bezalel and Oholiab as skilled artists (31:1–11); the second Sabbath passage is succeeded by the naming of Bezalel and Oholiab as God's chosen artists (35:30–36:1), leaving the golden calf narrative as the pivot, the message. The chiasmic structure of the episode can be schematized thus:

- A Bezalel and Oholiab (31:1–11)
- B Sabbath regulations (31:12–17)
- C Golden calf narrative (32:1–34:35)
- B' Sabbath regulations (35:1–3)
- A' Bezalel and Oholiab (35:30–36:1)

Aaron's making of the golden calf while Moses is receiving instructions for building God's residence in the midst of his people raises the fundamental question, How can the holy God dwell among a sinful people? How can fire be present in a bush without burning the bush? The liturgical regulations assume covenant faithfulness, and the golden calf narrative makes absolutely clear that keeping the pledge to obey the Book of the Covenant is essential for retaining God's presence; God cannot be manipulated by liturgical ritual; his presence cannot be demanded. The episode repudiates the notion of *ex opere operata* ("by the ritual it is effected"). This narrative guards against the pagan magical way of thinking that God is under human control.

An idealist may hope for a holy nation full of righteous individuals, each of them a Moses, but the golden calf episode deflates that idealism. God's people sin and sometimes prove unfaithful. What then? The narrative instructs us that God's presence is ultimately based on God's benevolent attributes.

The episode is divided into four scenes, each followed by dialogues.

A. Setting 1 and Dialogue (32:1–14)

In the first scene, Aaron makes the golden calf as seen from God's perspective. As God sees what happens in the Israelite camp, he tells Moses to get off the mountain where he has been giving instructions for building his residence. The scene amply demonstrates the sinfulness of the people. Right after sealing the covenant, they break its first two commandments: ascribing the work and glory of God to a bull god and making an idol of it. From Aaron's viewpoint it was merely a matter of iconography, representing God by a bull and in that way holding "a festival to *I AM*" (Exod. 32:5). But from the people's viewpoint, as seen from the command to Aaron "make us gods" (v. 1), they were turning to a pantheon of gods, represented by a bull god, to lead them. They follow up this blasphemy and idolatry with an orgy in compliance with Canaanite fertility rites.

A dialogue between God and Moses ensues. The Lord responds with plan A: to destroy the corrupt nation of Israel as he had the corrupt world in the Flood³⁸ and to begin a new nation from Moses' descendants. But Moses pleads against this plan. First, the nations will not understand God's action; they will see the exodus as an evidence of God's wrath, not his grace. God will go down in history as an angry, vengeful God rather than as the God of salvation. Second, this plan calls into question God's faithfulness to the covenant made to the patriarchs, and the Lord must keep his promise. *I AM* relents.

This scene encapsulates the interaction between God and humanity. Who is the hero? At first glance Moses looks like the hero, whose compassion and humility cause God to turn back from his wrath. But given what we know about God in the narrative so far, it seems more reasonable to understand the passage as God's orchestration to bring the best out of Moses. He offers Moses a chance at glory, an opportunity to replace Abraham as the father of faith in history, but Moses, with exemplary humility, turns down the offer. God relents because Moses proves to be a person utterly concerned with God's reputation, not his own. Therefore, the scene juxtaposes the worst of humanity, soiled in idolatry and sexual orgy, with the best of humanity embodied in the character of Moses. Perhaps the question of how a holy God can live among a sinful people is partially answered by the reality that God can sculpt a person like Moses.

B. Setting 2 and Dialogue (32:15–33:3)

After assuaging God's wrath, when Moses comes down off the mountain and sees the reality of Israel for himself, he becomes furious. He shatters the stone

tablets, powerfully picturing the broken covenant. He burns the gold calf—probably a wooden figure with gold overlay, grinds its gold into powder and sprinkles it into water, and forces the Israelites to drink their sin as a sign that they would bear it (cf. Num. 5:11–28). Aaron’s lame excuse that the people made him do it and that before he knew what happened there stood the calf foreshadows the failure of his priesthood from its inception. Moses asks for volunteers, shouting, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.” His own tribe, the Levites, distinguish themselves as the tribe of faith by rallying to Moses. Moses commands the Levites to cut off the sinners, killing fornicators and idolaters alike. Moses realizes, however, that although the rebellion has been quelled, this bloodletting is insufficient to atone for the enormity of the people’s sin. In plan B he asks that as a substitute for the people his name be blotted out of the “book” that registers God’s people (cf. Ps. 56:8; Isa. 4:3; Mal. 3:16; cf. Rom. 9:3). But Moses, unlike Christ, cannot make atonement. The ones who sinned will be blotted out of the “book,” and *I AM* will strike them with a plague.

The question of how God can dwell with the people remains. A third alternative, what we may call plan C, is for God to dwell outside the camp of the people in a tent and send his angel to go with them to the land. This is an ideal alternative for many sinful people. God’s presence and his demands for ethical living are rather tedious and inconvenient. How much better, on the one hand, for God to be nicely out of the way, “watching us from a distance,” without exacting his rather tedious and inconvenient standards of holiness, while, on the other hand, being easily accessible in times of trouble. A God who is always with us requires a radical change in our lifestyle and dramatic shift in our value systems. For many, such a God is almost more trouble than he is worth. The scene draws to conclusion with God striking the people with a plague to accompany the Levites’ sword. But the question remains, Will Moses accept plan C, the sinner’s ideal solution and easy way out?

C. Setting 3 and Dialogue (33:4–21)

One might think that the Israelites would have leapt at this opportunity to receive their inheritance in the land without the threat of God’s presence. But instead they stripped themselves of their ornamentation and mourned God’s loss as at a funeral. Had they accepted plan C, they would no longer experience intimacy with God, which was the whole point of their exodus. But the problem remains.

In this setting Moses confronts God apparently in a simpler and provisional Tent of Meeting: “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people” (Exod. 33:12–13). In this speech Moses makes two requests. He asks for an assurance of God’s presence because he needs this reassurance to continue to lead the people. He also asks to know God — a profound request. What is God really like? What is his character, his nature? The Lord responds to the first request, acceding to Moses’ plea to stay with the people.

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory” (i.e., that which gives him honor and respect). The Lord’s reply, plan D, is astounding. His social “weight” is in all his goodness, which proclaims his mercy and compassion. This demands explanation.

D. Setting 4 and Dialogue (34:1–28)

In the final scene, a solitary Moses is found on a mountain with two tablets, waiting for God to renew the covenant. *I AM* descends in a cloud with his hand covering the rock where Moses is so that Moses can only see his back—just a small portion of what he is really.³⁹ God proclaims “I AM, I AM, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (Exod. 34:6–7).

In other words, plan D, depends on Israel’s repentance and *I AM*’s five benevolent attributes toward those who love him (i.e., those who show themselves loyal [Deut. 6:5]) by affirming the freedom from condemnation and the healing of character. Ultimately, however, God’s grace, not priests and rituals, makes possible his residence among sinful covenant partners. The covenant relationship rests “upon the unchangeability of the divine nature and not upon the indifferent quality of human performance.”⁴⁰ But those who do not love him, as shown by their rejecting his means of atonement and healing, retain their guilt. Within that new context, on the one hand, *I AM* renews the covenant, modifying with apodictic regulations in light of the further revelation about the

liturgy, promising to again exalt Moses and commanding him to write down these words. The scene on top of the mountain ends with Moses writing the Ten Commandments on the two stone tablets that he had brought with him. In short, in spite of Israel's gross violation, covenant can be renewed in a way appropriate to a new situation through Israel's repentance and God's unchanging and unending grace.

The episode draws to a conclusion with Moses descending the mountain within a fading glory.

IX. DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

We are now better positioned to consider the theme of liturgy on the broad canvas of the whole Bible. The external expressions of worship and the attending presence of God remain a critical concept in the Bible, and its clear exposition is crucial for the church in its understanding of its Lord and his ministries and of the Christian faith.

A. Liturgy before Moses

I AM established a liturgy as early as the Garden of Eden. The omnipresent God expressed his unique care for his covenant partners in the garden, the prototypical temple where the partners coexisted in community and Adam, assisted by Eve, served him as an undefiled priestly couple. After the fall, God instituted the practice of sacrifice, shedding the blood of animals to clothe (physically and spiritually) the two sinners. The practice continued as evidenced by the altars of Abel, Noah, Abraham, and Jacob. Their solitary altars mark the axes between the heavenly and earthly realms, but we are not told how the sites were chosen. By a sacrifice (*zebaḥ*) on the altar (*mizbēaḥ*, lit., “place of sacrificial slaughter”), they approached God. Abel’s altar teaches that God requires the best sacrifice and that it must be anointed with love and devotion — nothing less is acceptable (Gen. 4). Noah’s altar reinforces that notion — only clean animals will appease God’s wrath against sinners (Gen. 8:20). God tested Abraham to see whether he would give the ultimate sacrifice, his own dear son (Gen. 22:1–10). From Abraham’s altar between Ai and Bethel, we learn that the altar serves as a place for worship, for proclamation that the site belongs to *I AM*, and for restoration of fellowship with God after spiritual failure (Gen. 13:4). From Abraham’s altar on Mount Moriah, we learn that *I AM* always provides a sacrifice, more specifically a substitute to shed its blood. God probably locates his temple on this same mountain (2 Chron. 3:1).⁴¹

Jacob first names a site where God appeared as a “temple” (lit., “the house of God”) (Gen. 28:10–22). His rock-pillow and the darkness of the night symbolize the crisis of his life as he flees from Esau’s death camp at Beersheba for what

would prove to be Laban's slave camp at Haran. But then his eyes are opened in a dream. The invisible presence of God becomes visible in angels ascending and descending a staircase with *I AM* probably standing at its top, promising Jacob his presence in exile. Jacob reacts in fear and awe, setting up the stone as a pillar to commemorate the site.⁴² To spiritually closed eyes, the temple site is nothing more than a rocky no-place, but to spiritually opened eyes, the temple links God and man. Paradoxically God is present with Jacob during his exile without liturgy. God's beneficent presence is not limited to the temple, but one must not neglect the temple. When Jacob stops short of returning to his temple at Bethel, while lingering at Shechem, he compromises himself, and his sons behave rashly, inflict death, not life, by their practice of circumcision, and fall into disfavor both with God and the Canaanites (Gen. 34). To survive Jacob radically symbolizes his true identification with *I AM* (Gen. 35:1–5) and returns to God's favor at Bethel (vv. 6–15). From Jacob's example Israel also learns to bring a tenth of all *I AM* gives him.

Liturgy in patriarchal times, like the Genesis cosmogony and God's names (see [chap. 7.III.B](#) and [chap. 13.IV.B](#)), show striking external, not worldview, resemblances to the pagan literature and practices of the ancient Near East. For example, though expressly forbidden in the book of Deuteronomy, Jacob set up a stone pillar (a *stèle*) in the tradition of Canaanite religious practices, to commemorate his encounter with the true God at Bethel. Thus, old symbols are given new meanings. As explained earlier, these similarities are probably due to the incarnation of God's revelation into the world (see [chap. 1](#)).

B. The Mosaic Liturgy

We devoted the bulk of this chapter to the Mosaic liturgy. We supplement that discussion with two further observations. First, the Mosaic liturgy also reflects Israel's pagan surroundings. Biblical Hebrew, originally Canaanite, retains pagan vocabulary. For example, Leviticus 21: 6 refers to offerings as "food of their God." As we have seen, the Book of the Covenant also contains striking agreements in style and substance with the laws and treaties found in other ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

Second, in the Deuteronomistic history, God's residence is marked finally by the permanent presence of his name at the Jerusalem temple, where the ark symbolizes the throne of the invisible God in contrast to his moveable "glory cloud" at the Tent of Meeting and at the Jerusalem temple in Ezekiel. Many

source critics (Moshe Weinfeld, R. E. Clements, Gerhard von Rad) pit the Deuteronomist's name theology against an "old crude idea" of *I AM*'s dwelling in a shrine. "The idea of name as the characteristic form in which Jahweh reveals himself is not in itself anything new—we have only to think of the law of the altar in Exodus 20:24. But what is decidedly new is the assumption of a constant and almost material presence of the name at the shrine."⁴³ According to source critics, the Deuteronomist demythologized the "old crude idea." Instead of thinking of *I AM* as actually dwelling in a shrine, according to them, in the Deuteronomistic history only his name, not his person, dwelt there, and the ark symbolized his invisible presence.

J. Gordon McConville, however, disagrees. First, he finds insight into a "name dwelling" from the Akkadian phrase *shakan shumshu*: "It appears to be an affirmation of ownership of the place where the name is set." Second, Exodus 33:18–22, which seems to be a unified source, unifies glory and name. Third, from a study of so-called J, E, and P, the Psalms, and Chronicles, he finds that the name and ark/glory theologies complement one another. The glory of God is unapproachable and dangerous, but the name of God is something with which his worshipers are permitted to become familiar. Glory is preferred when the context is that of the dramatic, exceptional manifestations of God, but "name" is used in contexts where the kind of revelation of and the people's response is more intimate.⁴⁴

C. Davidic Modifications

According to the Midrash, as Moses gives us five books (Pentateuch), so David gives us five books (the Psalms). The inaccurate correlation — the Psalter was divided into five books in the postexilic period — may, however, insightfully point to the fact that David transformed the Mosaic liturgy into opera. David was Israel's Mozart, a consummate genius. He provides the libretto of his psalms to accompany the ritual in connection with musical scores; elaborates the liturgy's staging in the magnificent temple that he envisioned and his son built; and gave the liturgy a choreography that includes dances and processions. With David, the Mosaic liturgy comes to life, reaching its aesthetic zenith. When the Psalter is read from this perspective, its frequent references to the liturgy jump out of the text.

From the time of Moses' praise at the crossing of the sea, Israel knew that God would lead them to a particular place that he would designate as his

mountain sanctuary in the Sworn Land (Exod. 15:17–26). Moses knew by faith that Israel would become an established kingdom, finally at rest in fulfillment of the patriarchal sworn covenant. For that fulfillment Moses gave regulations in advance for a permanent central sanctuary, its sacrifices, and its sacred personnel, including kings, priests, and prophets. Israel had to wait another four centuries before God brought the covenant promises to fulfillment through his slave David and it became clear that Jerusalem was the place in view.

With the arrival of kingship, there arose two new sacred personnel: the king and the prophet. On the one hand, the charismatic king carries out *I AM*'s command as Israel's military and political leader. Perhaps as the owner of the City of David, he inherited the liturgy of Melchizedek, the priest-king of El Elyon, another name for *I AM*. On the other hand, the prophet stands opposite the king as a representative from the heavenly court of the King to the terrestrial court of the temporal king. Therefore, the prophet authorizes and directs the king. In short, the prophet becomes part of the liturgy: authorizing the king with his sacred anointing; directing and reproving the king with his Spirit-inspired words; and preaching to the masses in the temple.

D. Prophetic Modifications

When Jeroboam rent asunder Israel into two kingdoms, he set up a rival liturgy "of his own choosing" at Bethel and Dan to compete with the Jerusalem liturgy. About a half century later Ahab established Baal worship as the official state religion at Samaria, and a generation later Jehu reestablished the liturgy of Jeroboam. *I AM*'s prophets inveighed against and condemned these false liturgies, and we need not spend more time on them because, although an important part of the religion of Israel, these heresies stand apart from the development of orthodox biblical theology.

More significantly, a century later (ca. 750 BC), Jerusalem increasingly broke the Book of the Covenant, in spite of periodic revivals such as those of Hezekiah and Josiah. As *I AM* waited for the iniquity of the Amorites to become full before handing them over to Joshua's sword and driving them off the land, so also he waited for Israel's sin to ripen and rot before handing the nation over to the Assyrian army that stomped through the pleasant land during the second half of the eighth century, casting one city after another into exile. A century and a half later, Nebuchadnezzar and his army ravished Jerusalem, pillaged the temple, and carried off its sacred objects as plunder and its sacred personnel, including

both the king and the priests, into exile.

The prophets interpreted Israel's exile as the fulfillment of the covenant curses, but they also predicted Israel's salvation with the renewal of the covenant and the liturgy on the basis of the sworn covenant to the patriarchs and to David. Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of God lifting up and departing from the temple just prior to the exile (Ezek. 10:1–22), but he also had visions of Israel's dry bones in exile being revitalized, of their return to the land, and of a reinstitution of the temple and its sacrifices (Ezek. 40–48). Isaiah predicted that Cyrus would authorize the returnees to rebuild their Jerusalem temple (Isa. 44:28). His prophecy was fulfilled probably in 538–537 BC. At the time Cyrus authorized rebuilding the temple, he also returned the articles belonging to the temple of *I AM*, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away and placed in the house of his god (Ezra 1). As soon as they were settled, the returnees rebuilt the altar in 537, reestablished the liturgy as best they could, and began to rebuild the temple in 536 on the foundations of Solomon's temple. But due to political opposition and spiritual laxity, the work ceased in 530 (Ezra 3:7–4:5). Haggai and Zechariah stirred the people to complete the temple in 520. Over a long period of time, this temple was repaired and reconstructed and finally replaced entirely by Herod's magnificent edifice.

Although Ezra the priest was a faithful descendant of Aaron, others, like Eliashib, who was in charge of the storerooms, provided Tobiah the Ammonite with a large room (Neh. 13:4–9). By favoring this spiritual enemy of true Israel and the political enemy of Nehemiah, Eliashib showed the same character of infidelity and spiritual ineptness of the Aaronic priesthood as Aaron and his sons had shown at its inception.

Jacob's departure from his temple at Bethel due to his exile in Aram and his return and halting steps in rededicating that temple (Gen. 28:10–22; 33:18–20; 35:1–15) foreshadow Israel's fortunes during the seventy-year exile in Babylon. Without a temple and altar, the covenant partners lost the intimacy that the liturgy provided, but the faithful did not lose *I AM*'s spiritual presence and protection. They found spiritual fellowship in their lament of their loss and in their confessions of faith in *I AM* and of fidelity to him (Pss. 74, 79–89). They refused to entertain their captors by singing the songs of Zion (Ps. 137) but cried to *I AM* to restore liturgical intimacy (see Pss. 42–43; 120–34) and faced toward Jerusalem when they prayed three times daily (Dan. 6:10). They know that the whole world is destined to be filled with *I AM*'s splendor (Num. 14:21; Ps 72:19; Isa. 6:3; 40:5).

Isaiah's amazing prophecy of the vicarious passion of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Acts 8:32–35) provides an important link between the Old

Testament sacrificial system and Jesus Christ's atoning death.⁴⁵ The Servant offers himself as a guilt offering (*ḥāṣām*), and having made that sacrifice in his death, he rises, ascends, and is glorified, seeing his spiritual offspring after his death — rewards accompanying his resurrection from the dead.

For more on the interpretation of prophecies regarding the future liturgy of the Israel of God, see [chapter 28](#).

E. New Testament Modifications

The sacred sites, objects, seasons, personnel, and institutions under the administration of the old covenant are only types of the true reality (see IV. Liturgy and Ethics above). Christ fulfills the expectation that there will be one in whom God and man merge in perfect union and provide perfect access into the omnipresent God's unique presence and care. The incarnate Son of God fulfills what the temple always was, a place where infinite merges with the finite to give salvation to the faithful. The Truth said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," in reference to his own body (John 2:19–21). Since he ascended to heaven, the covenant people no longer face toward Jerusalem, but pray, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9), and worship in spirit and in truth (i.e., in the Reality) (John 4:23–24). Presently, God's temple is the Spirit-indwelt church, both in its individual members and in collective body (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19, respectively). Natural humanity despises and seeks to destroy this temple, but the new humanity sees the church as an awesome sight — it is nothing less than the house of God! The consummation of the temple theme, for which the people of God have always hoped, lies in heaven, "the Father's house," from which Christ came and to which he returned to prepare a place for his covenant people, whom the Spirit is preparing to dwell in it (John 14:1–4). The Father's house, whose glory exceeds human imagination, has plenty of room to accommodate a multitude too numerous to count (John 14:2; Rev. 7:9).

Frank Thielman notes that the anonymous homily "The Letter to the Hebrews" "presents a sustained argument of exceptional rhetoric sophistication for the eschatological superiority of the Christian message of salvation to the system of atonement described in the Mosaic Law."⁴⁶ The priests made atonement for themselves as well as for the people; thus the various regulations in Leviticus 1:3–7:36. Hebrews 5:3 explains that the priests' need to offer sacrifice for their own sins shows the inferiority of the Aaronic priests to Christ: he is the great and final High Priest who knew no sin. In this way these Old

Testament regulations pointed to their own inadequacies and the need for a greater high priest to come. Christ's priesthood, sacrifice, and intercession supersede the entire Mosaic system for atonement for sin (Heb. 7–10).

Within the heavenly sanctuary Christ the Great High Priest — but now after the unending order of Melchizedek—mediates between the covenant partners, God and his people. By his death outside the camp, he atoned once and for all for the sins of his faithful people. Bearing his people upon his heart, he prays for them, sustains their justification, and gives them guidance. In the Communion supper, they spiritually feed on his flesh and blood, enjoying fellowship together. Through his death and the gift of his Spirit, he clothes his people in robes of righteousness that separate them from the world. In the waters of baptism, they are inaugurated into the fellowship of his people and find cleansing from the world's defilement.

Moses' glory was great but fading, to be replaced by the unfading glory of the new covenant in Christ (2 Cor. 3:7–11). Moses wore a veil because of the people's fear and the dullness of their minds (2 Cor. 3:12–14),⁴⁷ but Paul shares a covenant in which all may experience what Moses enjoyed — an unveiled, face-to-face encounter with God (2 Cor. 3:15–18).⁴⁸

Beside these typical fulfillments, the New Testament changes other aspects of Israel's liturgy while retaining spiritual continuity. The *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* summarizes these changes and continuities:

Baptism (Matt. 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26–29; 1 Cor. 11:23–26) replace circumcision (Gal. 2:3–5; 6:12–16) and Passover (1 Cor. 5:7–8). Likewise, the Jewish festal calendar no longer binds believers (Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16), and notions of ceremonial defilement and purification, imposed by God to enforce Old Testament awareness that some behaviors, conditions, and exposures cut one off from God, cease to apply directly (Mark 7:19; 1 Tim. 4:3–4). Even the Sabbath has been renewed and is now observed on the first day of the week, the day of Jesus' resurrection, also referred to as “the Lord's day” (Rev 1:10). These changes were at first momentous, but the pattern of praise, thanksgiving, desire, trust, purity, and service, which together comprise and embody true worship, continues unchanged to this day.⁴⁹

In sum, Jesus fulfilled the liturgical (or ceremonial) parts of the law, but he wants *us* to fulfill the moral parts of the law. We are to be perfect like our Father (Matt. 5:48). Jesus never broke the moral law; he only broke traditions that the Pharisees had *added* to the Old Testament.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does Israel's liturgy promote your communion with God in the church community?

1. L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 53.
2. G. H. Davies, "Tabernacle," in *IDB*, ed. G. A. Buttrick *et al.* (New York: Abingdon, 1962); J. Palmer ("Exodus and the Biblical Theology of the Tabernacle," in *Heaven on Earth*, T. D. Alexander and S. J. Gathercole, eds. [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004], 19) cites approvingly Brevard S. Childs (*The Book of Exodus*, OTL [Louisville: Westminster, 1974], 540): "What happened at Sinai is continued in the Tabernacle."
3. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 392.
4. F. H. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 40–45.
5. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:15.
6. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:98.
7. Kurt Goldammer, *Die Formenwelt des Religiösen* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1960); cf. Kurt Goldammer and Kurt Wessel, *Kultsymbolik des Protestantismus* (Stuttgart: A. Heirsemann, 1960).
8. Martin J. Buss, "The Meaning of 'Cult' and the Interpretation of the Old Testament," *JBR* 32 (1964): 317.
9. Buss, "The Meaning of 'Cult,'" 321. Here is Hegel's definition: "This is the general definition of the cultus: it is the eternal relationship, the eternal process of knowing in which the subject posits itself as identical with its essence." Moreover, according to Hegel, in that moment of consciousness, the eternal spirit is reunited with itself. See Georg W. H. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 1, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1962), 188–94, esp. 193.
10. Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 118.

[11.](#) The details for the consecration of the priests in Exod. 29 differ somewhat from their execution in Lev. 8. Jacob Milgrom, in *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 495, explains: “The text here is concerned with the procedural order, whereas the comparable verses of Exodus 29 are a random inventory of the materials required without even describing their function.” Milgrom documents that this difference between the items in an inventory text and the order in the ritual text “is standard scribal style in the Ancient Near East.”

[12.](#) *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, ed. Richard L. Pratt Jr. *et al.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 99–100.

[13.](#) Paul A. Wright, “Exodus 1–24 (A Canonical Study)” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Vienna, Austria, March 1993).

[14.](#) For retaining holiness in the church, see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 291–301.

[15.](#) Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 281.

[16.](#) Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Catechism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1940): cited in *ibid.*

[17.](#) Hebrew *tabnît* probably refers to a pattern, in this case, of God’s heavenly dwelling.

[18.](#) This theology is similar to Plato’s notion of the world as but a shadow of reality.

[19.](#) Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

[20.](#) So Craig R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament*, CBQMS 22 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989), 7, cited approvingly by Palmer (“Exodus and the Biblical Theology of the Tabernacle,” 12–15).

[21.](#) Jonathan Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us? How It Shaped the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 2005), 67.

[22.](#) Dismountable tabernacles for ritual and royal purposes have been attested from the texts and/or artifacts from well before and at the time of Moses. Moreover, Israel’s liturgy has many analogues with other ancient Near Eastern religions at these times. These analogues show that Israel’s liturgy by comparison was minimal and modest. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 276–83.

[23.](#) E. Gerstenberger, *TLOT*, s.v. “*ēd*,” 2:844.

[24.](#) The ark compares with the contemporary shrine and funerary furniture of

King Tutankhamun (ca. 1350 BC), which, along with the Nimrud and Samaria ivories from a later period, depict extreme reverence by facing winged guardians shielding the sacred place.

[25.](#) More strictly speaking, theologians refer to *kairos* as the decisive moment of experiencing the transcendent within regular time, as when the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah while he attended the regular priestly duties (Luke 1:8–12).

[26.](#) Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 176.

[27.](#) Richard E. Averbeck, *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “*šlâ*,” 3:410.

[28.](#) Ibid., s.v. “*šhelem*,” 4:135.

[29.](#) Ibid., 4:139.

[30.](#) Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

[31.](#) Richard E. Averbeck, *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “*ḥattā’t*,” 2:94.

[32.](#) Ibid., 1:557–65, esp. 558–61.

[33.](#) For the work of Jesus Christ in providing righteousness for his people, see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 353–56.

[34.](#) In an overfed society such as North America, we fail to understand what fat represents to poor agricultural societies: luxury. It is a reflection of our overindulgence that we find fat to be repulsive.

[35.](#) M. Douglas (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966]) argues that the purity laws had the sociological purpose of helping Israel grasp the unity and perfection of God’s creation, a worldview that set them apart from their neighbors.

[36.](#) House, *Old Testament Theology*, 145.

[37.](#) R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34*, JSOTSup 22 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1983). See also Deut. 9:11–21; 1 Kings 12:28; Ps. 106:19–23; Ezek. 20:8–9; Acts 7:41.

[38.](#) Hebrew *śāḥat*, the word to describe the way people corrupted the earth prior to the flood (Gen. 6:12).

[39.](#) The apparent contradiction between statements that Moses spoke with God face-to-face (Deut. 5:4; 34:10; cf. Gen. 32:30 [31]) and Exod. 33:20, 23, which says that seeing God would lead to death can be resolved by noting that Num. 12:8 says that Moses saw “the form of *I AM*” (Heb. *tēmūnâ*), “a figure, manifestation of “*I AM*” (*HALOT*, s.v. “*tēmūnâ*,” 4:1746). The situation is analogous to the difference between persons seeing each other in virtual reality versus reality. The former — a theophany — is a possibility without its leading to death; the latter is an impossibility without its leading to death.

[40.](#) Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:69.

[41.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 305.

[42.](#) See discussion of this passage under “Anachrony” in [chap. 5](#).

[43.](#) Von Rad thinks P’s glory theology was an advance over name theology, for now the tabernacle becomes “the place on earth where, for the time being, the appearance of Yahweh’s glory meets with his people,” but Weinfeld thinks the “glory” imagery “derives from ancient traditions concerning divine manifestations.” Both, however, pit D’s name theology against P’s glory theology. See Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, trans. David M. G. Stalker (SBT 9; London: SCM Press, 1963), 138.

[44.](#) J. Gordon McConville, “God Name and God’s Glory,” *TynBul* 30 (1979): 156–57; J. Gordon McConville and J. G. Millar, *Time and Place in Deuteronomy*, JSOTSup 179 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 112–13.

[45.](#) See Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 71–74, 197–206.

[46.](#) Ibid., 585; see 585–611.

[47.](#) Scott. J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul’s Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14–3:3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 223–25.

[48.](#) House, *Old Testament Theology*, 124.

[49.](#) *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, 175.

Chapter 17

THE GIFT OF *I AM*: DEUTERONOMY

It is easy to judge of its [the Law] perfection by simply reading it; for we see that it has provided for all things with so great wisdom, equity and judgment, that the most ancient legislators, Greek and Roman, have had some knowledge of it, have borrowed from it their own principal law.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 9.620

I. INTRODUCTION

Deuteronomy is the most important book in the Old Testament for writing an Old Testament theology.¹ J. Gordon McConville calls it “one of the great theological documents of the Bible, or of any time.”² This chapter is titled “The Gift of *I AM*” because the book of Deuteronomy expresses most fully God’s essence and character.³ Moreover, as McConville says, “It ... goes to the heart of the great issues of the relationship between God and human beings.”⁴

Deuteronomy has had greater consequences for human history than any other single book. Its continuing influence is one of the major forces shaping the future of humanity. The regulations of *I AM*s covenants are the first to establish universal education and health for all members of a nation and fixes the only welfare system that was in existence in ancient times.

Its importance can be inferred from its cardinal role in the Primary History (see [chap. 8](#)) and its foundational role in the Deuteronomistic history (see [chap. 2](#)). That history calls upon the exiles to evaluate their failure to keep covenant with *I AM*. Each book in the Deuteronomistic history has its own individuality and character, but Deuteronomy informs them systemically in language and worldview, giving rise to the academic title for this collection of books as the Deuteronomistic history. The summaries at the seams of this history (e.g., those of Samuel [1 Sam. 12] and the narrator’s evaluation [2 Kings 17]) resemble the parenetic speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy. Gerhard von Rad says, “We call these histories Deuteronomistic because they take as normative for their judgment of the past certain standards laid down either exclusively or chiefly in Deuteronomy.”⁵

In addition, Deuteronomy provides the theological grist for the later (i.e., writing) prophets’ interpretation of Israel’s history in both their oracles of doom and of salvation. Its impact is especially noteworthy on the preaching of Jeremiah.⁶ The classical prophets are the branches that spring from its root.

Other features of the book also attest its importance. It first formulates the greatest command of all Scripture: to love God (Matt. 22:34–40). Moreover, it establishes a constitutional monarchy. Upon the anticipated accession of Israel’s king to the throne, the king is to make a copy of this book under the tutelage of the priests and thereafter read it daily. Moreover, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy

more often than any other book, suggesting its effect on shaping his theology. He resisted Satan's three temptations by three quotations from this book (Luke 4:1–13), inferring the book's potential spiritual power. The New Testament refers to Deuteronomy more than fifty times, a number exceeded only by Psalms and Isaiah.

Amazingly, however, I do not recall hearing one sermon on this book over my seventy years of attending church services. Perhaps its misunderstood form, content, structure, and subject, its boringly prosaic style, and its apparent irrelevance in matters such as dietary laws scare preachers off. In addition, the false theology that the substance of the Law has been done away—which is not the same as saying that administration by the Law has been abrogated—occulted this book for many Christians. A friend of mine wrote a commentary on the book and entitled it *The Gospel of Love*. To his dismay, and without his knowledge, the publisher changed the title to *The Gospel of Law*! This chapter aims to recoup this great theological treatise for the church by removing these regnant misunderstandings.

II. CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

The book of Deuteronomy is preached law, because Moses is at the same time both a prophet and a legislator. The book's hortatory addresses and legal stipulations are constructed as a chiasm as the following outline shows:⁷

- A Narrator's outer frame: Introduction (1:1–5)
- B Moses' first address: A mixture of motivations with a call for witnesses (1:6–4:40)
- C Narrator's inner frame break (4:41–5:1a)
- D Pivot: Moses' second address (5:1–28:68)
 - 1 Covenant at Horeb (5:1b –36)
 - 2 Basic stipulation of covenant renewal (6:1–11:25)
 - 3 Ebal-Gerizim frame break (11:26–32)
 - 4 Pivot: Statutes and ordinances for Israel's worship and conduct (12:1–26:15)
 - a Laws of worship/consecration (12:1–16:17)
 - b Laws of leaders (16:18–18:22)
 - c Laws of righteous conduct (19:1–21:21)
 - d Laws of purity (21:22–25:19)
 - e Laws of offerings and tithes (26:1–15)
 - 3' Ebal-Gerizim frame break (27:1–28:68)
- C' Narrator's inner frame break (29:1–2a [28:69–29:1a])
- B' Moses' third address: A mixture of motivations with a call for witnesses (29:1 [28:69] –30:20)
- A' Narrator's outer frame: Conclusion (31:1–34:12)

An outer narrative frame (A/A') introduces Moses' addresses and draws the book to conclusion, and an inner narrative frame calling, among other things, for witnesses (C/C') isolates Moses' second address, the book's pivot (D), which sets forth in detail the covenant stipulations. His first and third addresses (B/B') frame that pivot with motivations to obey the stipulations. The Ebal-Gerizim frame, calling upon Israel to proclaim the covenant's blessings and curses, frames the statutes and ordinances, the bulk of the book, and separates those

detailed regulations from the basic stipulation: to love *I AM* from the heart.

A. Narrator's Outer Frame: Introduction (1:1–5)

Moses mediated at Sinai the original covenant between *I AM* and Israel; now forty years later on the plains of Moab, he speaks (Deut. 1:1) “all that *I AM* commanded him” (v. 3) and *expounds* and *clarifies* (*b^cr*, Piel)⁸ it. In this way the narrator establishes that Moses' speech is human (v. 1), inspired (v. 3), and clear (v. 5).⁹ These valedictory addresses by Moses that reteach and supplement the Law are especially needed for the new generation poised to enter the Land.¹⁰

B. Moses' First Address of Mixed Motivations with a Call for Witnesses (1:6–4:40)

Moses' first address consists of recollections of the past salvation history and reflections on its future.¹¹ The former functions as a motivating historical prologue, recounting Israel's salvation from Mount Sinai in Horeb to the Plains of Moab (Deut. 1:6–3:29; cf. Numbers; see [chap. 15](#) above). Looking to the future, Moses calls upon Israel to heed the decrees and laws he is about to teach them in order that they might both take and inherit the Land. The distinction between recounting and reflection can be seen in his shifting style from indirect discourse (Deut. 1–3) to direct discourse (Deut. 4). His introduction to his new commandments and their canonical status (4:1–2) match the conclusion to hold on to the commands, especially to love God, at the end of his third address (30:20). His call to heaven and earth to bear witness are mirror images (4:26–27; 30:19–20), and his offer of salvation upon repentance (4:25–31) is reflected in his prophesied history of Israel that will follow the pattern of exile, repentance, and restoration (30:1–10). Probably 4:1–30:20 — apart from the narrator's inner frame breaks — constitutes the Book of the Law that is laid up beside the ark and energizes Josiah's reform in 622 BC.

The founder of Israel motivates the children born of the fathers who died in the wilderness¹² to obey the covenant stipulations, using mixed motivations. For example, he recites their history with the purpose of encouraging them to keep covenant, and he argues that there is no god like *I AM* and no divine election like that of Israel (Deut. 4:1–40).

Paul House calls attention to two significant canonical details: reflections upon Israel's history and interpretation of Israel's history by its covenants. He says, "Moses' review of Israel's past begins the process of biblical books reflecting [not merely amassing data] on previous material." Second, "Moses begins a canon-long practice of assessing Israel's history by covenant standards."¹³

C. Narrator's Inner Frame Break (4:41–5:1a)

The narrator breaks up Moses' first two addresses by looking back to Moses' allotting the three cities of refuge in Transjordan (Deut. 4:41–43) and by looking ahead to the second address that Moses delivers in Transjordan (4:44–5:1a). The narrative preamble in 4:44–45 functions as a formal introduction to the Second Address.¹⁴ Israel stands poised to possess the Land, but "before euphoria can be converted into a bold Jordan crossing,"¹⁵ Israel first must renew covenant with supplementary modifications pertinent to the Land and Joshua must be prepared to succeed Moses (1:38; 3:28; 31:2–3, 7–8).

D. Moses' Second Address (5:1–28:68)

As in all his speeches and in the narrator's inner frames, Moses first recollects the covenant at the beginning of their journey from Horeb/Sinai and then reflects upon the covenant renewal at the end of that journey in Moab.

1. Covenant at Horeb (5:1b - 36)

Moses recollects both the Ten Commandments, which *I AM* himself thundered, and his appointment by *I AM* to mediate the rest of the covenant stipulations (Deut. 5). He then reflects upon Israel's future according to whether they obey or disobey his commands (6:1–26:19). We already noted his change of motivation for keeping the Sabbath from an appeal to the order of creation to an appeal to the order of redemption (see [chap. 15](#) above), a shift in keeping with the covenant renewal's emphasis on *I AM*'s salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*).

Moses' ambiguous remark in Deuteronomy 5:3 that *I AM* did not make the covenant at Horeb with the fathers but with the present generation differentiates

the patriarchs from the founding generation of the nation. His other ambiguous remark that the covenant is made “with us, each one of us, these present today, all of us who are living” underscores that the covenant at Horeb is made with the founding generation, who came up out of Egypt and entered the Land, and who stand as representatives of all Israel.

2. Basic Stipulation: Love *I AM* (6:1 -11:32)

Like the analogous Hittite suzerainty treaties, the stipulations consist of the basic stipulation to love the king (Deut. 6:1–11:25) and specific statutes and ordinances that flow from that command (12:1–26:15).¹⁶ Five concepts develop the basic stipulation: motivations for keeping the commandments (6:1–3), the basic stipulation (6:4–5), the propagation of the commandments spanning the generations (6:6–9), the protection of the commandments against spiritual attacks (6:10–10:22), and concluding exhortations for commitment to *I AM* (11:1–32).

a. Motivations (6:1–3)

By keeping *I AM*’s command, Israel will “fear *I AM*” (i.e., enjoy a relationship with him by obedience to his word out of awe for his person), and enjoy long life and prosperity in the Land (Deut. 6:1–3). The theologically loaded phrase “the fear of *I AM*,” like “heaven and earth” in Genesis 1:1, must be studied as a unified compound, not as separate words (see [chap. 7.III.A](#)). The phrase entails three notions at one and the same time. First, it entails a cognitive aspect; namely, *I AM*’s objective revelation in what the Israel of God recognized as Holy Scripture. In Psalm 19:7–9 “fear of *I AM*” is a synonym for “law of *I AM*” “statutes of *I AM*” “precepts of *I AM*” “commands of *I AM*” and “ordinances of *I AM*” Similarly, the sage says, “If you accept my words ... you will understand the fear of *I AM*” (Prov. 2:1–5). Second, it entails a subjective humility. Proverbs 22:4, properly translated, makes the point: “humility, the fear of *I AM* sort.”¹⁷ Third, the phrase “the fear of *I AM*” entails visceral fear or awe for *I AM* because he holds his subjects’ life and death in his hands (cf. Exod. 14:21). In other words, it entails faith that *I AM* says what he means and means what he says. One can trust that sort of God. The promises of long life and prosperity express a truth, but not the whole truth, about the covenant relationship. God’s presence also entails discipline (cf. Deut. 8:1–4) and mystery

(Job 38–41).

b. Basic Stipulation (6:4–5)

Scholars debate the meaning of the famous *Šema*^c that introduces the command: “Hear [Heb. *šema*^c], O Israel: *I AM* our God, *I AM* is one [*ʾehad*]” (Deut. 6:4).¹⁸ J. Gerald Janzen suggests that “one” has the sense of “integrity” — that is, God’s action cannot be turned or deflected from its goal; God is unchangeable in his intention to bless the patriarchs in connection with Israel’s obedience to the covenant stipulations.¹⁹ That notion is true, but one would expect *tammîm*, not *ʾehad* to express it. More probably the confession aims to refute the notion that the tribes worship different manifestations of *I AM*. There is not an *I AM* represented by a bull at Jeroboam’s northern sanctuary and another *I AM* represented in the Jerusalem temple. This sense is underscored by “our.” Israel is one people with one God under the tutelage of one Torah.

“And so you [Israel] shall love *I AM*“ (*wʾāhabtā*²⁰ *ʾet* YHWH) is at one and the same time the language of kingdom law,²¹ of obedience (i.e., it can be commanded; cf. Deut. 11:1, 13, 22), and of spiritual commitment. From the archives of El Amarna (ca. 1350 BC) comes the political statement of a ruler to a vassal: “May my brother preserve love toward me ten times more than did his father, and we will go on loving my brother fervently” (29:166). A vassal treaty of the Assyrian emperor Ashurbanipal (675 BC), reads: “You will love Ashurbanipal as yourselves.” “To love” describes the commitment of kings to one another. Though legal language that can be commanded, it is also the language of emotion and spiritual commitment. Hillers comments: “ ‘Love Yahweh your God,’ like much of the rest of this terminology, words like ‘brother,’ ‘father,’ ‘with your whole heart,’ express a desire ... to effect sincere affection and heartfelt loyalty as bonds of peace.” In other words, the legal concept shapes the emotional term.²² The qualifier “with all your heart [*lēbab*, i.e., “intention”], soul [*nepeš*, i.e., “passion”], and total being [*mʿōd*, lit., “muchness]” underscores the total, personal, spiritual commitment.²³ Richard Niebuhr draws the conclusion: “The key to the personality of Jesus was his single-eyed devotion to God.”²⁴

c. Propagation of the Commandment Spanning the Generations (6:6–9)

Parents, with the commandments firmly fixed in an exemplary fashion upon their own hearts, are to teach them diligently (*sinnen*, lit., “with a bite”), universally (when at home or on the road), constantly (when you retire and get up),²⁵ prominently (as constant reminders), and relevantly. In other words, much effort is needed to pass on covenant faith from generation to generation.

d. Protection of the Commandments (6:10–10:22)

Three spiritual enemies attack Israel’s obedience to the Law of *I AM*: self-confidence/autonomy (Deut. 6:10–12), Canaanite idolatry (vv. 13–19), and generation gaps (vv. 20–25). With regard to the latter, *I AM* instructs parents to teach their children about his grace so that they can understand the purpose of the stipulations. Later on Moses morphs the threat of self-confidence to the threat of self-righteousness.

(1) Safeguards against the Canaanites (7:1–26)

To eliminate the threat of the Canaanites’ spiritual contagion, Israel must annihilate them (Deut. 7:1–5) and not fear them (vv. 17–26). Between this inclusio of commands, Moses motivates Israel to live in covenant with *I AM* by looking both back and ahead. God elected Israel to be his treasured possession and shows he keeps covenant by protecting them thus far (vv. 6–19). He looks ahead to God’s continued covenant faithfulness to keep his promises, but also his threatened curses, in the Land (vv. 12–26).

(2) Safeguards against Autonomy/Self-Confidence (8:1–20)

After an initial command to obey *I AM* in order to enjoy covenant blessings, Moses looks back upon the Israelites’ salvation history, recollecting that *I AM* made Israel dependent upon him by feeding them manna in the wilderness. He did so to discipline his nation to a life of dependence upon and obedience to him (Deut. 8:2–5). Looking ahead, Moses reflects on the future temptation to pride and self-reliance by crediting *I AM*’s love for them and their wealth to their own achievements rather than to God’s election of them and his covenant fidelity to his elect (vv. 6–18). To offset this threat, Israel must constantly praise *I AM* for his blessings (v. 10) and remember, not forget, *I AM*’s miraculous salvation history on the nation’s behalf to fulfill his sworn covenants (vv. 11–18). Moses concludes with a warning: if Israel forgets, they too will be destroyed just as surely as *I AM* will destroy the Canaanites (vv. 19–20).

(3) Safeguards against the Threat of Self-Righteousness (9:1–10:22)

Closely related to the danger of the Israelites' thinking that their own strength achieved their settlement in the Land is the temptation to think that their own righteousness, not God's goodness, earned them the Land. In truth, however, Israel takes possession of the Land because of God's presence with them, because of the Canaanites' sin that merits the judgment of *I AM*, and because of God's faithfulness to the ancestors — not because of Israel's righteousness (Deut. 9:1–5). Again, Moses argues his case by first looking back, recollecting Israel's past sins: their golden calf at Mount Horeb (vv. 6–17) and their rebellion and disobedience at Taberah, Massah, Kibroth Hattaavah, and Kadesh Barnea. Were it not for Moses' fasting and prayer at Horeb, *I AM* would have wiped them out (vv. 22–29). Instead, *I AM* renews the Ten Commandments and recommissions Moses to lead Israel (10:1–11). Looking ahead, Moses tells the stiff-necked Israelites that to live righteously and so retain the Land (see 6:25), they must circumcise their hearts to love their awesome God (10:12–22).

Moses' command "Circumcise your hearts" (Deut. 10:16; cf. 30:6; Jer. 4:4) is an effective answer for those who imagine that the Old Testament teaches merely a religion of outward form. Circumcision is a symbol of an inward grace. Apart from this, as Paul argues, circumcision is of no saving significance. True circumcision is of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter (Rom. 2:29). An adult Israelite, whose parents had circumcised him as an infant to bring him into the covenant relationship, fulfills their hope by allowing the Law as preached by Moses to penetrate his heart. But that condition presumes the heart is already circumcised. The first cause of every good and perfect gift is God's sovereign grace.

e. Concluding Exhortations for Commitment to *I AM* (11:1–25)

Moses concludes the basic stipulation by calling upon Israel's future generations in the Land to give their heartfelt commitment to *I AM*. He recollects that this founding generation, not their children, experienced God's judgment on Egypt and on Israel in the desert (Deut. 11:1–7), and he reflects upon their future in the Land. Israel will experience covenant blessings and avoid the corresponding curses by keeping religious affection for *I AM*. To assist them, *I AM*, as a loving Father, will discipline Israel by giving rain or withholding it, and Israel's parents must faithfully and constantly teach their children the

commandments by looking back upon their great history and by looking ahead in light of the covenant blessings and curses.

3. Ebal-Gerizim Frame Break (11:26–32)

The call to proclaim the covenant blessings from verdant Mount Gerizim and its curses from bald Mount Ebal separates the basic stipulation to love I AM from the detailed stipulations that give that command definition. Similarly, one may instruct a driver to “drive carefully,” but that basic command needs specific directions.

4. Statutes and Ordinances for Israel’s Worship and Conduct (12:1 -26:15)

The rule of God — what the Bible is all about — is now spelled out in detail: “These are the decrees (*ḥuqqîm*) and laws (*mišpāṭîm*) you must be careful to follow in the land that I AM, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess” introduces the detailed stipulations that regulate Israel’s worship and conduct (Deut. 12:1). We first categorize the laws sequentially and then reflect upon them more topically and theologically.

- I. Laws of Worship/Consecration (12:1–16:17)
 - A. One Place of Sacrifice and Penalty for Idolatry ([chaps. 12–13](#))
 - B. Laws of Cleanness: Improper Mourning; Clean and Unclean Foods (14:1–21)
 - C. Laws of Giving (14:22–16:17)
 - 1. Laws of Tithing (14:22–29)
 - 2. Laws of Canceling Debt and Generosity to Poor (15:1–18)
 - 3. Law Concerning Firstborn Animals (15:19–22)
 - 4. Laws of Festivals: Passover, Feast of Weeks, Tabernacles (16:17)
- II. Laws of Conduct for the Righteous Nation (16:18–26:15)
 - A. Laws of Leaders (16:18–18:22)
 - 1. Laws of Judges and Officers in the Gate; No Idols (16:18–17:13)
 - 2. Laws for the King (17:14–20)
 - 3. Laws of Portions for Priests and Levites (18:1–8)
 - 4. Laws of Prophets (18:9–22)
 - B. Laws of Righteous Conduct (19:1–21:21)

1. Cities of Refuge (19:1–13)
2. Property Boundaries (19:14)
3. Laws Concerning Witnesses (19:15–21)
4. Laws of Warfare (20:1–19)
5. Laws Concerning Unsolved Murder (21:1–9)
6. Laws Concerning Female Captives (21:10–14)
7. Laws Concerning Inheritance Rights (21:15–17)
8. Laws Concerning Rebellious Sons (21:18–21:21)
- C. Laws of Purity (Protecting Sanctity of God’s Kingdom) ([chaps. 21–25](#))
 1. Miscellaneous Laws (21:22–22:12)
 2. Laws of Sexual Morality (22:13–30)
 3. Laws Concerning Those Excluded from the Congregation (23:1–8)
 4. Laws Concerning Cleanliness of the Camp Site (23:9–14)
 5. Miscellaneous Laws (23:15–24)
 6. Laws Concerning Divorce (24:1–4)
 7. Miscellaneous Laws (24:5–25:4)
 8. Laws of Levirate Marriage (25:5–10)
 9. Miscellaneous Laws (25:11–16)
 10. Law to Destroy Amalekites (25:17–19)
- D. Laws of Offerings and Tithes (26:1–15)

The laws are meant for “as long as you live in the land” (Deut. 12:1), whose boundaries are demarcated in 1:7 and 7:1. The Land has a sacramental value: a source of material well-being (8:7–9) and a discipline to observe the covenant. Enjoyment of the land depends on Israel’s moral behavior (4:25–27; 6:18; 8:1; 11:8–32; 28:20–21, 24, 33, 36, 42, 51, 64). The threat of losing possession of the Land is the fundamental punishment to motivate Israel not to go after other gods.

The collection of laws mixes material and religious commands, allowing no divorce between secular and sacred, between holy and profane. They cover a wide range of subjects, including the organization of worship, the administration of justice, and even the composition of Israel’s army and its method of waging war. In other words, all of life is lived under God’s rule. Nevertheless, in keeping with the basic stipulation to love God, the liturgy comes first. Harold M. Wiener contends that two principles govern the arrangement of material. “First, the lawgiver is dominated by his religious interest” and “secondly, he is guided in his arrangement by the association of ideas.”²⁶ Moreover, the liturgy assists Israel to fear God, and with rejoicing Israel brings a tithe to him (14:28–29).

Because the laws are conceptually somewhat mixed, their categorization into

laws of worship/consecration (12:1–16:17), laws for leaders (16:18–18:22), laws of righteous conduct (19:1–21:21), laws of purity (21:22–25:19), and laws of offerings and tithes (26:1–15) is somewhat arbitrary. In truth the laws morph into one another.

a. Laws of Worship/Consecration (12:1–16:17)

Liturgy plays a prominent role in actualizing Israel's inward commitment to *I AM* (Deut. 12:1–16:17). The first liturgical obligation in Deuteronomy (12:1–3) stipulates that Israel destroy the Canaanite cultic sites; a later stipulation obliges Israel to instigate a holy war to liquidate the Canaanite nations (20:16–18). *I AM*'s worship is unique and not to be patterned after the pagan nations (12:4, 29–31; 20:16–18) or according to Israel's own ideas (12:8, 13) to ward off the encroachment of the deplorable Canaanite practices such as child sacrifice (12:29–31). The stipulation that the Israelites not cut themselves for the dead, as the pagans probably did in their ancestor worship and mourning rituals (14:1), also aims to set them apart from the Canaanite contagion.

The second stipulation (Deut. 12:5) calls Israel to worship at a central sanctuary. The majority of scholars since Wilhelm de Wette who accept the dictates of historical criticism (see [chap. 2](#)) interpret the central sanctuary as referring exclusively to the temple in Jerusalem at the time of Josiah (see 2 Kings 22–23).²⁷ They associate the Deuteronomic ideology of “one God, one people, one cult” as an invention to validate the religious and political policies of the Jerusalem court during the reign of Josiah. Philip R. Davies draws the conclusion that an impartial witness must judge 2 Kings 22–23 a “pious legend, barely possible, but highly improbable.”²⁸ Scholars who reject the dictates of historical criticism interpret this call as referring to an exclusive, not a sole, sanctuary, which proves to be the case in a succession of sanctuaries until David locates the ark and its altar in Jerusalem (Exod. 20:22–26; 2 Sam. 6).²⁹ Bergen rejects the pious fraud theory on the basis of narratology: “If the narrative of 2 Kings 22 is deemed ‘true,’ then the same degree/kind of truth must be accorded to the writing even reported in Deut. 31:26 (‘Moses wrote this law in a book to the very end.’)”³⁰ This is so because the Deuteronomist, who carries the same authority throughout his history, narrates both the writing of the book by Moses and its discovery at least a half millennium later. In other words, exegesis, not eisegesis, demands that Deuteronomy 12 and 2 Kings 22 be read in a harmonistic way.

Israel's King specifies the location of the ark (i.e., his footstool) and his place

of worship (Deut. 12:5, 11, 14; 16:2, 15, 16) as a safeguard against everyone doing as he sees fit. Worship will be centralized in time of peace (12:8–11). To this place (i.e., *I AM*'s capital) Israel brings burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes, heave offerings, vows, freewill offerings, firstborn cattle, and so on (12:6, 17–18, 26–27; 14:22–29; 15:19–23; 16:5–7; 26:1–11), a regulation that assumes the sacrificial system is known (see [chap. 16](#) above). At this site, not fully realized until Solomon dedicated the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 9:3), all Israel shares in the benefits of *I AM*'s rule as they rejoice before him (Deut. 12:7, 12, 18). Provisions are made for regular butchering apart from the central sanctuary (12:15–16, 20–25). Again it is asserted that the life is in the blood, laying the foundation for a theology of substitution of the innocent for the guilty, a theology that finds its fulfillment in the blood of Christ (Isa. 53:10). Because *I AM* authors life, the firstborn belongs to him (Deut. 15:19–20; cf. Exod. 13:1–2), and because of the holiness of his capital, no blemished firstborn are sacrificed there (Deut. 15:21–23).

Johannes Pedersen says, “The main object of the book ... is to protect the Israelite community against Canaanite influence.”³¹ Idolatry poses the greatest threat to Israel's kingdom mission and their preservation as a pure people in the Land. False prophets or dreamers who turn people from *I AM* are to be executed (Deut. 13:1–5; 18:20–22), as well as apostate loved ones (13:6–11), demanding a wholehearted commitment on the part of each individual Israelite. An openly apostate city is also placed under the ban of holy war, including all its property (13:12–17). In cases where idolatry is not a public matter, the death penalty is exacted only after due process of law, including the testimony of reliable witnesses (17:2–7; see below).

Some commands reflect a basic principle that Israel must perform her religious services out of the wholehearted worship that is *I AM*'s due. They give a tenth (Deut. 14:22; cf. Lev. 7:30–33) and eat with the priests; take care of the Levites and the poor (Deut. 12:19; 14:27–28); offer no blemished sacrifices (17:1; Lev. 21:23); keep all vows (Deut. 23:22–23); and observe leprosy law, which requires going to the priest (24:8–9).

Observing civil and humanitarian commands maintains Israel's integrity and coherence as a national community and keeps them distinct from other nations. The laws listed in Deuteronomy 14–15 are given because “you are the children of *I AM* your God” (14:1). Israel is to maintain a distinct identity by adhering to dietary laws against eating unclean animals, fish, and birds (14:3–20; cf. Lev. 11), blood (Deut. 15:23), that which dies of itself (14:21), and a kid seethed in its mother's milk (14:21b; cf. Exod. 23:19; 34:26). The latter may be a Canaanite practice. Or the point of the stipulation may be to protect nature, as in

Deuteronomy 22:6. Some laws prohibit mixtures: sowing with mixed seeds (22:9), plowing with an ox and donkey together (22:10), and wearing garments with mixed fibers (22:11). Israelites also were to wear tassels on their garments (22:12). These requirements — except some, such as the prohibition against eating blood if it offends Jewish Christians (Acts 15:20; but cf. Rom. 14:1–4, 14–18; Col. 2:16, 20–23) — are no longer normative for the church, but they teach the truth that God’s people are to be distinct and pure; they are in the world but not of it.³²

Other laws show concern for the poor and the vulnerable within the unique nation. Creditors are to call off all debts every seven years for Israelites (Deut. 15:1–3; cf. Exod. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:1–7), and the rich are to be generous and compassionate toward the poor (Deut. 15:7–8). If Israel keeps covenant, there will be no poor because there will be sufficient wealth to provide for all. Interest can be charged of a foreigner, but not of a *poor* Israelite (23:19–20). There are restrictions against taking pledges from the poor (24:6, 10–13) and provisions for gleaning to feed the poor (24:19–22); hired workers must be paid on time because they usually own no land (24:14–15). The sabbath year and Jubilee year provisions (Lev. 25:8–34; see [chap. 16](#) above) minimize aggrandizement and the accumulation of great wealth by individual families. The principle of caring for and helping the poor is valid today for the church, but the details that are designed particularly for the nation in the Land are not repeated.

Finally, *I AM* specifies the time of worship to remind his nation of their uniqueness. Three times per year all males are to appear before their King, not empty-handed, but bringing gifts according to how *I AM* has blessed them (Deut. 16:16–17) — at Passover (vv. 1–8), the Feast of Weeks (vv. 9–12), and the Feast of Tabernacles (vv. 13–15). At the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles Israel is to rejoice as a community grateful for God’s blessings. They are to give to God voluntarily, rejoicing and reflecting on the exodus as a motive for grateful obedience.

b. Laws of Leaders (16:8–18:22)

Theology and public life are inseparable. Some laws maintain legitimate national leadership and provide a standard for the leaders’ approval ratings.

(1) Law Courts (16:8–13)

Judicial officers are to show no favoritism and are not to take bribes (Deut. 16:19; 24:17–18); absolute justice is the standard (16:20; 19:21; 25:1). Israel

must exact capital punishment but only after due process of law (17:1–7). Difficult cases are taken to *I AM*’s sanctuary, where the Levitical priests and the judge handle the case (17:8–9); their decisions are binding on pain of death (17:10–13).³³ Judgments are made only on the testimony of two or more reliable witnesses. In cases of capital crimes, the witnesses are the first to be involved in the execution (17:6–7), and false witnesses are to be punished with the same punishment the accused would have suffered if found guilty (19:15–21). The judge is not to compare the case with the typical rulings but give a decision in accordance with the justice and equity as espoused in this written code. If these rules were followed in the courtroom today, many of the arguments against capital punishment would be silenced. The ruling of “eye for eye” meant the penalty fits the crime, unlike the frivolous lawsuits and outrageous rewards that some judges and juries honor and reward. Of course, just weights and measures are required (25:13–16). Judges mete out justice to the guilty individual, not to his or her family (24:16), and share responsibility with the elders to investigate and expiate an unsolved murder (21:1–9). Unlike today’s common legal systems, in Israel’s judicial system crimes were regarded as committed against the individual, not the state, and the crimes were always compensated by repayment to the innocent party, not by prison sentences.

(2) The King (17:14–20)

The future king (Deut. 17:14–20) must be an Israelite, one of the covenant community who understands intuitively its history and meaning, to guard the nation against departure from covenant fidelity. The pride of heathen kings is their armories, foreign wives, and treasures. The future king must not multiply horses, wives, or wealth, all of which turn him aside from trusting *I AM*, his Great King. He must copy God’s Law, read it, follow it, and avoid pride and disobedience (17:18–19), making Israel a constitutional monarchy. In governing his own life by the same Torah that regulates the whole nation, the king reins in his exercise of power. The regulation that he write “for himself” a copy of the laws given to the entire nation is unique in the biblical world.

(3) Priests and Levites (18:1–8)

The priests, who belong to the tribe of Levi (Deut. 18:1–8), serve before *I AM* the Great King himself, and so their rights are not slighted. The priest’s due is to be supplied — namely, the right shank (leg and/or thigh; Lev. 7:32).

(4) Prophets (18:9–22)

With regard to presaging the future, pagan ways of divination are rejected (Deut. 18:9–14).³⁴ Rather, Israel must heed a prophet like Moses (vv. 15, 18) and regard him as a mediator (vv. 16–17), for a prophet is to speak only God's word (vv. 18–19). Israel's future depends on keeping covenant, not on chance or any other factor.

c. Laws of Righteous Conduct (19:1–21:21)

The covenant also stipulates elements of warfare and of everyday life that define Israel in the image of God's communicable attributes, such as justice and mercy. The provision for the city of refuge illustrates the just and merciful character of the covenant (Deut. 19:1–13; cf. Exod. 21:13; Num. 35:6–28). A proven murderer is put to death in the cause of justice, but a person guilty of manslaughter is punished by his loss of freedom, being confined to a city of refuge. Nevertheless, he is to be spared and, unlike a prison, he can lead a normal life in a nearby city. This regulation reflects a tremendous respect for human life and is much more humane than the prison system. Nevertheless, to establish the principle of life for life, the manslayer stayed in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest (Num. 35:28).

A neighbor's property is respected by not allowing encroachment upon it (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10). Private land boundaries, which are marked out by stone pillars or cairns, mark legal ownership. Throughout the ancient Near East people have great respect for private and tribal boundaries so essential for a family's life. Without this understanding, every field is up for grabs and anarchy ensues. Unfortunately, the crime is easy to accomplish and difficult to prove. If a dishonest neighbor moves the boundary stone annually only an inconspicuous half-inch, in time it adds up to a sizable land grab.

Murder is to be avenged by the next of kin; the avenger may even pry the murderer from the altar (Exod. 21:14; cf. 1 Kings 2:28–29). In the case of an unsolved murder, the responsible elders from the nearest town are to take an oath of innocence and ignorance, while a heifer that has never been worked is to be killed violently in an out-of-the-way place. This substitution prevents any cover-up, purges the land of serious guilt (Deut. 21:1–9), and illustrates the Law's concern for justice (i.e., life for life), fairness, and grace.

The holy nation also agrees to obey laws that preserve human dignity and rights. A Hebrew slave is to be released in the seventh year and supplied liberally with livestock, grain, and wine (Deut. 15:12–18). Refuge is provided for mistreated runaway slaves (23:15–16); and, as noted, cities of refuge are set

apart to protect a manslayer not deserving of death from an avenger (19:1–13). Kidnapping is a capital offense, preventing slave trade (24:7). A woman taken captive in war is respected as a person and given time to adjust to life in Israel (21:10–14). Excessive punishments that destroy human dignity are prohibited, such as exposure of a corpse (21:22–23) and excessive beating (25:2–3). Some of these laws are conditioned on Israel’s needs as a nation (e.g., cities of refuge), but the underlying concern for human dignity and rights is a common feature with New Testament morality.

d. Laws of Purity (21:22–25:19)

The separation between “laws of righteous conduct” and “laws of purity” is somewhat arbitrary, for the two corpora overlap. The impaled corpse of a person guilty of a capital offense is under a curse and must not be left on the pole overnight in order to avoid desecration of the Land (Deut. 21:22–23).

Other laws protect the home as a basic institution, giving stability to the state: a rebellious son is put to death to prevent his contagion (Deut. 21:18–21); a husband takes time to establish a good relationship with his new wife (24:5). There are sexual prohibitions as well: sex outside of marriage, confusion of gender-related clothing (22:5), adultery (vv. 22–27), fornication (vv. 28–29), incest (v. 30 [23:1]), prostitution (23:18 [19]), and indecent behavior (25:11–12). A procedure for determining the virginity of a bride (22:13–21) and restrictions on divorce and remarriage (24:1–4) are also given.

Still other laws relate to maintaining a distinctive community spirit: having a concern for stray or lost property (22:1–3), not separating a bird from its young (22:6–7), protecting one another from senseless danger (22:8–9), and marrying a childless widow to preserve the estate of the deceased (25:5–10). The law not to muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain (25:4) occurs in a context of miscellaneous humanitarian laws (23:15–25:19), suggesting it was originally a proverb for providing for the worker, as it was interpreted, not reinterpreted, by Paul (1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim 5:18).

To keep an exclusive membership for Israel, some stipulations exclude certain persons: a person emasculated according to Canaanite worship practices or dedicated as children to a foreign god (Deut. 23:1–2),³⁵ Ammonite and Moabite males to the tenth generation (vv. 3–6 [4–7]), and Edomite and Egyptian males to the third generation (vv. 7–8 [8–9]). The army camp is kept clean in order to please the Warrior who dwells in it (vv. 9–14 [10–15]).

Other laws pertain to the relationship to other nations and to their treatment.

Because of a historical wrong, Israel has a perpetual animosity toward Ammon and Moab (Deut. 23:4–6 [5–7]) and blots out the remembrance of Amalek. Realizing that these commands assume the humane righteousness of Israel's laws lessens their harshness. If Israel remains true to *I AM*, *I AM* will bring other nations under their righteous and humane rule. These nations, however, are expected to resist Israel's righteous rule because they are opposed to *I AM*, Israel's great King.

This attitude toward the nations is not appropriate for the church because the church's mission is to call out believers from among the nations by preaching the cross of Jesus Christ. The church establishes a righteous political rule over the nations by being the salt and light that impacts the political state to serve as God's minister of righteousness by wielding the sword appropriately (Rom. 13:1–6). The separation of church and state allows the church to view the nations differently than Israel viewed them. That separation prevents the folly of administering the state by the ethics informed by the cross, which is appropriate for the church, and from administering the church by the ethics enforced by the sword, which is appropriate for the state.

e. Laws of Offerings and Tithes (26:1–15)

Worship of *I AM* as Israel's great King demands tribute be brought to him in the form of worship and offerings that he specifies (Deut. 12:28; 13:18). Specific practices to be avoided are named (14:1; 16:21–22; 18:9–14; 23:18–25), and specific ceremonies are required. Finally, at the conclusion of all the laws, laws of offerings and tithes are again given: presentation of firstfruits with a confession of *I AM*'s goodness to Israel (26:1–11) and reporting the distribution of the third-year tithes with a prayer for *I AM*'s blessing (26:12–15).³⁶ House says, "The commands about the first fruits convey a simple elegance that makes the Yahweh-Israel relationship sound loving yet powerful."³⁷

5. Ebal/Gerizim Break (27:1 -28:68)

The introductory frame surrounding the statutes and ordinances calls for proclaiming blessings and curses at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (see Deut. 11:26–32), and the concluding frame specifies them (27:1–28:68). The concluding frame consists of historical notices. First, Moses records two anticipated scenes at Mount Ebal, situated in the heart of the Land. In the first

scene Israel writes the covenant law on an altar there (27:1–8), and in the second scene six tribes shout covenant blessings from luxurious Mount Gerizim and six tribes shout the covenant curses from barren Mount Ebal. Moreover, the Levites shout curses for twelve kinds of sins committed in secret, such as moving a neighbor’s boundary stone, having illicit sex, or accepting a bribe (27:9–26).

The narrator then recounts Moses’ recitation of the blessings and curses for fidelity or infidelity respectively to the covenant (Deut. 28:1–68). Upholding the blessings and curses depends entirely on I AM. He provides the gift of the Land to his elect people, and Israel involves themselves in holy war to take the Land and in covenant fidelity to retain its enjoyment. Retaining the Land becomes a “theological barometer” of Israel’s obedience to the covenant.³⁸

E. Narrator’s Inner Frame Break (29:1 [28:69] – 29:2a [29:1a])

The narrator’s janus between Moses’ second and third addresses is so smooth that the Hebrew tradition associates it with the second address and the English versions connect it to the third address. Paradoxically this inner break belongs to neither and to both. More important, it shows that the Book of Moses’ Law supplements the Sinai covenant: “These are the terms of the covenant *I AM* commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he made with them at Horeb” (29:1).

F. Third Address (29:2 [29:1] – 30:20)

In his third address, Moses again exhorts the people to covenant fidelity (Deut. 29:2–30:20). First, he looks back, recollecting Israel’s salvation history (29:2–9); then he shifts to the present when all Israel renews covenant at Moab (29:10–29); and finally, he looks ahead to the future ([chap. 30](#)). Unlike Hittite treaties, provision is made for the subject’s repentance and restoration to fellowship with the King with its attendant blessings. No matter how much Israel sins, there is always a provision for delayed or reversed judgment in response to their repentance (4:29–31; 5:9–10; 30:1–10). In that future, knowing the depravity of Israel, Moses foresees national apostasy and exile, but knowing also *I AM*’s faithfulness to his sworn covenants, he anticipates the nation’s

repentance and restoration. *I AM*'s blessings, not curses, will have the last word.

As part of that restoration, *I AM* will circumcise the hearts of the whole nation to love him (Deut. 30:1–10). By circumcising (transforming) their hearts, he will replace their spiritual impotence and stubbornness (5:29; 10:16; 29:4) with the humility and repentance they need (cf. 30:1–2), purifying for himself a people who will love and obey him. That promise is foundational for the later prophetic expectation (Jer. 31:3–34; Ezek. 36:25–27), finds fulfillment in believers today (Rom. 2:29), and will be consummated in ethnic Israel before the Parousia (Rom. 11:26).³⁹ Right now, however, Israel must choose life or death (Deut. 30:11–20).

G. Narrator's Outer Frame: Conclusion (31:1–34:12)

Deuteronomy is drawn to conclusion with seven historical notices designed to establish the emergence of Joshua as the authorized successor to Moses and to reinforce for future generations the importance of keeping the Book of the Law. First, Moses transfers his human leadership under *I AM* to Joshua (31:1–8). Second, Moses himself writes down the law and commands the priests and the elders to read the law at Israel's central sanctuary every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles (vv. 9–13).⁴⁰ In other words, the law of Moses is immediately granted canonical status. Third, in connection with the commissioning of Joshua to succeed Moses, *I AM* predicts Israel's apostasy.

Fourth, in the Tent of Meeting, *I AM* dictates to Moses a memorable song as a witness against Israel (31:14–22). This “national anthem,” which Moses writes down and teaches the nation to sing, predicts Israel's rebellion in spite of God's grace, God's retribution for her apostasy, and his restoration of Israel because of his covenant fidelity (31:30–32:43). The written song immediately assumes canonical status, vindicating God's activity in salvation history. In addition to condemning and correcting the nation, the song sustains the people's faith during the crisis of the exile, when *I AM* abandoned his mountain and his temple and allowed foreigners to destroy his people. Its prediction of Israel's doom and restoration given within a single song refutes the academic view that Israel's preexilic prophets delivered only oracles of doom to which later prophets *vaticinium ex eventu* added oracles of salvation (see [chap. 28](#)). Moses and Joshua exhort Israel to take this song to heart (32:44–47).

Fifth, *I AM* commands Moses to climb Mount Nebo, where he views the Sworn Land before his death and burial on the mountain (vv. 48–52). Sixth, the

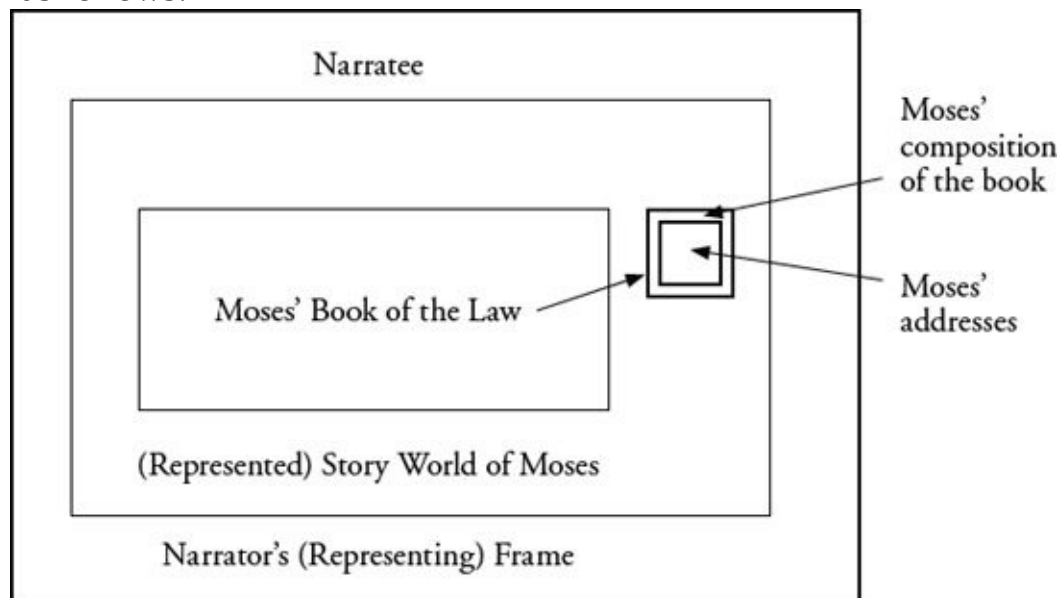
Deuteronomist probably added to his final composition Moses' eloquent benediction upon the twelve tribes, counting Manasseh and Ephraim as Joseph and omitting Simeon, probably because of his absorption into Judah (33:1–29). Seventh, the Deuteronomist writes Moses' obituary and implicitly adds himself as a prophet like Moses, but not his equal (34:1–12).

The Law is written and preserved (Deut. 31:9, 24–26) and is not to be added to or diminished (12:32). A personal copy of the Law is read daily by the future king (17:18–20) and is read to all the people every seven years (31:10–13). An elaborate ceremony is commanded for the sealing of the covenant when Israel crosses the Jordan (Deut. 27–28). All this outward ritual solemnizes the covenant in the minds of the people. Finally, the Israelites are to be continually teaching the covenant and its requirements from generation to generation (6:7–8, 20–25; 11:18–21). While such specific ceremonies are not required of Christians, believers see in these laws principles that help them remain committed to obeying *I AM*, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Who would deny that a Christian would not benefit from the daily reading of these Scriptures?

Although the narrator does not narrate Israel's solemn sealing of the renewed covenant in Moab as in the narratives of the sealing the covenant at Horeb (Exod. 24) and at Shechem (Josh. 24:1–27), such a sealing by the generation at Moab and by future generations is assumed (Deut. 29:12–15). Moses is represented as teaching the people his Book of the Law (1:1–5), and upon Joshua's succession to leadership after the death of Moses, the people accede to Joshua's leadership with the promise: "Just as we fully obeyed Moses, we will obey you" (Josh. 1:17). Once in the Land, they follow Moses' instructions at Mount Ebal: build the altar, copy the Law of Moses on a stele or two, and read the entire Law of Moses, including the blessings and curses (Josh. 8:30–35).

III: LITERARY GENRE: HISTORY OF A COVENANT RENEWAL DOCUMENT

Deuteronomy receives its title from the Septuagint, which calls it *Deuteronomion*, meaning the “Second Law,” or the “Repetition of the Law.” More accurately, on the story level, it is a covenant renewal document, and on the plot level, it is a historical narrative about Moses’ Book of the Law. The book of Deuteronomy narrates the making of the book of Moses.⁴¹ Unlike Polzin, who considers the two books as a dialogue of different viewpoints, Jean-Pierre Sonnet essentially sees the two books speaking with one voice.⁴² David Bergen schematizes the relationship of Moses and his book to the narrator and his book as follows:⁴³



On the story level, the founder of Israel’s prophetic faith is concerned with Israel’s successful occupation of the Land. He assumes the founding generation seals the renewal of the covenant in response to his preaching. Moreover, on this level, concerned for the nation’s long-term viability in the Land, Moses also writes down the renewed covenant that future generations of the nation, especially its leadership, should hermeneutically engage by placing the document beside the ark and obliging the nation to read it every seven years. Unfortunately, over the course of centuries, the nation forgot the document, and its recovery in 622 BC prompted Josiah’s reform.

At the plot level, the narrator mediates the contents of Moses' original book in this extant book of Deuteronomy, presumably to engage hermeneutically his generation—probably the exiles—with Moses' covenant renewal for their renewal.⁴⁴

A. Story (Moses): A Covenant Renewal Document

In this section I contend that the combined three valedictory addresses of Moses renews the original covenant at Mount Sinai in the area known as Horeb; supplements, not abrogates, the original covenant; is spiritual, not juridical; and contains dual obligations and dual purposes.

1. A Covenant Renewal Document

Israel originally sealed their covenant relation with *I AM* at the beginning of the wilderness journey at Horeb and sealed the renewed treaty with *I AM* at the end of that journey at Moab (Deut. 29:1[28:69] – 15 [14]; cf. 11:31–32). The Decalogue (Deut. 5), which was given at Horeb, is clearly distinguished from the regulations in [chapters 12–26](#). The former is designated the “Ten Commandments” or “Ten Words” (4:13; 5:22); the latter is introduced as “decrees and laws” (12:1), to which is added in 26:17 the word “commands.” The whole is the Law. The covenant renewal assumes an original covenant, because it refers to *I AM* as the God of Israel, the relationship that began at Sinai. G. Ernest Wright comments, “Yahweh is the God of Israel, and they are His chosen people. The time of His choice is invariably carried back to the period of wilderness wanderings and to Sinai in particular; it was there and then that Yahweh chose Israel to be His people, and that Israel confessed Him as its God.”⁴⁵

On both the story and plot levels there is a clear historical consciousness of recollecting the past, reflecting upon the future, and choosing in the present. Key words include “today” with reference to time, and “Jordan” with reference to space. “This day” is the decisive time for Israel to identify with God's past promises and workings with Israel in order to commit themselves to accomplish the will of God for their future.

2. A Supplementary Document

Like the ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty, the covenant renewal supplements, not abrogates, the original (Deut. 29:1 [28:69], see above). The original is housed in the ark; the supplement is laid up alongside it. R. E. Clements comments: “Its own status as a supplementary document is not intended to lead to the replacing of the original law tablets, but to its being set alongside them. Deuteronomy is in effect a supplement to the original covenant law tablets, showing their significance for a wider area of life.”⁴⁶ We should suppose the same is true of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22–23:33). Gerald T. Manley lists the thirty-one unique features of this covenant from the one at Sinai and comments: “The real fact is that these 31 laws ... are all alike ancient and belong to the same category; they are supplementary not successive; parts of a larger whole, as is proved by their collection together in Hammurabi’s code.”⁴⁷

This renewal covenant modifies the original to fit Israel’s changed circumstances. Ludwig Koehler comments, “In Deuteronomy the laws are summarized and interpreted, and adjusted to the new, specific situation Israel would face in Canaan. Thus, Deuteronomy is, in essence, a covenant renewal [and updating] document.”⁴⁸

3. Spiritual, Not Juridical

The first and last addresses aim to motivate Israel spiritually to keep the stipulations in the second address. Foundational to the second address is the basic stipulation to love God with all the heart. In other words, the covenant renewal documents pertain to a spiritual, not legalistic, commitment. Walther Eichrodt comments, “A national law can never attain its goal so long as it remains a system reluctantly endured and effective only by compulsion; it must be founded on the inward assent of the people.”⁴⁹ The language of Deuteronomy is of the heart and conscience, especially the admonishments to love *I AM* and to fear him (see above).

That language also includes “to remember.” Edward P. Blair demonstrates that “remember” has a prominent emphasis in Deuteronomy to span the generations (5:15; 6:20–25; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7; 16:3, 12).⁵⁰ Clements says, “In consequence of this appeal to the inner psychological attitude of worship, two dispositions are especially commanded. These are love to Yahweh, and continued remembrance of him.”⁵¹ Von Rad says, “Deuteronomy’s unremitting call to ‘remember’ Jahweh, his commandments, his acts ... corresponds to the

urge for subjective actualisation.”⁵² All memorize the covenant, from the king on down to the children. Those responsible for teaching it are the Levites (Deut. 31) and the heads of families (6:5–25). Their audiovisual aids are liturgical seasons (16:1–17), liturgical activities such as erecting the stones on Ebal (Deut. 27), and the Song of Moses (31:19, 22; 32:1). The emphasis on the instruction of children is one of the book’s striking features (4:9–10; 6:7, 20; 11:19; 31:13; 32:7, 46).

Moreover, anything that threatens loyalty to *I AM*, such as the Canaanites without, or as pride within, must be eliminated. Loyalty to *I AM* has such a high value that anything that threatens it must be eliminated (Deut. 7–10).

That language also entails faith that leads to obedience (Deut. 6:16–25). Expressions for the concept of loyalty include trust (1:32); follow wholeheartedly (1:36); listen/obey (4:1; 13:18); hold fast to *I AM* (4:4; 13:4); keep *I AM*’s commands and do them (4:6; 5:32; 11:22); learn and observe (5:1); do not turn aside to the right or left (5:32); walk in the way *I AM* commands (5:33; 11:22; 30:16); do what is right and good in *I AM*’s sight (6:18); and serve *I AM* only (6:13; 11:13; cf. “servants” in 32:36).

The book describes its content as *tôrâ* (see [chap. 15](#) above; Deut. 1:5; 4:8; 17:18, 19; 27:3, 8, 26; 28:58, 61; 29:21 [20], 29 [28]; 31:9, 11, 12, 24; 32:46). One’s whole life is lived in the context of this catechism. The acceptance of God’s stipulations stems from an unconditional trust in his person, love and fear of him, and a desire to enjoy a personal covenant relationship with him, not the sense of submitting either to a juridical code or to a book of priestly instruction.

Within the broader context of a covenant, the *tôrâ* sets out and explains the conditions of the covenant (*ḥerîṭ*) by which Israel lives under *I AM*. *Torah* includes *ḥēdōt* (“statutes”/“written expressions of *I AM*’s will”), *mišpat* (“judgments,” “case laws”) and *ḥuqqîm* (“apodictic laws”), and *mišwôt* (“commands” from a superior to an inferior) (Deut. 4:44–45; cf. 12:1).⁵³ The last two terms are interchangeable. Koehler remarks: “No one has ever managed to determine ... when one should say *ḥuqqîm* and when *misvah*, and when one or the other is inadmissible.”⁵⁴

In the realm of the human spirit, there is an immense difference between having a relation to an impersonal law and/or keeping a law merely out of fear of the power of its author, and having an unconditional trust in the author.

4. Dual Purpose of the Covenant

The covenant serves two purposes: *I AM* uses it to bind Israel to himself to establish his kingdom in the land of Canaan,⁵⁵ and through Israel's memory it becomes the divine instrument for maintaining the continuity of Israel and upholding their welfare. To be sure the covenant aims to serve *I AM* (Deut. 6:13; 10:12; 11:13), but it also serves Israel (4:40; 5:33; 6:2, 18, 24; 11:9; 12:28; 13:17, 18). Clements comments that the purpose of the covenant was "not to bind Israel to a set of arbitrary restrictions, but to guide it towards the fullest enjoyment of life. Repeatedly it is stressed that the law is given 'that it may go well with you,' and 'that you may prolong your days in the land which the *I AM* your God gives you'" (Deut. 6:24). These two purposes are harmonious: "What was at stake was ultimately the union of morality with religion, and what we find in Deuteronomy is the refusal to accept that God could demand of men, in the name of religion, what the conscience of society condemned as immoral [see 12:29–31]."⁵⁶ We live in a universe (a united voice): what is in the divine interest is in human interest.

5. *Dual Obligations*

Because of the nature of a covenant, one can juxtapose the obligations *I AM* takes upon himself and those Israel takes upon itself. *I AM* graciously obligates himself to keep faith with the fathers and to elect their offspring for this unique covenant relationship with him. Before the founding generation has done good or evil—indeed, and in spite of their sin and unbelief in the wilderness—*I AM* offers Israel, united by blood and history from the patriarchs, the unique opportunity to become de facto, not just de jure, his people. Furthermore, because of Israel's depravity and his covenant faithfulness to the patriarchs, in the future *I AM* will circumcise all of Israel to guarantee the nation's fidelity to him. By implication, in the interim he elects a remnant within the outward nation to love him, entailing regenerated hearts, but Moses and the Deuteronomist treat Israel as a unified nation.

The nation obliges itself to accept this covenant relationship. Even as God said yes to Israel on account of the fathers, Israel must also say yes to him. Peter Diepold sees in the idea of covenant a resolution of two poles. On the one hand, "Yahweh's saving action on Israel's behalf has become effective, before Israel could have done anything about it." On the other hand, it is of the character of covenant that "this very action and offer of Yahweh's is not forced upon Israel, but that Israel can decide, and only after her Yes does Yahweh's offer come to reality."⁵⁷ Loving *I AM* with all of one's heart manifests itself concretely in

obedience to his laws: “Solomon showed his love for *I AM* by walking according to the statutes of his father David”⁵⁸ (1 Kings 3:3). Iain Provan comments, “True worship is always bound up with obedience to the law of God.”⁵⁹ Likewise, the apostle John in his paraphrase of Christ’s farewell address, says, “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3). In short, those who reject the circumcision of the procreative organ, the outward sign of the covenant, are “cut off” from the elect people, and those who have only that outward sign without circumcising their hearts to love *I AM* are “of Israel,” but are not “true Israel.”

Apart from sovereign grace, however, Israel is stiff-necked, as their history proves from the exodus to Christ and in their rejection of Christ. The Israelites cannot circumcise their own hearts, even though commanded to do so. “True Israel” depends on God’s sovereign grace to give them new hearts. In the new covenant, *I AM* takes upon himself the additional obligation to give national Israel a new heart. The means of this grace is preached law. Von Rad comments, “Deuteronomy is not divine law in codified form, but preaching about the commandments — at least, the commandments appear in a form where they are very much interspersed with parenthesis.”⁶⁰ The Law in itself cannot regenerate the heart; rather, the Spirit through the preaching of God’s grace and law regenerates the elect. Moses motivates Israel to keep the law in the future by reflecting upon God’s sublime attributes in connection with recalling God’s grace in the past and by reminding them of covenant blessings and curses.

B. Plot (Deuteronomist): A History of a Covenant Renewal Document

The goal of this section is to establish the continuity between the covenant renewal mediated by Moses and the Deuteronomist and the purpose of this history.

1. Continuity between Story and Narrative

The book of Deuteronomy was probably written during the exile (ca. 550 BC), about eight centuries after Moses mediated the renewed covenant. By his at least fifty-six additional verses, the Deuteronomist transforms Moses’ covenant renewal document into a historical narrative, probably originally addressed to the exiles but intended for the universal faith community. That community

recognizes it as such, and it becomes part of their canon (*norma normanda*) for their faith and practice. The line between story (Moses) and plot (Deuteronomist) is attenuated, however, because the Deuteronomist adds so few verses of his own and many of them are only historical notices. It is unreasonable to think that if the Deuteronomist did not intend to represent both Moses' theology as his own and Moses' addresses as also addressed to the exiles and all Israel, he would devote almost his entire book to Moses' addresses to Israel at Moab.⁶¹

By his additions the Deuteronomist shifts the addresses from "that day" to "this day," even as Moses had made a similar shift from the audience of the original covenant at Horeb to its renewal at Moab. This historical form of the covenant renewal now constitutes the basis of the paradigmatic prologue of the Deuteronomic history (= "Former Prophets"), originally addressed to the exiles around 550 BC⁶² but also intended for all Israel and recognized as such as shown by its incorporation into the canon (see [chap. 4](#).IV.A).

2. Deuteronomy as a Covenant Renewal Document

In the hands of the Deuteronomist, this retrospective history accuses Israel of bringing upon itself the curses of the covenant that Israel's founding fathers had sealed. The nation had been duly threatened and warned and so is without excuse. They are without excuse, among other sins, for neglecting the reading of the covenant until a lost copy of it is found in the temple and inspires Josiah's reform in 622 BC. This history, however, also demonstrates that God keeps his covenant, not only the curses of the covenant Moses mediated, but also his promissory covenants to the patriarchs. Therefore the exiles need not despair. They are not cut off from God without hope. God will keep his covenants and his oath to the patriarchs. Paul Ricoeur says, "The God of the exodus has to become the God of the exile in order to remain the God of the future and not only the God of memory."⁶³

The whole tenor of the book as "preached law" serves to move Israel at all times in its history, including during the exile. The "this day" is always "this is the acceptable time." The spiritual foundation for this relationship will always be appreciation to God for electing Israel, offering his sublime person to them, and performing mighty acts on their behalf, and it will always include a spiritual commitment to his person. As Israel had to exterminate the Canaanites to retain loyalty to *I AM*, so now the returnees can infer they will have to excommunicate the Ammonites, Horonites, and Samaritans to retain their purity of worship back

in the Land. This is Ezra and Nehemiah's role.

In short, as Moses calls upon the founding generation to renew the covenant at Shechem, and as Joshua renews it at the time of his death, so the Deuteronomist aims to energize the exiles and the succeeding generations of Israel to keep Moses' Book of the Law. His book implicitly invites Israel in exile to repent, to renew the covenant, and to pray that they will experience it as a new covenant. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the returnees renew it again.

IV: THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

One can write a comprehensive, systematic theology about the sublime person of *I AM* from Deuteronomy.⁶⁴ James Houston, in a magisterial study, shows that the wise people of the church right up until the end of the seventeenth century spelled out consistently the “double knowledge” that one only knows God in knowledge of oneself and vice versa.⁶⁵ Therefore, in this section we consider first the knowledge of *I AM*, the author of the covenant, and then of Israel, its beneficiaries. Although the “double knowledge” aims to exalt God by his contrast with humanity, it is also true that we would hardly see ourselves in a people wholeheartedly devoted to the highest in their religion. We can, however, profit in identifying ourselves with a nation torn between devotion and self-gratification and seeking restoration through repentance.

A. *I AM*: Author of Covenant

Deuteronomy, in its clarification of the covenant, takes up the matters of God’s revelation, his names, and above all his attributes.⁶⁶

1. Revelation of God: Present with His People in Word

The voice of God is heard directly by Israel in the Ten Commandments (5:6–17) and in several short speeches to Moses (e.g., 1:6–8, 35–36; 5:18–31; 31:14a, 16b–21, 23b; 32:4–52; 34:4b), but even these direct speeches in the final analysis are mediated by Moses and the Deuteronomist. Otherwise, God’s voice is heard by the original audience in the voice of Moses and by future generations through the book of Moses. The immediate transcription of the prophetic word is well documented in the ancient Near Eastern records.⁶⁷

The founding generation uniquely experienced the events that gave birth to Israel as a nation (Deut. 5:3–4). *I AM* destroyed the land of Egypt by mighty plagues and drowned Pharaoh’s elite army in the Red Sea. He miraculously

protected and provided for Israel in the wilderness; and he spoke to them from Mount Sinai. Their children, however, do not see these events (11:5), and they must not expect God to repeat them (30:11–14). Rather, God speaks to future generations through their periodic reading of the covenant (17:18; 27:3; 31:9–13, 26) without adding to it or subtracting from it (4:2; 12:32). Israel perceives God’s presence principally with their ears, not with their eyes. Memory becomes the divine instrument for maintaining the continuity of Israel and for upholding the divine welfare of those within it. Memory actualizes the word. Brevard Childs says, “The act of remembering serves to actualize the past for a generation removed in time from those former events in order that they themselves can have an intimate encounter with the great acts of redemption. *Remembrance equals participation.*”⁶⁸ Later prophets who replaced Moses as mediators of God’s authoritative word to future generations (cf. 5:23–28 and Deut. 18:14–20), however, interpreted and recontextualized it (Deut. 13). Nevertheless, as Clements says, “The prophets were given by God to confirm the truth and authority of the Mosaic revelation.”⁶⁹

2. Names and Epithets of God

Manley lists nine names of God used in Deuteronomy: “‘El, ‘Eloah, ‘Elyon, ‘Elohim (“gods” or “God”), *I AM [YHWH]*, ‘Adonay *I AM*, *I AM* God of your [thy, our] fathers, and *I AM* your [thy, our] God”⁷⁰ (see [chap. 13](#) above).

3. God’s Sublime Attributes

To motivate Israel to love *I AM*, Deuteronomy catechizes the nature and character of God and the ways in which the people of Israel can enjoy communion with him.⁷¹ For convenience, like a systematic theologian, I first list the attributes of his essence/being and then his communicable attributes in which human beings can share. However, this arrangement misses the text’s rhetoric. For example, note the chiasm and tension in Moses’ characterization of *I AM* in the witness section (Deut. 4:1–31):

A Israel not to forget the covenant of *I AM* (4:23)

⊃⊃⊃B For *I AM* is a devouring fire, a jealous God.... you will be destroyed (4:24)

⊃⊃⊃B’ For *I AM* is merciful... ; he will not destroy you (4:31)

A’ *I AM* will not forget covenant with the fathers (4:32)⁷²

a. His Essence/Being

1. He is an aseity (see p. 175). His existence derives from himself and is not dependent on any other being. His name is *I AM*.
2. He is living and eternal (Deut. 32:40). Therefore, he is able to take vengeance (vv. 41–42) and to give life (v. 39).
3. He is unique. There is no other god (Deut. 4:35; 32:39). None can do his works (3:24).
4. He is incomparable, distinct from every other god, not to be confused with them and not to be set alongside them (Deut. 10:17). John Bright says,

Here is the sharpest break with paganism imaginable. The ancient paganisms were all polytheistic, with dozens of gods arranged in complex pantheons. These gods were for the most part personifications of the forces of nature or of her cosmic functions; they were in and of nature and, like nature, without any particular moral character. Their will could be manipulated in the ritual (which reenacted the myth) so that they would bestow on the worshiper the desired tangible benefits. In such religions no moral interpretation of events, nor indeed any consistent interpretation, was possible, for no one god ruled history.⁷³

5. He is spiritual/not plastic. *I AM* is a spiritual being, dissimilar in kind to any and every material form; hence, no sensible representation can be framed of him; still less should Israel worship any other material object (Deut. 4:12, 15).
6. He is a person. Though spiritual, he is not diffuse or indefinite; he is a being who meets Israel in an “I-Thou” relationship. His intelligence can be seen in his “sovereignty” (see below). He is passionately repulsed by images (Deut. 7:25–26), pagan cults (12:31; 20:18; 27:15), defective sacrifices (17:1), pagan practices of divination (18:9–13), and confusion of the sexes (22:5) among other things. Moses uses anthropomorphism to denote his person. He speaks of God’s mouth (8:3), hand and arm (4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8), and finger (9:10), and tells of God walking through the camp to inspect it (23:14) and riding through the heavens on a cloud (33:26).
7. He is transcendent, reigning in heaven above (Deut. 4:39; 26:15). He is awesome and terrifying (7:21; 10:17) with a venerable name (28:58). He was present in the foreboding darkness, thick cloud, and dark gloom (4:10–11) at Mount Sinai (4:33–36). His voice is so terrifying that the people had to appoint Moses as their mediator or they would have died. At the same time he is

mysteriously immanent: on earth (4:39); near when Israel calls on him (4:7); moving about in Israel's camp (23:14), promising he "will never leave you nor forsake you" (31:8).

b. *I AM*'s Character/Communicable Attributes

1. He is gracious, condescending to commit himself to Israel by promises, oath, and covenant (Deut. 29:12–15), and providing Israel with certainty regarding their future and their forgiveness (30:1–10). He is not arbitrary and does everything in public and without secrecy.

2. He is just, righteous, and moral, showing no partiality and taking no bribes (Deut. 10:17), defending the cause of the orphan and widow, and loving the alien (10:18). His decrees and laws commend themselves to conscience (4:8). His moral purity calls for the extermination of the seven Canaanite nations (9:4–5) and for avenging the wrong of the Amalekites (25:17–19). His justice informs the standard for Israel's judges (16:18–20) and informs the threats against Israel (4:21–26; 6:14–15; 8:19–20). Ethics, not magic or divination, determines Israel's future.

3. He is faithful to his word: to the nonelect (Ammon, Moab, and Edom, Deut. 2:5, 9, 19) and to the ancestors (1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 10:11 et al.). Lester Kuyper said, "Frequently we are reminded that God had made his oath and never could it be thought possible that God would abandon his word. Herein one catches the mighty perspective of God's plan. The program of making Israel a nation was the fulfillment of God's great design started and promised centuries before."⁷⁴ He is faithful to Israel, both to reward those who love him (7:9) and to punish the disobedient (28:15–68). This is the basis for Israel's restoration beyond judgment (4:25–31; 30:1–10).

4. His mercy is also the basis for Israel's future restoration (Deut. 4:31; 30:8).

5. His power sanctions his mercy. Apart from his omnipotence, his mercy could not guarantee Israel's salvation. *I AM*'s power is seen in his acts in the past, an earnest of his ability to give Israel the land (Deut. 3:24; 4:34; 7:21–23; 9:29; 10:22; 11:2–3). It is also seen in the creative power of his word (28:2, 15; 30:1–10) and in holy war (7:17). Hence, Israel ought to love him, fear him and trust him; he is worthy of a relationship (10:17).

6. His goodness is seen in his giving of four gifts to Israel: Law (Deut. 6:24); Land (9:4–5; 17:18–20; 26:5–10); prophets (18:22); and priests (18:6–7). His goodness is the basis for their spiritual gratitude. Clements says,

Throughout Deuteronomy there is a constant emphasis on the debt which Israel owes to God. All its life, both political and religious, is seen to be dependent upon what God has given to Israel. Consequently there is not part of this life which is not a cause for Israel to show gratitude to Yahweh who has made it possible, and it is this gratitude which the Deuteronomists regard as the true basis of worship.⁷⁵

7. He is loving. This attribute is the basis of Israel's election (Deut. 7:8; 23:5). If they kept God's laws he would keep his covenant of love with them in the future (7:12–13).

8. He becomes angry against unbelief (Deut. 1:34–36; 9:22) and breach of covenant (4:25).

9. His wisdom is seen in his catechism (Deut. 4:2–6).

10. His jealousy is closely related to his uniqueness (Deut. 4:24) and demands both undivided loyalty (5:9; 6:5, 15) and the extermination of nations whose religions might corrupt Israel's loyalty ([chap. 13](#)).

11. He has aesthetic appreciation (Deut. 14:1–29; 22:4–11; 23:10–14).

12. His holiness or "otherness" consists in the totality of all his sublime attributes and threatens human life (Deut. 5:22–27; 18:16).

c. Sovereign

I AM's sovereignty is related to his uniqueness: if only one God exists, then he is in absolute control of history. His sovereignty is universal. There are aspects of God that are cosmic (he relates to the entire cosmos), communal (he relates to peoples), historical and cultural (he is establishing a kingdom), and personal (he relates to individuals in an I-Thou encounter and relationship).

1. *I AM* is sovereign over the universe (Deut. 4:32; 10:14), all life (32:39), and the nations. Clements notes: "His role as Creator is not distinct from his role as Yahweh of history, for both creation and history alike are expressions of his one will."⁷⁶ He parcels out to the nations their lands (2:5, 9; 32:8), rules over their kings (2:30), and even gave them their gods (4:19; 29:25 [26]). Kuyper comments:

Jahweh was supreme over all gods, "he is God of gods, and Lord of lords" (10:17). He is supreme to this remarkable degree that God has allotted to people these lower deities ... (4:19). These gods of the nations God has not allotted to Israel (29:29). Worship, which is a normal function

for mankind, falls under the providence of God. Even false religions are taken up in this world plan of God. This statement (rather startling) is to evidence the supreme rule of God. To allow pagan worship beyond the realm of God's sovereignty would make God less than he is.⁷⁷

Commenting on Deuteronomy 4:18, Samuel R. Driver says, "The God of Israel is supreme: he assigns to every nation its objects of worship; and the veneration of the heavenly bodies by the nations (other than Israel) forms part of His providential order of the world."⁷⁸

2. If *I AM* is sovereign over the nations, how much more he rules supreme over Israel (Deut. 10:15; 14:2). His sovereignty is seen above all else in his election of Israel for the covenant relationship. "Yet *I AM* set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations" (10:15). "Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, *I AM* has chosen you to be his treasured possession" (14:2). Meredith Kline says, "Such a covenant is a declaration of God's kingship, consecrating a people to himself in a sovereignly dictated order of life."⁷⁹ He elected Israel for the glory of his name. Wright comments, "With a dynamic, persistent, and independent energy, he set his course and that of his people for his own names' sake."⁸⁰ He is sovereign over Israel's will. "But to this day *I AM* has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear" (29:4). But he will change this in the future: "*I AM* your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (30:6).

Like a father, he cares for Israel. He fights for his firstborn son (Deut. 3:22), going before Israel (1:30), driving out the nations (4:38), thrusting them out (6:19), clearing them away (7:22), and destroying them before Israel (31:3; 2:15). He provides for and protects Israel (11:10–12) and judges and legislates (Deut. 4; 5:4–21; cf. Deut. 12–26). He bears them (1:31) and disciplines them (8:5), such as by withholding and giving the rain (11:13–17). He does this to teach them religious devotion. Kuyper remarks, "The experiences of the wilderness wandering were designed by the Father-God to impart spiritual and moral lessons so that Israel might know true devotion to the law of God" (see Deut. 8).⁸¹ Manley is more specific: "The people's memory of their servitude and deliverance is made a plea for the punishment of apostasy (13:5), showing liberality (15:14–15), seeking divine pardon (21:8), and showing clemency (24:8, 22)."⁸²

I AM is sovereign over Israel's liturgy, choosing the site of the sanctuary

(Deut. 12) and the Levitical priests to serve there (18:1–5), and over her civil government, choosing its king (17:15), while reserving for himself the role of Israel’s supreme Judge (10:17–18). The Book of the Covenant commits civil matters that are dealt with at the city gate to the elders, and the book of Leviticus provides the priests to deal with matters that pertain to the temple. But Deuteronomy focuses on *I AM* who ultimately upholds justice and purity in Israel, and therefore Israel should fear, love, and trust him.

B. Israel: The Recipients of the Covenant

In this section we extend the double knowledge beyond human misery to consider more broadly Israel as the recipients of *I AM*’s treaty.

1. A Unity

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy Israel is spoken of simply as “Israel,” “we,” “you,” and other pronouns, suggesting the author conceptualized them as a unified covenant community. Moreover, he speaks of them as the children of Israel (1:3; 3:18; 4:44; 23:17 [18]; 24:7; 32:49, 51, 52), the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1:8). They are brothers (3:18) and sisters (23:17), members of one family. They are the unique nation to whom *I AM* has chosen to reveal himself (4:7; 8:20) and to make them his possession (7:6). Individual families worship *I AM* according to his direction (12:7, 12), and individuals are to bring him their gifts personally (26:1–11), but worship of *I AM* is the accepted norm binding on all individuals in the nation. Any deviation from this norm is punishable by death (13:1–18). Clements comments, “In the personal response of each Israelite ultimately lay the response of Israel as a whole.”^{[83](#)}

The doctrine of a remnant that is found in the writing prophets is not in view in this book. Even in the predicted future when the Israelites will be scattered among the nations and returned, they are regarded as a unity (Deut. 4:27–31; 30:1–10). Moses safeguards this unity throughout history by the instruction of the children (4:9–10; 6:7, 20; 11:19; 31:13; 32:7). This emphasis on the instruction of children is one of the book’s striking features. In other words, the book never separates the kingdom of God from the kingdom of Israel.

2. Elect

Israel's election is based on *I AM*'s love and nothing else (Deut. 7:7–8; 8:17–18; 9:4–6). Ernest Nicholson comments: "Israel's election is simply and solely the result of Yahweh's love for her and not because she merited it in any way (7:7–8; Hos. 11:1). Israel was to love Yahweh because he first loved her."⁸⁴ Certainly, Israel's election is not merited (Deut. 7:6; 27:9ff.). Obedience is not a prerequisite for election; indeed, the order is reversed. Moreover, Israel's election cannot be separated from *I AM*'s sovereignty (4:37; 7:6; 10:15; 14:2).

I AM chose Israel to effect his kingdom on earth. Kuyper makes the point: "What brought about the great change in value? God's relation has been entrusted to this nation so that now Israel is more than a federation of tribes occupying the land in ancient time; for they are the vessel in which God has placed the salvation of the world."⁸⁵ The result of his election is Israel's holiness in both their position (Deut. 4:20) and practices (14:2, 26:18). Clements says,

All the various detailed regulations which appear in the laws of Deuteronomy are the outworking of this primary belief in the holiness of Israel, and they are intended to serve as guidelines to enable Israel to live up to its privileged position. They point out the way by which Israel can become, in practical expression, what is already in theological affirmation.⁸⁶

In other words, Israel is a peculiar, or personal, treasure (Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; cf. 1 Chron. 29:3; Eccl. 2:8).⁸⁷ Elsewhere, the book refers to Israel as God's inheritance (Deut. 4:20; 9:26, 29; 32:9).

3. Fallen Humanity

I AM's election of Israel and his extension of his benevolent attributes toward them are the more remarkable when profiled against Israel's depravity.⁸⁸ Moses indicts Israel as blind, deaf, uncircumcised of heart, and stiff-necked, basing his verdict on their track record (Deut. 1:26–43; 4:3; 9:7). Moreover, on the same basis he indicts them as tending to become proud, ungrateful and forgetful (8:7–20), and lacking loyalty (13:6–11). Moses' eyes are wide open to Israel's reality because he perceives God's purity and reality. To cripple Israel's pride and cause them to lean on the crutch of acknowledging *I AM* as God, their only hope for spiritual transformation, Moses prevents Israel from deceiving themselves about their true spiritual nature.

4. Responsible

In the mystery of a covenant relationship between God and his people, *I AM*, as God, is sovereign over all things, including Israel's will and their future, and yet Israel is responsible for their choices to serve or not serve *I AM* and for their destiny (Deut. 30:15). *I AM* gives Israel their Land, but Israel must take it by faith (2:21, 31; 7:1–2).

I AM rewards or punishes Israel for obedience and disobedience. His blessings for obedience and his curses for disobedience are both certain because of God's pure justice. That justice both to reward and punish informs Israel's entire history. There is a basic interplay between *I AM*'s righteousness, Israel's disobedience, and *I AM*'s mercy and faithfulness. Israel's unrighteousness and disobedience leads to *I AM*'s punishment of them (Deut. 28:15–68). *I AM*'s mercy and faithfulness in connection with Israel's repentance leads to the promised kingdom (4:25–31; 30:1–10). God's sovereignty in connection with his other sublime attributes and Israel's responsibility to do righteousness work in harmony and never contradict or oppose each other. *I AM*'s faithfulness to his elect works in harmony with his justice to reward and punish according to their behavior. Kuyper explains:

Carl Steuernagel called attention to two elements in God's relationship to Israel. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the possessing of the Sworn Land are expressions of God's faithfulness to his covenant. However, if God were controlled entirely by faithfulness of the covenant, then his moral character would be called into question. Therefore it is that God punishes the sins of his people to such an extent that regard for the covenant is set aside. In contrast, proper response by his people in ethics and worship is a guarantee of God's favor and faithfulness. This demonstrates clearly that God is a moral being. On the other hand, if God were merely the incarnation of ethics to prosper all good and to destroy all evil, then the reward principle for right living would be established and self-righteousness would become imminent.⁸⁹

On the one hand, the ultimate cause of good is *I AM*, who alone is sovereign and good. He elects some to do good to all, not to condemn some. On the other hand, *I AM* does not author sin; Israel does. Therefore, to establish his universal kingdom, *I AM* ultimately, in his own time and in his own way, overcomes Israel's inherent, sinful nature.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does the book of Deuteronomy with its focus on God's sublime being and the Israel of God's covenant responsibilities instruct you in your economic choices, in your sexual and social behavior, and in your politics?

[1.](#) For the origin of Deuteronomy, see Daniel I. Block, "Recovering the Voice of Moses: The Genesis of Deuteronomy," *JETS* 44 (2002): 385–408. For Deuteronomy's function in the Primary History, see [chap. 2:II.A](#).

[2.](#) J. Gordon McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomistic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 9.

[3.](#) See Peter T. Vogt, *Deuteronomistic Theology and Significance of Torah: A Reappraisal* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005). Vogt argues that at the heart of Deuteronomistic theology is the principle of the supremacy of *I AM*, which is to be acknowledged by all generations of Israelites through adherence to the *Torah*.

[4.](#) McConville, *Grace in the End*, 9.

[5.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, SBT 9 (London: SCM Press, 1963), 75.

[6.](#) J. Gordon McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993).

[7.](#) I was greatly helped in my understanding of the book's structure by D. A. Bergen, "Dialogic in the Narrative of Deuteronomy" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Calgary, 2003).

[8.](#) *Bar* is used in Deut. 27:8 to indicate the clarity or legibility with which the words of the Law were to be inscribed in stone.

[9.](#) Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 22–23.

[10.](#) My use of "the Land" is equivalent to the Sworn/Promised Land, the land sworn to the patriarchs, in contrast to land in general. The choice between them is subjective.

[11.](#) The looking back to the past and looking ahead to the future in Moses' three addresses is consistent with the Deuteronomistic history. That history looks back to explain the fall of Jerusalem from a comprehensive moral point of view and looks ahead to encourage the restoration of the city from the same

perspective.

[12.](#) Cf. Num. 14:21–23.

[13.](#) Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 174.

[14.](#) Possibly 4:44 by its mention of “teaching” refers to Moses’ hortatory teaching in [chapters 6 – 11](#) and 4:45 by its mention of “stipulations, decrees and laws” refers to [chapters 12 – 26](#).

[15.](#) Bergen, “Dialogic in the Narrative of Deuteronomy,” 43.

[16.](#) K. Baltzar, *The Covenant Formulary: In Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. D. E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

[17.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 15 – 31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 193.

[18.](#) Regarding the rendering of the syntax of the verse, I independently drew the same conclusion as R. W. L. Moberly (“Yahweh Is One,” in *Studies in the Pentateuch* [Leiden: Brill, 1990]: 209–15).

[19.](#) J. Gerald Janzen, “On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–5),” *VT* 37, no. 3 (July 1987): 280–300.

[20.](#) An apodosis *waw* (Bruce K. Waltke and P. M. O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 519–26; and see S. D. McBride, “The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4–5,” *Interpretation* 27 [July 1973]: 273–83). Jakób Jocz believes that the undue emphasis on the unity of God on the part of the synagogue is the result of the controversy with the church: “It is the deliberate effort to contradict the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.... The effect of the controversy with the church was to shift the emphasis from the affirmation of loyalty to a philosophical concept of unity” (J. Jocz, *A Theology of Election: Israel and the Church* [London: SPCK, 1958], 41).

[21.](#) W. L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 25 (January 1963): 78–84.

[22.](#) D. R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), 154.

[23.](#) McBride, “Yoke of the Kingdom,” 304. In the New Testament, James emphasizes the Christian’s undivided life (see F. Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 496–511).

[24.](#) H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1956).

[25.](#) “We are what we repeatedly do — excellence then is not an act but a habit.” This saying is not actually by Aristotle but is often ascribed to him.

[26.](#) H. M. Wiener, “The Arrangement of Deuteronomy 12–16,” in *Posthumous Essays*, ed. H. Loewe (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), 28 (see

26–36).

[27.](#) Wilhelm M. L. de Wette, *Dissertatio critica, qua Deuteronomium a prioribus Pentateuchi libris diversum, alius cuiusdam recentioris auctoris opus esse monstratur* (1805). This work is foundational to Wellhausen’s famous documentary hypothesis that the Pentateuch consists of J, E, D, P documents.

[28.](#) Philip R. Davies, *In Search of “Ancient Israel,”* JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 40–41. For my personal experience of finding the lost Bible in an apostate church, see [chap. 26](#):I.F.4.

[29.](#) Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 217; D. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9*, rev., WBC (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 6A: 242–44. The debate depends on a grammatical ambiguity in the phrase *bēʾahad šēbāṭēykā* (12:14). Does *ʾahad* mean in “one [of your tribes],” as in 1 Sam. 26:15, or “any,” as in Deut. 23:17? Israel’s history supports the latter interpretation. Assuming with most critics that a single author edited the Deuteronomistic history, is not the interpretation of an ambiguous term more plausible that accepts a careful author’s coherence than his incoherence? Earlier sites were Gilgal (Josh. 4:19; 5:9; 7:6), Shechem (Josh. 8:33; cf. 8:24), Bethel (Judg. 20:18, 26–28; 21:2), and Shiloh (cf. Josh. 18:1; Judg. 18:31; 1 Sam. 1–2; Jer. 7:12–15). David brought the ark to Jerusalem during his reign (ca. 1000 BC), and Solomon transferred the ark at the dedication of the temple (ca. 960 BC; 1 Kings 8:1–13).

[30.](#) Bergen, “Dialogic in the Narrative of Deuteronomy,” 25.

[31.](#) J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, I – II (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1926), 27.

[32.](#) Eleazar, the learned high priest during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283–246 BC) also interpreted the regulations about food and contact with persons and objects as pointing to larger issues of human relations (see *Letter of Aristeas* [trans. R. J. H. Shutt in *OTP* 2], 130, 139, 142–48, 168).

[33.](#) We do not know the details of the Israelite court system. Evidently, in Israel’s theocracy, both the priest, who knew the law, and other judges respected by the people were involved in the judicial process.

[34.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke (with Jerry MacGregor), *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 41–58.

[35.](#) Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy: Not by Bread Alone* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 219.

[36.](#) “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give” (Winston Churchill).

[37.](#) House, *Old Testament Theology*, 189.

[38.](#) Patrick D. Miller, “The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the

Land,” *Interpretation* 23, no. 4 (October 1969): 451–65.

[39.](#) Luder Whitlock Jr. et al., eds., *New Geneva Study Bible: Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 280.

[40.](#) Cf. J. W. Watts, “The Legal Characterization of Moses in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 422–26.

[41.](#) Deut. 17:18, 19; 27:3, 8; 28:58, 61; 29:20; 30:10; 31:9, 24, 26. According to Jeffrey Tigay, two steles the size of the diorite cone on which the Code of Hammurabi is inscribed could “easily” contain more than Deuteronomy (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* [Philadelphia/Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 248).

[42.](#) J.-P. Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy*, Biblical Interpretation Series, vol. 14 (New York: Brill, 1997), 246, 261.

[43.](#) Bergen, “Dialogic in the Narrative of Deuteronomy,” 25.

[44.](#) Ibid., and Frank Moore Cross, “The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 274–89.

[45.](#) G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1950).

[46.](#) R. E. Clements, *God’s Chosen People: A Theological Interpretation of the Book of Deuteronomy* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1969), 98.

[47.](#) Gerald T. Manley, *The Book of the Law: Studies in the Date of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 80–81.

[48.](#) Ludwig Koehler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A. S. Todd (London: Lutterworth, 1957).

[49.](#) Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 91.

[50.](#) E. P. Blair, “An Appeal to Remembrance: The Memory Motif in Deuteronomy,” *Interpretation* 15 (January 1961): 41–47.

[51.](#) Clements, *God’s Chosen People*, 82.

[52.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), 226n85.

[53.](#) See C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1954), 25ff. for crucial terms.

[54.](#) Koehler, *Old Testament Theology*, 204.

[55.](#) Clements, *God’s Chosen People*, 58.

[56.](#) Ibid., 73–74.

[57.](#) Peter Diepold, *Israel’s Land* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1972).

[58.](#) Lit., “Solomon loved *I AM* by/in/with respect to walking in the statutes of David.”

[59.](#) Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1995), 12.

[60.](#) Von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, 15.

[61.](#) Robert Polzin, by contrast, thinks the Deuteronomist reinterpreted the earlier law, attributed to Moses, by adding the concept of grace.

[62.](#) Martin Noth first presented the now classical theory that an exilic author composed a comprehensive historical work extending from the framework of Deuteronomy (Deut. 1:1–4:43 and 31:1–32:44) to Kings, “scrupulously taking over and quoting the existing tradition but at the same time arranging and articulating all the material independently, and making it clear and systematic by composing summaries which anticipate and recapitulate” (Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* [Sheffield: Univ. of Sheffield Press, 1981], 6).

[63.](#) Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. M. I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 41.

[64.](#) No distinction is intended here between the theology of Moses and the application of that theology in the book of Deuteronomy. I came across Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of “Monotheism”* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) too late to incorporate his study into this theology.

[65.](#) James M. Houston, “The ‘Double Knowledge’ as the Way of Wisdom” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 308–26.

[66.](#) For names and epithets of God in Deuteronomy, see [chap. 13](#).

[67.](#) Cf. A. R. Millard, “La prophétie et l’écriture — Israël, Aram, Assyrie,” *RHR* 202 (1985): 125–44.

[68.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

[69.](#) Clements, *God’s Chosen People*, 65.

[70.](#) See Manley, *The Book of the Law*, 37.

[71.](#) Cf. R. L. Smith, “Some Theological Concepts in the Book of Deuteronomy,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 7 (October 1964): 17–25.

[72.](#) These contrasting characterizations of *I AM* become manifest in conjunction with Israel’s disobedience and then obedience to the Sinai covenant that enables *I AM* to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant (Deut. 4:29–30; 31:1–3).

[73.](#) John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 25.

[74.](#) Lester Kuyper, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” *Interpretation* 6 (July 1952): 330.

- [75.](#) Clements, *God's Chosen People*, 69.
- [76.](#) Ibid., 57.
- [77.](#) Kuyper, "Book of Deuteronomy," 329.
- [78.](#) Samuel R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 70.
- [79.](#) M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy; Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 17.
- [80.](#) Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment*, 48.
- [81.](#) Kuyper, "Book of Deuteronomy."
- [82.](#) Manley, *The Book of the Law*, 28–29.
- [83.](#) Clements, *God's Chosen People*, 36.
- [84.](#) E. W. Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 70.
- [85.](#) Kuyper, "Book of Deuteronomy," 332.
- [86.](#) Clements, *God's Chosen People*, 33.
- [87.](#) "Peculiar must here be understood in its basic Latin sense derived from *peculium*, which is a technical term denoting the private possession which a slave or child might possess" (Kuyper, "Book of Deuteronomy," 331).
- [88.](#) See H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).
- [89.](#) Kuyper, "Book of Deuteronomy," 333.

Chapter 18

THE GIFT OF LAND, PART 1: JOSHUA

The history of the Church ought properly to be called the history of truth.¹

Pascal, *Pensées*, 14.858

I. INTRODUCTION

The command of *I AM* at Horeb for Israel to set out for the Sworn Land and take it (Deut. 1:6–8) is about to be realized in Israel’s youth who survived the wilderness. The book of Joshua opens with Israel on the brink of crossing the Jordan to fulfill their destiny with the Land. God’s kingdom is about to irrupt into unholy Canaan through Joshua’s sword. Under the leadership of Joshua, Moses’ aide-de-camp, the youth of the nation’s founding generation, together with their offspring, who have known only the discipline of the wilderness, fulfill God’s promises to their patriarchal ancestors to give them the land of Canaan (Gen. 15:5–21; 17:4–8; 18:18–19; 22:17–18; 26:2–4; 28:13–15; 35:11–12; 46:3; Exod. 3:6–8; 6:2–8). Canaan, “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Num. 14:8; Deut. 11:9),² offers the nation rest, security, and abundance. Life in the Land represents “the goal and desire of the people of God.”³ John Goldingay says, “From the beginning of Israel’s story, each generation stands before Yhwh responsible for its own commitment and open to the possibility of entering the Sworn Land, but also open to the possibility of being condemned to wander for its lifetime rather than entering into God’s blessing.”⁴

The books of Deuteronomy and Joshua are linked by the chronology “after the death of Moses” (Josh. 1:1); by Moses’ aide taking the Land to fulfill *I AM*’s promise to Moses (vv. 2–3); by *I AM*’s appointment of Joshua, “As I was with Moses, I will be with you” (v. 5); by the people’s recognition of that election, “As we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you” (v. 17); and by other types of intertextuality (e.g., see 1:1–9 below).

The themes of Pentateuch merge throughout the book. (1) The drama of salvation history now comes to the climactic moment of crossing the Jordan to dispossess the Canaanites from their land. (2) As *I AM* elected Moses, he now chooses Joshua to succeed him; and as he chose Canaan for his holy land, he now assigns the tribes their portions in it. (3) The covenant relationship between *I AM* and all Israel is affirmed. It consists of *I AM*’s promises and Israel’s pursuit of them in faith and of *I AM*’s law and Israel’s obedience to his standards. These and other theological hues meld together so that they cannot be easily separated without destroying the glorious radiance of the whole.

In this chapter we analyze the structure and content of the book of Joshua with

theological reflections. The theme of possessing the Sworn Land is so important, yet so complex and fiercely debated, that we devote [chapters 18](#) and [19](#) to that theme in the Old Testament and [chapter 20](#) to the theme in the New Testament.

II. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF JOSHUA

The narrator unifies his book in several ways: by chronology —recording the events of one generation from the death of Moses (Josh. 1:1) to the death of Joshua (24:29–30); by its common theme — claiming the sworn land by faith; and by its unified structure and inclusios. Joshua’s farewell address, with its emphasis to serve *I AM* (23:1–16, esp. vv. 6–8) corresponds to his initial address that opens the book (1:1–18, esp. 6–9). The return of the eastern tribes to their lands in Transjordan (22:1–8) brings closure to their promise at the beginning of the book to remain in Canaan until the other tribes achieve their “rest” in Canaan (1:14–18).

The book’s theme informs its structures: taking the Land (Josh. 1–12), allotting it (Josh. 13–21), and retaining it (Josh. 22–24). The book opens with *I AM*’s eightfold promise to give Israel the sworn land (1:2, 3, 6, 11, 13, 14, 15 [2x]) and ends with reminders that *I AM* has faithfully kept his promises (23:14; 24:8, 11, 13). The book’s three sections are marked off by a summary refrain: the LORD gave the Land and Israel took it (11:23 [with an appendix in 12:1–24]; 21:43–45).⁵

In truth, however, as L. Daniel Hawk⁶ argues, all three sections contain striking tensions: faithfulness/obedience versus disobedience/unfaithfulness in connection with success and failure, integration and fragmentation, concordance and dissonance, closure and suspense, desire realized and unrealized. The book is marked by exceptions: “only” (Heb. *raq* [11:13, 22]) and “except” (Heb. *biltî* [11:19]). Success is increasingly followed by failure. These contrasts are part of the book’s theological opalescence.

A. TAKING THE LAND: CONQUEST AND COMPROMISE (1:1–12:24)

An inclusio marks off the first section about taking the Land: “as I promised Moses” (Josh. 1:3); “just as *I AM* had directed Moses” (11:23). Its key word is “enter” (2:18) in contrast to “cause to inherit” of the next section.⁷ Both are key expressions in Deuteronomy. The first section consists of a prologue (Josh. 1), narrative on entering into the Land and preparing for battle (Josh. 2–5)⁸ and subjugating the Land (Josh. 6–11), and an appendix of defeated kings (Josh. 12).

1. Prologue (1:1–18)

The frame of the prologue, “As I [i.e., *I AM*] was with Moses, so I will be with you [i.e., Joshua]” (1:5) and “As we [Israel] fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you” (1:17), points to the book’s theological theme: *I AM*’s faithfulness and Israel’s required obedience. The four addresses that make up the prologue, the first act⁹ of the first section, reinforces this:

I AM’s threefold charge to Joshua (1:1–9)¹⁰
⇒⇒⇒⇒Joshua’s charge to the officials (1:10–11)
⇒⇒⇒⇒Joshua’s charge to the eastern tribes (1:12–15)
Eastern tribes’ charge to Joshua (1:16–18)

I AM’s charge to Joshua picks up on Moses’ charge to his aide in Deuteronomy 31:1–8 (cf. Deut. 11:1–32) and initiates the book’s plot. The repetitive addresses underscore that *I AM* will give Israel the Land on the condition that Israel keeps faith with him. Joshua is to express that faith in three ways: to cross the Jordan and set foot on the Land (Josh. 1:2–5, 10–11), to be courageous to fulfill his task (1:6), and to meditate on the Law (1:7–9, 13). Faith and ethics, not jingoism, energize the battle.

The commands and the promises in Joshua 1:2–9 exhibit the covenant relationship. God elects Israel to enter and inherit the Land (v. 6), and Israel claims his gift by faith (vv. 3–4). It is not so much a matter of obedience albeit important, as a matter of trust in God (vv. 6, 7, 9). God gives Israel reason to

trust: *I AM* is present with them (vv. 5, 9). Verses 7–8 show that possessing the Land depends on Israel’s obedience to the Book of the Law. Trust and obedience kiss, not fight (cf. Rom. 1:5; 16:26; James 2:14–26). Joshua’s speech emphasizes that spiritual preparation is the real cause of victory (Josh. 1:10–15). The eastern tribes accept the condition, but they also recognize the nature of the covenant relationship — namely, *I AM* also must fulfill his role: “only [*raq*] may *I AM* be with you as he was with Moses” (1:17).

Zionists who claim the Land on the basis of the Bible wrongly fail to distinguish between the cursed Canaanites and non-cursed Palestinians, between holy war and secular war, between covenant fidelity and the denial of its relevance, and above all, between being politically “in the Land” and its fulfillment of being spiritually “in Christ” (see [chap. 20](#)).

2. Entry into the Land (2:1–5:12)

The second act opens with Israel moving to Shittim in Transjordan and closes with the cessation of manna and Israel’s eating the produce of Canaan. It begins with the king of Jericho fearing (Josh. 2) and ends with the fear of the kings of Canaan (5:1). The act shows how *I AM* single-handedly brings the faithful nation into the Land and how the nation is being prepared spiritually for battles ahead.

a. The Spies’ Report: Canaan Defeated (2:1–24)

Being strong and courageous may include sending spies.¹¹ Reconnaissance, espionage, and deception are necessary components even in holy war (cf. Josh. 2:2–7, 16–17; cf. Josh. 8:9; Judg. 7:10–11; 1 Sam. 26:6–12; 2 Sam. 15:32–37; 16:15–22).¹² Hawk, in his work *Every Promise Fulfilled* and in his commentary on Joshua, faults Joshua for sending spies: “the strategy ... has been tried before, with disastrous results.”¹³ But *I AM* commands Moses to spy out the Land (Num. 13:1–2), and Israel’s earlier failure was due to lack of faith, not the strategy. In fact, the narrative has come full circle with these two spies serving as a redemptive counterpart to the previous spies who were unable to prepare the way for entry into the Land. Now the Canaanites, not Israel, fear. Their report, due to Rahab’s testimony, assures Joshua that *I AM* has already engaged holy war by collapsing the enemy’s morale. As the Greeks used to say: “Whom the gods will destroy, they first make mad.”

Hawk also faults Israel for making a treaty with Rahab, contrary to Moses’ command (Deut. 7:2). But the rationale for Moses’ command — “for they will

turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods” (Deut. 7:4) — is not applicable to Rahab. This prostitute, more sinful than the average Canaanitess, is the most unlikely candidate for admission into the kingdom of God. In fact, however, her faith strengthens Israel’s faith in *I AM* in contrast to the earlier Israelite spies who disheartened the nation. Her confession of faith in *I AM* stands in marked contrast to the Canaanites’ dread of him (Josh. 2:9–11, 24). For James, Rahab is a model of saving faith (2:25), and the damning belief of the Canaanites is like that of demons — they shudder (James 2:19). Instead of working out Rahab’s appropriate response of trust, they work out a scheme of resistance.

The spies do not disobey Moses by making a treaty with the Canaanitess, but interpret the Mosaic law according to its intent. Moses’ command to liquidate the Canaanites in order to prevent their contagion shows that Moses does not have in view a Canaanitess who, like Abraham, renounces her pagan gods to walk with *I AM*, and who, like Ruth, risks her life to identify with the people of *I AM*. The Rahab incident sharpens the hermeneutical point that the Primary History includes both the Mosaic law and Israel’s subsequent history. In this case, the latter shows that *hesed* has priority over *herem*, or as James puts it: “Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13). *The whole of the Primary History is Israel’s Torah*¹⁴

This scene also shows that the exodus made “news” in the ancient Near East, even though the Egyptians did not report it,¹⁵ and that the Canaanites were familiar with Israel’s other victories and covenant (cf. Josh. 9).¹⁶ Rahab becomes the first convert by this good news that brings life to the believing and death to the unbelieving (2 Cor. 2:14–16)¹⁷.

b. Crossing the Jordan (3:1–4:24)

The second scene, “crossing the Jordan,” is unified by Israel’s going into the Jordan (Josh. 3:1) and coming up out of the swollen river (4:18; cf. 3:15). A coda follows to certify and memorialize the awesome event (4:19–24).¹⁸ In the two parts of this scene, the Jordan opens (Josh. 3) and Israel erects a national cairn in Cis-Jordan to commemorate the crossing (Josh. 4; see [chap. 4.II.A](#)).¹⁹ A detailed command and faithful execution framework reinforces the plot of Israel’s obedience and success.

In the symbolic events that take place in the spring, the Warrior of whom no image is possible, is represented by his throne, an ark of gold (4 × 2 × 2 ft.). The representative throne, carried by the Warrior’s priests, leads Israel into the swollen Jordan, dries it up, and protects the holy nation as they step into the

Sworn Land.²⁰ *I AM* and his priests remain at the place of danger, while the people cross over. By opening the way through the flooded Jordan, *I AM* teaches the Israelites and the Canaanites two lessons.

In Canaanite mythology Baal was believed to reign as king among the gods because he triumphed over the sea god and/or the river god. But *I AM*, not Baal, is the true God and lord over the waters (as he was at the Red Sea, at the flood, and at creation; see Ps. 114). Additionally, in surviving the crossing of the Jordan, *I AM* demonstrates his rightful claim to the Land. In the ancient Near East, a common way for obtaining the judicial verdict of the gods was by compelling the accused to submit to being cast into a river. If he drowned, the gods declared him guilty; if not, the gods declared him innocent (cf. Num. 5:16–28). By entering the Jordan first and then standing in the midst of the riverbed, the whole time the nation crosses over, *I AM* passes the trial by water. The triumph of *I AM* and of his people in the river crossing prove their claim to the Land. No wonder the Canaanite kings are fearful (5:1).

Israel's crossing of the Jordan symbolically marks their transition out of the hostile, precarious, and chaotic wilderness. The moment of crossing into the good land drastically revises Israel's being (cf. Josh. 23:15–16). Leonard L. Thompson says, " 'Land' becomes a cipher for a total social order. The move into the Land is nothing short of that creative change from chaos to ordered cosmos."²¹ The change begins with Joshua's river crossing and culminates in Solomon's temple building. *I AM* cares for the Land so that Israel's well-being depends on the Rain Giver, not on their calculations and their manipulation of the water supply as in Egypt (Deut. 11:10–12). As the crossing of the Jordan symbolizes the transformation of all the tribes from an unsettled and arid wilderness to a settled and arable land with walled cities, wells, and watered plains, so the ark symbolizes that the crossing that occurs with Israel's Savior and with his priests who mediate the transformation.

c. Ritual Preparations (5:1–15)

The third scene portrays Israel's threefold ritual preparation for the battles of act 2: circumcision (Josh. 5:2–9), Passover (vv. 10–12), and reverence for *I AM*'s heavenly commander, who functions as God's surrogate (vv. 13–15), a janus narrative that introduces the next scene. Each of these ritual incidents displays a parallel between Moses and Joshua, similarities that evoke the imagination to see Providence passing on the mantle of leadership from Moses to Joshua and so prompting the nation to follow Joshua in the subjugation and allocation of the Land.²² The celebration of Passover at the end of their journey reminds the

Israelites that they began this marvelous journey with God through his Passover (see [chap. 14.III.A.3.c](#)). On the very next day, they will enjoy the long-anticipated food in the Sworn Land. The forty monotonous years of eating manna in the desert are now behind them (Num. 11:4–9).

3. Subjugating the Land (5:13–12:24)

The conquest of the Land takes a long time (Josh. 11:18) and many battles (12:1–24). Of these the narrator selects four *battles* —Israel made a treaty, not war, with the Gibeonites — for historical and theological reasons and presents them according to an alternating pattern as the following schema shows:

- A Israel initiates battles against the two central cities (5:13–8:29)
 - 1 *I AM* miraculously destroys Jericho (5:13–6:27)
 - 2 Joshua by strategy destroys Ai (7:1–8:29)
- ⊃⊃⊃X Covenant renewed at Shechem (8:30–35)
 - A' Two Canaanite confederations attack Israel (10:1–11:23)
 - 1' *I AM* miraculously defeats the southern coalition (10:1–43)
 - 2' Joshua by strategy defeats the northern coalition (11:1–23)

The battles against Jericho (A1) and the southern coalition (A'1') are marked by *I AM*'s amazing interventions. They are balanced by the battles of brilliant strategy against Ai and the northern alliance (A2/A'2'). At the heart of these alternating scenes, Israel pledges to keep God's law in the Land (Josh. 8:30–35). This is what the war was all about.^{[23](#)}

a. Battle of Jericho (5:13–6:27)

Israel's first battle scene for the Land takes place at Jericho, which is crucially situated at the entrance to the Land from the east. On the night before the battle, *I AM*'s commander appears to Joshua, making the critical point that Israel is not alone. Joshua, not recognizing the captain's identity, asks, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" (Josh. 5:13). The commander responds unexpectedly, "Neither," making the critical point that it is not a matter of whether God fights for Israel, but whether Israel fights by faith for God. *I AM*'s presence is a boon for a faithful Israel but a bane for an unfaithful Israel. The commander's unsheathed sword, elsewhere an ominous and threatening gesture (cf. Num. 22:21–35; 1 Chron. 21:14–16), symbolizes the latter possibility. Joshua appropriately prostrates himself with nose and forehead on the ground, asking, "What message

does my Lord have for his servant?” (Josh. 5:14). Again, the answer is unexpected — “Take off your sandals” (v. 15) — making the critical point that reverence, which is signified by removing all dirt from *I AM*’s presence, is more important than making war. Only after this act of total worship does the captain give Joshua the battle plan for the capture of Jericho.²⁴

The divine King, represented by the ark, assumes his rightful place at the heart of his sacred warriors. The royal march around the city is based on widespread custom in the ancient Near East of laying claim to territory by tracing out its bounds.²⁵ Seven priests marching seven times on the seventh day —the number seven is repeated three times in Joshua 6:15 — signified divine perfection and so the sacredness of the event. Blowing on rams’ horns signaled the presence of the King (see 2 Sam. 6:15; 1 Chron. 15:28; Zech. 9:14) and the start of holy war, and the noise served to create panic and confusion in the enemy. The people, giving an earthshaking shout when they heard the last blast of the horns, gave voice to their faith and escalated the spiritual-psychological factor. Each warrior attacked the city straight ahead after the walls fell, indicating that each soldier exercised his own faith. That faith was consummated when they devoted the city to *I AM* (Josh. 6:17–21). One of the days had to be the Sabbath. Tradition relates that the stipulations of the seventh day were not allowed to interfere with the holy war.

After the battle, Joshua commands his army to “devote” (Heb. *ḥērem*) the city to *I AM*, which involves killing all the people and animals in it (Josh. 6:16–17, 21).²⁶ This practice is restricted to the Canaanites and not to be used against other people (Deut. 20:10–15; cf. Deut. 7:2–6); its goal is to protect Israel against the spiritual contagion of the Canaanites (Deut. 20:18). Moreover, their idols are burned, and Israel is to detest, not covet, the precious metals that cover them. Perhaps Joshua consigns the nonflammable precious metals to *I AM*’s treasury to symbolize that *I AM* is the Victor; the firstfruits of the plunder belong to him. That interpretation would explain why anyone who took these “firstfruits” of his victory away from him would compensate for it by giving *I AM* his firstborn, according to Joshua’s curse (Josh. 6:26). *I AM* approves the curse (cf. 1 Kings 16:34; Prov. 26:2).

b. Battle at Ai (7:1–8:29)

The second battle scene, against Ai, has two incidents: a debacle (Josh. 7:1–26) and a victory (8:1–29). The reasons for the debacle are manifold. First, and above all, whereas Rahab abandoned Canaan and her gods on account of *I AM* and Israel, Achan²⁷ proves disloyal to *I AM* and Israel. Rahab receives the land

back, but Achan loses his inheritance, and his sin of coveting the wealth of the detestable Canaanite culture adversely affects his entire nation (6:18).²⁸ Behind this story and other Scriptures (2 Sam. 21:1–9; Acts 9:4; Rom. 5:12–19; Col. 1:24) is the concept of national solidarity, the notion that an individual's acts affect the whole group (cf. Josh. 7:1, 11; 22:20). Second, Joshua's initiating battle without seeking divine approval violates the rules of holy war and smacks of autonomy (cf. Num. 27:21). Third, the spies violate holy war standards by counting on Israel's "thousands" (better, "contingents"), not on *I AM* (Josh. 7:3–4). Without *I AM*, as Joshua recognizes too late, the conquest of the Land would have been impossible. Fourth, in a military blunder, Joshua attempts a frontal attack against a walled city (7:4). Israel's spiritual failures help explain Joshua's stupidity. In his renewed and successful attempt to take the city, he follows the rules of holy war and of sound military tactics. Being spiritual is not to be equated with being senseless. In fact, righteousness and wisdom are coreferential terms.²⁹ The results of the initial failure are spiritually catastrophic; Israel's defeat heartens the Canaanites to think no longer that *I AM* and his people are invincible and correlatively disheartens Israel's confidence in *I AM*.

Joshua restores Israel to the spiritual mode of conquest by reconsecrating the people through a threefold purification ritual. God's providence exposes Achan's sin, and the sinner's confession glorifies God. Israel stones to death the rebel and his household, who are in corporate solidarity with him (see [chap. 10](#)). And they burn the bodies to purge the Land. In the second part of the scene, Joshua resumes subjugating the Land, this time by employing a successful, deceptive ambush.³⁰ While upholding *hērem* in the case of Jericho, Israel by *I AM*'s command keeps the plunder of Ai.

c. Covenant Renewed at Mount Ebal (8:30–35)

At the literary pivot of the alternating battle scenes, Israel renews covenant at Mount Ebal, as Moses had instructed (Deut. 11:29; 27:1–8). The mandated altar symbolizes God's claim to the Land (cf. Gen. 12:8; Exod. 20:24; Deut. 27:5), and the law written on stones defines the character of his rule. The burnt offerings symbolize Israel's total consecration to God and serve to ransom them. The fellowship offerings celebrate their relationship with God (see [chap. 16](#).VI.E).

d. Treaty with Gibeon (9:1–27)

As the fourth scene opens, the formerly quivering Canaanite kings (Josh. 5:1), whose people themselves had come from outside the Land, now band together to

fight against Israel (9:1–2; 10:1; cf. 7:9).³¹ The Gibeonites, however, are aware of Israel's foreign policy that allows the Israelites to offer terms of peace to distant cities in contrast to the *ḥērem* determined for the Canaanites (see Deut. 20:10–18). To spare their lives, the Gibeonites work out a different scheme from Rahab's rational faith and the kings' irrational resistance; they work out a compromise. They disguise themselves as coming from a distant,³² non-Canaanite city and offer themselves as slaves to Israel. Their ruse would have failed if Joshua had consulted *I AM* according to the prescribed rules of holy war (9:14; cf. Num. 27:21). Deception is a recognized necessity in war, but deception in making treaties is unconscionable.

Three times in successive verses (Josh. 9:18, 19, 20) the point is made that the not-so-innocent Israel must not break an oath, even though made under false colors, and so misuse God's name (cf. Exod. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; 1 Sam. 14:24; 2 Sam. 21:1–14; Matt. 5:37). This is a truth that needs to be reasserted in an age of broken marriage vows and of broken business contracts. Moreover, *I AM* shows his approval of Israel's keeping their oath by miraculously intervening on Israel's behalf when they come to the defense of Gibeon (Josh. 10).

Once again, however, Moses' law to eliminate all the Canaanites is qualified with regard to Canaanites who do not threaten the integrity of *I AM*'s covenant with Israel. Rahab, by her confession of faith in *I AM* and her desire to be in covenant with his people, poses no threat to their covenantal relationship. Likewise, the Israelites have no rationale to destroy the Gibeonites, who fear God (Josh. 9:24) and willingly accept the status of slaves at *I AM*'s altar (vv. 25–26). Unlike his predisposing of the other Canaanites, *I AM* does not harden their hearts to wage war against Israel (11:19–20). Israel's failure to consult *I AM* (9:14–15), we may suppose, is part of God's sovereign design to spare the Gibeonites to serve him at his altar. As with Rahab, the delegation from Gibeon both recognize and confess their fear of *I AM*— and so also their faith in him — and are familiar with the Mosaic law (9:24–25).³³ Both believe in *I AM*'s promise to give Israel the Land.

Nevertheless, both Israel and Gibeon fulfill the divine will in the wrong way and are punished.³⁴ Israel fails to consult *I AM* and therefore loses possession of four Gibeonite cities (9:16–17). The Gibeonites, unlike Rahab, seek to effect a treaty with Israel by subterfuge, and because of their unethical means, are put under a curse to become Israel's slaves in *I AM* liturgy. This curse becomes the first fulfillment of Noah's curse that Canaan would be a slave of Shem (Gen. 9:26).

Moreover, Israel's sparing of Gibeon and the villages around it shows that

exceptions could and must be made to the Law. When compromising situations arise because the word of God has not been sought or followed, leaders are to pursue the path of holiness and to avoid breaking still other laws. In this case, Israel's leaders, in spite of the grumbling of the people, refuse to rectify their first wrong by breaking their vows (Josh. 9:16–21). *I AM* shows his approval by empowering Israel to save Gibeon in the next scene.

e. Conquest of the Southern Confederacy (10:1–43)

Alarmed by Gibeon's defection, the king of Jerusalem rallies together four other southern cities to teach Gibeon a lesson. Gibeon's battleground provides a stage for the divine Warrior's display of heavenly wonders. This is the third and final scene in the first section of the book in which *I AM* intervenes in an amazing way on Israel's behalf.³⁵ These wonders do not necessarily defy scientific explanation—probably the Jordan dried up due to a landslide and the walls of Jericho fell in an earthquake (see n. 20) — but they cause us to marvel. Goldingay says, “At one level we may understand ... how the cosmos works ... or how a baby is formed in the womb.... Yet these do not cease to be wonders that at another level are inexplicable.”³⁶

In the best traditions of holy war, *I AM*, probably after being consulted, assures Joshua and his army of victory. The heavenly Warrior throws the enemy into panic when Joshua takes them by surprise after a 22-mile (35-km.) tortuous, uphill, all-night climb from Gilgal to Hebron (Josh. 10:9–10); and he rains a deadly barrage of hailstones upon the routed enemy fleeing toward their strongholds in the foothills (v. 11; cf. Exod. 14:24; Judg. 4:15; Ps. 77:17–19).³⁷ Using flashback, the narrator saves the most spectacular incident for the last. At Beth-Horon Pass, Joshua petitions God to stop the movement of the sun and moon (vv. 12–15) until Israel avenges themselves (i.e., defensively vindicating their sovereignty) on their enemy. Amazingly, the Lord submits his heavenly attendants to a man's command on earth's stage.³⁸

f. Conquest of the Northern Confederacy (11:1–15)

The northern campaign, like the southern one, also consists of two incidents: the rout of the Canaanites at the Waters of Merom (Josh. 11:1–9) and the subsequent capture of their cities (vv. 10–15). The vast northern coalition, “as numerous as the sand on the seashore” (v. 4) — a typical hyperbole in ancient Near East war stories³⁹ — is armed with the ultimate weapon of their day, the lightweight horse-drawn chariot, which can be disassembled and reassembled for

fighting in the plains. Once again Israel follows its rules of holy war: Joshua consults *I AM*, and he gives Joshua's army the encouragement and tactics needed against staggering odds. When Joshua's men have crippled the chariot horses, the charioteers will be forced to flee and the Israelites can pursue them. Joshua and his battle-hardened army attack suddenly in a preemptive strike (v. 7), and the holy rout is on again (v. 8).

g. Summary of the Conquest (11:16–12:24)

The first section of Joshua draws to conclusion with a series of victory reports, first in the form of a narrative summary of victories in Canaan (Josh. 11:16–23) and then in the form of a list of the kings that Moses, Joshua, and Israel's army have defeated (Josh. 12).⁴⁰ The impression of total victory in the reports is reinforced by the impressive catalogue of defeated kings. In the latter, the narrator repeatedly notes the change of dominion from thirty-three wicked kings to righteous *I AM* and the handing over of their lands to *I AM*'s tribes, who will sanctify the Land.

The summary of the conquest teaches several theological truths. First, the just kingdom of God rightfully replaces the unjust kingdoms of this world that have usurped his rule over the earth (Josh. 3:9–13; 8:30–35). Second, at the time of judgment, God decisively and entirely eliminates the wicked (11:12, 20). The Hebrew term *kōl* (entire, all, whole) is repeated eighteen times in 11:10–23 alone with regard to people, lands, kings, and cities. The narrator, however, qualifies this hyperbole by *raq* ("only"): only Hazor was burned on its tell (11:13), and some Anakim are still left in what will become Philistia (11:22). Third, the wicked cannot stand before a holy army, one that obeys God's commands and trusts in him (11:15; cf. 1:5; 10:8). The destruction of the Anakites, who had frightened the Israelites into disobedience a generation earlier (Num. 13:26–33; Deut. 1:26–28), concludes the account of the obedient conquest under Joshua (Josh. 11:21–22). Fourth, the *united* people of God — *all* Israel, including the tribes both west and east of the Jordan — dispossess the illegitimate rulers and inherit the Sworn Land (1:12–15; 12:1–6, 7–24). Fifth, God hardened the hearts of the Canaanites to wage battle and be slaughtered (11:20; see Exod. 8:32; 9:34). His longsuffering and patience, which had restrained his moral indignation and righteous anger, now bursts, and he unleashes his righteous judgment on the wicked nations who worshiped fertility deities instead of the sublime God. But God did not harden the hearts of Rahab with her family and of the Gibeonites. Sixth, and most important, the eternal and faithful God keeps his promissory covenants, though centuries may intervene between the promise and

its fulfillment (Josh. 21:45; cf. 10:42).

The war of subjugation has been successful—“the land had rest from war” (Josh. 11:23) — and the occupation of the Land can now commence. In other words, the final unit of the first section functions as a literary bridge between the subjugation of the Land and its allotment.

B. Allotting the Land (13:1–21:45)

Whereas the first section of the book of Joshua emphasizes that *I AM* gives Israel the Land, the second section primarily concerns the divine authorization of the distribution of Canaan among the tribes and Israel’s duty to occupy their tribal allotments. Whereas the two and a half eastern tribes have possessed their land, the nine and a half western tribes have not yet possessed theirs. Both sections stress the divine activity in subduing and allocating the Land, but the first section emphasizes Joshua’s success and the second section shows that many tribes have had limited success and occasional failures in settling their allotments (cf. Judg. 1).

The prologue (Josh. 13:1–7), which marks the new beginning and defines the central concern of the second section, is followed by the allocations of Transjordan to the two and a half tribes of Levi’s inheritance (13:8–33) and of Cis-Jordan to the remaining seven and a half tribes (Josh. 14–19). Thereupon follows the allotment of cities designated for specific purposes: cities of refuge (Josh. 20) and cities of the Levites (Josh. 21). The section concludes with the summary refrain (21:43–45). In truth, however, as the section progresses, “the focus becomes non-possession and non-fulfillment.”⁴¹

1. Introduction: Land That Remained (13:1–7)

The second section, like the first, begins with an address from *I AM*. There is much land still to be possessed by dispossessing the Canaanites (*yrš*, Josh. 13:1), and he will empower Israel for that task (v. 6). *Kōl* (“all”) is now used of “all” the land that remained to be possessed. Although all the Land is not occupied, *I AM* authorizes Joshua to allocate⁴² the Land in the interim (vv. 6–7).

By featuring Joshua’s old age (Josh. 13:1–2) the narrator implies that the future occupation of the huge tracts of Canaanite land that remain to be occupied will not occur under him (vv. 3–5).⁴³ The land allocated to some of the tribes

prior to their taking possession of it presents a continuing challenge to the faith of these unsettled tribes. Though all Israel has fought concertedly to establish themselves in the Land, the various tribes take possession of their territories in several ways, at different times, and with varying degrees of success. The two and a half eastern tribes ask for and receive from Moses the area east of the Jordan (13:8–33; cf. 12:1–6), but they are not entirely successful (13:13). West of the river, Judah, Ephraim, and half of Manasseh carve out land for themselves and then have it allotted to them by Joshua (13:17–18), but the remaining seven tribes do not have this success (cf. Judg. 1:27–36; 2:20–3:6). In their case Joshua has the land surveyed, divides it into seven appropriate geographical areas, and then casts lots for its distribution (18:1–19:51). It is up to each tribe to claim its allotment.

Thus the two sections of the book present two views of the nature and scope of Israel's occupation of Canaan. The first represents lightning-quick and spectacularly successful battles in conquering the entire land, resulting in its rest. The second features many battles over a long time (Josh. 13:13; cf. 11:18) with huge tracts of territories still to be possessed little by little after the conquest (13:1–7; 18:3; cf. Exod. 23:29–30; Judg. 1). Several considerations help resolve this tension.

First, the biblical writers share an already–not yet viewpoint toward *I AM*'s promise. In this case, Israel's possession of the Land and rest are expandable themes, for the Land was taken “little by little” (Exod. 23:30) but never consummately (Heb. 4:1–11 ; 11:39–40).⁴⁴ Future generations must play their part (Judg. 3:1–4). The Chronicler (1 Chron. 13:5) uses Joshua 13:1–7 to present David as greater than Joshua because he rules from Shihor of Egypt to the entrance of Hamath. Some of the envisioned allotments never fully materialized for the tribes; for example, Philistia never had a Hebrew population of settlers (contra Josh. 15:45–47). At any given point along the continuum of fulfillment, it can be said that God fulfilled his promise. Moreover, each fulfillment was a part of the ultimate fulfillment and could be reckoned as such. Isaiah saw the fulfillment of the ideal limits in the messianic age (Isa. 11:12–16). The New Testament presents the same tension regarding the kingdom of God: it is here “already” but in its fullest sense “not yet.”

Second, biblical historians present their materials according to different ideologies. Sometimes, as in the case of the books of Kings and Chronicles, they present the same history from two different angles; the Gospels present four different viewpoints of the Lord. To make their points they use a heavy hand, carefully selecting material, organizing it thematically, not necessarily chronologically, and editorializing as necessary. They write history to provoke

memory and inspire vision, not to chronicle events. Our narrator celebrates that now that Joshua's amazing campaigns have ended, Canaanite resistance is gone. Moreover, his concept of the Land is both geographic and ethnographic. Now that the Land in its ethnographic sense is defeated, it can be said that the whole land in its geographic sense has been taken. That memory prods Israel to settle the land that remains.

Third, the rhetorical hyperbole of the first section is typical of ancient Near Eastern conquest narratives and is presumably understood by the original narrator and his audience as such. In the first section, the writer already shows restraint both geographically — by not claiming that Joshua subdued Philistia — and temporally—by his admission that “Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time” (Josh. 11:18). In other words, the narrator balances the typical use of *kōl* (“all”) in conquest narratives with the historical qualifications signaled by *raq* (“only”).⁴⁵

2. Distribution of the Land East of the Jordan (13:8–33)

The summary of the conquest in Joshua 12 began with the kings and their territories east of the Jordan (12:1–6; cf. 1:12–15), and now the account of the distribution of the Land begins in [chapter 13](#) with the allocation of these territories. In this way the narrator represents Joshua finishing what Moses had begun. The rest of the chapter tells of the distribution of the land east of the Jordan. Verses 8–13 give a survey of that land. Verses 14 and 33, which pertain to the non-land inheritance of the Levites, function as a frame to the more detailed account of the distribution of the Land to the eastern tribes (vv. 15–31). By this frame the Levites' inheritance (i.e., the Lord and his offerings) is both highlighted and distinguished.

3. Distribution of the Land West of the Jordan (14:1–19:51)

The vocabulary of Joshua 14:1 and 19:51 are mirror images of each other and mark off the third unit. Between the introduction (14:1–5) and the conclusion (19:51), the narrator frames the unit with the robust faith and unmitigated successes of Caleb (14:6–15) and of Joshua (19:49–50) in taking possession of their inheritances. These two heroes, who by faith outlived their own generation,

claim and possess their inheritances. They are a model for Israel and leave no excuse for not possessing the inheritance by faith. These two scenic frames bound two other scenes, at Gilgal and at Shiloh. The first concerns the assignment of the Land to the two major tribes of Joseph and Judah (14:1–17:18) and the second, the allocation of territory to the remaining seven tribes (18:1–19:51).

a. Introduction (14:1–5)

The introduction names the land, the administrators, the method, the tribes, and the legal warrant. The Egyptians referred to this land as “Canaan,” the administrative term used here for the territory in view (see Josh. 21:2; 22:9). *I AM* directs the distribution of the holy land by means of the lot, while Eleazar the priest, Joshua, and the heads of the tribal clans (i.e., subtribal chiefs; see 21:1) mediate the decision and administer it (cf. 18:10; Num. 27:21).

b. Early Allotments at Gilgal: Judah and Joseph (14:6–17:18)

The early distribution of the Land at Gilgal first presents Caleb’s special inheritance (Josh. 14:6–15) and then the allotments of Judah (Josh. 15) and of Joseph (Josh. 16–17). Both scenes contain heroes and heroines. The warlike descendants of Makir, Manasseh’s firstborn, possess their lands (17:1–3). Both heroes, Caleb and Makir, are linked with mighty heroines. The boundary and city lists of both Judah and Joseph are broken up by two short vignettes that relate the possession of land by the bold and compelling requests of women: Acsah (15:13–19) and the daughters of Zelophehad (17:3–6).

(1) Caleb Conquers Hebron (14:6–16)

Caleb’s name means “dog” — a contemptible animal in the ancient Near East — and as such ironically reflects the honored status of this faithful and humble “slave of *I AM*” (Num. 14:24). In both the Amarna Letters (ca. 1350 BC) and Lachish Letters (586 BC), vassals use the term of themselves to express their loyalty to kings. After an introduction (Josh. 14:6a), Caleb’s story has three parts: his legal right based on God’s promise (vv. 6b–9), his claim of it by faith and war (vv. 10–12), and Joshua’s grant (vv. 13–15). God’s promise implies that casting lots will not determine Caleb’s inheritance. Caleb’s demand exemplifies the nature of the covenant with God. God grants Caleb the right to the Land initially because of Caleb’s faith (vv. 7–9), but now Caleb must possess it by

claiming it and driving out the mighty Anakites (vv. 10–12; see 1:6–7; cf. Matt. 25:34).

(2) Allotment for Judah (15:1–63)

The precise definitions of Judah's inheritance is a clear reminder that God has fulfilled his promises to give his covenant people the Land, which is fit for kings (Josh. 15:1–2; 21:43–45). Caleb's inheritance is mentioned again to stress his example for others (cf. 14:6–15; esp. 14:15 and 15:13). The account (15:13–19), however, is dischronologized, for Caleb and his son-in-law Othniel take their cities after the death of Joshua (cf. Judg. 1:1, 11–15).

The scene, however, ends with the disconcerting note that Judah does not drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem. Hawk says, "The notice stands outside the borders of text, just as Jerusalem lies outside the boundary of Judah, but it nonetheless intimates an association between Jerusalem and Judah which signals disintegration in tribal and territorial integrity."⁴⁶ In other words, the historical reality is messier than Israel's desired boundaries.

(3) Allotment for Ephraim and Manasseh (16:1–17:18)

The presentation of Joseph's allotment consists of an overview of its southern boundary (Josh. 16:1–4), the territory of Ephraim (16:5–10), the territory of Manasseh (17:1–13), and the complaint made by these tribes about the size of their inheritance (17:14–18). However, in contrast to Judah's detailed and precise boundaries, with the exception of Jebus, the boundaries of Ephraim and Manasseh are even messier: cities separated out for the Ephraimites are within the inheritance of the Manassites (16:9), and Manasseh has cities within Issachar and Asher (17:11). Moreover, there is no report of Ephraimite cities within Ephraim or of Manassite cities within Manasseh. In addition to not living within their allotted boundaries, these tribes do not dispossess the Canaanites from their cities (16:10; 17:12). There are gaps in their borders and within their borders. The request and failure of the people of Joseph at the end of the scene (17:14–18) contrasts sharply with the request and success of Caleb of Judah at the beginning of the preceding scene (14:6–15; Judg. 1:27–28). The peoples of Joseph complain that their allotment is too small; Joshua responds that their faith is too small.

c. Division of the Rest of the Land at Shiloh (18:1–

19:48)

Joshua, in connection with the whole assembly of Israel, moves his base camp from Gilgal (Josh. 14:6) to Shiloh in the heart of Ephraim and of the Land, where *I AM*'s Tent of Meeting is pitched (18:1–2; cf. Exod. 33:7; Num. 11:16; Deut. 31:14). The distribution of the Land in *I AM*'s presence reinforces the meaning: it is *I AM*'s land, to be sanctified for him (see Josh. 8:30–35), and he is giving it as a usufruct⁴⁷ to an Israel who worships him at his sanctuary. Joshua's urgent command that the seven remaining tribes possess their territories (18:3) suggests that they too are like the procrastinating, spiritually faltering Josephites.

The first lot falls to Benjamin, and his boundaries and cities are delineated as neatly and completely as Judah's at the beginning of the preceding scene (Josh. 18:11–28). By contrast, Simeon and Dan, to whom the lot falls in the second and seventh place, have no boundaries at all (19:1–9, 40–48). In mapping out the land, it is decided that Judah's portion, though designated by lot, is larger than needed, so Simeon is given land within Judah's allocation (v. 9), fulfilling Jacob's curse on Simeon (Gen. 49:7). Dan loses his allocation within the Land altogether (Josh. 19:47) and his eventual possession lies outside the boundaries fixed for the other tribes. Hawk comments:

The description of Israel's lands in Canaan thus begins with the success of Judah and concludes with the failure of Dan. The entire corpus manifests the steady unraveling of coherence. One senses a degeneration from Caleb's victories and Judah's well-ordered territory to Dan's displacement and disintegration. The two accounts, moreover, are the only ones which actually related how tribes took possession of their territories.⁴⁸

d. Conclusion (19:49–51)

The conclusion consists of two parts: Joshua's inheritance (Josh. 19:49–50) and a fulsome concluding report about the administrators of the lot, the place of casting, and the complete distribution of the land (v. 51). The summary is important for the theology of this book. The unified people under God's command give the town of Timnath Serah to Joshua, and he exemplifies for them faith's obedience by requesting this as his inheritance, possessing it and rebuilding it. Through the casting of lots at the entrance to the Lord's tent, it was clear that this was *I AM*'s land, a gift to Israel, to be taken by faith. Joshua's example shows that the tribes are without excuse.

e. Designated Cities (20:1–21:42)

(1) Asylum Towns (20:1–9)

As a practical measure to assure justice and mercy, God instructs Moses to have Israel locate six cities, three on each side of the Jordan, where anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally can flee and find asylum from the avenger of bloodshed.

(2) Levitical Towns (21:1–42)

Though the Levites have the Lord for their inheritance (Josh. 13:14, 33), they need towns to live in and pasturelands to support them. Like Joshua and Caleb, and unlike the slothful, timorous seven tribes who need Joshua's prompting (18:2–3), the heads of the three branches of Levites (Num. 3:17) take the initiative and approach the administrators of the sacred lot at Shiloh, claiming God's promise through Moses to give them forty-eight towns with their adjoining pastureland, including the six cities of refuge (Josh. 21:41–42; cf. Num. 35:1–5). The Israelites accede to the Levites' request and give from their own inheritance to this more pilgrimlike tribe. In giving this sort of "tithe," they bless themselves, for the separatist Levites in their midst teach them the catechism that sanctifies, blesses, and secures them in the Land (Deut. 33:8–11). At the time these towns are distributed, some of them are still in Canaanite hands. The Levites have to possess them by faith's obedience.

f. Summary: God's Amazing Faithfulness (21:43–45)

The narrator himself qualifies his concluding summary statement of Israel's complete subjugation and possession of the Land. His counterplot of a diachronically unraveling society severely qualifies his Near Eastern style conquest narrative (see [chap. 4.11.A](#) and [ll.B](#)). Moreover, the narrator's painting of Israel's spiritual warts on his noble portrait of Israel as *I AM*'s faithful covenant partner brings to the fore the unexpressed grace of God as well as the expressed faithfulness of God.

C. Retaining the Land (22:1–24:27)

The narrator now relates three episodes to show that Israel must retain the Land in the same way they possessed it. However, the call to retain the Land by covenant fidelity creates tension with the reality of Israel's heart to be unfaithful.

After Joshua's admonition to retain covenant loyalty, the noble eastern militia builds an altar on their way home to bear testimony to their unity with *I AM* (Josh. 22:1–34), but while the altar ostensibly speaks of fidelity to *I AM* and tribal unity, it implicitly covers over infidelity and disunity. In his farewell address to Israel's leaders, Joshua stresses covenant loyalty to remain in the Land (23:1–16), and solemnizes Israel's covenant by renewing it at Shechem (24:1–27). Both his farewell and covenant renewal speeches reflect on Israel's past success (23:3–5; 24:2–13), challenge them to fidelity in the present (23:6–13; 24:14–15), and predict future apostasy (23:15–16; 24:19–22).

1. Eastern Tribes Released and Their Altar of Witness (22:1–34)

Joshua releases the Transjordan tribes from further service in Canaan because they have fulfilled their obligations (Josh. 22:1–8; cf. 1:15–18; 21:43–45; Num. 32:20–22; Deut. 3:20). His generous farewell forms a link with the commands in Joshua 1 (cf. Josh. 22:2–3 and 1:12–18). They have displayed faith's endurance in performing this lengthy mission (cf. Josh. 1:1–18; Heb. 12:1) and have finished their course (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6–8). *I AM* affirms Joshua's evaluation by blessing them (Josh. 22:6). Joshua draws his speech to conclusion by essentially repeating *I AM*'s charge at the beginning of the book (22:5; cf. 1:7). Sending them away to a splendid homecoming with the plunder they have won (see 11:10–15), he charges them in the best traditions of holy war to share it with those who have remained behind to protect their homes (cf. Num. 31:27; 1 Sam. 30:16–25). All enter their rest fully rewarded (cf. Matt. 6:18; 16:27; Col. 3:24; 1 Tim. 5:18).

However, the eastern militia perform one last deed of exceptional loyalty to *I AM* before rejoining their families. So that future generations in western Israel may not bar the eastern tribes from coming to worship *I AM* west of the Jordan, where he has caused his name to dwell, they build an imposing altar at Geliloth as a witness that *I AM* has elected them also to be his people. On the surface the story about the witness altar emphasizes the unity of the people of God through their common faith in *I AM* and shrewd diplomacy at the time of Joshua's death. But on a deeper level, future apostasy, expulsion, and destruction, like distant clouds and thunder, resonate in the background of this sunlit surface, raising the question of who is true Israel. The tribes fear and do not fully trust one another. The eastern tribes build the altar because they fear that later Israelites will use the Jordan to expel them from a share in *I AM*, transforming them from insiders

to outsiders. The western tribes fear that already the eastern tribes have apostatized (Josh. 22:16; cf. 22:19; Deut. 12:1–7).⁴⁹ Their charge against the easterners falls into two sections (Josh. 22:16–18, 19b–20), each of which connects the building of the altar with previous apostasy and death. In other words, each fears wrong by the other.

2. Joshua's Farewell (23:1–16)

Joshua's "last words" put him in the distinguished company of Moses (Deut. 31:1–13), Samuel (1 Sam. 12:1–25), and David (1 Kings 2:1–9), all of whose valedictory addresses emphasize Israel's need to keep covenant fidelity—the essential theme of the Deuteronomistic history — and signal the end of major narrative units. This second scene of the final section is closely related to the second section of the book. The reference to Joshua's advanced age (Josh. 23:1) —approximately 110 years (24:29) — resembles the opening of the second section (13:1), and this scene pertains to Joshua's exhortation to possess the tribal allotments he allocated in that section.

The content of Joshua's farewell, although structured differently, resembles that of Moses' address in Deuteronomy 4: call to obedience (cf. Josh. 23:6, 11 with Deut. 4:1–2, 6–9, 39–40), affirmations that *I AM* has kept covenant fidelity by dispossessing the Canaanites (Josh. 23:5, 9, 14; Deut. 4:37–38), stern warning against following the gods of Canaan (Josh. 23:7, 12–13; Deut. 4:15–20, 23–24), and prediction that Israel will eventually be expelled from the Land (Josh. 23:15–16; Deut. 4:25–28).⁵⁰ Joshua's call for covenant fidelity matches his addresses that opened the book, including many intertextual allusions to Deuteronomy (compare Josh. 23:6 with 1:7; 23:9b with 1:5a). Joshua speaks clearly, asserting covenant promises to inspire Israel's love and covenant threats to provoke the fear of the Lord. God's past faithfulness in keeping with his covenant promises should challenge his saints to fidelity, comfort them in adversity, and restrain them in temptation (22:4–5).

The address again paradoxically represents *I AM*'s promises to the patriarchs regarding the Land as already fulfilled through Joshua's victories but not yet fulfilled through the necessity of his successors to possess their allotments. *I AM*'s promise to be with Joshua "all the days of your life" (Josh. 1:5) is seen to be fulfilled. On the one hand, the address brings closure to the settlement of the Land: Joshua is about to die, Israel is settled in the Land, and *I AM* has been faithful. On the other hand, possession is incomplete, the temptation to follow Canaanite gods remains, and an ominous threat, even a prediction, anticipates

that Israel will end up as wandering exiles outside the Land. In short, Joshua's farewell asserts both a successful ending to subduing the Land and the beginning of Israel's failed history to retain it. As subjugating the Land is conditioned upon obedience to *I AM*'s covenant, complete possession and retention of the Land are similarly conditional. Whereas Joshua and his generation kept covenant, their descendants will not. Hawk says, "The 'good word' of Israel's past paradoxically points to the 'evil word' of Israel's future (v. 15)."⁵¹

3. Covenant Renewal at Shechem (24:1–28)

Israel's leaders, eyewitnesses of *I AM*'s amazing acts in the founding of the nation, seal and renew the covenant four times, twice under Moses (Exod. 24; Deut. 29:1) and twice under Joshua (Josh. 8:30–34; 24:11–13, 18). Covenant renewal is necessary because Israel has again fallen into idolatry (24:14).

The ceremony scene is framed by references to all Israel (Josh. 24:1, 27) and to Shechem (vv. 1, 25). The site is probably chosen because Jacob put away the foreign gods of his household beneath the oak at Shechem (Gen. 35:1–4). The site also points to *I AM*'s fidelity to keep his promise to the patriarchs to give them the Land.

The covenant is again similar to the ancient Near Eastern "vassal treaties": *preamble* identifying the Great King as its Author (Josh. 24:2a), *prologue* reciting the King's past kindnesses to the vassal (vv. 2b–13), *stipulation* to serve only the King and his kingdom (vv. 14–15), *rites of commitment* (vv. 16–24), and *deposit* of a treaty document (vv. 25–26). Joshua speaks with the authority of Moses (Deut. 5:27) and with that of a prophet (Josh. 24:1–2a; cf. Deut. 18:15–19). The historical reflection (Josh. 24:2–13) focuses on the Land as seen by its contents and its omissions. It rehearses Israel's history since the days of Abraham, commencing with the time outside the Land worshiping other gods (v. 2) and culminating in *I AM*'s gift of the Land promised to Abraham (v. 3) and now received by his descendants. Earlier material from the creation to Abraham is not summarized because the history that climaxed with the receiving of the Land began with the promise to Abraham. Of Abraham's descendants, God chose Jacob, not Esau, to inherit the Land (v. 4), but the route to their inheritance included the sojourn in Egypt, Israel's awesome exodus from there to the Land, and years in the desert outside the Land (vv. 5–7). Remarkably, in his summary of the book of Exodus, Joshua makes no mention of Sinai, and in his summary of Numbers, he makes no mention of their rebellion. This is so because the prologue features *I AM*'s giving Israel the Land as a gift. *I AM*'s dynamic role in

this salvation history is underscored by verbs such as “I took,” “I gave,” and “I brought.”

This chain of indicatives in the historical prologue is replaced by imperatives in the stipulation. Ten times the key word “serve” is repeated (Josh. 24:14 [2x], 15 [4x], 18, 19, 21, 24) to define the stipulation. To serve is implicitly equated in verse 26 with keeping the Book of the Law (see p. 497). The stipulation is framed by Joshua’s call to throw away their gods and the people’s acceptance of the command (vv. 14–18, 23–24). Three times in vv. 14–24 they declare, “We will serve *I AM*.” Between Joshua’s admonition and Israel’s agreement, however, Joshua solemnly warns the people that they are not able to keep covenant and will apostatize. When that happens God’s fidelity to keep his words will turn from doing them good to destroying them. The people unwittingly confirm their certain failure by their overconfidence. Their doom is sealed when they bear witness against themselves (i.e., indict themselves; cf. Num. 5:13; Deut. 19:16; Prov. 24:28; Mic. 1:2). The narrative repeats the solemn agreement and recounts Joshua’s setting up of a rock as a witness against Israel — repeated twice for emphasis — should they renege on their promise to serve *I AM*. The altar of witness of the preceding chapter bears ambiguous witness to Israel’s unity and disunity, and the rock of witness bears ambiguous witness to devotion and rejection.

The scene is unsettling. The worship of other gods is already a present reality, and future apostasy is presented as inevitable because of Israel’s overconfidence. Ironically, their confession of fidelity is at the same time a confession of their infidelity. They trust themselves, not *I AM*, to keep faith. This concluding irony highlights the book’s tension: the ambiguously successful subjugation of the Land with incomplete/certain failure to possess the Land. The book of Joshua implicitly looks forward to the need for a new covenant even as the book of Deuteronomy explicitly prophesies a new covenant after exile. Once again we see that the Old Testament is a masterpiece of indirection, understandable only to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

4. Postscript: Burial Notices (24:28–33)

After Joshua dismisses the people to their homes, three burial reports — of Joshua, Eleazar, and the bones of Joseph — bring closure to *I AM*’s promise to give Israel, particularly Joshua and his generation, the Land.

THOUGHT QUESTION

Assuming that the Land represents the Christian’s life in Christ (see [chap. 20](#)),

how does the book of Joshua instruct you on entering into that life, on your understanding of God's allotting life in Christ with the church, and on your retaining that life?

[1.](#) Pascal has in mind the Catholic Church; I have in mind "salvation history" of the Israel of God. Pascal was a Jansenist who believed both in the Roman Catholic Church and in Paul's doctrine of grace by faith in God's promises realized in Jesus Christ. The Calvinists recovered Paul's doctrines, but Pascal considered them heretics. By "Church" in this quote he means the Roman Catholic Church, though his cardinal rejected his Jansenist teachings. Pascal without realizing it was speaking of the true catholic church, not the church of Rome.

[2.](#) Milk and honey are metonymies of effect, associated with luxurious pasturelands and flowers.

[3.](#) Patrick D. Miller, "The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the Land," *Interpretation* 23 (1969): 461–65.

[4.](#) John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 1:466–67.

[5.](#) The equal distribution of material between the first and last two sections suggests the author may have had in mind composing a literary bifid (i.e., a book to be written in an intentional and meaningful way on two scrolls).

[6.](#) L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

[7.](#) The Merneptah stele makes the first clear extrabiblical reference to Israel in the land in Merneptah's fifth year (1209/1208 BC). Pharaohs from the time of Moses mention Edom and Moab. The Amarna Letters of the mid-fourteenth century mention the Apiru, or displaced persons. Like the biblical Hebrews in Joshua, the Apiru tried to overcome cities and expel their petty kings to gain control. In the last ten or fifteen years of Akhenaten's reign, the main period of the Amarna Letters, a certain Abdi-ashirta and his son, who aided and succeeded him, created from scratch with the aid of Apiru fighters the Amurru kingdom based in Northern Lebanon, which was much larger than the modest Hebrew kingdom Joshua founded (see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 165–66).

[8.](#) Joshua's vision of the *I AM*'s commander (5:13–15) forms a transition between spiritual preparations and the battle of Jericho.

[9.](#) By "act" I mean a principal division of the narrative's sections. By definition, a narrative tells a story, which involves plot development.

[10.](#) Note also the intertextual connections between v. 2 with Deut. 10:11; v. 3

with Deut. 11:23–24; v. 5a with Deut. 7:24; vv. 5b – 7a, 9 with Deut. 31:6–8. Verses 7b – 8 recall texts in Deuteronomy, which refers to itself as “the book of the Law,” and stress the importance of meditating on and obeying this law (see Deut. 5:32–33; 30:10). “This Jordan” occurs only in Josh. 1:2 and Deut. 31:2.

[11.](#) The use of spies and misinformation is well attested in the Mari archives in northeast Syria. “In Old Babylonian city states the local ruler required of tavern keepers to inform him of rogues” (Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 167).

[12.](#) Indirect analogies of situations where deception and misinformation are right and necessary may help to elucidate how the ethics of war differ from those of peace. Hunters use blinds; athletes assume deceptive postures; chess players deceive their opponents into taking a weaker piece in order to capture a stronger one; poker players keep straight faces, *etc.* In such situations deception is recognized as part of the “game” and so is not wrong.

[13.](#) Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 61; *idem*, *Joshua* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000).

[14.](#) The New Testament inferentially supports this traditional interpretation against Hawk by honoring Rahab (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25).

[15.](#) The Egyptian silence resembles that of Saddam Hussein’s press secretary, who claimed the Iraqi army held the Baghdad airport while television showed American troops occupying it! Western reporters were as incredulous as Western scholars are incredulous of the silence of ancient Egyptian sources.

[16.](#) Cf. Josh. 2:9 with Exod. 15:15b – 16a; Josh. 2:11b with Deut. 4:39.

[17.](#) Hawk (*Every Promise Fulfilled*, 70) explains the scarlet cord (*tiqwat haššānî*, v. 21) as a pun in code. *Tiqwat* means both “cord” and “hope,” and scarlet (*šānî*) signals the two men (*š^enê*) who made the oath, giving hope.

[18.](#) John Beck (“Why Do Joshua’s Readers Keep Crossing the River? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Joshua 3–4,” *JETS* 48/4 [Dec. 2005]: 689–99) documents the very grave dangers Israel faced in fording the Jordan and in that light explains the exaltation of *I AM* and his general, Joshua.

[19.](#) As is now well known, the Jordan’s flow stopped due to landslides at Adam near Zarethan (3:16) in AD 1267, 1906, and 1927. The last landslide dammed up the river for twenty-one hours, which suggests that there would have been a sufficient amount of time for Israel to cross downstream (John Garstang, *Joshua, Judges* [London: Constable, 1931], 136–38).

[20.](#) Assyrian military campaigns often begin with the safe crossing of a river in flood, a sign of divine protection (cf. J. van Seters, *The Life of Moses* [Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994], 144–45).

[21.](#) L. L. Thompson, “The Jordan Crossing: *Šidqot* Yahweh and World

Building,” *JBL* 100 (1981): 343–58.

[22.](#) Joshua miraculously led Israel across the Jordan at the same season of the year as when Moses shepherded them across the Red Sea. Both leaders struck fear into their enemies (Josh. 5:1; cf. Exod. 15:14–16); both initiated circumcision before fully entering the task (Josh. 5:2–9; cf. Exod. 4:24–26); both celebrated the Passover as part of the march to the Holy Land (Josh. 5:10–12; cf. Exod. 12); both took their sandals off before *I AM* (Josh. 5:13–15; cf. Exod. 3:5).

[23.](#) The full battle reports against Jericho and Ai and the battles for Gibeon and at Makkedah, followed by the staccato, summary accounts of the attacks on the following six cities, resemble the campaign annals of Tuthmosis III of Egypt (ca. 1458–1438 BC) (Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 170).

[24.](#) Jericho is the oldest known city on the earth (ca. 7000 BC). It was heavily walled throughout its history because it provided access into Canaan. Major earthquakes happen in the Jordanian Rift an average of four times a century, and the excavations at Jericho have revealed clear evidence of a collapse of at least one mud brick wall. This data gives credibility to the epic without detracting from the wonder that God predicted it and executed it with perfect timing.

[25.](#) In Egypt a new Pharaoh at his coronation circumambulated a fortified wall in a festal process. The Hittite king toured his realm at an annual winter festival. In the Canaanite “Poem of Baal,” discovered at Shamra-Ugarit, that god made the rounds of “seventy-seven towns, eighty-eight cities” to assert his new kingship over gods and men (Theodore H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament: A Comparative Study with Chapters from J. G. Frazer’s Folklore in the Old Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], 411–15).

[26.](#) The NIV text note defines *h.ërem*: “the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them.” The practice of slaying a person and burning him or her for breaking a taboo is well-attested in the ancient Near East.

[27.](#) Achan’s nickname, a parody on his real name, is *Achor* (“Trouble,” 1 Chron. 2:7). Moreover, since the meaning of the Hebrew root *kn* (*ākān*, “Achan”) is unknown, Achan may be an anagram of the root *kʿn* (*kēnāʿan*, “Canaan”). If so, Achan signifies the hidden presence of Canaan in Israel, and that spells “trouble.” In any case, Rahab and her family inherit the covenant; Achan and his family are cut off from his people (cf. Matt. 1:5; Heb. 11:31; James 2:25).

[28.](#) F. A. Spina (*The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005]) chooses these six outsider stories from the Old Testament and the story of the Samaritan woman in the

New Testament to prevent the exclusivity theme of God's election of Israel from being construed as a one-dimensional, simplistic feature of Old Testament theology: Esau and Tamar, Rahab and Achan, Naaman, Jonah, and Ruth.

[29.](#) *Coreferential* refers to terms that refer to the same extralinguistic referent but with different meanings.

[30.](#) A Hittite king in 1275 BC sent out decoys who duped Rameses II of Egypt into making a rash advance on Qadesh (Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 167).

[31.](#) According to the Amarna correspondence, the petty kings of Canaan continually feared that other cities would join up with the Apiru and band together against a third party.

[32.](#) The Gibeonite emissaries appear as Israel would have appeared after their trek in the wilderness had not *I AM* provided for them (Deut. 29:3–6). Ironically, the Gibeonites have eyes to see and ears to hear *I AM*'s marvelous wonders for Israel (Josh. 9:9, 24), but the Israelites do not (Deut. 29:9–10).

[33.](#) Although *de jure* there was no reason to put in treaty form the covenant to spare the lives of those from a distant city, the delegates *de facto* are in Canaan, and so it is necessary that the Gibeonites be exempted from the Canaanite *h.ërem* (9:15).

[34.](#) A similar conflicted situation occurs in Israel's choosing of a king (see [chap. 22](#) below).

[35.](#) Cf. crossing the Jordan (Josh. 3–4) and the felling of Jericho's walls (Josh. 6).

[36.](#) Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 522.

[37.](#) K. Lawson Younger Jr. (*Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, JSOTSup 98 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 209) cites striking parallels between the Ten Year Annals of Muršili and Josh. 10. (1) Just as the hero and his army arrive, the deity sends his "miracle" and there is confusion and discouragement in the enemy camp. (2) The deity hurls his meteor/stones, killing many of the enemy. (3) The hero fights a great field battle and then pursues the enemy. (4) The hero conquers the entire enemy region in one campaign. Younger (pp. 210–11) also cites similarities in Sargon's Letter to the God. (1) A confederation is broken up. (2) A great slaughter takes place during the pursuit on the ascent and descent of the mountain. (3) A pursuit takes place over a great distance. (4) During the descent the divine intervention of hailstones occurs. (5) The enemy hides in the recesses of the mountain/cave. (6) The enemy is subdued.

[38.](#) For various interpretations of the long day, see *ibid.*, 211–20.

[39.](#) *Ibid.*

[40.](#) The arrangement of preface (12:1–2) followed by a full list of those Moses and Joshua had defeated, forming a topographical list, in several coherent groups of place names, is almost a verbal equivalent of the lists of vanquished places and peoples by New Kingdom pharaohs. These lists with pictorial accompaniment can still be seen on pylon towers and the walls of their temples, such as those at Karnak.

[41.](#) Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 99.

[42.](#) “Allocate” (Josh. 13:6 NIV) glosses “cause to fall,” suggesting allocation by lot (14:2; 15:1; 18:6; 19:51).

[43.](#) Although the Philistines are not ethnic Canaanites, their land is reckoned as belonging to Canaan (Josh. 13:2).

[44.](#) See Sara Japhet, “Conquest and Settlement in Chronicles,” *JBL* 98/2 (1979): 205–18.

[45.](#) Younger (*Ancient Conquest Accounts*) documents that rhetorical hyperbole was a regular feature of ancient Near Eastern military reports in the second and first millennium. Josh. 10:20 says that Joshua completely destroyed the Amorite kings but then adds, “The few who were left reached their fortified cities.”

[46.](#) Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 105.

[47.](#) *Usufruct*: “The legal right of using and enjoying the fruits or profits of something belonging to another” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Ed.). The owner who grants this right to a beneficiary retains the authority to revoke the legal right if he determines that the beneficiary misuses and/or abuses that which the owner granted to him.

[48.](#) Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 112.

[49.](#) Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 134–41; and D. Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative II: Structural Analysis in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 39 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 39–134.

[50.](#) *B^{ec}ābr^ekem* ambiguously means, “when you violate,” which can be interpreted either as a temporal or conditional clause.

[51.](#) Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 130.

Chapter 19

THE GIFT OF LAND, PART 2: THE OLD TESTAMENT

Sincerity of the Jews. — They preserve lovingly and carefully the book in which Moses declares that they have been all their life ungrateful to God.... He declares that God, being angry with them, shall at last scatter them among all the nations of the earth; that as they have offended him by worshipping gods who were not their God, so he will provoke them by calling a people who are not his people.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 9.631

I. INTRODUCTION

The kingdom of God irrupts on earth: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The Old Testament focuses that in-breaking of God’s kingdom on Israel’s land and particularly on its capital, Jerusalem.¹ Moshe Weinfeld, in his book *Promise of Land*, says, “The fate of the land is the focal point of biblical historiography.”² In all the varied experiences of the people of God, the teaching of the Old Testament retains and refreshes the people’s memory of the promises of the Land. “Land,” or “earth” (Heb. ^{ʾeres}), is the fourth most frequent word in the Old Testament. In 1943 Gerhard von Rad proposed that in the Hexateuch (Genesis–Joshua) there is probably no subject as important as the Sworn Land; that promise gives it its theological character.³ The prominence of land in biblical theology arises from the deep and moving yearning in the human spirit to have a home, to be in a safe place.⁴

The importance of land in biblical theology extends beyond this existential need to a sociological significance. Land symbolizes the transition from disordered existence to ordered structures (see [chap. 20](#)). More than territorial *space*, land is a *place* of memory and meaningful existence. It symbolizes the roots of oneself. Brueggemann observes, “Place is space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations.”⁵ In biblical theology the ideal “land” is the place where *I AM* chooses to be uniquely present to provide for and protect his people.

In this chapter we reflect theologically first on the cosmic earth in salvation history (esp. Gen. 1–11) and then on the Land, according to the successive epochs of that history.⁶ In and through each epoch, the people of God learn new aspects of what it means to live in relationship with the living God.

II. COSMIC EARTH

Earth (^{ʿereṣ}) in the cosmic sense and as actual turf (^{ʾāḏāmā}) plays a prominent role in the primeval narratives of Genesis ([chaps. 1–11](#)): the creation of the cosmos (Gen. 1), the gift of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2), man’s expulsion from Eden (Gen. 3), Cain’s expulsion from the arable land (Gen. 4), the destruction and re-creation of the cosmos (Gen. 6–9), the distribution of the earth to the nations (Gen. 11), and the scattering of the nations after the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). The Creator is the source of all gifts of the natural order to all people, and Israel’s special gifts, including its land, are part of that natural order. From the creation account and the first eleven chapters of Genesis, one can infer the several relationships of the Creator to his creation; these relationships are made explicit elsewhere in the Old Testament.

A. The Benevolent God Is Transcendent

The Creator stands apart from his creation and retains his transcendence over it (see “Creation,” [chap. 7](#)). He created the earth and the so-called natural order according to his own pleasure and for his own glory (Ps. 115:3; Isa. 43:7). As Creator, God knows the intricate design of his created order, and because he is good, his commands conform to that design. It is folly for human beings to challenge his revealed commands, for they conform to his design.

In common grace, the benevolent Creator separated land from water to provide a source to produce and sustain life for the flora (Gen. 1:9–13), fauna (1:24), and human beings (2:27). The earth provides space for animals, a source of wealth for people (2:12), and places for them to multiply and be culture makers. The word *land* connotes that which is benevolently ordered by God’s sovereignty in the interests of human life and security (Ps. 24:1–10; cf. Prov. 2:21–22). Since the earth is the agent through which God mediates his generative power, there is no excuse for deifying it as “Mother Nature”; so-called “nature” is God’s mediated power and life. Moreover, God appointed humankind as his regents to subdue and care for the earth.

Although God normally uses the natural order as a secondary cause to sustain

the earth, he is not restricted in his power over this natural order. His awesome acts that overrule that order—as when he cleanses a leper by seven washings in the Jordan and makes an iron axhead float by throwing a stick in the water (2 Kings 5:1–6:7) — function as signs and wonders, causing people to fear him and trust him (Exod. 14:31). But many of his awesome acts in nature do not defy scientific explanation (see [chap. 20](#) below).

B. Benevolent God Sustains the Earth

The flood story illustrates that God sustains the earth. When his Spirit would no longer contend with sinful mortals, he returned the earth to its primeval chaos and then refashioned it. Today the earth attests to his unfailing love (Pss. 33:5; 65), and when he roars against the nations, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God (Ps. 46). Our world is no more self-sustained than it was self-created. He who set the earth on its foundations so that it can never be moved and set the boundaries for the seas now pours water into the ravines, gives water to all the beasts of the field, makes grass grow for the cattle, and gives food at the proper time to all animals, even to predators. All animate beings, which are created by God's spirit, die when he withdraws his spirit (Ps. 104; cf. Ps. 29). In other words, *I AM* reigns over the chaotic seas and the good land (Pss. 93, 95, 96, 97, 99).

I AM's preservation of the creation in Noah's ark, which functioned as a surrogate for the land during the Flood, shows the high value God places on his creation and also shows that he preserves it through his righteous people. After the Flood, *I AM* covenants in common grace to make the earth fruitful in its seasons to sustain the life of all people, in spite of their sinfulness, until the end of this cosmos.

C. God Owns and Distributes the Earth

In his grace God gives the earth to humankind but reserves the heavens exclusively for himself (Ps. 115:1–16) and reserves his right to control the earth according to his good pleasure. Whereas the Egyptians thought their land belonged to Pharaoh, to whom they paid a 20 percent royal tax, the biblical writers regard *I AM* as the ultimate owner of the earth, worthy of tribute from his creatures and free to distribute it to whom he will (Deut. 32:8–9). As the

psalmist says, “The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it, ... for he founded it upon the seas” (Pss. 24:1–2; 89:11). The Table of Nations infers that as owner of the earth *I AM* parcels out the earth to the nations according to his good will: “he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26; cf. Deut. 2:16–23; 32:8; Job 12:23). He has the sovereign right and power to dispossess old owners and replace them with new ones. According to Amos he brings the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir, just as much as he brings Israel up from Egypt (Amos 9:7). According to the Deuteronomistic history, God replaces the Emmites with the Moabites and the Horites with the Edomites and forbids Israel to take the land of either of them (Deut. 2:9–12), just as he later replaces the Ammonites in Transjordan and the Canaanites in Cis-Jordan with Israelites (Judg. 11:4–27). He chooses Zion as the place of his dwelling (Ps. 48). Ultimately he will give the earth to his Son as his possession (Ps. 2:8).

More specifically, he gives lands to the nations as a *usufruct* — that is, they have “the legal right of using and enjoying the fruits or profits of something belonging to another” (cf. Ps. 47). They may use their lands for maximum enjoyment, but God reserves the right to remove the people from their lands if they are wicked. He drives the murderer Cain off the arable, fertile land, making him an outcast. When the human race as a whole becomes so sinful that it corrupts the earth, God wipes out all apart from Noah and his family and washes the earth clean before restoring it. He replaces the Canaanites with the Israelites “because of the wickedness of these nations” (Deut. 9:4).⁷ For the same reason, according to the Deuteronomist, he gives the portions of the Land successively to the Arameans (ninth century BC) and the Assyrians (750–612 BC), and finally gives the whole land to the Babylonians (597–539 BC). First nations of any place do not have an unconditional claim to their lands. God both roots people in a place and uproots them from it, yet never terminating humankind or the earth (Jer. 1:10).

D. Saving God Chooses Sacred Sites

In ancient Near Eastern myths, sacred places became holy at the *Urzeit* (the Primordial Event) when primeval power was released to fill the content of that space. In their view, that power is permanent according to the established order (cf. 2 Kings 20:23). Biblical writers decidedly rejected that worldview. The sublime *I AM* chooses the places where he dwells with his people according to

his good pleasure. Moreover, to enjoy his presence they must live holy lives as defined by Israel's covenant. *I AM* either evicts sinners from his presence, as in the case of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and of Israel's exile from the Land, or he will remove his presence, as he did from Jerusalem before handing it over to destruction (Ezek. 8–10; 20). Those who keep covenant uniquely enjoy his protection and provision at his sacred place. In the end, at the final judgment, the wicked will be torn from the land, and only the people of God will enjoy his presence in the regenerated earth (Prov. 2:21–22; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Rev. 22:14).

III. LAND IN THE PATRIARCHAL COVENANTS

The call of Abraham to the land of Canaan, with its attendant promise to give him that land, essentially informs and unifies the entire Pentateuch (see [chap. 12.IV.B](#)) and in fact the entire Old Testament. The Land in the patriarchal narratives has both a historic and liturgical dimension. Its historic dimension pertains to promise and fulfillment (cf. Gen. 12:1; Josh. 21:43–45); its liturgical dimension pertains to God’s gift as a unique and holy place of worship.⁸

A. Historic Dimension: Place of Promise and Fulfillment

Abraham’s exodus from his homeland and Israel’s exodus from Egypt are the two pivotal events in the formation of national Israel. In sovereign grace, *I AM* calls, not forces, Abraham to venture by faith in his word and promise to go to a land he has never seen and in that connection to mediate God’s blessings of life and prosperity to all people. As a reward for Abraham’s walk of living in confident expectation, both in going to the Land (Gen. 12:4) and in living as a resident alien in it (Gen. 13:17), *I AM* covenants and swears to Abraham to give him and his descendants forever the land of the Canaanites as a royal land grant (Gen. 12–15; 26:3–4; 28:13; 35:9–15; cf. Lev. 26:43–45; Deut. 1:31; 8:5; 14:1).⁹ Similarly, a Hittite royal grant reads: “After you, your son and grandson will possess it; nobody will take it away from them. If one of your descendants sins, the king will prosecute him ... but nobody will take away either his house or his land in order to give to a descendant of somebody else.”¹⁰

Israel’s claim to the Land depends on *I AM*’s prior action to elect Abraham’s seed for this gift (Josh. 1:6). “Of the 167 occurrences of the verb *nātan* (‘give’) in Deuteronomy, 131 have the LoRD as subject— The object of the verb is usually ‘land’ itself, but sometimes varies to ‘cities,’ ‘towns,’ *etc.* (e.g. 13:12; 17:2; 31:12).”¹¹ The land grant is good land that flows with milk and honey (Num. 13:27; 14:8), metonymies of effect for its rich pastures that feed the flocks and for its fruitful orchards, vineyards, and date palm trees. This good inheritance includes houses that Israel did not build, wells they did not dig, and

orchards they did not plant (Deut. 6:10; 8:7–9). In sum, the patriarchal covenants and their examples assured Israel that behind its existence and its tenure of the Land and its wealth lies the divine election.¹²

Israel's original land grant, and their heartland, is Canaan, bounded by the desert in the south, by the Mediterranean on the west, by Mount Hor and Lebo Hamath in the north and by the Jordan and Dead Sea on the east (Gen. 11:31; 12:5; 17:8; Exod. 6:4; Lev. 14:34; 25:38; Num. 13:2, 17; Deut. 32:49; Josh. 14:1–19:51). This is the land Israel is instructed to dispossess. But the first land they occupy, because the Amorites attack the pilgrim nation on their way to their inheritance, is the land of the Amorites in Transjordan (Num. 21:24, 35; 32:29; Josh. 22:9, 13, 15, 32). That land extends from the Golan halfway down the Dead Sea. Eventually, due to the political realities of war, the land is seen as extending from the river, not the wadi, of Egypt (i.e., probably the Nile's most easterly branch that empties into Lake Sirbonis not far from Port Said) in the south to the Euphrates in the north, and includes in Transjordan the lands of Moab and Edom (Gen. 15:18; Num. 24:17–19; Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:4; 2 Sam. 8). Though the Davidic empire at its height exercises political and economic control over this vast tract of land (2 Sam. 8:1; 1 Chron. 18), Israel is not instructed nor do they attempt to dispossess the people beyond the geographic boundaries of Canaan (Gen. 10:19).

The land promises are fulfilled several times but have never been consummated. God fulfills the promises through Joshua (e.g., Josh. 21:43–45) but not completely (e.g., Josh. 13:1–7); he fulfills them more completely through David and Solomon (1 Kings 4:20–25; Neh. 9:8) but not consummately (see Ps. 95:11). There still remains a consummation of the Sworn Land for the people of God (Heb. 4:6–8; 11:39–40).

Possessing that land is the goal of the patriarchs and their descendants. During the four centuries between the patriarchs and the exodus, Israel lives by faith, depending on God's faithfulness to give them the sworn land. The closing death scenes of Jacob and Joseph, as recorded in the last *tôlê dôt*: of Genesis, represent these ancestral heroes in Egypt looking forward to their return to the Land. After blessing his sons with a foretaste of Israel's future life in the Sworn Land, Jacob in his last words looks back to his ancestors and expresses his longing to be buried with them in that land (cf. Gen. 46:4; 47:29–31; 48:21–22; 50:1–14), and though Joseph is first buried in Egypt, his final resting place is in the Land (50:25–26; Exod. 13:19).

From the patriarchal narratives, the elect people of God learn to freely separate themselves from their old places of meaning in their families and

cultures that are without God and to venture out by faith with God's revealed word and promises that make all things new. Looking to God's promise to give them the land of unending rest, they learn to live as alien residents in a foreign, fallen world.

B. Liturgical Dimension: Unique and Holy Place

God delays in giving Israel the Land until the iniquity of the Canaanites is fully ripe for his judgment (Gen. 15:16). This future dispossession of the iniquitous Canaanites of the Land entails that Israel, upon its possession, is to sanctify the Land by holding fast to *I AM* (22:1–18), by not intermarrying with Canaanites (24:3; 26:34–35; 27:46), and by doing what is right and just and fair (18:19; cf. Ps. 105:44–45).

IV. ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS

Upon exodus from Egypt, Israel fully expected to arrive without delay in the Sworn Land of rest. To their surprise they found themselves as wanderers being tested by God in a wilderness (Deut. 8:2). In Exodus 16–18 it is a place, as Brueggemann expressed it, of “having nothing yet lacking nothing,”¹³ and in Numbers 10:11–14:45 (esp. Num. 14) it is a place of decision: to return to Egypt or to persevere by faith to the Sworn Land.¹⁴

A. Exodus 16–18: The Wilderness: Having Nothing Yet Lacking Nothing

Brueggemann depicts wilderness as being formless and lifeless.¹⁵ It is a place without clear geographic boundaries, a place of aimless wandering, and a place “without any of the props or resources that give life order and meaning.” It is a land that is not sown and cannot be sown (Jer. 2:2). Instead of living in the rich land of milk and honey, the Israelite wanderers find themselves unexpectedly in barrenness, living in tents and staggering between oases. It is the utter antithesis to normal human society; Israel might just as well have been in outer space. Worse yet, for Israel the wilderness is a place of cosmic hostility and war. Unexpectedly and without provocation, they are attacked by the Amalekites at Rephidim and for the first time have to fight with real swords (see [chap. 14.II.B.5](#)).

Israel’s structured existence in the wilderness consists entirely of its liturgy, at the center of which is God’s royal tent, assuring them of his presence. Instead of living on the natural props that the people normally construct for themselves and on the farming resources that they manage by their own wit and strength, the elect nation is taught in the wilderness to depend totally on God and his word. He rains upon them the bread of heaven in the morning and flesh to eat in the evening. He gives them water out of flinty rock. Amazingly, *I AM* transforms the wilderness into a banqueting table: “He acted decisively to make for landless Israel an environment as rich and nourishing as any landed people had ever known.”¹⁶ In short, lacking normal human structures of society and life and

confronted with the hostility of the environment and enemies, Israel finds its life in God. They are learning to be in the world, but not of it.

B. Numbers 14: Israel's Twofold Responses to the Wilderness

The wilderness tests Israel's fidelity to *I AM*. Unlike their patriarchal ancestors, the majority murmur, quarrel with God and Moses, and want to return to Egypt; and at Kadesh Barnea, upon the threshold of entering the land, they draw back from it. A spirit of mistrust and a fear of having been abandoned replace a spirit of faith and confidence in *I AM*'s presence and power. Instead of destroying them on the spot for their defection, *I AM* consigns the cowards to killing time, going around and around as on a merry-go-round, in a meaningless and purposeless existence without ever seeing the Land until the despisers die of natural death. Only Caleb and Joshua, along with the next generation who were disciplined in the wilderness, have the robust faith it takes to enter the Sworn Land. They endure in face of want in the wilderness, because they count on God to see them through to final victory. "The wilderness is the *route of promise* on the way to land, or the wilderness is *unbearable abandonment* to be avoided by return to slavery."¹⁷

The wilderness is also a place of Israel's collective memory, where the people of God learn valuable theological truths. (1) The Transformer fills the empty, and the hungry hunger no more (1 Sam. 2:5; Luke 1:53). (2) They do not live by natural bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3). (3) They dare not change stones in God's will for bread outside his will, even when it is in their power to do so (Luke 4:3–4). (4) True believers do not grumble and test the Lord but persevere to the end (1 Cor. 10:1–13; 1 John 2:19).

V. LAND IN THE MOSAIC COVENANT

I AM delivers Israel from Egypt so that they might return to the Land and worship him at his mountain sanctuary. If the wilderness represents enjoying intimacy with God in spite of suffering and through self-denial, mountains—such as Sinai and Zion in the Old Testament and the mountain of Jesus' most famous sermon in the New Testament — represent an even closer intimacy. Spiritually, on a mountain one is lifted up above the world; in a wilderness, one is removed from it.

In either case, the manner of worship, both in its ethical and liturgical content, is defined in the Mosaic covenant. The teachings about the Land in the Mosaic code can be batched together under the rubrics of *I AM*'s relationship to the Land, of how Israel is to live in the Land, and of Israel's status in the Land. How Israel should live in the Land and manage it was discussed in [chapters 15](#) (III.B.4) and 17 (II.G).

A. *I AM*'s Relationship to the Land

1. *As Owner of the Land*

As Creator of the earth, *I AM* owns everything, including Canaan. But *I AM* has a dual claim to the Land; he also possesses it by conquest. He is the Warrior who gives Israel the Land through Joshua's sword, and as Victor in the holy war against the Canaanites, he gives the Land to Israel. In his Song of the Sea, Moses celebrates that *I AM* dispossesses the Canaanites and gives his holy mountain to Israel (Exod. 15:13–17), a synecdoche for the whole of the Land (cf. Pss. 23:6; 27:4; 61:4; 78:54; Isa 11:9;¹⁸ 57:13). In the course of Israel's history, *I AM* chooses Zion as his holy mountain. Here the historical and liturgical concepts of the land are inseparable. Von Rad notes:

An Israelite who participated in the worship of the Lord on Mount Zion was maintaining his obligations and responsibilities as the one who dwelt on the Lord's land. He was rendering due homage to the one to whom the

whole land belongs and who held the right to give or withhold the land from its inhabitants. When, therefore, the poet proclaimed, “Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?” (Ps. 15:1), not only was the right to enter the temple at stake, but ... the right to continue as an Israelite; to be one of the LORD’S “*gērîm*’ (Ps. 39:12 [13]; Lev. 25:23) and to dwell on the LORD’S land.¹⁹

The Mosaic law recognizes that *I AM* holds the title deed to the Land (Lev. 25:23). The Land is divided in proportion to the size of the group, with locations decided by lot (Num. 26:55–56). Israel gives the Land’s firstfruits and tithes to *I AM* to acknowledge his ownership of the Land (Exod. 22:29–30 [28–29]; Lev. 27:30–33; Deut. 14:22–23; 26:9–15). The personified Land keeps a sabbath to *I AM*, resting every seven years, to show its special relationship to *I AM*.

2. As Sanctifier of the Land

I AM’s unique presence in the Land makes it holy (see Num. 35:34). W D. Davies notes that the term “holy land,” which may suggest that land itself was inherently “holy” seldom occurs in the Old Testament. “The holiness of the land is entirely derivative” because *I AM*’s presence radiates throughout its boundaries.”²⁰ Davies continues, “It was this very relationship of the land to Yahweh that governed the relationship of the Law to the land... If the Israelites were to live in Yahweh’s land, in his very presence, they had to approximate to this holiness by following his law” (Lev. 19:1).²¹ In other words, with the destruction of the temple, it ceased to be the holy land.

B. Israel’s Status in the Land

Israel’s status in the Land can be summarized under the metaphors of *resident alien* and *son*. Both metaphors point to God’s grace in giving the Israelites the right to share in the Land, and also to *I AM*’s right to hold them accountable for its use.

1. As Resident Aliens and Tenants

The recognition of *I AM* as Owner of the Land puts into proper perspective

Israel's status within the Land. Because *I AM* is the Owner, each family holds its land as inalienable land tenure from *I AM* and must not sell its inheritance permanently:"The land must not be sold in perpetuity [permanently, NIV],²² because the land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants with me" (Lev. 25:23). The metaphor of Israelites as a *gēr*, "resident alien," pictures them as foreigners in the Land who pledge their total allegiance to its Owner and so enjoy his favor and protection by his grace. The metaphor of "tenant" (*tôšāb*) escalates the thought, for it represents the Israelites as sojourners apparently of a more temporary and dependent status (Lev. 22:10; 25:6) than the *gēr*, with which it is often joined. However, *I AM* says, that as such they live in the Land "with me" (*immādī*) — that is, "under my protection."²³ *I AM* is affirming Israel's right to share in the Land, and his right to hold them accountable to enjoy this right.

The legal term for God's and Israel's relationship to the Land, as mentioned earlier, is "usufruct." *I AM* freely gives his land to Israel as a beneficiary to maximize their opportunity to enrich themselves by means of it, but Israel will be held accountable to not abuse their benefactor's trust; he reserves the right to withdraw his gift if Israel breaks covenant with him. When that relationship is broken, the people suffer first judgment in the Land and, if they persist in unbelief, expulsion from it. Before they can be restored in the Land, the covenant must be renewed.

2. As Sons

The nation also conceives of itself as God's son/sons (Exod. 4:22; cf. Deut. 8:5; 14:1; 32:5, 6, 18, 19; Isa 1:2; 30:1–9; 43:6; 64:8; Jer 3:14; 31:9, 20; Hos. 11:1; Mai. 1:6; 2:10). Christopher J. H. Wright analyzes this metaphor of a Father-son relationship on both a national and individual level. On the national level, he explains:

Israel is addressed as a "son" of God (singular) who was sovereignly brought into being by God (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 32:6, 18; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). Israel owes its existence to the LORD'S creative or "procreative" action, because the LORD brought them into existence. The nation was not adopted by the LoRD but formed by him, because it had no existence apart from the LoRD bringing them into being. Furthermore, Israei is not his son by its choice and action but by the LORD'S election of them. This datum is presented in the indicative mood. The LORD brought his people into

existence prior to the giving of the Sinai covenant. This indicative existence remains to be invoked even after the judgment of the exile on the nation's disobedience as the basis for a fresh redemption and a restored relationship (Isa. 43:6; 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 31:9, 20; Hos. 1:10; 11:Iff.).²⁴

On the individual level the generations are addressed as “sons” of the LoRD (plural), and on this level they must obey to enjoy the status and rights of faithful sons. The mood is now imperative (Deut. 14:1), and they are addressed as faithless, rebellious and lying sons (Isa. 1:2; 30:9; Jer. 3:22). Caleb and Joshua distinguish themselves as faithful sons. “Thus we find within one and the same relationship that both poles of the promise-obedience duality are to be found in the natural, inherent tension arising from the givenness of the filial relationship (the indicative) and the demands it imposes (the imperative).”²⁵

Invidiously, the Land itself becomes a temptation. Without retaining a firm hold on the Giver, the gift itself seduces Israel to forget *I AM* and to think they have won it by their own merits and strength. Moses warns: “When you eat and are satisfied ... then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LoRD your God.... You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me’ “ (Deut. 8:12–17). Israel's means of grace to overcome this temptation is to remember their salvation history (8:1–5) and to praise *I AM* (8:10), recognizing that they do not prosper by their carefully planned and manufactured achievements rooted in their own ingenuity.

VI. LAND IN THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY

In addition to being a source of Israel's life and a place to dwell, the Land is holy (i.e., set apart as a place to realize *I AM*'s holy will; cf. Josh. 8:30–35) and a place for Israel's rest and security (Deut. 12; Josh. 11:23; 21:43–45). The doctrine of possessing the Land in the Deuteronomistic history can be analyzed with regard to Israel's role and the tribe of Levi's better inheritance without land.^{[26](#)}

A. Israel's Role

Paradoxically, Israel's role in participating in this gift is conditioned upon their trusting *I AM* to keep his promises to give them the Land against contrary evidence (Deut. 6:18; 8:1; 11:8–9; cf. 11:18–21; 16:20; Josh. 1:6; 14:1–6; and 19:49–51). Covenant fidelity is the condition for taking the Land (Josh. 1–12), possessing it (Josh. 13–21; cf. Deut. 9:26; 18:1; Josh. 24:1–27; 2 Sam. 20:19; 21:3; Jer. 2:7; 16:18), and retaining it (Josh. 22–24).

To preserve its fidelity to *I AM* and so retain the Land, Israel must possess the Land by dispossessing its contagious inhabitants (Deut. 7; Josh. 6:1–11:23). Unless they drive the Serpent/the Canaanites out of the Garden/the Land, the Serpent/Canaanite defilement will drive them out. Peaceful coexistence with this spiritual enemy is not an option. After they take the Land, the Mosaic commandments are regulatory, providing instruction for the governance of the Land.^{[27](#)} Israel expresses faith through obedience to the covenant stipulation to serve *I AM* alone (see Josh. 1; 23–24). As the Abrahamic covenant guarantees Israel its right to the Land, the Mosaic covenant makes the nation's enjoyment of the Land conditional upon the trusting nation's continued service to the Lord (Deut. 5:31ff.; 6:1ff.; 8:1ff.; 11:8ff.; 12:1; 28:58ff.). As McConville explains, this establishes a fundamental sequence: "God blesses, Israel obeys, God continues to bless."^{[28](#)} Here we see the tension of God's prior election of Israel and Israel's subsequent faith-obedience. McConville says, "It would not be an exaggeration to say that all the theology of Deuteronomy can be organized around the paradox

between the Lord's prior actions and Israel's response."²⁹ Obedience and blessing are inseparable: "As blessing is unthinkable without righteousness or obedience, so is obedience unthinkable without blessing."³⁰

Obedience involves personal sacrifice. Many of the laws of Deuteronomy have something more specific than obedience in common. Obedience is costly, for example, requiring animal sacrifices (Deut. 12), tithes (Deut. 14; 26), seventh-year release from debt and slavery, with the added stipulation to be generous in both cases (15:1–18), setting apart firstlings to *I AM* (15:19ff.), the celebration of Passover and feasts, giving "priests" their dues (18:1–8), and setting up cities for priests and refuge, which necessitates considerable investment of labor as well as territory (19:1–10).³¹

While *de jure* the whole nation enters into or renews covenant, *de facto* entrance into this covenant is a matter for each individual family to decide, as seen in Joshua's famous resolve (Josh. 24:15). Although Israel functions as a nation, yet the covenant is essentially a family matter (cf. Acts 16:31; 1 Tim. 3:4–5). As eyewitnesses of the acts recited in the covenant's prologue, and therefore capable of confirming their accuracy, the families of Moses and Joshua's generation appropriately form the foundation for the old covenant relationship with God. After this, however, the covenant is passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next (Deut. 31:11–14). Each successive family must decide to identify with the testimony of the first generation that *I AM* is owner and protector of his land (cf. Josh. 24:15b–18). Because each generation must learn and experience covenant fidelity to possess and retain the Land, Israel already possesses the Land through the founding generation (11:21–22) but not yet completely (13:1–7).³²

With the introduction of kingship, the king plays the leading role in managing the Land according to the Sinaitic covenant, without modifying or compromising it (1 Sam. 12:14–15; 1 Kings 9:4–9). The whole nation is regarded as in corporate solidarity with the king. *I AM*'s anointed is the very life breath in their nostrils (Lam. 4:20). If the king mismanages the Land for his own benefit, forgetting Israel's peculiar meaning and destiny, he finds himself alienated both from God and the people and without land. Moreover, after God grants the house of David an eternal throne in Jerusalem in response to his desire to build him a temple commensurate as much as humanly possible with God's glory, Jerusalem is reckoned as having a unique relationship with *I AM*.

B. Inheritance of the Levites

The inheritance of the Levites shows that an inheritance without land is a possibility (Josh. 13:14, 33). The Levites live on Israel's tithes and offerings to *I AM*. In this way they share the closest fellowship with *I AM*, and their inheritance is reckoned as *I AM* himself. In fact, intimate fellowship with him is the best inheritance of all; it is available to all who desire it (cf. Pss. 16:5; 119:57; 142:5).

VII. LAND IN THE PSALMS: ZION

The Deuteronomistic narrative of the choice of Jerusalem (Zion) as the place of God's throne forms the background to the songs of Zion (see p. 659). The book of Psalms is a compendium of Israel's theology about Zion—originally the name for the temple area, then for Jerusalem, and then for the entire land of Israel.³³ Its Zion theology spans Israel's history from the monarchy to the exile. After David had captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites, he would not rest until he built God's house there (2 Sam. 6–7; Ps. 132:2–5). At the dedication of the temple, God took up his residence there (1 Kings 8:10), and it became *I AM*'s "resting place" forever (Ps. 132:13–14). By David's capturing the city, it became "the city of David," but more importantly it is the City of God, the city where the Great King resides. In ancient Near Eastern thought, a deity's heavenly temple is inseparable from his earthly residence. So the city is glorious because *I AM* chose Zion/Jerusalem and its temple as his unique earthly residence (Pss. 46:6; 87:2). God ordered Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on Mount Zion (Gen. 22:2, 14; 2 Chron 3:1), and here Israel's father received *I AM*'s oath to bless him and his descendants. *I AM*'s own hands established Zion (Exod. 15:17), and the angel of *I AM* pointed it out as the site for the temple.

In ancient Near Eastern mythology the gods achieved their status as kings by routing the primordial chaos (see [chap. 7](#)). In the temple rituals their worshipers celebrated the victory of their kings over the primordial chaos. In these rituals the Babylonians proclaimed "Marduk is king,"³⁴ and the Canaanites at Ugarit cried out "Aliyan Baal is our king."³⁵ In a polemic against these pretenders, Israel acclaimed *I AM* as the true King, who rules in Zion (99:1–2). He alone created the earth and made it stand firm (93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; 104:5–9). *I AM*'s victory over the chaotic sea that still rails against the good earth and makes it stand firm is a guarantee of his victory over the chaotic nations that rail against his throne in Zion (18:16; 76:3; 104:7). This is so in part because pagan nations celebrate gods devoid of righteousness and justice (82:1–8), but *I AM* establishes righteousness as the foundation of his throne and will judge the whole earth according to justice (93:5; 94:1–21; 98:7–9). Their gods must die (Ps. 82:1). The impression is left in Psalms that Zion is invulnerable because the Great King makes his residence there, but it must be remembered that Israel always knew

her covenant blessings were conditioned on her faith-obedience to Torah, which demanded justice (see Ps. 1).

From Zion, *I AM* provides for and protects his chosen ones (Pss. 46; 132:15–16) and crowns the house of David, his viceroy, with victory (132:17–18). *I AM* loves Zion more than any other mountain (78:68); it is his “holy hill” (2:6), the joy of the whole earth (48:3), and the perfection of beauty (50:2). Although in terms of geography Zion is only 2,500 feet high, theologically it towers over all creation (Zech. 14:10). Her beauty is like lofty Mount Zaphon in Israel’s far north, which in Canaanite mythology is the seat of the Canaanite’s high god, Baal Zaphon (48:2). No wonder the majestic and rugged mountains of Bashan gaze on her in envy (68:17) and Israel makes pilgrimages to her!

These Zion-praise psalms leave the impression that Zion is invulnerable because the great King makes his residence there, a belief strengthened by Sennacherib’s lifting of the siege of Jerusalem and by the reform of Josiah (cf. Mic. 3:8–12). (The Aramaeans draw the conclusion that *I AM* is a mountain deity, not a valley deity.) The just God shattered that pagan theology by first abandoning his temple and then destroying it (586 BC). Nevertheless, since *I AM* had promised David an eternal throne at Jerusalem, a passionate attachment to Zion persists, fostered by the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, and the returnees build the second temple on the site of the first temple (516 BC). Along with the Law and the expectation of the Messiah, the sacredness of Zion is a primary concern of postexilic Judaism (cf. Pss. 84:10–12 [11–13]; 132:13–14; 4 Ezra 13:35–36). But it must be remembered that Israel always knew from the covenant Moses mediated between God and herself that her covenant blessings were conditioned on her faith-obedience to Torah (see Ps. 1).

VIII. LAND IN PROPHETIC LITERATURE

The content of the prophetic oracles regarding the Land differs to a large extent according to whether the prophet lived in the preexilic, exilic, or postexilic periods (for their dates see [chap. 28](#)).³⁶ In all periods, however, the prophets essentially use the same forms: oracles of reproach/doom, oracles calling for repentance, and oracles of restoration/salvation.

The prophetic oracles of reproach and judgment—especially predicting Israel’s loss of their land and exile from it, in the preexilic prophets — are based on the Mosaic covenant, which conditions Israel’s enjoyment of the Land on covenant fidelity (see [chap. 28](#)). The salvation oracles, often signaled by “in days to come” or “in that day” — an ideal age in an indeterminate future that lies beyond the immediate judgment — are based on God’s unconditional promises. The prophets share the eschatological hope that all nations will come to Jerusalem in the end of the days (Isa. 2:2–4; 25:7; 66:18–23; Mic. 4:1–4; Zech. 14:16–19; cf. T. Levi 18:9).³⁷ We will look at their prophecies in more detail in [chapter 28](#).

IX. LAND IN LAMENTATIONS

The book of Lamentations (see [chap. 6.VIII.A](#)), though traditionally assigned to Jeremiah on the basis of 2 Chronicles 35:25 and the LXX, consists of five anonymous lament psalms, such as those found in the book of Psalms (see [chap. 30](#)). The first four are in the form of an acrostic, probably — by expressing one’s grief from “A” to “Z” — to provide a cathartic cleansing of the poet’s or poets’ anger and grief over the fall of their city, the destruction of their temple, the scattering of their priests, the end of the House of David’s kingship, and the exile of the city’s most important citizens.

The first poem emphasizes their incomparable suffering: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? *Look around and see*. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, / that *I AM* brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?” (1:12). The faithful poet, a member of the remnant, recognizes this as deserved punishment: “*I AM* has brought her grief because of her many sins.... Jerusalem has sinned greatly and so has become unclean” (1:5, 8).

The second poem piles image upon image of Zion’s desolation to depict *I AM*’s fierce anger while blaming *I AM*’s lying prophets that seduced her: “The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; / they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. / The oracles they gave you were false and misleading” (2:14).

I AM’s wrath, however, does not entail his rejection, as the third poem makes clear: “Because of *I AM*’s great love we are not consumed, / for his compassions never fail. *They are new every morning*; great is your faithfulness” (3:22–23). If *I AM* afflicted Zion, then he is the One who will heal her: “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?” (v. 38). Until then, she examines herself, resolved to return to *I AM* (vv. 40–42), quietly wait (vv. 24–30), and pray (vv. 52–57) for his salvation of Zion and his retribution upon her enemies, who mock her (vv. 61–66).

The fourth poem piles on still more images of Zion’s desolation due to her sins and concludes with the most confident affirmation that Zion’s exile will be short and her enemy, Edom, will be punished (4:22). But like all mourners, her moods sway between hope (at the end of [chapter 4](#)) and grief (resumed in [chapter 5](#)).

The fifth poem prays that *I AM* will remember Zion in her affliction and

restore her fortunes, because without forgiveness there is no hope of renewal (5:21–22).

X. LAND IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH (458–432 BC)³⁸

After Israel's prophesied restoration to the Land, the province of Judea within the Persian Empire consists simply of Jerusalem and a small area, about thirty-five miles long and twenty-five miles wide. In that confined space, Jerusalem and its temple comes to be the center of life for postexilic Jewry and can be substituted for the Land.³⁹ However, when Cyrus (538 BC) makes return to the Land possible, many of the exiles in Babylon choose to retain their more secure positions there rather than risk an uncertain future in the Land.⁴⁰ Deutero-Isaiah (see [chap. 28.II.B.3](#)) has to exhort the faithful to flee Babylon (Isa. 48:20), and *I AM* brings back to the Land three successive waves of the faithful remnant: first under Zerubbabel in connection with his rebuilding the second temple (Ezra 1–6); second under Ezra in connection with his restoring the Mosaic covenant (Ezra 7–12); and yet a third under Nehemiah in connection with building Jerusalem's wall to provide a relative political autonomy (Neh. 1–6). The members of this faithful remnant understand themselves as participating in Israel's historic salvation history, including the Abrahamic Covenant (Neh. 9:1–37, esp. 7–8).

Ezra fashions his return to resemble the exodus (see Exod. 7–8),⁴¹ suggesting that the return to Jerusalem is not for political freedom but to worship on the holy mountain. Each of the three returns that structure this first part of Ezra-Nehemiah is carefully crafted by the use of the divine initiative, the genealogies, the number “twelve,” and typology (e.g., the “temple building motif,” the “second exodus motif,” and the “holy war” motif from the preexilic epoch). The aim is to proclaim that the postexilic community stands in strict continuity with its preexilic ancestors and is the heir of God's election and covenants. The covenant community is to be assured that one can live a life of faith and establish the kingdom even when subjected to foreign rule.

This, however, is not the fulfillment of Israel's prophesied Ideal Age. Although the remnant renews the Mosaic covenant from the heart, *I AM* has not yet effected the new covenant with all Israel, and the nation is still under Gentile dominion and without a king (Neh. 9:32, 36). In spite of their covenant renewals, they lapse time again and again into infidelity (see Mal. 1–3; Neh. 13). Israel continues to hope for a future salvation based on the Abrahamic covenant and a

glorious restoration like that envisioned by her earlier prophets (Neh. 9:36–37). Nevertheless, before that day comes, *I AM* will have to purge Israel with burning fire (Mal. 4). Isaiah applies the vocabulary of entry into the Land and of national promise to the just man, the saint (Isa. 57:13b; 65:13–16).

The story of Esther shows that God graciously extends his providential protection also to the Jews who refuse to return to the Land.

XI. LAND IN APOCALYPTIC (DANIEL)

The restored nation, having experienced the loss of fundamental institutions for national existence, such as monarchy, and having to exist in the Diaspora, find hope through the religious perspective of apocalyptic eschatology. Several features characterize apocalyptic literature: (1) It focuses on the end of the ages. (2) Its method of revelation is dynamic (i.e., through an angelic interpreter; don't tell anyone but keep the message among the wise that judgment is coming on the wicked). (3) It presents several dualisms. Society is divided between the wicked and the righteous; time is divided between the present situation and the age to come; and the cosmos is divided between heaven and the world. *I AM* and/or the Messiah as the divine Warrior will restore the Land as Israel's promised inheritance, and this action will either inaugurate or accompany the new and final age. (4) It is addressed to the oppressed as a means of resolving Israel's stark political realities with the promise of blessing in the Land. (5) It uses bizarre and/or cosmic images, not the terms of plain history. In this imagery the blessings in the new age are expressed in greater and more cosmic dimensions. Although Jerusalem or temple could epitomize the Land, through the cosmic imagery of apocalyptic literature, the Land can transcend the boundaries of Canaan and be instead a promised new world of blessings. (6) Its purpose is to bring repentance.⁴² In apocalyptic the temporal and spatial categories of blessing in the new age are expressed in more cosmic dimension.

With regard to apocalyptic dualism, Daniel observes successive Gentile kingdoms being supplanted at the end of the ages by the heavenly kingdom of God comprised of the saints of the Most High (Dan. 2:31–45; 7:15–28). In the interim, God in his sovereignty rules over these Gentile kings (4:2–3), and the people of Israel stand apart from them. With regard to apocalyptic cosmic imagery, Daniel understands the struggle of the elect during the times of the Gentiles as part of a cosmic struggle in which the elect will emerge as victors. This dualism and its cosmic dimensions pertain to the Land. Daniel prays three times daily facing toward Jerusalem, symbolizing his loyalty to the Land and his hope for its future. History marches toward Israel's triumphant conclusion, which is focused on Jerusalem and the temple, within the Sovereign's determined times.

Daniel's vision of seventy weeks in Daniel 9:20–27 is of particular interest for

our subject matter. Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10) had prophesied that Israel’s exile in Babylon would last seventy years (i.e., 7 [the numerical symbol of divine perfection] $\times 10$ [the numerical symbol of fullness]). Biblical numbers are often used indefinitely—as round figures — or rhetorically, for emphasis or in a hyperbolic sense. Seven plays an exceptionally important role in the ancient Near East antiquity. It was sacred to the Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, and the Vedic people in India. In the Bible the number seven is connected with every aspect of religious life. In relation to time, seven represents a fitting (or sacred) period (Gen. 1:3–2:3; 8:12; 50:10; Exod. 7:25; Lev. 8:33; Josh. 6). More generally it indicates a complete or round number of moderate size (Est. 1:10; 2:9; Job 1:2; Ps. 12:6; Prov. 26:16, 25; Isa. 4:1; 11:15; Mic. 5:4).

Like the Sumerians, the biblical authors often add seven to a large number to indicate a very big figure (cf. 7×7 and 7×62 in Dan. 9:25). Seventy (the product of two sacred numbers, 7×10) is used as a round figure, with symbolic or sacred nuances. Multiples of seven bear the same character with added emphasis (Lev. 12:5; Num. 29:13; 1 Kings 8:65). Seven and its multiples should be taken for what they are: symbols, not literal numbers. More specifically, from an inscription of Esarhaddon, it appears that seventy years was a standard sentence for rebellion against a god,⁴³ allowing a time of penitence, designed to appease divine wrath.⁴⁴ But at the time of Daniel’s vision — sixty-six years had passed since 605 BC — Israel has not yet repented of the sins that have led them into exile: “yet we have not obeyed him” (Dan. 9:13–14). Only a remnant of Israel returns; most prefer the security and ease outside of the Land to the risk of living in the restricted land. *I AM* complains of the “treacherous” exiles: “See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction” (Isa. 48:10). Instead of the pure gold or silver that his refining fire should have produced, *I AM* has a clinker (vv. 8–10). As noted above, Malachi (ca. 430 BC) looks to the future for *I AM* to come to purify the still impure people.

In Daniel’s vision the angel Gabriel makes him understand that for Israel’s continuing rebellion their seventy years of exile will now be multiplied by seven (i.e., for 490 years) to finish transgression, put an end to sin, atone for wickedness, bring in everlasting righteousness, seal up vision and prophecy, and anoint the most holy (Dan. 9:24). The perfect number is chosen according to the covenant curse that continuing sin would bring a successive sevenfold increase of punishment (Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28). In Daniel the sevenfold judgment is applied to the seventy years of exile.⁴⁵ In other words, the multiple 7×70 represents a complete and full era of judgment,⁴⁶ meaning the end will come in

the perfect fullness of time (cf. Gal. 4:4).

Although Daniel's calculations cannot be taken as precise, the basic pattern of his calculations is clear. The "seventy sevens" are divided into three broadly defined periods: seven, sixty-two, and one. The terminus *a quo* of this "seventy sevens" is the decree by Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple (Dan. 9:24; cf. Isa. 44:24–45:13, esp. 44:28; 2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:1–4). The initial "seven sevens" probably refers to the "troubled times" of the founding of the second Jewish commonwealth, during which Jerusalem with its altar, temple, and walls are rebuilt. The prediction that "after the sixty-two 'sevens' the Anointed One [i.e., Jesus Christ] will be cut off and will have nothing" (Dan. 9:26) finds its consummate fulfillment in Jesus Christ's rejection and crucifixion by his own nation.⁴⁷ The final week is characterized by war. "The ruler who will come" and destroy Jerusalem and its sanctuary is possibly generic with reference to both the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–146 BC), and the Roman general Titus (see [chap. 28](#)).

"In the middle of the 'seven' " in Daniel 9:27 is explained by Carl H. Cornill to mean the time after three and a half years and to have its origin in the three and a half years of Antiochus's persecution.⁴⁸ In 169–168 BC the Syrian king plunders the temple and crushes a Jewish rebellion, abolishing the temple state of Jerusalem, establishing a pagan *polis* on the Akra, and renaming the temple "Olympian Zeus." The "abomination of desolation" is something the Syrian king constructs on the altar of the Jerusalem sanctuary in 167 BC (see 1 Macc. 1:54; 2 Macc. 6:2).

Additionally, the abomination of desolation is identified by Jesus with the desecration of the temple by the Roman general Titus, who destroys Jerusalem in AD 70 (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). In other words, Israel continues to disobey in spite of the 7×70 year beating. They will not repent until Jerusalem is utterly destroyed in AD 70, as Jesus had prophesied, and the kingdom taken away from them and given to another fold, a church made up of Jews and Gentiles without distinction.

Jesus reveals the "mysteries" (i.e., truths kept hidden from the Old Testament prophets) about the kingdom of God in parables (Matt. 13:1–52; see p. 442). These hidden truths, such as the parable of the weeds, entail there will be an extended period of time between his first and second comings (Matt. 13). He inaugurates the messianic kingdom of righteousness in his first coming, continues it now, and will consummate it at his second coming. The widespread acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ in church history is an astonishing event. As seen in the next chapter, after the destruction of Jerusalem and its

temple, these institutions become spiritualized, transcendentalized, and eschatologized in the kingdom brought through Christ.

XII. LAND IN SECOND TEMPLE SOURCES

A. Introduction

Hellenization arose as a new threat to post-Ezra Judaism and its commitment to the blessing in the Land.⁴⁹ Hellenization was an effort to change the emphasis from *ethnos* (race/tradition) to *polis* (city state civilization), denying the historical particularism of the Jewish faith concerning Israel's covenants and inheritance.⁵⁰ The culture war between traditional Judaism and Hellenism reaches a boiling point when Antiochus IV Epiphanes hellenizes the temple.⁵¹ In the best traditions of holy war, the Maccabees successfully fight to defeat the pagan and to retain the Land and the temple within Israel's traditions.⁵² Although initially successful, the Hasmoneans, who succeed Judas Maccabee, later cooperate with Rome to ensure their own governing power.

Nevertheless, in spite of this compromise, the Jews retain their distinctive identity and hope for the Land. The geographer Strabo (ca. 41 BC–AD 24) notes of the Jews, “This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not that easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt.”⁵³ The Jews have a dual-polar identity. They turn to Jerusalem for guidance and the fulfillment of their destiny, while having a plurality of centers in the Diaspora. E. J. Bickerman says, “This counterpoise of historical forces is without analogy in antiquity.”⁵⁴ In spite of their loyalty to Jerusalem as their religious center, however, the Jews of the Diaspora refuse to contest Rome for making it their political center. They do not regard their separation from the Land as an unmitigated evil.

Although scattered abroad under the successive Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman empires, the Jews regard themselves as a covenanted community. Their covenants, not their land, hold them together. Although there are few references to the Abrahamic covenant in the Second Temple literature, nevertheless, as Davies comments, “like a foundation of a building it was often hidden from view and not actively discussed.”⁵⁵ The Jews also maintain their unity by observing

Torah, such as celebrating their annual feasts.⁵⁶ Philo has Balak say of the Hebrews that they are not reckoned among other nations “not because their dwelling-place is set apart and their land severed from others, but because in virtue of the distinction of their peculiar customs they do not mix with others to depart from the ways of their fathers.”⁵⁷

B. Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

In the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, specific references to the Land, which concentrate on Jerusalem and the temple, are meager in comparison to the Primary History. Nevertheless, they develop Ezekiel’s concept of Jerusalem as the center of the earth,⁵⁸ and in all periods there is the eschatological hope that all nations will come to Jerusalem in the end of days (Isa. 2:2–4; 25:7; 66:18–23; Mic. 4:1–4; Zech. 14:16–19; cf. T. Levi 18:9). In these sources the connection of Israel with the good/beautiful Land is assumed; the connection between Israel’s conduct and their possession of the Land is marked; and the idea is growing in intensity that the Lord must vindicate his choice of his people by restoring them to their own land according to their tribes as a united people.

This literature also recognizes a heavenly Jerusalem. If the idea of a heavenly Jerusalem is not already present in Isaiah 60:19–20, it probably first occurs in 1 Enoch 90:28–38 where the phrase “heavenly Jerusalem” occurs after a description of the judgment of the fallen angels and apostates. Moreover—assuming the new house is heavenly Jerusalem—heavenly Jerusalem does not remain in heaven but comes down to earth. Syriac Baruch (4:1–7), which was probably written forty years after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, makes a clear distinction between the temporal earthly temple/Jerusalem and the pretemporal heavenly temple/Jerusalem. The link between the temple and city is fluid. In any case, Adam, Abraham, and Moses all saw this heavenly Jerusalem. This heavenly temple was the pattern for Moses’ tabernacle, and the heavenly Jerusalem, not earthly, is engraved on God’s palms. The same belief in a “heavenly Jerusalem” also occurs in 4 Ezra, also written after AD 70. Both the city and the Land that are in the present invisible and concealed shall in the future become visible and be seen (4 Ezra 7:26). In 4 Ezra 3:13–14 Abraham’s night vision of the Land pertains to “the end of the times.” According to this seer, God elected him to “a City builded, a Rest appointed” in the eschaton, which by definition transcends the present historical order of things (8:52–53).⁵⁹ In his “Vision of the Disconsolate Woman,” the woman represents “a builded

City” that gave birth and outlives her son, and her son is the divine dwelling in Jerusalem and the pattern of her (4 Ezra 9:38–10:57).

C. Qumran Community

The Qumran community, which withdraws from the compromised Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, understands part of its purpose to be to make the Land clean and restore it to the Lord’s favor. In their view they are the remnant that had been spared to atone for the Land in place of the sacrificial system (CD 111:7–10).⁶⁰ Moreover, they maintain their own apocalyptic expectations of restored blessing in the Land on the basis of the Abrahamic covenant (CD 1:4–8).⁶¹ The means by which the Land will be possessed is a holy war of conquest, no doubt influenced by the book of Joshua (IQM 1:5).⁶²

D. Rabbinic Literature

Pharisaism so cherishes the view that there is an unseverable connection between Israel, the Lord, and the Land that this view has been referred to as a “dogma” of the Pharisees. The rabbis glorify the Land by regarding it as holier than any other land. Moreover, some connect the gift of prophecy, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of resurrection of the dead with the Land. It is the only land fit for prophecy and for the *shekinah*—the Talmudic word for the “glory cloud.”

After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, the conscious cultivation of the memory of the Land, concentrated in Jerusalem and the temple, continues in Judaism to the present time. The Jerusalem Talmud has a law that gives Israel a legal right to the Land, a right that some Jewish settlers in the Land claim today.

The Land can also have a meaning other than the territorial land. Sometimes it is spiritualized to refer to the life to come: “All Israelites have a share in the world to come, for it is written, Thy people also shall be righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever” (*m. Sanh.* 10:1). Davies argues that here the “world to come” refers to the final age beyond the resurrection of the dead.⁶³ Rabbi Akiba, who certainly reveres the geographic land, also uses the Land in this transcendental sense. According to the Gemara, the righteous in the world to come does not include the ten tribes of Israel. In the *Testament of Job*, the land is

wholly transcendentalized.⁶⁴ In short, the rabbis can spiritualize the Land even while retaining their hope for its restoration.

The Jewish hope for the Land becomes absorbed in the hope for the city and the temple. After Jerusalem falls in AD 70, the rabbis continue the postexilic prophetic trajectory of projecting Jerusalem and its temple's glory into the future. However, as in the pseudepigraphal literature, the rabbis also reckon with a heavenly Jerusalem that existed prior to the six days of creation. One discussion centers on its location—was it in the third or fourth heaven (cf. Rev. 21:2, 10)? *Genesis Rabbah* 69:7 places the heavenly Jerusalem eighteen miles above the earth. The other discussion pertains to how this heavenly city is to be made manifest. Unlike the pseudepigrapha, the rabbis do not anticipate that the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to earth to replace the earthly city, which is built with human hands. The heavenly and earthly prototypes are located opposite each other. According to Rabbi Eliezer Jacob, a contemporary of the AD 70 destruction, “Jerusalem is destined to keep rising aloft until it reaches the throne of glory.” It is unclear whether he thinks that the earthly city will become entirely transcendent with the heavenly city or that de facto there is no difference between them.⁶⁵ Davies summarizes the discussion: “In some circles the hope for the land had been taken up along with Jerusalem and the Temple, into a more than ordinarily terrestrial context.”⁶⁶

E. Conclusion

The literature of the Second Temple era shares in common the belief that *I AM*'s promise to give the descendants of the patriarchs the Land gives Israel an eternal right to the Land; it assumes an indissoluble connection between Israel and the Land. Moreover, the literature shares the common vision of Israel's restoration to a renewed Holy Land. Beyond that, however, there is no one clearly defined and normative doctrine. Rather, as Davies comments, there is “a multiplicity of ideas and expectations variously and unsystematically entertained.” Later sources show a bewildering variety of views on the end:

It would be by fire ... corresponding to the initial destruction by flood; it would occur sometime after the Messianic Age or before the final judgment of God. If there was to be a “place” for salvation, where was that to be, in heaven or on earth after the earth had been scorched? Or again what was meant by the “new heaven”? Was the old earth to be undone and

then remade out of a new substance? Or was the earth in its present material form to undergo a transformation? Or was the earth, without undergoing dissolution, to be purified? Or was “the new” to be wholly unrelated to the old?⁶⁷

Nevertheless, as Leslie Hoppe writes, the Jews hoped for the reestablishment of Israel in its land and of its rules.

Though early Judaism showed a marked diversity in its messianic and eschatological expectations, there was one element that was common to most, if not all, of the Jewish visions of the future: the land. Jewish hopes for the future centered around something concrete and tangible: the constitution of Israel in its land, the return of the exiles, the reestablishment of the Jewish ruler over the land, and peace and prosperity in that land. Of course, Jerusalem as the site of the Temple and the capital of the former Judahite kingdom was an essential component of Jewish hopes for the future.⁶⁸

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do the Old Testament teachings about the historical and liturgical dimensions of the Land contribute to the development of your spiritual life?

[1.](#) For a study of the history of theological differences regarding Jerusalem in the Old Testament — such as in the Psalms, the Deuteronomic tradition, Isaiah 1–39, and prophecy — and in the pseudepigraphical works and Dead Sea Scrolls, see Leslie J. Hoppe, *The Holy City: Jerusalem in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000).

[2.](#) Moshe Weinfeld, *Promise of the Land* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), xv, 201.

[3.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. T. Dicken (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), 79. Contemporary source critics tend not to reckon the alleged Hexateuch as a literary corpus (see John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004], 47–65).

[4.](#) See Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, 4.

[6.](#) No attention will be paid to the Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) because humankind (*ʾādām*), not the land (*ʾerets*), but see Prov. 2:22), is their focus.

[7.](#) See also Deut. 18:9–13; 29:2–28; Ps. 44:3.

[8.](#) Von Rad, “The Promised Land and the Lord’s Land in the Hexateuch,” in *Problem of the Hexateuch*, 184. Von Rad distinguishes these two conceptions of the land as due to different sources; in fact, they are two sides of one coin.

[9.](#) Weinfeld, *Promise of the Land*, 222–64.

[10.](#) *Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköl*, IV, 10, obverse 8–14. Moshe Weinfeld, “Covenant, Davidic,” *IDBSup*, 190; *idem*, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970): 189–95.

[11.](#) J. Gordon McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, *JSOTSup* 33 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984), 12.

[12.](#) See Deut. 4:6, 14; 9:1; 11:31–32; 17:14; 18:9; 21:1; 26:1. See von Rad, *Problem of the Hexateuch*, 91.

- [13.](#) Brueggemann, *Land*, 27.
- [14.](#) I lean heavily in this section on Brueggemann, *Land*, 27–41.
- [15.](#) *Ibid.*, 28.
- [16.](#) *Ibid.*, 31.
- [17.](#) *Ibid.*, 35.
- [18.](#) Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Prosperity in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 63.
- [19.](#) R. E. Clements, "Temple and Land: A Significant Aspect of Israel's Worship," *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 19 (1961–1962): 16–28, esp. 20ff.; and *God and Temple* (Oxford: Blackwell; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 51ff.
- [20.](#) W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christian and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), 29.
- [21.](#) *Ibid.*, 31.
- [22.](#) *Liš'mitūt*: "in perpetuity," "to exterminate or annihilate (i.e., a sale in derogation of the seller's right of redemption)," "with irrevocable validity" (*HALOT*, s.v. "*š'mitūt*," 3:1036).
- [23.](#) Horst Dietrich Preuss, *TDOT*, 1:450.
- [24.](#) Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 21 (see also pp. 16–22).
- [25.](#) *Ibid.*
- [26.](#) For discussions of the Zion and the land, see [chap. 16](#). VI.E and [chap. 26](#).II.G.
- [27.](#) See Deut. 5:31; 6:1, 18; 16:20; 29:16–28; cf. Josh. 23:16.
- [28.](#) McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, 17.
- [29.](#) *Ibid.*, 18.
- [30.](#) *Ibid.*, 15.
- [31.](#) *Ibid.*
- [32.](#) Realized eschatology: several fulfillments ("the already") but never consummated ("the not yet"): cf. Exod. 23:30; Josh. 11:23; 13:1–7; Judg. 3:1–4; Neh. 9:15; Ps. 95:11; Heb. 4:6–11; 11:39–40.
- [33.](#) The book of Psalms mentions Jerusalem seventeen times and Zion thirty-nine times.
- [34.](#) *Enuma Elish*, 28; see *ANET*, 66.
- [35.](#) *CTA*, 3.D.40.
- [36.](#) Davies (*Gospel and the Land*, [chap. 3](#)) provides a helpful documentation of the biblical and scholarly material on the doctrine of land in the Prophets.
- [37.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 191–220.
- [38.](#) See also [chapter 27](#).

[39.](#) For the history of Jerusalem and Judah and the Judeans under Babylonian rule, see Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Jerusalem under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005). For the status of Judah and its inhabitants during the period of Achaemenid domination, roughly during the fifth and first half of the fourth centuries BC, see Michael Avon Oeming and Oded Lipschits, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

[40.](#) John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 344.

[41.](#) Ezra began his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month (7:10). The funding for the temple by the Persians repeats the furnishing of the Tabernacle by the Egyptians (7:15–16). His appointment of magistrates resonates with Moses' delegation of authority (7:25; cf. Exod. 18:13–27; Deut. 1:15–18). He may have wanted Levites to be part of the caravan to the Promised Land, as they had been at the time of the exodus from Egypt and the first return from Babylon (see 1:2; 8:15–32). The returnees' camping at the canal for three days repeats the first exodus (8:15; cf. Josh. 3:2). The number twelve, representing all Israel, also features prominently. For example, in Ezra 7:3b – 14 there are descendants of 12 other families; 12 priests and 12 Levites (2+10) to transport vessels to the temple (8:24); 12 bulls, 96 (8x12) rams, 72 (6x12) lambs (1 Esdras 8:26, not 77 of MT), 12 goats for sin offering for all Israel (8:35).

[42.](#) R. H. Charles, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, in Judaism, and in Christianity: Or Hebrew, Jewish, and Christian Eschatology from Pre-Prophetic Times Till the Close of the New Testament Canon* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899), 82–102; Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 133; M. Rist, "Apocalypticism," *IDB*, 1:159, § 2c; D. S. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 99–156; idem, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 B.C. – A.D. 100* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 285–356; J. Block, *On the Apocalyptic in Judaism* (*Jewish Quarterly Review*, Monograph Series 2 [Philadelphia: Dropsie College Press, 1952]), 86–89; H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic: A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to the Revelation*, rev. ed. (New York: Association Press, 1964), 13–166; N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. and exp. ed. (London: Temple Smith, 197), 19–21; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (1973; repr., Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 91–101, 343–46; Paul D. Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), 1–31, 280–401;

idem, "Zechariah 9 and the Recapitulation of an Ancient Ritual Pattern," *JBL* 92 (1973): 43n19.

[43.](#) See Thomas E. McComiskey, "The Seventy 'Weeks' of Daniel against the Background of Ancient Near Eastern Literature," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 35–40.

[44.](#) E. Kipinski, "Recherches sur le livre de Zacharie," *VT* 20 (1970): 40.

[45.](#) Klaus Koch, "Die mysteriösen Zahlen der judäischen Könige und die apokalyptischen Jahwochen," *VT* 28 (1978): 443–51; John J. Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, FOTL 20 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 91–92.

[46.](#) Similarly, the pious priest who wrote the Book of Jubilees (ca. 160–110 BC) divides salvation history into "weeks" (i.e., periods of 7 years) and Jubilees (i.e., periods of 7×7 years). He divides the period from creation to Moses into 7 "weeks" [of years] $\times$ 7 Jubilees for a total of 49 Jubilees. After that, "and the jubilees will pass by, until Israel is cleansed from all guilt of fornication, and uncleanness, and pollution, and sin ... and there will be no more a Satan or any evil one, and the land will be clean from that time for evermore" (50:5).

[47.](#) The anonymous suffering slave of Deutero-Isaiah complains, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing" (Isa. 49:4), and they sentence him to death (Isa. 53:1–12).

[48.](#) Carl H. Cornill, *Die siebenzig Jahrwochen Daniels* (Königsberg: Hartung, 1889).

[49.](#) For the bibliography of this section, I lean heavily upon R. J. Vair, "The Old Testament Promise of the Land as Reinterpreted in First and Second Century Christian Literature" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., 1979).

[50.](#) For the diffusion of Hellenistic culture as a policy of Alexander the Great and his successors, see W. W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), 138ff. For the dispersion of the Jewish people at and after this time, see G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 73ff.; M. Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 1ff.; G. La Piana, "Foreign Groups in Rome during the First Centuries of the Empire," *HTR* 20 (1927): 195ff.; J. J. Petuchowski, "Diaspora Judaism — An Abnormality? The Testimony of History," *Judaism* 9 (1960): 19–22; P. Schäfer, "The Hellenistic and Maccabaeian Periods," in *Israelite and Judaeian History*, ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 539–603.

[51.](#) To explain how Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to Hellenize Jerusalem, Schäfer combined the theories of E. J. Bickerman and V. A. Tcherichover, "Hellenistic and Maccabaeian Period," in *Israelite and Judaeian History*, 562–64. For singling out the Law as a purpose of the Maccabean revolt,

see Russell, *Between the Testaments*, 42–48.

[52.](#) For the importance of the holy war, the temple, and the land in the Maccabean revolt, see Hanson, “Zechariah 9 and Ritual Pattern,” 48–51; Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 48–49; Brueggemann, *The Land*, 163–64; J. R. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 26–33; Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible from 500 B.C. to A.D. 100*, trans. D. E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 49–54.

[53.](#) Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.7.2. According to columnist Charles Krauthammer (“Everyone Is Jewish until Proven Otherwise,” *Washington Post*, 25 September 2006, A21), “There are 13 million Jews in the world, one-fifth of 1 percent of the world’s population. Yet 20 percent of Nobel Prize winners are Jewish, a staggering hundredfold surplus of renown and genius.”

[54.](#) E. J. Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees*, Foundations of PostBiblical Judaism (1962; repr., New York: Schocken, 1987), 3–4.

[55.](#) Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 108.

[56.](#) R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (1944; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1968), 189.

[57.](#) Philo, *On the Life of Moses* 1:278.

[58.](#) Ethiopic Enoch 26:1; Jub. 8:12, 19; Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 7. Ezekiel’s map of the world was a circle with Spain on the west, the Indus River on the east, Greece in the north, and Ethiopia in the south. The rest was guess work. On that map Jerusalem came nicely in the center.

[59.](#) Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 145–46.

[60.](#) For the withdrawal to the desert, see F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 104; Theodore H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures: In English Translation with Introduction and Notes*, 3rd ed., rev. and enlarged (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 553; H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (repr., Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1971), 13. For the concept of atonement, see Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 98–100; R. J. McKelvey, *New Temple* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 46–53.

[61.](#) For the general attitude of the community in respect to apocalyptic, and for more on the messianic banquet, see Geza Vermes, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” *IDBSup*, 216, § 8; Krister Stendahl, “The Scrolls and the New Testament: An Introduction and a Perspective,” in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. Krister Stendahl (repr., New York: Herder & Herder, 1991), 9–11. For the limiting of the powers of the future Davidic prince by a covenant, see W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, supplement to *Novum Testament*, vol. 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 167. On the

concept of the Qumran community as the true Israel and heir of the land, see Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 52–55; William Sanford La Sor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 97; L. E. Keck, “The Poor among the Saints in Jewish Christianity and Qumran,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche*, 57 (1966): 74–77; M. Grant, *Jews in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 44.

[62.](#) For the concept of holy war, see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 108–11, 326–34; La Sor, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 94–95.

[63.](#) Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 124.

[64.](#) K. Kohler, “The Testament of Job: An Essene Midrash on the Book of Job,” *Semitic Studies in Memory of Rev. Dr. Alexander Kohut* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1897), cited by Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 125n121.

[65.](#) Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 148–50.

[66.](#) Ibid., 154.

[67.](#) Ibid., 155–56.

[68.](#) Hoppe, *The Holy City*, 9.

Chapter 20

THE GIFT OF LAND, PART 3: THE NEW TESTAMENT

The veil, which is upon these books [the Old Testament] for the Jews, is there also for evil Christians, and for all who do not hate themselves. But how well disposed men are to understand them and to know Jesus Christ when they truly hate themselves.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 10.676

I. INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to show the meaning of the Sworn Land [hereafter Land] in its canonical context. In [chapter 2](#) we stated that the task of this theology is to identify the teachings of individual books of the Old Testament and to unify them by tracing the development of progressively revealed themes through the unified corpus in connection with motifs such as “seed,” “temple,” “Sabbath,” “kingship,” and “land.” This chapter attempts to do the same with the New Testament corpus in that readers will profit with regard to hermeneutics, pedagogy and homiletics, theology, spiritual life, and politics.

As for hermeneutics, the definition of Hebrew *‘areṣ*, “land” or “earth” — the fourth most frequent word in the Old Testament — affects the interpretation of almost every book of the Bible. As for pedagogy and homiletics, one cannot teach or preach the whole counsel of God without defining “Land” in its canonical context. As for theology, the interpretation of “Land” validates a dispensational or covenant system of theology. As for spiritual life, Christians will be nourished by understanding how the New Testament reveals what the Old Testament conceals about the Land. As for politics, the validity of the Jewish state’s claim to the land of Palestine depends in part on the meaning of “Land.” In other words, does the Jewish state play a role *in salvation history*?¹ Obviously it plays a role in universal history, which impacts salvation history.

Politically, the survival of the United States as a nation may depend in part on a right understanding of this motif. The United States government supports the Jewish state to preserve democracy in the Middle East, but to do so successfully it must deal justly with the Muslims who contend with the Jewish state for this same piece of real estate. Islam perceives the United States as being unjust in this dispute, a perception abetted by the popular eschatology of many American fundamentalists and evangelicals. These Christians support the Jewish claim to the Land because they equate the Jewish state with God’s people and — often unconsciously — equate the Arabs with the Canaanites. In this popular eschatology, with no understanding of covenant theology, the State of Israel has a right to possess Palestine because God gave that land as a perpetual fief to Abraham and his descendants.² They are also ardent supporters of the State of Israel’s claim to the Land because they believe the rise of the modern State of

Israel is a harbinger of the imminent return of Christ. This evangelical partiality contributes to the Arab perception of being treated unfairly, and this Arab perception contributed to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in September 2001. The wrong eschatology of Jewry in Jesus' day led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 with a horrific loss of life; the popular theology today could contribute to the same tragic consequences both for the Jewish state and for the United States.

The trajectory of the Land motif into the New Testament, however, is the most difficult biblical motif to track. This is so because the New Testament rarely uses the term "land" for salvation history after the death of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus intentionally changes his one Old Testament citation pertaining to the land of Canaan (Ps. 37:5) to refer to the whole earth. Paul infers the term by "inherit" in Romans 4:13, and he too refers it to the whole earth.

Since the New Testament does not use the term "Land," we have to work with equivalent terms that imply Land, such as "Jerusalem," "throne of David," "temple," and "Zion." All these terms refer to real estate in the Land. Prophets use Jerusalem and Land in close connection with one another. The superscript to Micah says his words are addressed to Jerusalem and Samaria, but he opens his first sermon with: "Listen, O earth [*'ares*], and all who are in it" (Mic. 1:2). In the same sermon he asks and answers, "What is Judah's high place? Is it not Jerusalem?" (v. 5).

In the postexilic period Jerusalem came to be used as a synecdoche for Judea. Within the Persian Empire, Judea was a tiny province, only twenty-five miles east to west and thirty-five miles north to south; Jerusalem was the center of the province's political, economic, and social life. The rabbis regarded the temple in Jerusalem as the center of the world. Israel's hope to rule the world at the End centered in Jerusalem. It comes as no surprise, then, that in the Second Temple period Jerusalem and its equivalents are a synecdoche for the Land. As a convenient catch-all for these coreferential terms, this chapter mostly uses hereafter either "Land" or "Jerusalem."

Moreover, we restrict a more detailed exegesis to the few ambiguous texts regarding Land in the New Testament. Space restraints, however, do not allow a *detailed* precis of Gregory K. Beale's excellent exegesis of the difficult and controversial interpretation of John's highly symbolic visions.³

In this chapter we argue that the New Testament redefines Land in three ways: first, *spiritually*, as a reference to Christ's person; second, *transcendentally*, as a reference to heavenly Jerusalem; and third, *eschatologically*, as a reference to the new Jerusalem after Christ's second coming. By "redefine" we mean that whereas "Land" in the Old Testament refers to Israel's life in Canaan, in the

New Testament “Land” is transmuted to refer to life in Christ. In other words, the New Testament skins like a banana the Old Testament references to the Land as real estate in order to expose its spiritual food. Christian theologians since Augustine have contended that “the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed.” As for Land, I contend that the Old Testament conceals and the New reveals that Canaan has the hidden manna of three eternal, spiritual truths involved in the life of God’s elect in Christ. In addition, I contend that Land in the Old Testament is a type of the Christian life in Christ.

By noting this progressive revelation within Scripture, we are not allegorizing Land in the Old Testament by imposing upon its reluctant text spiritual truths from the New Testament. Rather, we argue that the Author of the Bible intended these concealed, spiritual truths regarding the Land that the New Testament reveals. Moreover, these three spiritual redefinitions of Land often overlap so that the redefinition of Land has polyvalent values. Nevertheless, we hope this threefold analysis will clarify these values of being in Christ.

The New Testament redefines most Old Testament motifs or themes. In the new dispensation the covenant people of God are not marked by circumcision as in the old, but by their doing God’s will (Matt. 8:21–22 [Luke 9:59–60] ; Matt. 12:46–50 [Mark 3:21, 31–35; Luke 8:19–21]; Luke 11:27). Jesus does away with Sabbath-keeping as a religious obligation and “redefines” it according to its true intent: a time to heal, to do good, and to enjoy spiritual rest (Matt. 12 [Mark 2]; *passim*). As for the purity of food, Jesus taught in contrast to the rabbis that real purity pertains to the state of the heart, not to what goes into one’s mouth (Matt. 15 [Mark 7]).

Jesus, as the Author of Torah, has the right to redefine Old Testament terms and themes according the divine Author’s intention. Orthodox Jews, both in apostolic times and today, believe that by their defining the Old Testament woodenly and by their holding firmly to their traditions, God will reward them by inaugurating the kingdom of God. According to the Jewish view, the kingdom of God will cater to their carnal desires and gratify their nationalistic pride. Jesus calls on the nation to repent of this way of thinking: to renounce their old securities with their corrupt priesthood and hypocritical righteousness. N. T. Wright says, “Jesus was replacing adherence or allegiance to Temple and Torah with allegiance to himself. Restoration and purity were to be had, not through the usual channels, but through Jesus.”⁴ Allen Verhey calls this overturning of the conventional mores “the great reversal.”⁵ If the Jewish nation did not repent of their old allegiances and carnal interpretations and trust him, Jesus warned, they were headed for certain judgment: the fire and sword of a

soon-approaching Roman army. History has validated Jesus Christ, not Judaism. His temple (body) was raised; the Jerusalem temple was razed.

Before looking at the New Testament's teachings about the Land in particular, however, I first consider its teachings about the earth in general.

II. THE EARTH

In [chapters 7](#) and [11](#), I considered Old Testament teaching about what we now know to be planet earth. Here we consider the New Testament's teachings about the planet.

A. In the Present

The New Testament continues to reckon God, who is now understood to be a Trinity, as the earth's Creator, Sustainer, Owner, and Lord. Its distinctive modification is attributing the creation of the earth to the active agency of Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:25; 28:18; John 1:1–3; Acts 4:24; 7:49; 14:15; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2–3). In the Bible, God is recognized as “God” by his roles as Creator of all things and Ruler of all things. The New Testament represents Jesus as the Creator and Ruler of all things — that is to say, as God. In God's common grace, the earth continues to provide for all humankind their social space (Acts 17:26) and their source of life (Matt. 13:3–9).

The New Testament represents the earth as the setting for the dramatic conflict between God and his church versus Satan and the world. “World” (Gr. *kosmos*) does not refer to quantifiable space, but to an organized kingdom of Satan opposed to the kingdom of God. Although Satan has blinded humanity's spiritual eyes (2 Cor. 4:4), Christ breaks into his world/kingdom (see [chap. 6](#)) to (1) glorify God (John 17:4); (2) establish his universal rule by doing signs and wonders and by his disciples bearing witness to him (Matt. 6:1–15; Acts 1:8; 2:19; 14:37);⁶ (3) forgive sins (Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24); (4) make disciples to be its salt and light (Matt. 5:13); and (5) bring a sword that divides the children of light from the children of darkness (Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:51). Christ empowers his disciples to evangelize the earth through his administration of the Holy Spirit, and he gives them the keys to open the doors to those who confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and to exclude those who do not receive their testimony to Christ (Matt. 10:14–15; 16:19; 18:18).

Unlike the old age, Christ does not authorize or commission the church, nor does he send his Spirit to empower her or gift her, to establish a geopolitical

kingdom in the new age. When arrested by the Jewish leaders, Jesus commands Peter to put his sword away (John 18:11). Also, Paul writes that the apostles do not fight with the weapons of the world (2 Cor. 10:4); rather, they take thought captive and establish a spiritual kingdom by preaching the gospel. The Spirit does not gift the church for military warfare, and the Spirit never comes upon Christ or the apostles to empower them for military battles, as in the case of Joshua, the warlords (e.g., Gideon), or the kings (e.g., David). In the new age God's word in the mouths of babes and sucklings, not an iron weapon in the hand of a military hero, is the powerful sword that slays the world. This changed style of warfare is part and parcel of the redefinition of Land from a terrestrial reference to a spiritual reference.

B. In the Future

We drew the last chapter to conclusion with a bewildering array of rabbinic opinions about how the earth would end. The New Testament comes down on the side of those who contend that it will be purged by fire and will be regenerated to become a part of the everlasting new heaven and new earth (Matt. 24:35; Luke 12:49; 2 Peter 3:12–13). The whole creation waits in eager expectation for the true nature of the people of God to be revealed in their resurrection, which is the redemption *of* their bodies — not redemption *from* their bodies. Saints will enjoy their freedom from sin and its effects in this regenerated earth that is liberated from its present state of imperfection and decay (Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:22–25; Rev. 21:1), not in a spiritual, disembodied heaven “up there.”

The creation's present condition is akin to a woman's labor pains in childbirth in order that it might bring forth its eschatological destiny (Rom. 8:18–25). At that time, the meek (i.e., the people of glory) will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). This is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, whom Paul in Romans 4:13 calls “heir of the world” (cf. Heb. 11:16).

Let us now take up the theme of Land in particular. Before analyzing the New Testament's three positive “useful” teachings regarding Land (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), we first consider its references to the Land as geopolitical territory.

III. LAND AS GEOPOLITICAL TERRITORY

The New Testament opens with Jerusalem still being ruled by foreign powers. The seven-times-seventy years of God's judgment upon Israel—which Daniel prophesied and which Jesus probably had in mind in referring to “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) — terminate in Jesus' death and resurrection, the essentials of the gospel message (see [chap. 19](#)). Christ Jesus' death and resurrection fulfilled and inaugurated the six things promised at the end of the 490 years (Dan. 9:24): “to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.” Some of these promises were fulfilled in Christ's death, such as his making atonement for wickedness; others he inaugurated, such as bringing in everlasting righteousness; and others he will consummate at his second coming, such as his sealing up the vision and prophecy.

The Jews, however, rejected Jesus as Messiah and with that rejection forfeited God's sixfold promise to Daniel. Forced from the Land in AD 70, they have wandered the face of the earth and have traditionally hoped for the day when they will return to the Land and God's ancient promises to Abraham and David for the Land will be realized at the end of history. Three times a day and at Sabbath worship and festivals, Jews remember Zion: “Merciful Father, Deal kindly with Zion, Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.” Even at the joyous occasions of weddings, they break a glass to remind themselves of Jerusalem's destruction. Rabbi Heschel affirms, “To abandon the land would make a mockery of all our longings, prayer, and commitments. To abandon the land would be to repudiate the Bible.”⁷

The writers of the Synoptic Gospels, however, each in his own way discredits this Jewish hope for the Land. But before considering how they debunk this expectation, let us first reflect on why prophecies that pertain to Messiah Jesus' passion and resurrection find a literal fulfillment, yet those that pertain to his glory after his resurrection find a spiritual fulfillment presently in the church and a consummation beyond imagination in the future. This reflection is important because it is argued by premillennialists that if the Land promises that pertain to Jesus' life before his resurrection are fulfilled literally, we should expect that those prophecies that pertain to his glory will also be fulfilled literally. As we shall see, the argument is guilty of a *non-sequitur*.

We begin our study with Land promises in Matthew and Mark.

A. In Matthew and Mark

Matthew's and Mark's gospels present the Old Testament Land promises as literally fulfilled in Messiah Jesus' passion, and they anticipate their spiritual fulfillment in Messiah Jesus' glory after his resurrection.

1. Land Prophecies Literally Fulfilled in Messiah's Passion

Matthew interprets Old Testament prophecies that locate Messiah's earthly career in the Holy Land as having a literal, geopolitical fulfillment. Jesus' birth (2:1–12) fulfills Micah's prophecy that Israel's future ruler would come from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2 [1]). The escape of the holy family to Egypt (Matt. 2:13–15) is represented as the fulfillment of Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called my son." The slaughter of the innocent at Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16–18) fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy that Rachel weeps there for her children (Jer. 31:15). The holy family's return to Nazareth (Matt. 2:19–23) fulfills what the prophets said: "He will be called a Nazarene."⁸ After the fulfillments of the birth narrative, Matthew identifies John the Baptist as the one in Isaiah's vision who in the wilderness prepares the way of *I AM* (3:1–2; cf. Isa. 40:3). Jesus begins his own preaching in Galilee in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that the first territory of Israel to suffer the darkness of deportation and exile will be the first on which the light of the Messiah's salvation will shine (Isa. 9:1–3 [8:23–9:2]; Matt 4:12–16).

These and other prophecies, such as the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and a colt in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy (Matt. 21:1–5; Zech. 9:9), find a literal fulfillment because they pertain to Christ's earthly ministry. It does not follow, however, that because Land prophecies that pertain to Christ's earthly passions find a literal fulfillment, prophecies that pertain to his glory also have a literal fulfillment. Rather, we should expect that as prophecies regarding Christ's earthly passion find an earthly fulfillment, those prophecies that pertain to his glory (i.e., his spiritual reign from heaven) will find a spiritual fulfillment. The apostles who wrote of Christ's present glory will not disappoint our expectation. In other words, Old

Testament prophecies that pertain to Messiah's glory, though couched in the language of the old dispensation when Israel existed as a geopolitical kingdom, will have to be redefined according to the spiritual realities of the new kingdom, where Messiah reigns from David's throne in heaven by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew portrays the response of Jerusalem to Jesus as negative, except for the note in 4:2. Commenting on Matthew, Leslie J. Hoppe says, "The reaction of Jerusalem to the appearance of the Magi inquiring about 'the newborn king of the Jews' (2:1–4) is a harbinger of the city's reaction when the adult Jesus entered its gates to the acclamations of his followers. Matthew comments that witnessing Jesus' entry, 'the whole city was shaken' (21:10). A few days later the Jerusalemites called for his execution."⁹ Jesus responds to their rejection of him by predicting the city's destruction (22:7; 23:37–38). At his second coming, however, a converted Jerusalem will greet him appropriately (23:39; see [chap. 12.VI.C.4](#)).

As for the temple, during Christ's first advent he recognized the edifice as the house of God (Luke 2:49; cf. Matt. 12:4; 11:17; Luke 18:10). His cleansing of the temple shows his respect for the edifice. But God discredited the Jewish temple when its leaders crucified his Son. During Jesus' crucifixion, the Roman soldiers and the Jewish priesthood were mocking Jesus' claim that he could rebuild the temple in three days. However, God mocked both the Roman army and the chief priests. At the sixth hour, darkness came over the whole land and an earthquake occurred, tearing the temple veil in two. Upon seeing this, the awestruck Roman centurion, who was in charge of the crucifixion, confessed Jesus as the Son of God. He made his surprising confession because the birth and death of the Roman emperor, who was regarded as a god and called *Sol Invictus* ("The Unconquered Sun"), were allegedly accompanied by astral wonders. Moreover, according to Josephus, the outer veil portrayed the entire panorama of the heavens.¹⁰

These two events symbolically mocked the Roman gods and the Jewish priests. They symbolized both the end of the Roman pantheon of gods and the end of the unique privilege of the high priest to go behind the veil — it matters not whether the veil is the inner or the outer —and make atonement for the people (Mark 16:33–39; Exod. 26:31–33; Heb. 8:1; 9:1–10, 14). And heaven was now open to all who would enter by faith. In other words, this rending of the veil opens the way to a spiritual fulfillment of the Land promises after Jesus Christ's resurrection.

2. Land Prophecies Fulfilled Spiritually in Messiah's

Glory

Although Matthew's and Mark's writings trace the life of Messiah Jesus only to his resurrection, they prepare the way for the apostolic teaching that the Old Testament Land promises are fulfilled in the church spiritually. They anticipate this redefinition by predicting the annihilation of Jerusalem and exalting Galilee over Judea in the new age. Isaiah's prophecy—that in the future God will honor Galilee of the Gentiles — forms the background for Matthew's and Mark's representation of the contrasting roles of Jerusalem and Galilee in the ministry of Jesus and in the church's witness to him (Isa. 9:1–2; cf. Matt. 4:13–15).¹¹ Galilee first sees the light of the messianic age and will become the launching point for the new age. Similarly, Luke, the author of Acts, has Peter summarizing Christ's ministry as beginning in Galilee (Acts 10:37), and John notes that Messiah first reveals his glory in Galilee in the miracle of changing water into wine, the sign that the messianic age had come (John. 2:1–11).

a. Galilee: Locus of the Beginning of the New Age

Matthew and Mark artificially divide the ministry of Jesus into three successive acts, each of which they carefully stage in different locations within the Land. I restrict our study here to Mark. Act 1 (Mark 1:14–8:21) takes place in Galilee; Act 2 (8:22–10:52), on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem; and Act 3 (11:1–16:8), in Jerusalem, where Jesus spends only five days before he is arrested, tried, and executed. Matthew presents the same geographic movements as Mark.¹² This artificial schema of Christ's movements stands in marked contrast to the gospel of John, which more realistically represents Jesus as moving back and forth between Galilee and Judea. Ernst Lohmeyer and R. H. Lightfoot in particular argue that in both Matthew and Mark the area around Galilee represents Jesus' story as, in the words of R. T. France, "open proclamation and acceptance, with committed disciples and the enthusiastic crowds."¹³

Let us narrow our focus to Mark's three acts. Act 1 peaks in the extreme north of Galilee where Peter, representing the disciples, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (8:27–30). After this high point, in Act 2, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he must be rejected and crucified by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. Act 3, in Jerusalem, is, as France expresses it: "a dismal story of conflict, rejection, and death."¹⁴

After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem, both gospels feature Galilee, the place where the good news of Jesus was first preached and widely embraced, as the place from which the worldwide preaching of the Good News will be launched. In Mark, the angelic messenger at the tomb directs the disciples to return to Galilee, where they will meet and see the resurrected Christ (14:28). In Matthew, Christ and his disciples return to Galilee where on a mountain he authorizes them to proclaim the Good News worldwide (28:16–20).¹⁵ The significance for launching the new age from Galilee, not Judea, becomes even clearer when one realizes, as W. D. Davies notes, that “the ministry of Jesus in Galilee ran counter to the dominant popular and learned expectation of Judaism that Jerusalem [not Galilee] would be the centre for the advent of the age of the Messiah [cf. John 7:52].”¹⁶

b. Jerusalem: Locus of the End of the Old Age

In striking contrast to this unexpected rhetorical exaltation of Galilee as playing the honored role of launching the new age, Jesus predicts Jerusalem will be annihilated during the generation that killed him. His prediction was fulfilled in AD 70.

Let us look at that prediction in more detail. After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1–11) and his clearing of the temple (21:12–17), Matthew anticipates this destruction of the city and the end of the old age by mixing the accounts of the unbelief and rejection of the Jewish authorities (21:23–27, 28–32; 22:15–22, 23–33, 34–46) with Jesus' symbolic cursing of the fig tree (21:18–22), his parables of the tenants (21:33–46) and the wedding banquet (22:1–14), and his seven woes on the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem (23:1–36). The barren fig tree symbolizes the temple with its barren ritual and so is ripe for destruction.¹⁷ Similarly, the three polemical parables in 21:28–22:14 are all directed against the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and aim to identify the true people of God as those who win his favor in contrast to the city authorities, who gain his wrath. As a bridge to the Olivet discourse predicting the annihilation of the city (Matt. 24; Mark 13), Matthew records Jesus' last words to the people of Jerusalem: “Your house is left to you desolate.... You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ “ (23:38–39).

Matthew 24 presents Jesus' private teaching to the disciples after he symbolically leaves the temple for the Mount of Olives. That trek reprises Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the Lord leaving Solomon's temple and stopping on the same mountain just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In his

private teaching Jesus tells them that Jerusalem will be destroyed in their generation (see excursus 1). No New Testament passage predicts or cites an Old Testament prophecy that it will be rebuilt. Pascal makes the point:

When Nebuchadnezzar carried away the people captive, in case they thought the scepter had been forever removed from Judah, God told [Israel] beforehand their captivity would not last long, and that they would be restored (Jeremiah 29:10). They were comforted throughout by the prophets, and their royal house continued. But the second destruction came [in AD 70] without any promise of restoration—without having prophets, without kings, without consolation and hope, because the scepter has forever been removed [from national Israel].^{[18](#)}

This characterization of Galilee as the place of proclaiming the new age and of Jerusalem as the place of annihilation marks a decisive change from the old age to the new. Matthew and Mark intentionally negate Jewry's expectation that Jerusalem will continue to play a role in salvation history after its destruction in AD 70. Implicitly, then, Old Testament prophecies about Jerusalem's future glory must find their fulfillment in ways that conform to the transmutation of the kingdom of God from an earthly kingdom into a spiritual kingdom.

EXCURSUS 1: THE DISCIPLES' QUESTIONS

Jesus' prediction that Jerusalem will be totally destroyed prompts his disciples to ask two questions: (1) When will it happen? and (2) What will be the sign of Jesus' coming and of the end the age?

1. Jerusalem will be destroyed in the apostolic age

Jesus answers the first question in Matthew 24:4–35 (= Mark 13:1–31), with this climactic revelation: “this generation will certainly not pass until all these things have happened” (v. 34). To a modern reader unfamiliar with apocalyptic language, it appears as though “all these things” includes the Parousia. (*Parousia* is the Greek work for “presence,” in contrast to *apousia*, “absence.”) The Parousia connotes the arrival of someone after a period of absence and is used especially of royalty and officials. Some premillennialists contrast Christ's Parousia (an event at the beginning of the Millennium) with his Second Coming (which comes at the end). I use the two terms interchangeably, because the New Testament does not speak of an intermediate Jewish kingdom between two comings of Christ. If Jesus claimed the Parousia would occur within the lifetime of his generation, then, contrary to his claim, his words are not true (Matt. 24:36), and he apparently contradicts himself, because after setting the time frame, in the next breath he asserts that no one knows the day or hour of his Parousia (vv. 36–50).

To safeguard the modern reader against questioning the veracity or coherence of Jesus' words here, a more detailed exegesis of the *apocalyptic* language of verses 29–31 (= Mark 13:24–27) merits a precis of R. T. France's helpful interpretation. According to France, the cosmic disturbances of verse 29 in apocalyptic language refer to the overthrow of political powers (Babylon [Isa. 13:10]; Egypt [Ezek. 32:7]; Jerusalem in 586 BC [Joel 2:10]; the nations [Isa. 34:4]; Jerusalem in AD 70 [Matt. 24:29]), while the language about “the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds” refers to his ascending to God to receive vindication and universal authority over all the earth (Dan. 7:13–14), not of his coming to earth.¹⁹

The interpretation of the “sign” (*sēmeion* — the LXX uses this word to translate “banner”; cf. Isa 11:12; 49:22) of the Son of Man in heaven is more problematic. If “banner” is the correct rendering of “sign,” then it possibly refers to the “gathering of the exiles,” since that is what “banner” and “trumpet call” (v. 31) refer to in Jewish liturgical language.²⁰ The phrase “all the nations will mourn” (v. 30) is better translated as “all the families of the land [i.e., Israel] will mourn.” They do so in connection with their seeing the Son of Man receiving authority from God.

The prophecy of national mourning, based on Zech. 12:10–14, is fulfilled at Pentecost and throughout the apostolic period. Before Jerusalem was destroyed, the Church had already been firmly established in Rome. Jesus ascends on the clouds to sit at God’s right hand, and as proof that he has received power and authority he sends the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Peter explains: “Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father, the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Peter draws his Pentecost sermon to the conclusion, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36). The people hearing it, “were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ “ (2:37). Luke says, “those who accepted his message were baptized and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (2:41).

In Matthew 24:31 Jesus had said that the believers are gathered from the “four winds.” That is what happened at Pentecost (see Acts 2:5–11). Jesus also prophesied that God would gather them by sending his *angeloi* with a “loud trumpet call”—which, as we noted above, is the language of gathering exiles. According to Isaiah 27:13, “In the day a great trumpet will sound, those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LoRD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.” *Angeloi* (lit. “messengers”) may refer to preachers, such as Peter (cf. “messengers” [NIV] in Lk. 7:24; 9:52), or to the spiritual power that lies behind them (cf. Rev. 2). R. T. France comments, “The reference [to the *angeloi* in Matt. 24:31] is not ... as in 13:41, to the final judgment, but to the worldwide growth of the church ..., which is consequent on the ending of Israel’s special status, symbolized in the destruction of the temple” (*Gospel of Mark*, 35).

In Matthew 24:36–41 Jesus answers the second question, “what will be the sign of Jesus’ coming and of the end of the age,” by citing the judgment that will accompany the unknown time of his second and final coming. In

sum, Jesus clearly distinguishes the time of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the ingathering of the Jews from all over the world into the community of faith from the time of the Parousia.

2. The time of the Parousia is unknown

Since the time of the Parousia and with it the final judgment is unknown, Jesus warns his disciples to watch for his coming. This is all the more important because his coming will be followed by eternal rewards and terminal punishment, not millennial bliss, as Jesus' conclusion to the Olivet discourse (24:42–51) as well as his parables of the ten virgins (25:1–13), talents (25:14–30), and the sheep and the goats (25:31–46) make clear. He concludes the latter by asserting “then the wicked will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” In sum, Mark-Matthew predicts the *destruction* of territorial Jerusalem in connection with the beginning of a new age, not Jerusalem's *future glory* in a millennial kingdom, as some mistakenly allege.

B. In Luke-Acts

Jerusalem sets the scene for the beginning and end of the gospel of Luke (1:9; 24:53) and also sets the stage of his sequel, the book of Acts (Acts 1:8; 2:1–17). In his sequel we can trace by this extension of church history Luke's redefinition of the kingdom of God from a reference to life in territorial space to a reference to life in Christ. The primitive church expected Jesus Messiah to rule from David's throne in Jerusalem and reestablish Israel's glory and in that way to be a light to the nations. However, the Spirit-enlightened and Spirit-empowered church came to understand that Messiah Jesus rules the world from David's throne in heaven in a universal kingdom without national boundaries.

1. Jewish Misunderstandings of the Primitive Church

The opening scenes of Luke take place in Jerusalem (1:5–79). Here the pious characters of Luke's infancy narratives — Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary and Simeon—praise God for sending Jewry's long-hoped-for Messiah.

Not yet having heard the teachings of Jesus and not yet having experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit, they express their praise in terms they inherited from their Jewish context. Mary probably understood Gabriel's announcement that Jesus would reign over the House of Jacob from David's throne in an everlasting kingdom as referring to David's throne in Jerusalem (vv. 32–33). The priest Zechariah, on the birth of his son, John the Baptist, praises God that he “raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” to save Israel from her enemies (v. 69), probably meaning that Messiah would deliver Jerusalem from Rome's yoke.

2. Jerusalem: Locus of the End of the Old Dispensation

But as Luke continues his two-part drama, the primitive church's Jewish expectations for the kingdom are reshaped. Jerusalem remains the center of God's kingdom during Messiah's earthly career but not after his resurrection. Christ's passion must be fulfilled in Jerusalem but not his glory. During his life Jesus anticipates his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. In contrast to Matthew, Luke locates Satan's last temptation of Jesus on the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem. By this rhetoric, Luke subtly foreshadows the sinister and satanic role the temple will play in the rejection and death of Jesus (Luke 4:1–13; Matt. 4:1–11). On his march to Jerusalem to fulfill his destiny, Jesus says sardonically, “I must keep going ... for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” (Luke 13:33; cf. 18:31).

Jesus now subverts any future in salvation history for the unholy city through his parables, actions, and prophecies. Luke records that when Jesus “was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once” (19:11), he told them the parable of the minas. In this parable a mina is taken away from the unfaithful servant and given to another. He concludes the parable with the ominous command: “But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them — bring them here and kill them in front of me” (19:27). After relating this parable, Luke records Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem — but instead of fulfilling Jewish hopes for the exaltation of the city, Jesus weeps for Jerusalem because the city is about to be annihilated for rejecting him. The time is near, he says, when armies will lay it to waste. Luke also omits any allusion to Old Testament prophecies that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and does not cite any prophecy by Jesus or within the early church to that effect. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 terminates its role in salvation

history.

Turning to Luke's sequel, in its first scene we find Jesus instructing his disciples to stay in Jerusalem until God empowers them from on high. Only after they have been clothed with the Holy Spirit are they to begin their worldwide witness to the gospel. In the second scene, on the Mount of Olives, the disciples still think like the primitive church: "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" they ask (Acts 1:6; cf. Luke 24:21). Instead of promising to fulfill their Jewish expectations, Jesus again instructs them to stay in Jerusalem until they are Spirit-empowered to bear witness to the gospel to the ends of the earth. With that, Luke shifts the scene to Christ ascending into the clouds and to an angel announcing that he will return in the same manner (Acts 1:1–11).

3. Jerusalem: Locus of the Beginning of the New Age

After Christ's ascension, the disciples return to Jerusalem, praising God in the temple, where on Pentecost they are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin their preaching mission to the world (Luke 24:50–Acts 2:4). In sum, Luke defrocks Jerusalem of any priestly ministry in salvation history after it serves its purposes of fulfilling the essentials of the gospel. Instead of being the center of the world in the everlasting End of salvation history as the Jews expected, Luke reduces it to becoming the *point de départ* and divests it of ever again becoming the center of gravity (cf. Acts 8:14–16; 1:1–18; 15:1–35).

With Christ's ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Luke explicitly redefines crucial terms regarding the kingdom of God. Spirit-enlightened Peter locates David's throne in heaven. He explains the gift of the Spirit enabling Christ's disciples to bear witness to the gospel in many languages as evidence that he now sits on David's heavenly throne: "Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I made your enemies a footstool for your feet' " (Acts 2:33–35).

Nevertheless, the Jewish leadership, in contrast to thousands of common Jews who were baptized in the name of Jesus, rejected Peter's Spirit-empowered witness and stoned Stephen, the church's first martyr, because he condemned Judaism and the worship that took place in Jerusalem's temple and accused them of resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:11–7:53). At his death Stephen sees Jesus standing at God's right hand ready to welcome him into heaven (7:56). The apostle with the keys to the kingdom then opens its gate: first to the Samaritans

(Acts 8) and then to a Roman centurion. The centurion's conversion epitomizes how the gospel overturns Rome's power (Acts 10).

Luke now shifts his focus from Peter, the apostle to the Jews, to Paul, the apostles to the nations. Prior to his conversion Paul persecuted the church in doomed Jerusalem. His conversion occurs on the Damascus road, not in Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter we learn that Antioch, not Jerusalem, becomes the center for gospel proclamation throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 13:13). Luke draws his narrative to conclusion with Paul in Rome. Here, at the political and religious center of his world, the great apostle "preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:31). Within a few centuries, the pagan Roman Empire will become the Holy Roman Empire.

This narrative background, tracing the redefinition of Land from a reference to a Jewish kingdom ruled from Jerusalem to a universal kingdom ruled from heaven, prepares us to reflect on the teachings of the apostles about the continuing role of the Land in salvation history.

C. In John

Although in the Fourth Gospel Jesus makes several trips from Galilee to Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 12:12), the city plays no central role in his preaching. To be sure, Jerusalem is important to John because it is the place where the Son of God manifests his glory—his death and resurrection — but the city as such plays no significant role in his gospel. John describes Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, but he never has Jesus speak to the people of Jerusalem. Jesus delivers his farewell address only to his disciples (John 13–17).

D. In the Life and Teaching of the Apostles

Jerusalem plays a role in the apostles' lives, but not in their teachings.

1. In Narrative

Paul probably shared the Jewish conception of Jerusalem as the center of the world (see [chap. 19](#)). He summarizes his ministry to the Gentiles as extending from "Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum [modern Albania and

Yugoslavia] “ (Rom. 15:19). Let us reflect on the role Jerusalem played in Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles and to the Jews.

a. Jerusalem in Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles

Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles occurs largely apart from Jerusalem. This is surprising, given that Paul, though born outside the land of Israel — in Tarsus, the Hellenistic capital of the province of Cilicia—came to Jerusalem at an unknown age to study with Gamaliel. Significantly, however, he received his call to be the apostle to the Gentiles while nearing Damascus (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:12), and he received the revelation of God’s Son in him so that he might preach among the Gentiles/nations, while in Arabia (Acts 9:23–25; Gal. 1:17; 2 Cor. 11:32–33). God neither called nor revealed his gospel to the great apostle while he was in Jerusalem, the cultural and religious center of ancient Israel as well as home to James, Peter, and John, who figure prominently as Christian leaders in that city.

After his conversion, Paul returned to Jerusalem, but God warned him to flee the spiritually hardened city (Acts 22:17ff.). Three years later, by revelation he went to Jerusalem “to get acquainted” (*historēsai*, “to seek/inquire after a tradition” or “to visit an authoritative teacher”) with Peter, who was probably regarded as the depository of the early Christian tradition (Gal. 1:18). Paul returned fourteen years later to make sure his work had the approval — not the authorization—of these Jerusalem “pillars” (Gal. 2:1–10). They confirmed him in his gospel of liberty to the Gentiles by giving him their right hand of fellowship.

Before going to Rome and Spain, Paul traveled to Jerusalem to carry a collection from Christians in Macedonia and Achaia for the poor among the saints. He agreed with the Gentiles that they owed a debt to the Jerusalem Christians for their bearing the original witness to Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:23–29).

b. Jerusalem in Paul’s ministry to the Jews

Paul accepted the temple as a legitimate place of worship for the believing Jews in Jerusalem. He used the example of the priests in the temple to justify that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14). After his conversion, he had a vision in the temple and frequented the temple for prayer (Acts 22:17–18), and after his third missionary journey he again went to Jerusalem. So as not to offend the Jews of the Diaspora and to win them to

Christ, he took upon himself a temporary Nazirite vow, and he paid the expenses for sacrifices and purification rituals for four others under the vow (Acts 21:24–26; 1 Cor. 9:19–23). Nevertheless, unlike Christ, he did not attempt to cleanse the doomed temple.

2. In Paul's Teaching

Land or Jerusalem, which had once been the center of salvation history in the old age, disappears entirely from its radar screen in the new. The contrast between the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament teachings of the apostles regarding the Land is so striking that it becomes a *tour de force* that the New Testament redefines the concept. “Land” no longer refers to territorial space but to spiritual space that encompasses both universal space — on both the vertical and horizontal axes — and universal time (i.e., “forever more”).

a. Jerusalem intentionally omitted from salvation history

It is surely unsettling that if there is a continuing role for Jerusalem, the most formally educated apostle in Jewish literature never mentions temporal Jerusalem vis-à-vis salvation history. Indeed, the great apostle identifies Jerusalem with Hagar and her rejected seed, who opposed and persecuted the people of God (Gal. 4:25). At an unknown age Paul came to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel. As a devout Pharisee, who outstripped his classmates for zeal (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:4–5), Paul shared in and cherished the Diaspora Jews’ apocalyptic hopes that the Messiah would rule the world from a glorious throne in Jerusalem. Paul’s failure to mention that role must be chalked up as a meaningful gap, not an insignificant blank. To be sure, in speaking of ethnic Israel’s privileges in contrast to the Gentiles, he says that theirs are the “promises” (Rom. 9:4), but he never singles out the Land for special mention (Gal. 3; 4:2; Rom. 4; 9:7; 11:28). Davies says, “[Paul’s] silence points not merely to the absence of a conscious concern with [the Land promise], but to his deliberate rejection of it. His interpretation of the promise is a-territorial.”²¹

This is not an argument from silence. Jesus promised the apostles that the Spirit would guide them into *all* truth (John 16:12). The truth in view pertains to Messiah’s kingdom. The logic is inescapable: If the Spirit will guide the apostles into all truth about Christ’s kingdom, and if the inspired apostles do not teach a

future Jewish kingdom that is centered in Jerusalem, then the popular, evangelical eschatology that the Land will play a role in an intermediate Jewish kingdom between two comings of Christ is not true.

The writer of Hebrews validates this logical conclusion. He explicitly teaches that the earthly sanctuary with its liturgy has been done away with *forever*, and he forbids the people of God from going back to that shadow. God does not walk backward in salvation history; he advances history by redefining earlier texts to bring into sharper focus their true significance (Heb. 7–10).

Two ambiguous passages, however, *may imply* a present or future role for earthly Jerusalem: 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and Romans 11:26.

b. 2 Thessalonians 2:4

Commentators have proposed three identifications of the temple of God in Paul's prediction: "he [the Man of Lawlessness] takes his seat in the temple [*naos*, 'inmost shrine'] of God, proclaiming himself to be God." These proposals are, first, a future earthly temple; second, the church, either corporately or individually; or third, the heavenly temple of God. Suffice it here to defend only the third interpretation.²²

Old Testament references to God's heavenly temple are also found in Psalms 11:4; 18:6 [7]; 103:19; and Habakkuk 2:20. If the reference is to God's heavenly abode, "to sit" is a metaphorical way of saying that the lawless man exalts himself to the place of a god. In the same way that the king of Babylon aspired to set his throne in heaven (Isa. 14:13–14) and the king of Tyre proclaimed, "I am God, I sit in the seat of the gods" (Ezek. 28:2; cf. Acts 12:21–23), so this lawless ruler will boast that he has dispossessed God and has taken his place. F. F. Bruce comments, "Had they (Paul, Timothy and Silas, 2 Thess. 1:1) said, 'so that he takes his seat on the throne of God,' few would have thought it necessary to think of a literal throne; it would have been regarded as a graphic way of saying that he plans to usurp the authority of God."²³ Jesus uses "sit/seat" in a similar figure with reference to the Pharisees: "they sit in Moses' seat" (i.e., they have taken Moses' authoritative place, Matt. 23:2).

c. Romans 11:26

Paul points to Zion's role in ethnic Israel's future salvation from sin, citing Isaiah 59:20 and 27:9 with possible overtones from Psalm 14:7 and Jeremiah

31:33: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” In saying “from” (Gr. *ek*), Paul intentionally changes the Hebrew text and its Greek paraphrase. The Hebrew text reads, “the deliver will come *to* [Heb. *lamed*] Zion”; its Greek paraphrase reads, “the deliverer will come *for the sake of* [Gr. *heneken*] Zion.” If the deliverer is still to come “to” or “for the sake” of Zion, Paul could be implying that Jerusalem will play a future role in God’s salvation history.²⁴ But by changing the text to “the deliverer will come from Zion” he removes that implication.

But in what sense does Israel’s spiritual salvation come from Zion? Douglas Moo thinks this text refers to salvation from heavenly Jerusalem,²⁵ but David Holwerda contends that “Zion” refers “to earthly Jerusalem, from which the gospel has gone out to the entire world.”²⁶ We need not decide here which interpretation is right. The important point for our purposes is that neither of these careful exegetes interprets Zion as referring to a continuing role for Jewish Jerusalem.

3. In the Book of Revelation

John’s visions are addressed to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2–3). He never refers to territorial Jerusalem by that name. It is possible that in 11:8 he *may* have libeled Jerusalem as the “great” — not “holy” — city “where also their [i.e., ‘the two witnesses’] Lord was crucified” by figuratively calling it Sodom (for its low morality) and Egypt (for its oppression and slavery).

IV. THE LAND AS SPIRITUAL TERRITORY

In [chapter 16](#), “The Gift of Liturgy,” we reflected on distinctions in the Old Testament between holy and profane spaces, such as the Garden of Eden versus the earth in general and the land of Canaan in Abraham’s pilgrimage in contrast to his land of origin in Mesopotamia. In this chapter we reflect on the redefinition of holy space from a reference to holy geopolitical territory to the holy body of the incarnate Son of God and those baptized into Christ, and to the eschaton that uniquely unites territory and the Spirit. Often, the three new references are not clearly differentiated in the New Testament. In short, the temple of stones becomes a universal, spiritual temple in space and time.

A. The Land as “Christified”

The New Testament replaces Israel’s life in the Sworn Land (cf. Exod. 40:35; 1 Kings 8:11; Pss. 9:11; 76:2; 87:3; 132:13) with the church’s eternal life by baptism into Jesus Christ. The land of Canaan, though impersonal, had a sacramental value, for in the land, sanctified by God’s unique presence, Israel had experienced her unique relationship with God. That sacramental value is now experienced even more richly in our being in Christ. Paul’s “in Christ,” with its “local” sense—so central in his theology—was for him the massive, Christologized fulfillment of the land promise.

1. In the Gospel of John

John opens his gospel with the glory of God appearing in Jesus Christ—probably an intertextual allusion to Ezekiel’s visions. In one vision Ezekiel sees the glory cloud, which signifies God’s presence, departing from the temple before its destruction in 586 B.C. (Ezek. 10:18f; 11:22–25). In a later vision he sees a future temple filled with the glory of *I AM*, who promises to dwell with his people forever (Ezek. 43:5, 7). In John’s gospel the person of Jesus Christ replaces Jerusalem’s temple of stones (see excursus 2 below). In him the glory of God becomes flesh and dwells among his people (John 1:14). Jesus said to those

who challenged his authority to cleanse the temple: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews thought he meant the literal temple, but John says that “the temple he had spoken of was his body,” and that the disciples did not understand what he meant until after his resurrection (John 2:13–22). In other words, using the coinage of W. D. Davies, John “Christifies” the Land (see below).

EXCURSUS 2: REDEFINING OLD TESTAMENT MOTIFS

Jesus' replacement of the temple of stone is one of his many redefinitions of Old Testament motifs in the gospel of John, leading to initial misunderstandings (e.g., 3:4; 4:15; 6:52). The spatially conditioned life symbolized through natural bread, living water, and earthly vines gives way to the true Bread, Living Water, and divine Vine. Jesus replaces the manna of the future life, which Judaism expected to eat in the Land, with his own flesh and blood to be eaten sacramentally in the present (John 6:22–50).

In the morning ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles the high priest led a procession toward the temple rock onto which he poured water. In the evening the same priest led a torchlight procession. Also, at the Feast of Tabernacles the people prayed for rain. Probably against these backgrounds Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, ... streams of living water [i.e., the Spirit] will flow from within him" (John 7:37–39), a clear allusion to the prayer for rain and the symbolism of the poured water in the morning ritual. In John 8:12 Jesus states, "I am the light of the world," also a clear allusion to his being the replacement of what the torchlight procession signified. After his rejection by the Jerusalem hierarchy, Jesus left the temple in its darkness (8:59).

Then in John 9, Jesus gives sight to a blind man, symbolizing that he, as opposed to the Jerusalem temple, is the true enlightener. And in John 10 he announces himself as the Good Shepherd who would assemble a new flock composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers. In the Old Testament the vine is a symbol of bliss in the Land (Hos. 10:1; Amos 9:13–15; Mic. 4:4); Christ presents himself as the true Vine offering eternal life to all who by faith reckon themselves as his branches (John 15).

Those who receive Christ (1:12) are led by the Spirit to understand his transmuting redefinitions, while those who reject him completely misunderstand him (John 1:5; 16:12–15). Because his opponents are of the world, they interpret Scripture and his words in an earthly way. Because he is of heaven and not of this world, his word and his interpretations of Scripture have a heavenly signification (John 8:23–24, 43–47).

2. In the Apostolic Teaching

By way of introduction to his Christification of the Land, recall that Paul proclaims his gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Moreover, according to his gospel, Jew and Gentiles are equally coheirs of God's covenant promises to Abraham and David (Gal. 3:26; Eph. 2:11–22; 3:6). This worldwide equality of all believers, however, is not possible in the old age. In the old dispensation each family of Israel inherited *in perpetuity* a piece of the turf in the Land, and none of the Land was left undistributed. In other words, that economy gave only the Jews an opportunity to own space in the Land. Gentiles, disenfranchised as they were, had no hope of possessing holy space. Davies draws the logical conclusion: “the logic of Paul's Christology and missionary practice, then, seems to demand that the people living in the land had been replaced as the people of God by a universal community which had no special territorial attachment.”²⁷

Not only does the logic of Paul's theology demand that he spiritualize the Land promises, but he does so explicitly. The apostle to the nations replaces Abraham's physical seed's attachment to the Land with Abraham's spiritual seed's attachment to a life in Christ. This replacement of an attachment to the Land by an attachment to Christ has two aspects: first, the Land of Canaan is Christified, and second, the stones of the Jerusalem temple are redefined as living, spiritual stones of the church.

a. Land as Christified

In this section we reflect first on the Christification of the Land of Canaan and then on the Christification of the temple.

Whereas old Israel found God's unique presence and her inheritance in the Land of Canaan, the New Israel finds God's unique presence in Jesus Christ and her eternal inheritance in her attachment to him. Paul's key term “in Christ” represents Paul's understanding of the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. Holwerda comments,

For Paul all the Old Testament promises are now fulfilled and have become personalized in Christ. Territory is insignificant and place does not matter. All that is significant is “in Christ.” Thus, it is argued, the promises have been “deterritorialized.” ... Paul's interpretation of the promise is “a-territorial” because the promises have been “personalized” and “universalized” in Christ. W. D. Davies coins the term “Christified” for this

new attachment: “The land has been for him [Paul] “Christified.” It is not the land promised ... that became his [Paul’s] “inheritance,” but the Living Lord, in whom was a new creation.^{[28](#)}

b. Temple as Living Stones

We now reflect upon the temple. Whereas old Israel located the most holy space in the Jerusalem temple, sacred space in the new age is located in all believers by their baptism into Christ, the true temple of God. The holy space of the Jerusalem temple is redefined as a community of holy persons in the New Testament. In the teachings of Paul and Peter, the church, both corporately and individually, is the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:14–20; 1 Peter 2:4–10). The Spirit of God directly indwells every individual within the totality, so that the Spirit corporately indwells the whole. All believers, says Paul, are “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:19–22).

c. Land as Rest

The writer of Hebrews contrasts the temporary, physical rest that Joshua gave Israel with God’s lasting and satisfying Sabbath-rest that the elect enjoy by believing in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:1). God swore on oath in his anger against Israel’s unbelief, “They shall never enter my rest” (4:3). “My” [i.e. God’s] rest is the rest a saint enjoyed upon his or her cessation from work on the Sabbath day. However, “today” God still offers his people that rest. “If Joshua had given them [God’s Sabbath] rest,” the writer argues, “God would not have spoken about another day.” That Sabbath rest, however, remains for the people of God (4:9) and those who have accepted the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ enter that rest (4:3).^{[29](#)}

3. In the Book of Revelation

The temple of God in Revelation 11:1 is a symbol of the true church, which is

protected and kept secure from attacks in and by God's very presence in it (see above).

B. Land as “Transcendentalized”

The New Testament also transcendentalizes the Land. By “transcendentalize” I mean that Jerusalem is redefined to refer to heavenly Jerusalem.^{[30](#)}

1. In the Teaching of Jesus

Amazingly, given the culture of the time, Jesus revealed to a woman the transmutation of earthly Jerusalem to heavenly Jerusalem—more precisely, to a mixed breed Samaritan, and even more precisely, to an adulteress. The unexpected recipient of this revelation points to the new administration of grace, where all people are allowed access to God in a heavenly Jerusalem that transcends land boundaries and cultural restrictions. In response to her contention, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain [i.e., Gerizim], but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem,” Jesus declared that the Jews until Messiah's appearing had it right, but now that he is here, “You will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:19–24).

Because God is spirit, not flesh and blood, Jesus argues that his worshipers encounter him in the “Holy Spirit” who comes from God, not in an earthly locale (cf. Joel 2:28–29; 1 Cor. 2:10–16). By “truth” (alēthē, he refers to “reality” — that is to say, the earthly Zion is only a type or symbol of the heavenly reality (cf. Heb. 8:2; 9:24).

2 In the Apostolic Teachings

As we noted above, Peter relocates David's temporary throne in Jerusalem with his Son's true throne in heaven. Seated now at God's right hand, Christ rules from heaven (Matt. 28:18; Acts 2:29–36; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:20–22; 1 Peter 3:22) and believers participate with him in his heavenly reign (Eph. 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 3:1; Rev. 3:21–22).

According to the apostles, we are “blessed in the heavenly realms with every

spiritual blessing in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Paul contrasts the freedom offered in this heavenly Jerusalem with the bondage of earthly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:25). He also reckons that the church’s citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

The writer of Hebrews transfers the Christian hope from Jewish Jerusalem to the heavenly Jerusalem. This brilliant writer demonstrates at length how Jesus entered “once and for all” into the heavenly sanctuary, not into a manmade one that is only a copy of the true (Heb. 7–10; esp. 9:11–12, 24). At present, he argues, the society of the new covenant now convenes in Mount Zion with thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly (12:22). They come to this throne of grace to receive mercy and obtain hope in their time of need from their “great high priest who has gone through the heavens” (4:14).

3. In the Book of Revelation

The temple of God in Revelation 11:1 is a symbol of the true church, which is protected and kept secure from attacks in and by God’s very presence in it (see above).

C. Land as “Eschatologized”

The New Testament also eschatologizes the Land. I am restricting the term “eschatological” to the everlasting End in the regenerated cosmos. The writer of Hebrews sees behind Abraham’s quest for God’s Sworn Land a quest for a city “with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11: 10). Abraham’s quest segues us into the New Testament’s eschatologizing of the Old Testament Land promises.

1. In the Teaching of the Apostles

The apostles refer to the Land in connection with the eschaton by the terms “to inherit,” “heavenly country,” and “times of refreshing” or “restoration of all things.”

Let us look first at the term “to inherit.” The apostles frequently encourage the suffering church with the promise of their imperishable inheritance. Peter promises the elect that their new birth has brought them into “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven” (1 Peter 1:3–4) and that this

inheritance is their coming salvation to be revealed in the last time (v. 5). The imagery of “to inherit” derives from the Old Testament terminology associated with Israel’s inheritance of the Land (Exod. 32:13; Lev. 20:24; Num. 26:3–56; Deut. 3:28). In other words, Israel’s inheritance of the land of Canaan is a foretaste of the Christian’s inheritance in the regeneration of all things.

According to the writer of Hebrews, Christ mediates a new covenant “that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15).

Paul encourages the Colossians to give thanks to the Father, “who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Col. 1:12) and to work for the Lord, not for humans, “since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward” (3:24). Paul also taught that Christians will share in Jesus’ kingship and in judging the world in the eschaton (1 Cor. 4:8; 6:2; Eph. 2:6) and that, as children of God, they are coheirs with the Lord (Rom. 8:16–17).

Second, the writer of Hebrews redefines Land in the eschaton as “a heavenly country.” For him, the Old Testament pilgrims were “longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (Heb. 11:13–16). None of these pilgrims, he says, “received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (vv. 39–40). God’s people have no lasting city on earth, but the heavenly Jerusalem is the goal of their pilgrimage — a pilgrimage that ends with Christ’s second (there is no third) appearing (Heb. 12:26; 13:14; Rom. 8:18; Eph. 1:9–10).

Third, Peter speaks of “times of refreshing” and “restoration of all things.” He exhorts the Jews in Jerusalem, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.” And he motivates them with the promise, “that times of refreshing [*anapsyxis*, ‘relaxation, relief’] may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ.... He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything [*apokatastaseōs pantōn*, ‘restoring everything to perfection’]³¹ as he promised long ago through the prophets” (Acts 3:19–21). The mention of “times of refreshing” and “restoration of all things” to their perfection presumably refers to the perfections of the eschaton. That “he must remain in heaven” until that time entails that the eschaton will come in conjunction with the Parousia. As in Romans 11, the final end occurs in connection with Israel as a nation repenting, turning to God and having their sins wiped away.

In his epistles Peter teaches the church to look forward to the destruction of this corrupt earth and to its regeneration: “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring

about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with the promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:11–13).

2. In Matthew

Two passages in Matthew about the Land *may imply* its role in an intermediate Jewish kingdom: Matthew 5:5 and 19:27–28. More probably, however, the Land in these passages should be located in the eschaton.^{[32](#)}

a. Matthew 5:5

Christ’s third beatitude in Matthew, “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth [Heb. ^{ʾeres} Gk. *tēn gēn*]” is a direct quote of Psalm 37:11 (LXX Ps. 36:11). Like *ʾares* in the Hebrew text, *gē* in the Greek text also may refer to the Land or the whole earth (see also v. 9). In any case, that Christ is referring to an inheritance in the land of Canaan in an intermediate Jewish kingdom is not necessary and is highly unlikely because that interpretation lacks a horizon in the gospels and epistles.

Some commentators interpret “land” in this beatitude as a symbol for inheriting conditions under the rule of God in “the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Matt 5:3, 10, 20; 6:10, 33; 23:13). Two factors, however, should be borne in mind when interpreting this beatitude: *tēn gēn* has an obstinately territorial connotation and the beatitudes have an unmistakable eschatological dimension. More probably, then, Jesus means that the meek will inherit the renewed earth as God’s vindication of them (Matt. 12:27–28; Rev. 21:1–2). This interpretation conforms to the many passages in the epistles regarding the saints’ inheritance (see above). The important point of the beatitude in both Psalm 37:11 and Matthew 5:5 is that those who humbly acknowledge their dependence on God’s power and justice, not on those who grasp the earth on their own authority, will inherit the earth.

b. Matthew 19:27–28

The interpretation of Matthew 19:27–28 is the most difficult from the perspective of this chapter. In response to Peter’s question regarding a reward for the Twelve, Jesus replies, “At the renewal of all things [*palingenesia*], when

the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (vv. 27–28; cf. 20:20–28). *Palingenesia* is derived from *palin genesis* and etymologically means “new genesis.”³³ In the eschaton Jesus will be enthroned as king over all things (cf. Matt. 25:31–34). At that time he will mete out judgment (John 5:22), and according to 1 Corinthians 5:12–6:13, the church will participate with Christ in judging the satanic world system, including the angels.

The highly symbolic Apocalypse also represents nations as having distinct roles when God lowers the heavenly Jerusalem to the new earth: “The nations will walk by its light [the light of the glory of God], and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it” (Rev. 21:24), and “the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations” (22:2).

The language and thought of the twelve disciples sitting on thrones in the regeneration of all things are derived from Daniel 7. In Daniel’s vision Israel rules the nations, but in Christ’s teaching the Twelve, who represent the true people of God in contrast to unbelieving Israel, judge (i.e., rule) the twelve tribes of Israel.³⁴ France comments, “This remarkable transfer of imagery graphically illustrates the theme of a ‘true Israel’ of the followers of Jesus who take the place of the unbelieving nation, a theme which runs through much of the teaching of Jesus in this Gospel (cf. 8:11–12; 21:43).”

3. In the Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation portrays the new Jerusalem coming down to earth from heaven at the End (3:12). Hoppe writes:

Those who are faithful to their Christian commitment will be citizens of the new Jerusalem, which will appear as a bride arrayed for her husband (Rev. 21:2). Life in that city, which has come down from God, will mean the restoration of paradise (Rev. 22:1–5). In the new Jerusalem there will be no need for a temple, since God and the Lamb will be immediately accessible (Rev. 21: 22).³⁵

V. THE LAND AS TYPIFIED

Christ and his apostles interpreted the Old Testament typologically and saw in its Scriptures types that pointed to life in Christ (see [chap. 6](#)). Similarly, Christian interpreters find striking parallels both from a historical or chronological perspective and from a conceptual perspective between the types of Israel and “Land” in the Old Testament, and its much greater Antitype, the Christian’s life in Christ. Let us consider this typology from a historical perspective first.

A. From a Historical Perspective

Even from a casual reading of the Old Testament one notes a number of important parallels between Israel and the church and their relationship to the Land.

1. While Israel in Egypt groans under the tyranny of slavery and death imposed by Pharaoh, she is saved by the mighty hand of God; in a parallel fashion the church in the world is saved out of the slavery of sin and death by the mighty act of God on the cross.

2. Israel is delivered by the blood of the Passover lamb and by the wind at the Red Sea; the church is delivered by Christ the Passover Lamb and by the Spirit who, on the day of Pentecost, appears as a mighty rushing wind (Acts 2; 2 Cor. 3:17).

3. Israel is baptized with Moses in the sea; the church is baptized in Christ through water.

4. Israel feeds on manna and drinks water from a rock that has been struck in the wilderness; the church feeds on Christ, the true manna from heaven, and learns that he is the rock in the wilderness (John 6;³⁶ 1 Cor. 10:1–4).

5. Israel is tested in the wilderness before inheriting the Land; the church suffers in its wilderness on the way to the celestial city where Christ is the light.

6. Israel enters the Land and finds physical rest, but not God’s Sabbath rest; the church presently finds God’s rest by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:1–11).

7. Israel finally enters the Land, but they will not enter its antitype without the church (Heb. 11:39–40).

B. From a Conceptual Perspective

This typology between Israel's land on the one hand and the church and its life in Christ on the other also exists on the conceptual level:

1. Both are a divine gift (Gen. 15:7, 18; Deut. 1:8; Rom. 6:23).
2. Both are entered by faith alone (Num. 14:26–45; Josh. 7; John 3:16).
3. Both are an inheritance (Deut. 4:21; Acts 20:32; Eph. 1:14).
4. Both uniquely offer blessed rest and security (Exod. 23:20–31; Deut. 11:12; 12:9–10; 28:1–14; Matt. 11:28; John 1:5a; 14:9; Heb. 4:2–3).
5. Both offer God's unique presence (Deut. 7:21; Rev. 21:3–4).
6. Both demand persevering faith (Deut. 28:15–19; Heb. 6; 10).
7. Both have an already-but-not-yet quality (Heb. 11:39–40; Rev 21:1–22:6).

V. CONCLUSION

Tracing the trajectory of the Land theme from the Old Testament into the New leads to these conclusions. First, Old Testament promises and prophecies regarding the essentials of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth—his life, death, and resurrection — necessarily find their literal fulfillment in the Land.

Second, the primitive church, lacking the teachings of Jesus and the illumination of the Spirit, mistakenly thought along with all of Jewry that the glories of Messiah Jesus would also be fulfilled literally in the land of Canaan.

Third, the Synoptic Gospels' predictions that Jerusalem will be annihilated without any prospect of its being rebuilt make a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies regarding Messiah's glory impossible.

Fourth, Christ inaugurated his everlasting reign at his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven.

Fifth, apart from the primitive church, the rest of the New Testament represents the glorified Christ as ruling the nations through the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's empowering the church in its witness to the gospel.

Sixth, the New Testament redefines prophecies regarding Messiah Jesus' glory in the Land as having a present spiritual fulfillment and/or an eschatological fulfillment in the regeneration of all things. By spiritual fulfillment is meant they are fulfilled either in the person of Christ and/or in his reign from heavenly Jerusalem; in short, they are fulfilled "in Christ."

Seventh, upon reflection the church realizes that the Old Testament promises regarding the Land typify Jesus Christ and the life of saints in Christ.

Let me state the case against the interpretation of Old Testament promises and prophecies as finding fulfillment in a future Jewish kingdom. No verse in the New Testament pertaining to salvation history after the resurrection of Jesus Christ represents the fulfillment of Old Testament Land promises in an intermediate Jewish kingdom. Some theologians appeal to Revelation 20:9 for such an interpretation, but that verse occurs in the baroque symbolism of apocalyptic literature, a literary genre that should not be interpreted literally. A comprehensive system for interpreting the term Land—^{2eres} is the fourth most frequently used word in the Old Testament — should be based on transparent texts in the New Testament, not on its esoteric texts.

The lack of any reference to a Jewish kingdom in the New Testament is truly

remarkable in the light of its Second Temple context. Jewish literature of that period impacted the language and imagery of the New Testament, but that literature's expectation of a Jewish kingdom at the End is discredited in the New Testament.³⁷ This glaring absence of interpreting Old Testament promises and prophecies about Land according to Jewry of the Second Temple period must be reckoned as an intentional gap, not an accidental blank.

Larry Helyer finds possible references to an intermediate Jewish kingdom in Matthew 19:28; Luke 13:29–30; 22:28–30; 1 Corinthians 6:2–3; 15:22–23; and Revelation 20:4–6.³⁸ (I do not know why he excluded Romans 11:26.) First Corinthians 6:2–3, which speaks of Christians judging the world — a term that refers not to space but to a spiritual state under God's wrath—should be interpreted in light of its context, beginning with 1 Corinthians 5:12–13. Paul is talking about Christians judging not only unbelievers, but even the wicked angels. Is it not more plausible that Paul is talking about the well-known final judgment in the End, not about a judgment in an intermediate Jewish kingdom?

Luke 22:28–30 conflates the teaching about the apostles sitting on thrones (Matt. 19:28) and a Messianic banquet (Luke 13:29–30). (We considered Matthew 19:28 and Revelation 20:4–6 above.) Helyer admits, “John, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrew, and 2 Peter [3:8–10] do not easily fit into a millenarian scheme.” In sum, out of the entire New Testament, Helyer finds less than a handful of texts that *possibly* teach an interim Jewish kingdom.³⁹ Our exegesis of those texts has shown that none of them teach the popular, evangelical misconception.

Moreover, whereas the Old Testament prophets foresaw the regathering of ethnic Israel to the Land after the Babylonian exile, none of the New Testament writers — who are guided by the Spirit into *all* truth — foresees a future regathering of ethnic Israel in the Land.⁴⁰

Finally, the Old Testament foresaw the destruction of the Canaanites; the New Testament does not foresee the destruction of Palestinians, many of whom are Christians. The church's mission is to evangelize all people without regard to their ethnicity.

The Old Testament promises regarding the Land must be interpreted in the light of the canon's own redefinition of the correlative terms pertaining to the Land. In other words, interpreting the Old Testament promises and prophecies about the Land with reference to life in Christ is not allegorizing a reluctant Old Testament text but showing how the New Testament reveals doctrines regarding the Land that the Old Testament conceals. Accordingly, the promise that Israel will inherit a land flowing with milk and honey becomes a metaphor for the milk

and honey of life in Christ, a participation in heaven itself and in a world that is beyond what saints could imagine or think.

Isaiah and Micah predict that Mount Zion will be exalted above all mountains and all the nations will flow to it. This prophecy should be redefined within its canonical context as a reference to the heavenly Jerusalem and/or to its being lowered to the new earth in the eschaton. Let the church rejoice that myriads of Christians from all over the world make their pilgrimage to heavenly Mount Zion to feed upon the hidden manna of Jesus Christ.

THOUGHT QUESTION

What New Testament texts support the notion that Christ now reigns from his heavenly throne over his universal church through the administration of the Holy Spirit? What New Testament texts support the notion that Christ will reign from territorial Jerusalem over a Jewish kingdom? What difference do these notions make in your understanding of your role in establishing the rule of God on earth?

1. For a definition of “salvation history,” see [chap. 2](#).
2. David Brog, *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support Israel* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Strang Communications, 2006).
3. Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
4. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 274.
5. Allen D. Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).
6. The Old Testament anticipates the “universalization” of the Land promises: e.g., Pss. 2, 72, 110.
7. Abraham J. Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 44.
8. Matthew calls Jesus a *Nazōraios* (i.e., a “Nazorene”) because he came from *Nazaret*. Bargil Pixner, a Benedictine monk and teacher in Jerusalem, explains the name “Nazorene” as follows: The earliest reference to Nazareth in the Jewish epigraphy spells it as *nšrt* (3rd to 4th cent. AD), showing the name derives from Hebrew *nešer*, “branch, sprout, shoot,” not *nāzar*, “to consecrate oneself to a deity.” In other words, Matthew calls him a “Branch” because he grew up in a group called a “Branch.” Matthew’s unique plural “prophets” suggests he is referring to a theme, not an isolated prophecy. The Messiah is called a “Branch” (Heb. *nešer*) in Isa. 11:1 and (*šemaḥ*) in Jer. 23:5; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. In hymns ascribed to the founder of the Qumran Essenes, he refers to his community as the “Netzer-shoot planted by God” (1QH vi 15, vii 5, 8, 10). Probably the Davidic clan from which Jesus sprang thought along similar lines. The designation

“Natzorean,” perhaps common to Jewish believers gathered around James, brother of Jesus (cf. Mark 6:4), was later applied to all who belonged to the new religious movement (Acts 24:5). Eusebius preserves a genealogy of Julius Africanus (AD 200) showing that the Savior’s blood family originated from the Jewish villages of Nazara and Cochaba, the main city close by the hamlet of Nazareth. Archaeological excavations show that Nazareth was uninhabited during the Persian and early Hellenistic times (8th – 2nd cents. BC) and was repopulated by a strong emigration of Diaspora Jews from Babylon and Persia during the reigns of the Hasmoneans: John Hyrcanus (134–104 BC), Aristobulus I (104–103 BC), and Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC). Probably the Davidic clan settled in the area of Nazareth at this time and gave their name to the place as “Branch Town.” See Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee according to the Fifth Gospel*, trans. Christo Botha and Dom David Foster (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), 14–19.

[9.](#) Leslie J. Hoppe, *The Holy City: Jerusalem in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 7.

[10.](#) David Ulansey, “The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark’s Cosmic Inclusion,” *JBL* 110:1 (Spring 1991): 23–25.

[11.](#) Zebulun and Naphtali were the first regions annexed by the Assyrians in 732 BC (2 Kings 15:29).

[12.](#) R. T. France argues that Matthew essentially presents the same outline: INTRODUCTION (1:1–4:11); MINISTRY IN GALILEE (4:12–13:58); WIDER MINISTRY IN THE NORTH (14:1–16:12); TOWARDS JERUSALEM (16:13–20:34); CONFRONTATION IN JERUSALEM (21:1–25:46); PASSION AND RESURRECTION (26:1–28:20). (See R. T. France, *Matthew* [TNTC; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1987], 58.) W. D. Davies, in *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974], 221–43, rejects this linking of doctrine with Land because he emphasizes the specks of exceptions and not the overall unique thrust of Mark’s presentation.

[13.](#) France, *Matthew*, 34.

[14.](#) R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 34.

[15.](#) Of course, there are exceptions in this broad characterization of the gospel — the distinction is not absolute.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, 235.

[17.](#) W. R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* (JSOTSuppl. 1; Sheffield, 1980). Carolyn Osiek in a personal communication calls attention to a student’s paper that cites Ze’ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (New

York: Routledge, 2001), to the effect that because figs don't all ripen at the same time, the harvester has to come back day after day. Nathaniel's sitting under the fig tree (John 1:47–49) is an expression of expectation and hopefulness for the restoration of the temple. Moreover, Nathaniel was in prayer; presumably, like Simeon, he is praying for the kingdom of God. Nathaniel believes in Jesus because Jesus knew his exceptional character even before Jesus met him (Safrai, 136–37).

[18.](#) Cited by James M. Houston, *The Mind on Fire* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1989), 200.

[19.](#) France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 35.

[20.](#) Cf. T. Francis Glasson, "Ensign of the Son of Man," *JTS* 15 (1964): 299–300.

[21.](#) Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 179.

[22.](#) Traditional Judaism believes that according to Old Testament prophecies, a third temple *must* be erected on the site of the previous temples. The synagogue prayer called the Eighteen Benedictions petitions God to return the divine presence to the temple and to reinstate the temple service. Premillennialists agree with this Jewish viewpoint (cf. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970], 56). I am not saying that a third temple will not be built in Jerusalem, but I am saying that Old Testament prophecy does not require such a temple. Three objections negate this Jewish expectation. First, the writer of Hebrews says that the temple liturgy in salvation history has been done away with *forever* (Heb. 8–10; see above). Second, the Lord Jesus replaces the Jewish temple with his body (John 2:19–22). Third, Paul consistently uses the term *naos theou* for the church in Christ. The interpretation "the temple of God" in 2 Thess. 2:4 as referring to a future Jewish temple lacks a New Testament context. Paul's consistent use of the term "the temple of God" for the church (1 Cor. 3:16f.; 6:19; Eph. 2:21–22; cf. 2 Peter 2:4–10) has led commentators, both ancient and modern, to identify the term in 2 Thess. 2:4 with the church. In that case, "he takes his seat" would mean to snatch the primacy. However, in all other cases where he refers to "the temple of God," Paul makes it perfectly clear he is using the term figuratively for a spiritual reality. The physical activity of "he takes his seat" does not readily suggest a spiritual sense of "temple of God." Cf. Edmund P. Clowney, "The Final Temple," in *Prophecy in the Making*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1971), [chap. 4](#); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 203–5.

[23.](#) F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 169.

[24.](#) This interpretation is unlikely for several reasons: (1) Paul intentionally changes the prepositions (see text); (2) the interpretation that connects Jesus' return to earth with his bringing salvation to the Jews is without an eschatological horizon in the Pauline corpus; (3) nowhere in Rom. 9–11 does Paul make any reference to Israel's future salvation as having any connection with a future Jewish kingdom. His point in the entire section and in this unit in particular pertains to Israel's spiritual salvation — that is to say, God “will turn godlessness away from Jacob” and “when I take away their sins.” Their salvation in v. 15 is equated with “life from the dead.”

[25.](#) The following considerations favor Moo's interpretation (*The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 684): (1) Paul uses the term Jerusalem/Zion in reference to heavenly Zion/Jerusalem in Gal. 4:26; (2) other apostles also transcendentalize Old Testament references to earthly Zion in referring to heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 14:1–2); Peter and the writer of Hebrews do so explicitly with reference to the throne from which the Lord Jesus establishes his present and future rule on earth (cf. Ps. 110:1–2 with Acts 2:34f.; Heb. 8:1; 12:2); (3) Christ and his apostles clearly taught that the ascended Lord rules on earth from heaven (Matt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:20–22; 1 Peter 3:22), that upon his ascension he and the Father poured out the Holy Spirit on his church (John 16:7–14; Acts 2:33), and that believers are joined with him in his heavenly reign (Eph. 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12; Rev. 3:21–22).

[26.](#) David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 172–75. My view is that this best matches salvation history.

[27.](#) Ibid., 182.

[28.](#) Ibid., 213.

[29.](#) Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 102–15.

[30.](#) In rabbinic tradition there is also a recognition of a temple above, but for the rabbis the way to enter the temple above is through the temple below (*Taanith* 5a).

[31.](#) BDAG, 112, s.v. *apokatastasis*.

[32.](#) The “universalization” of the Land promises in the Old Testament will be consummated at this time (see note 6 above).

[33.](#) *Palingenesis* first acquired significance in Stoicism before passing into Judaism. Philo uses the word of the restoration to life of an individual (e.g., Abel in Seth) and also of the reconstitution of the world after the Flood. Friedrich Büschel comments, “When *palingenesia* passes from Stoicism into Judaism its meaning changes. The new existence to which the world and man come in the

new aeon is not just a repetition of the form, as in Stoicism. It is an existence in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:13). In Judaism the cosmic catastrophe is the Last Judgment, and in contrast to that expected in Stoicism this is definitive” (Büschel, *TDNT*, 1.688, s.v. *palingenesis*). Büschel also says, “In Matthew 19:28 ... the Jewish faith in the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the world is clothed in this term.” In other words, the word entails the final judgment and the renewal of individuals and of the earth in a definitive final end. R. T. France says, “The word effectively conveys the Jewish eschatological hope of ‘new heavens and a new earth’ in the Messianic age (Isa. 56:17 [actually, 65:17]; 66:22; etc.” (see R. T. France, *Matthew*, 287).

[34.](#) For the identification of “Son of Man” see also Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 68–71.

[35.](#) Hoppe, *The Holy City*, 10.

[36.](#) Christ reprises the exodus through the Red Sea and the miraculous feeding of the people with manna by first crossing the Sea of Galilee and then feeding five thousand men (John 6:1–15) and then crossing the sea by miraculously walking on its water, thereupon presenting himself as the true manna from heaven (vv. 16–59).

[37.](#) Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 120–51.

[38.](#) Larry R. Helyer, “The Necessity, Problems, and Promise of Second Temple Judaism for Discussions of New Testament Eschatology,” *JETS* 47, no.4 (2004): 597–615.

[39.](#) Association of the future kingdom with a feast was common. In Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29–30 those sitting at the table are contrasted with the damned. The imagery refers to the felicity of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked by being excluded from the banquet at the final judgment and the inauguration of eschatological kingdom (cf. Isa. 25:6; Rev. 19:9). First Corinthians 15:22–28 pertains to the sequence of resurrections: First, Christ (the firstfruit) (v. 23a); then the church at his Parousia (v. 23b). His following statement, “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion.... For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” This sequence of resurrection shows that Paul does not have in view an intermediate kingdom between his Parousia and the handing over of the kingdom, for in that case he would have mentioned a third resurrection and the judgment at the end of the temporary messianic kingdom. D. S. Russell notes (*Between the Testaments* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 156) that “in a few cases they [apocalypists] distinguish the kingdom from the Finale Age so that the Final

Judgment follows the Messianic Reign.” Paul means by “then the end comes” that with the Parousia the goal of history has been reached. At that time Christ will show his authority even over death, the mortal’s worst and last enemy (see Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 751–54, and N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991], [chap. 3](#)).

[40.](#) N. T. Wright (*Jesus and Victory of God*, 364) makes the plausible case that Israel continued in exile because they were held captive by the Jewish leadership and they would not be free until the temple was destroyed: “When Jerusalem is destroyed, and Jesus’ people escape from the ruin just in time, *that will be* YHWH becoming king, bringing about the liberation of his true covenant people, the true return from exile, the beginning of the new world order.” Moreover, Wright (*ibid.*, 272) argues that return from exile means forgiveness of sin: “*Jesus was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological ‘forgiveness of sin’* — in other words, the kingdom of god [sic!] The temple and its wicked priests are replaced permanently by the priesthood of Jesus Christ in the heavenly sanctuary and on earth by the Church: a kingdom of priests.”

Chapter 21

THE GIFT OF WARLORDS: JUDGES

We must have a fixed point in order to judge.
Pascal, *Pensées*, 6.383

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bible is all about the irruption of the kingdom of God, which comes about through a covenant relationship between *I AM* and the nation of Israel. The book of Judges makes the argument that to be an effective tool in the hands of *I AM*, Israel needs a covenant-keeping king to shepherd them, not spiritually crippled charismatic warlords. Even though Samson has such supernatural charisma he can strike down a thousand Philistines with only the jawbone of a donkey, he does not deliver Israel. Lacking a king, and having only the apostate house of Levi as their spiritual shepherds, the nation falls into moral anarchy. In fact, the book's epilogue, as we shall see, fingers the tribe of Levite as the villain during the dark age when warlords ruled. The book is replete with other unexpected plot twists, misunderstandings, deception, and masquerade. It is a tragicomedy, full of irony, and so is church history.

A. Title and Place of Judges in Biblical Theology

The Vulgate's title, *Liber Judicum*, is based on Hebrew *šōpēṭîm* (traditionally glossed "judges"). The book's author does not call any of Israel's premonarchic deliverers a *šōpēṭ* (cf. Judg. 2:16–19), but later biblical writers do (Ruth 1:1; 2 Sam. 7:11; 2 Kings 23:22). The root *špṭ* means either "to decide between," like English "to judge" (glossed "held court" by TNIV in Judg. 4:5), or, most commonly, "to rule" (glossed "to lead" in TNIV; Judg. 3:10; 4:4; 10:2–3; 12:9, 11, 13; 15:20; 16:31; cf. 1 Sam. 4:18; 7:15).

A good English gloss for the *šōpēṭîm* of this book is "warlord" (i.e., a hero exercising leadership). Ideally, the warlord in foreign affairs is a "deliverer"; in internal affairs, an "administrator of justice" (Judg. 4:5; 1 Sam. 7:15–17); and in religious affairs, *I AM*'s covenant keeper (Judg. 2:17, 19). But this book's heroes are not what one expects: they are not above reproach. The narrator evaluates their faltering success in terms of their keeping covenant with *I AM* and of their deliverance of Israel from foreign oppressors. Israel's true Warlord is *I AM* (Judg. 11:27). "When warlords ruled" spans the time between the death of Joshua (Judg. 1:1; 1 Sam. 1:1, ca. 1225 BC) and the inauguration of monarchy (1

Sam. 12, ca. 1050 BC).¹

The narrator lays the foundation for Judah's leadership, from whom David will spring, not Benjamin's, from whom Saul comes, by framing his book with *I AM*'s divine appointment of Judah to lead the other tribes in battle (Judg. 1:2; 20:18). The narrator has little good to say about Benjamin. In addition, by the framing epilogue — “In those days Israel had no king [they had warlords and Levites]; everyone did as he saw fit” (17:6; 21:25) — he lays the foundation for covenant-keeping David, Israel's great king. David is a prototype of Jesus Christ, who is the only perfect covenant-keeping king.

B. Connection of Joshua and Judges

The narratives of Joshua and Judges dovetail (see [chap. 2](#) under “Primary History”).² The book's first prologue is a pastiche of texts from Joshua (cf. Josh. 15:13–19; Judg. 1:9–15). Judges 1 presents the same balanced descriptions as found in Joshua of Israel's entrance into the Land, of its allotment among the tribes, and of the tribes settling into their allotments by dispossessing the Canaanites. An even more striking connection, however, is the precise chiasmic verbal linking of Judges 2:6–9 in the second prologue with Joshua 24:28–31 in that book's conclusion. Robert Polzin observes, “the Book of Judges, like Joshua, briefly recapitulates the previous book before interpreting it further.”³

The book of Judges, however, presents an incredible contrast between the religious devotion and political success of Joshua and his generation and the spiritual and political failures of the next generation. As Joshua presciently warns at the covenant renewal ceremony just prior to his death, “You are not able to serve *I AM*” (Josh. 24:19), the next generation abandons *I AM* in favor of serving the morally debased Canaanite fertility deities. Where Joshua's generation serves *I AM* and enjoys the covenant's blessing, including rest in the Land, the succeeding generations incrementally break *I AM*'s covenant and experience the covenant's curses, including increasingly long epochs without rest in the Land. Whereas Joshua claims the Land for *I AM* by erecting altars to him, the next generation builds altars to Baal, thereby handing the Land back to Baal. Although Israel periodically tears down a Baal altar and replaces it with an altar to *I AM* (Judg. 6:24–32), in truth Israel becomes increasingly Canaanized by an incremental syncretism with Baal (cf. Judg. 17–18).

C. Political and Theological Realities of Israel

1. *Political Israel*

Separated by its tribal allotments into regions divided by mountains and valleys and having no federal government to administer the whole, Israel politically functions by tribes. In the book's political introduction (Judg. 1), tribes replace Joshua, with Judah taking the lead by divine designation. The tribes appeal to one another for aid (4:4–6; 6:35; 20:1), but the narrator's reports and Deborah's song represent failures of the tribes to help one another (5:13–18; 8:1), and/or of wars among the tribes (8:16; 9:1–56; 12:1–6; 20:1–48). Tribal and personal, not national, interests become primary (see 11:5–11).

The process of decision making at the tribal level is murky. We should probably assume the family patriarchs constitute the “elders,” providing leadership in political, judicial, and religious matters in local communities and, as the tribes settle down, constitute the “village council” (Deut. 19:12; 21:1–9, 18, 21; 22:13–21; 25:1–10; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:1–12).⁴ Toward the end of this epoch, some of elders by the accident of birth become “heads” (i.e., nascent princes) of their regions (see Judg. 11:11). Jair's thirty sons rode on donkeys (Judg. 10:4),⁵ Ibzan's thirty sons and thirty daughters formed political alliances by marriages outside their clan (12:9), and Abdon's forty sons and thirty grandsons rode on seventy donkeys (12:14)!

The escalation of the number of sons and of the generations, in conjunction with political alliances, betrays leaders attempting to extend their own power bases to their sons who become warlords by political science, not by divine calling and gift. Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon are not said to have “saved” Israel. To be sure, they are “minor” warlords, because they lack extensive anecdotal narrative, but they stand in marked contrast to Shamgar (Judg. 3:31) and Tola (10:1–2), both of whom are said to have saved Israel, though they too are “minor” warlords. Ideally, *I AM* raised up tribal warlords, but that is not said of the five “minor” warlords who frame the Jephthah narrative. In fact, the text also does not say *I AM* raised up Jephthah. In his case the elders chose whoever was willing to lead them into battle. Jephthah, who had dynastic aspirations, negotiated they appoint him their permanent “head,” not merely their military “commander” (10:6–10). In other words, as customarily happens in social movements, toward the end of the period of the warlords, charismatic leadership gave way to political structures: what sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920)

called “routinization.” Frank Thielman notes: “The history of the Christian movement follows this same general pattern”; the further the church is removed from Jesus and his charismatic apostles, the more complex its institutions become.⁶

2. Theological Israel

Although not united politically, the tribes are unified by their common ancestry⁷ and by their covenant with *I AM*.⁸ To preserve their spiritual unity as a nation, it is imperative that the Levites, who live in cities among the tribes, carefully instruct Israel in their covenant history and obligations and that the tribes assemble at the legislated annual festivals, which are held only at the sanctuary over which Aaron’s sons officiate. Because of the common physical and spiritual bonds of the people, the writer refers to them as “Israel” and identifies tribal names only as an “address.” In fact, the name Israel occurs more often in this book than in any other book of the Hebrew Bible.⁹ Although the warlords rule local tribes or groups of tribes and fight in local crises, the narrator slants his narrative in such a way that their stories become the memory of all Israel.¹⁰ John Goldingay says, “Acts of unfaithfulness and deliverance involving part of the people are part of the whole people’s experience.”¹¹ Moreover, their actions implicate the whole nation, as shown in the narrator’s digest of this history (Judg. 2). In short, the book’s theology pertains to all Israel.¹²

II. STRUCTURE

A. Outline

- I. Double Prologue: Failure of the Tribes (1:1–3:6)
 - A. Political Prologue (1:1–2:5)
 - B. Theological Prologue (2:6–3:6)
- II. Main Body: Twelve Judges (3:7–16:31)
- III. Double Epilogue: Failure of the Levites (17:1–21:25)
 - A. First Epilogue: A Levite and Idolatry in Israel (17:1–18:31)
 - B. Second Conclusion: A Levite and Violence in Israel (19:1–21:25)

Warlord		Region of Rule	Oppressor	Date BC ¹³
Othniel	(3:7 – 11)	Judah	Aram-Nahar (N) ¹⁴	1192 – 1152
Ehud	(3:12 – 30)	Benjamin	Moab (E)	1182
Shamgar	(3:31)		Philistia (SW)	1170
Deborah/Barak	(4:1 – 5:31)	Ephraim	Hazor/Canaan (N)	1165 – 1150
Gideon	(6:1 – 8:32)	Manasseh	Midian (E)	1179 – 1139
Abimelech	(8:33 – 9:56)		Civil War	1139 – 1136
Tola	(10:1 – 2)			1136 – 1113
Jair	(10:3 – 5)			
Jephthah	(10:6 – 12:7)	Gilead	Ammon (E)	1073 – 67
Ibzan	(12:8 – 10)	Judah?		1067 – 60
Elon	(12:11 – 12)	Zebulun		1060 – 50
Abdon	(12:13 – 15)			
Samson	(13:1 – 16:31)	Dan/Judah	Philistia (SW)	1080 – 60

B. Chiastic Pairings of the Book

David W. Gooding contends that the entire book consists of a chiastic structure (i.e., of paired elements that stand in the same kind of relationship to each other) with Gideon formally the pivotal judge. To anticipate the theological reflections that follow—with Gideon’s turning his hand against his compatriots and his manufacture of the idolatrous ephod — the warlords themselves contribute to Israel’s decline.¹⁵ Here is a self-explanatory schema of the narrator’s chiastically paired elements:

- A Prologue 1: Judah/Israel vs. Canaanite dismemberment (1:1–2:5)
- B Prologue 2: Israel forsakes *I AM* for Baalim (2:6–3:6)
- C Main body (3:7–16:31)
 - 1 Othniel: Israelite wife secret of his success (3:7–11 [+1:11–15])
 - 2 Ehud: takes “message” (*dbr*) (v. 19) to a foreign king, slays Moabites at fords of Jordan (3:12–31)
 - 3 A woman, Jael, slays Sisera and ends war (4:1–5:31)
 - X The personal story of flawed Gideon¹⁶
 - 3’ A certain woman slays Abimelech¹⁷ and ends war (9:1–56)
 - 2’ Jephthah: sends messages (*dbr*) to a foreign king (cf. 11:28) slays Ephraimites at the fords of the Jordan (10:1–12:14)
 - 1’ Samson: foreign women secret of his downfall (13:1–16:31)
- B’ Conclusion 1: Israel Reimages *I AM* with idolatry (17:1–18:31)
- A’ Conclusion 2: Israel/Judah vs. Benjamites and dismemberment (19:1–21:25)

The first three warlords (i.e., Othniel, Ehud, Deborah/Barak) are successful, but the last three have only qualified successes. Gideon is guilty of idolatry at Ophrah and of revenge against his compatriots in Transjordan. When he dies the nation is in the same spiritual state as when he was called. Jephthah is guilty of opportunism, child sacrifice, and revenge against Ephraim; Samson breaks his Nazirite vows and intermarries with the Philistines.

According to the covenant principle that fidelity leads to blessing and infidelity to punishment, the first three have unqualified successes, but not the last three. Othniel’s faithful wife gains precious reservoirs of water in an arid land, but Samson loses his sight and life by the betrayal of his paramour. Ehud kills Moabites at the fords of the Jordan, but Jephthah kills Ephraimites at those fords and loses his hope of dynastic succession by rashly murdering his own daughter. Jael, in conjunction with Deborah and Barak, kills the Canaanite

commander Sisera, but a woman of Thebes slays Abimelech — Gideon's son by a concubine who had murdered his seventy half brothers from Gideon's many wives.

The Samson cycle ends with a nation so dispirited that they do not even cry out to *I AM* for deliverance from the Philistines. Instead, Judah complains to Samson for the trouble he is making them in his slaying of the Philistines: "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" (Judg. 15:11).

The narrator shouts to his audience not to go back to "the good old days" when Israel had only charismatic leaders and an apostate and corrupt priesthood. What Israel needs is a charismatic, covenant-keeping priest-king, after the order of Melchizedek.

III. DOUBLE PROLOGUE: FAILURE OF THE TRIBES (1:1–3:6)

Both prologues commence by noting Joshua's death as the terminus a quo for Israel's history in this book (Judg. 1:1; 2:6–8), but they develop along different but complementary orientations. The political introduction (1:1–2:5) looks back to Joshua's generation by containing a pastiche of materials from Joshua and by naming some of the same cities as in Joshua 12. It recapitulates, recasts, and extends the book of Joshua, but whereas Joshua 12 pertains to the conquest of the Land, the first introduction pertains to its settlement. By contrast, the theological introduction (Judg. 2:6–3:6) looks ahead to the era of the warlords. The first introduction focuses on the pan-Israelite connection of the tribes and explains *politically* that the Canaanite altars were left because the enemy had chariots of iron (1:19).¹⁸ By contrast, the second introduction focuses on Israel's relationship to *I AM* and to the warlords and explains *theologically* that *I AM* left the Canaanite altars to test Israel's covenant fidelity and to teach succeeding generations how to fight the Canaanites (2:22; 3:4).

A. Political Prologue (1:1–2:5)

The narrator provides the skeletal frame for the first prologue by saying the *leitwort*, or theme-word, “go up” (*ʿālā*), presumably from Gilgal. This divides its first half (Judg. 1:1–36), which is about the tribes settling the land, from its second half (2:1–5), about a prophet's explanation of the tribes' failures. The political process begins with the assembled Israelites asking *I AM*, “Who will ... go up?” (*ʿālā*, 1:1–2a), and the theological explanation begins with the narrator saying the angel of *I AM* “went up” (*ʿālā*) to indict the assembled Israelites. Moreover, *ʿālā* divides the first half into the relative success of Judah and its associated tribes (1:2b–21) and the relative failure of the tribes associated with the house of Joseph (1:22–36). The inclusio “Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers” (1:3, 17) roughly frames the Judah section, and the inclusio “house of Joseph” (1:22, 35) roughly frames the Joseph section. Judah with Simeon and Joseph, unlike the other tribes, are relatively successful because *I AM* is with

them (1:2b, 19, 22). In a codicil (1:19–21) the narrator reflects theologically on Judah’s relative success in contrast to Benjamin’s total failure (1:21). He develops the “Joseph” tribes section by formulaic descriptions of their success and failures.

However, both Judah and Joseph fail to execute *herem* against the contagious Canaanite cities, contrary to Torah (Exod. 34:15–16; Deut. 20:16–18). Instead of executing Adoni-Bezek (“Lord of Bezek”), the men of Judah cut off his thumbs and big toes, a Canaanite practice, as the pagan king confesses (Judg. 1:6–7). This small infraction by Judah in connection with the very first battle report begins the Canaanization of the nation. Zarephath is the only city they totally destroy. They call it Hormah (“Totally Destroyed”), implying that its destruction is unique (1:17). Likewise the house of Joseph in its first battle report compromises Torah by offering to spare a collaborator in return for his showing them how to get into the city.¹⁹ The spared collaborator rebuilds the Canaanite city elsewhere, negating the house of Joseph’s holy destruction of Bethel. The little foxes of small compromises begin the process of destroying the precious vine that *I AM* has transplanted from Egypt. By the end of the book, the most charismatic warlord intermarries with the Philistines, whose cities Judah had originally taken (1:18).

As these introductions track Israel’s spiritual infidelity to its source, the formulaic description of the successes and failures of the Joseph tribes trace their increasing political failure. Barry Webb notes that at first the victorious Israelites allow the Canaanites to live at a distance (Judg. 1:22–26); then the Israelites fail to drive out the Canaanites and the Canaanites live among the Israelites (1:27–30); and finally the Israelites live among the Canaanites (1:31–33). Ultimately the Canaanites press back the Israelites and allow the Israelites to live at a distance.²⁰

The narrator on the plot level implicitly connects Israel’s spiritual and political failures. The angel of *I AM* on the story level connects them explicitly (Judg. 2:1–5). The apostle Paul makes the same point to the Corinthians, who fail to extirpate an immoral brother: “Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast — as you really are” (1 Cor. 5:6–7).

B. Theological Prologue (2:6–3:6)

After a preface to transition from the faithful generation of Joshua to the

unfaithful generation (Judg. 2:6–8), the second prologue theologically schematizes the era of the warlords in terms of the Mosaic covenant and God's grace (2:10–19). The narrator selects twelve warlords — a number reminiscent of the twelve tribes of Israel — and holds their narrative reports together by a sevenfold interpretative framework that both connects and unifies these narratives, “suggesting that they are manifestations of the same basic phenomenon recurring cyclically in Israelite history.”²¹

First, Israel dismembers itself from *I AM*, who delivered them from Egypt and to whom they had pledged covenant fidelity, in favor of serving the Canaanite Baals (i.e., “lords”), a religion in which divine immanence is realized through fertility rights. This violation of the first of the Ten Commandments functions as a synecdoche for Israel's disobeying the Law *en toto*, fracturing their covenantal relationship with *I AM* (Judg. 2:10–13). Second, *I AM* punishes them with the covenant curse of suffering at the hands of cruel oppressors (vv. 14–15). Third, though surprisingly the schema does not mention Israel's crying out to *I AM* for deliverance, the motif occurs in most of the cycles. Perhaps the narrator omitted it because their cry is bogus and to emphasize the fourth feature: God's grace in raising up a warlord to deliver them (cf. Exod. 3:1–6). Fifth, God subdues × (a proper name); sixth, the land has rest for a certain number of years; and seventh, the warlord dies. An absence of one of these elements, such as “the land had rest,” presumably functions as a gap, not a blank.

EXCURSUS: APOSTASY IN THE CHURCH

In church history, as in the days of the warlords of Israel, defection plagues the second generation of Christians. The epistles of Jude and 2 Peter address the problem of sexually immoral teachers who had infiltrated the church at the close of the apostolic epoch. Jude wrote to encourage his readers “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (v. 3) because impious people had infiltrated the community to which he is writing. In his second epistle, Peter, who is on the verge of death, gives a set of ethical instructions in view of teachers with adulterous eyes who promote “shameful ways” (2 Peter 2:2).

As in the days of the warlords, God will judge these apostates, but unlike ancient Israel, the judgment of God’s opponents is represented as occurring at the second coming of Christ. In 2 and 3 John, the apostle who never clearly identifies himself in either his gospel or his epistles refers to himself as “the elder.” He who bore witness to Jesus in his gospel now witnesses apostates departing from the truth and eternal life because they were nominal Christians, never members of the true church. He writes to reaffirm traditional Christian convictions. In 2 John he addresses churches in outlying areas to warn them also against these secessionists, with their faulty ethics, who may come to them. The churches can preserve themselves by love for one another and for the truth. In 3 John the elder sends out missionaries to counter the secessionists.

In the book of Hebrews, second-generation Christians are in danger of returning to Judaism to escape persecution.*

According to Revelation, the church at Ephesus loses its first love, the church at Sardis is asleep, and the church at Laodicea is lukewarm. In the church at Pergamum, some hold to the teaching of Balaam, who enticed Israel to idolatry and sexual immorality. And the church at Thyatira tolerates “that woman Jezebel” whose teaching also misleads God’s servants into idolatry and sexual immorality. The Lord removes the lampstands of these churches before the parousia.

After the schema, *I AM* explains on the story level that he will leave the Canaanite nations to test Israel’s fidelity and to teach succeeding generations to

fight (Judg. 2:22). In a codicil the narrator explains that to test Israel *I AM* did not hand over to Joshua the entire Land; in his grace God left the pagans only to teach warfare to the inexperienced descendants of Joshua's generation (2:22–3:4). He draws the introduction to a conclusion with the grim report that instead of stoutly fighting, Israel is weak and intermarrying with the Canaanites.

IV. MAIN BODY: TWELVE JUDGES (3:7–16:31)

The narrator selects six major warlords²² for a narrative report according to their tribal location. Moving from south to north, they are Othniel of Judah, Ehud of Benjamin, Deborah of Ephraim, Gideon of Manasseh, Jephthah of Gilead, and Samson of Dan. Unlike contemporary Hollywood action movies, the narrator selects them principally for characterization to prompt his audience to theological reflection on the kind of leader Israel needs. For example, he sums up Jephthah's battle against the Ammonites in just two (Judg. 11:32–33) of seventy verses. He devotes the most verbiage to the morally inferior judges.

The frame's statistics expose the decline of Israel during the span of years when warlords led Israel. Here is a chart of the years of oppression versus the years of peace:

	Years of Oppression	Years of Peace/*leading
Othniel	8 (3:8)	40 (3:11)
Ehud	18 (3:14)	80 (3:30)
Deborah	20 (4:3)	40 (5:31)
Gideon	7 (6:1)	40 (8:28)
Jephthah	18 (10:8)	*6 (12:7)
Samson	40 (13:1)	*20 (16:31)

Beginning with Jephthah, the years of oppression outlast the years of peace. Indeed, it is not said that during the lifetimes of Jephthah and Samson that the land had rest; it only says “they led” Israel.

A. Othniel

As Caleb's nephew, Othniel is an ethnic Kenazite who has been naturalized into Judah. He belongs to the generation of faithful Israelites who survived the wilderness. He won Acsah's daughter in marriage through faith, and she in turn won him springs of water by asking her father for them. However, she shows her father deference by getting off her donkey — a symbol of authority—before making her bold request (Judg. 1:14).

Othniel becomes a warlord when the spirit of *I AM* comes upon him. The idiom means that an urgent, compulsive, overwhelming force empowers him to achieve a God-ordained objective. God's spirit's coming upon Othniel is a mark of God's grace, not of Othniel's moral superiority nor of his harmony with the Holy Spirit. For example, Jephthah makes his rash vow while being overwhelmed by the spirit of *I AM*. Daniel Block says, "This expression, reminiscent of Num. 24:3 (in which case Balaam, the Mesopotamian prophet, experiences the same phenomenon), does not presuppose any particular level of spirituality on the part of the recipient. To the contrary, this divine intrusion in human experience seems to graphically describe YHWH's arresting of men ill-disposed toward resolving Israel's problems and his equipping of them for the saving task."²³

As a warlord Othniel confronts Cushan-Rishathaim (i.e., "Cushan the Doubly Wicked," so named perhaps to strike terror in his enemy, like "Jack the Ripper") from Aram Naharaim. Cushan's coming from a great distance points to his power. Five verses of this eight-verse cycle constitute the "frame." In other words, the narrator essentially presents only the frame and strikingly gaps — not merely blanks — the details. His intention is to establish the pattern, the paradigmatic model, by which the other cycles should be evaluated, exposing the degeneration of Israel. This concise straight-to-the-point narrative illustrates the simplicity and triumph of the life of faith and of God's Spirit.

B. Ehud

Ehud slaughters Eglon (i.e., "Little Calf"), king of Moab, by making a dagger small enough to be concealed and large enough to puncture Eglon's sphincter. He gains Ehud's private audience by announcing he has a "secret" message (Heb. *dbar*, "word," "thing") for him, a double entendre for a verbal message and for his dagger. As part of his subterfuge, Ehud turns back to the idols/sculptured stones to give the appearance that his secret message comes from the gods. Providentially the proud king takes the bait, dismisses his bodyguards, and rises to hear it, only to facilitate his disembowelment. The odor and embarrassment caused when Eglon's sphincter explodes gives Ehud time to lock the king's chamber door behind him and escape, for Eglon's bodyguard thinks he is relieving himself.

Some commentators fault Ehud for his treachery. But as noted above (cf. Josh. 2:4–7), halftruths, lies, deception, and treachery are all part of holy war. The

narrator says, “[*I AM*] gave them a deliverer” (Judg. 3:15), and his language suggests a sacrificial slaughter of Eglon (“Little Calf”). Ehud has faith that *I AM* will prosper his masquerade, for much could go wrong, such as the security guards finding his hidden dagger. He is not a suicide terrorist, because he is trusting God that his assassination of Eglon will rally the nation behind him to throw off Moab’s yoke (3:28). Within the story itself, Ehud credits his success to *I AM* and Providence confirms him. Some commentators also wrongly label him along with other warlords as a “murderer” (i.e., a criminal killer),²⁴ but Israel’s oppressors are as guilty as the Nazis who were sentenced to death by the war-crimes court at Nuremberg.

The warlords use whatever instruments they have in hand: Ehud fashions his dagger for the occasion; Shamgar uses an oxgoad, a long, sharp stick used to prod an ox (Judg. 3:31); Jael, a tent peg (4:21); Gideon, trumpets and empty jars holding torches inside (7:20); the woman of Thebez, a millstone (9:52–53); and Samson, a donkey’s jawbone (15:15).

C. Deborah

The Deborah cycle consists of a prose narrative reporting Deborah’s leadership in defeating Jabin king of Canaan (Judg. 4) and of Deborah’s song to immortalize the victory (Judg. 5).²⁵ My student Bryan Gregory suggests the narrative has a chiasmic structure that features at its pivot *I AM* as the true hero of this story:²⁶

- A Israel in Jabin’s hand²⁷ (vv. 1–2)
- B Israelites cry out to *I AM* (v. 3)
- C Deborah prophesies that *I AM* will deliver Sisera to Barak’s hand (vv. 4–7)
- D Deborah prophesies that Sisera will fall into a woman’s hands (vv. 8–9a)
- E Barak pursues Sisera (vv. 9b–12)
- F Barak goes up; Sisera assembles his army (v. 13)
- X *I AM* has given Sisera into Barak’s hand! (v. 14a)
- F’ Barak goes down; *I AM* routes Sisera’s army (vv. 14b–15)
- E’ Barak pursues Sisera (v. 16)
- D’ Sisera falls into Jael’s hand (vv. 17–21)
- C’ Jael delivers Sisera to Barak (v. 22)

B' *I AM* delivers Israelites (v. 23)
A' Jabin in Israel's hand (v. 24)

I AM of Hosts (of all armies) achieves his stunning victory over Jabin and Sisera, in spite of the enemies' vastly superior army, by sending a timely, torrential thunderstorm (Judg. 5:4–5, 19–23). *I AM* lures Sisera to surround Mount Tabor with his nine hundred chariots because the Israelites seem trapped. The chariots, however, are swept away in the flood of the swollen Kishon River and/or became stuck in its mud, making them useless and the charioteers vulnerable to the Israelite infantry who now rush down upon them and slay them (4:6–7; 5:4–5, 19–20).²⁸ The battle plan depends entirely on *I AM* sending the downpour at the right moment.

Remarkably, two heroic women begin and consummate this victory: Deborah and Jael. Deborah (an Ephraimite) is both a prophetess and a tribal leader, or *šōpēt* (Judg. 4:4). As a prophetess she functions as God's spokesperson, and with a divine conviction of her calling she assumes the role of leading Israel. As Israel's recognized leader and as a prophetess, she summons Barak to lead Israel in battle. What the Canaanite commander Sisera is to King Jabin, Barak is to *I AM* as represented by Deborah. Deborah's status as a prophetess assumes she has been raised up by *I AM*. She proves her prophetic gift by accurately predicting Sisera's death at the hand of a woman and her divine gift as a deliverer by leading Israel into battle through Barak.²⁹ Deborah combines her gift with great faith. She has confidence that *I AM* will deliver Sisera into her hand (4:9). Her song (Judg. 5) is a clear testimony of praise to *I AM*.

By contrast Barak (of Naphtali) is weak-willed, indecisive, fearful, and does not trust the prophetic word (Judg. 4:8). The contrast between Deborah and Barak suggests God raised up a woman to lead Israel because the Israelite men were cowards and declined leadership. Barak, though a gifted warrior, is tainted by his lack of faith and shamed for it. The honor of killing the enemy commander in battle will go to a woman. In the absence of stout-hearted men, *I AM* uses heroic women.

The real heroine of this story, however, is Jael. Another student of mine, William Fullilove, roughly analyzes the Deborah narrative as consisting of two acts: Act 1: Deborah and Barak versus Sisera (Judg. 4:1–16), and Act 2: Barak and Jael versus Sisera (4:17–24).³⁰ This structure strikingly contrasts Barak's fearful response with Jael's faithful response. Barak obeys only after Deborah promises to go with him. Jael acts in faith without any calling: she does what Israel should have been doing right along — she fights *I AM*'s enemy.

Nevertheless, *I AM* honors both Barak and Jael, but he gave the former the full grape harvest (i.e., the Canaanite army) and reserved the best gleanings (i.e., Sisera) for Jael (cf. 8:1–2). As Deborah said: the honor goes to blessed Jael. In plot structure, the narrator holds us in suspense: who will be the woman who gets the honor (4:9)? We have to wait until the climax when Jael drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple (4:21). In the interim the narrator slows down the action from speeding chariots, to Sisera's flight by foot, to his entering Jael's tent where he drinks milk, not water, and falls fast asleep.

Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, is a remarkable iconoclast. This most unusual woman violates the cultural norms of the ancient Near East to kill Sisera, who in his flight on foot has to pass her tent. In the home she does not follow the lead of Heber, her husband. His tribe had been Israel's ally (Judg. 1:16), but his clan left their tribe and had friendly relations with Jabin, king of Hazor. In addition to disobeying her husband in the home, in politics Jael has violated this peace treaty. Against propriety, she invites Sisera into her tent, gives him milk in a princely bowl, and puts a covering over him. But her hospitality is a ploy. Against military expectations, she takes the place of the male warrior, depriving him of glory, and winning glory by thrusting a tent peg through his temple into the ground. Why does she risk herself? This relative of Moses puts *I AM* before cultural conventions. The prophetess, speaking for God, pronounces her "most blessed of women" (5:24).³¹

Deborah's song celebrates the self-offering of Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali in the battle and protests the absence of Reuben, Gilead, Dan, and Asher. The people of God are to offer themselves to serve all the people of God, not to behave selfishly.

D. Gideon

At the center of the warlord cycles, which become progressively long and degraded, is Gideon's personal struggle to believe God. With him the character of the warlords significantly shifts from "better" (positive/strong) to "worse" (negative/weak) so that by the end of the book it becomes perfectly clear that charismatic warlords of Gideon's sort cannot lead the covenant people to permanent rest in the Land.

1. Structure and Content of Gideon Narrative

The Gideon cycle also has two distinct parts: of Gideon (Judg. 6:1–8:32) and of his son, Abimelech (8:33–9:57). Paul Tanner, in his University of Texas dissertation, analyzes by the passage's poetics the first cycle's five chiastically structured episodes:³²

I Introduction: evil situation at the time God calls Gideon (6:1–10)

II Gideon's call to deliver (6:11–32)

III Gideon's personal struggle to believe God (6:33–7:18)

II' Gideon delivers Israel from Midian (7:19–8:21)³³

I' Conclusion: evil situation at time of Gideon's death (8:22–32)

In I and I' he notes that because of Gideon's personal failure in the end, Israel "continues" in idolatry. In II and II' he notes that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. In spite of Gideon's shortcoming, when he believes God's promise, he achieves a stunning victory against insuperable odds.³⁴ The focus, III, is on Gideon's flawed character, not his function as a "deliverer." The deliverance is momentarily suspended to allow for another development, namely, his struggle to believe God. All the struggles in the book are due to a lack of faith. God is looking for a leader who will simply worship him and take him at his word.

There is a holy moment that God must bring His servant to, when with all human confidence stripped away, he silently sits in humble adoration of his God as the One who is everything and totally sufficient against all odds to accomplish His divine will. Then, and only then, is he fit to move forward to taste God's victory, though that victory were no more secure or certain than before.³⁵

2. Characterization of Gideon

Gideon is both hero and antihero, both a man of faith and a man of fear. His story, like that of all the warlords, functions to form the culture of the church—that is to say, to reinforce the values of Israel's covenants.

The photograph of Gideon's soul reveals serious blemishes. At the time of his call, he is dull to the spiritual condition of his people (i.e., he makes no attempt on his own to remove his family's altar to Baal), to salvation history (i.e., though a "mighty warrior" [6:12], he takes no initiative to save his people), and

cynically expresses his disappointment with God (i.e., instead of viewing God's mighty acts in the past as an encouragement to faith, he interprets them as a discouragement to faith: 6:13). He evades God's call (6:15) and lacks faith in God's promises through one who proves himself without reasonable doubt to be the angel of I AM (6:16–21, 36–40). *I AM's* sixfold promise to give Midian into the hand of Israel (6:36–38; 7:2, 7, 9, 14–15) contrasts with Israel's "fear" (7:3, 10). Gideon tears down his altar at night out of fear of his own family (6:27). His request for a wet fleece in a dry field and then for a dry fleece in a wet field reveals his lack of faith in God's word from none other than the awesome angel of *I AM* (6:36–40). Ironically, he has more faith in the dream of an enemy soldier than in *I AM's* promise. The Midianite interpreter of the soldier's dream only repeats what God has been saying all along (7:14).

Israel's deliverance by Gideon is due to God's empowering him with Moses-like perseverance to use his natural human strength, not to human courage and heroism (6:11–14). Nevertheless, he provokes the battle with the Midianites only because the spirit of *I AM* gripped him to do so (6:34). When Gideon crosses the Jordan, he takes extreme vengeance against fellow Israelites (8:16–17). Gideon is the first judge to turn the sword against his compatriots.³⁶ In the Transjordan campaign, instead of mentioning God, he is bent on revenge, torturing the elders at Succoth and pulling down the tower at Peniel, killing the men (8:16–17). He kills the Midianite kings as revenge for his brothers, not for any other reason (8:19). When he is contended against, he handles it with diplomacy (8:1–3; cf. 6:30–32), but when he is the contender, he tears down and kills (8:17).

Nevertheless, because of God's mercy to Israel, by God-induced faith, Gideon first builds an altar to *I AM*, then tears down his father's altar and builds a proper altar to *I AM*, a sign of his reclaiming the Land for *I AM*. In this way he drives Baal from the field of battle (Judg. 6:28), and by his charisma he rallies his clan and the neighboring tribes to holy war (6:34). After hearing the soldier's dream and its interpretation, Gideon is a changed man and ready for battle; he moves from fear to faith and repeats *I AM's* promise (7:15–18). Gideon trusts God to save with only three hundred men, though much could go wrong (7:8), and he takes the lead in the battle (7:17). With tactical skill he seizes the source of water supply at the spring of Harod, forcing Midianites to camp in the valley; he routs the enemy and spooks their camels with breaking pottery, revealing blazing torches, and the sound of three hundred trumpets. (Trumpets were usually blown only by captains, not ordinary soldiers, so Gideon makes it sound as if he has an army of 300,000.) Then Gideon heads off the kings of Midian in Transjordan (8:11) and kills them. He deals diplomatically with Ephraim, heading off a civil war (8:2–3).

In the light of the narrator's plot, we can understand the angel of *I AM*'s evaluation of Gideon at the beginning of the Gideon story as a "mighty warrior" (6:12) and his enemies' admission at its end that he has the bearing of a prince (8:18).

Gideon's refusal to be Israel's ruler is ambiguous (8:22). In [chapter 24](#) I argue that his statement is so much poppycock and does not express the author's evaluative point of view. In any case, he leads the nation back into idolatry by using the plunder of gold to make an ephod, a divining instrument, instead of keeping covenant with *I AM* out of faith in God (8:22–32).

Through this antiheroic-heroic warlord, *I AM* brings both grace (deliverance from Midian) and judgment (death to the Transjordanian cities for their neutrality in the war and to the Ephraimites for their pride). Remarkably, the New Testament remembers only Gideon's faith—meager as it is — and holds him up as an example of faith to the church (Heb. 11:32).

E. Abimelech Narrative

Whereas Gideon was a warlord and refused to be a king, his son Abimelech is not a warlord and installs himself as a king. Though not a warlord, Abimelech is given a full narrative, in part to teach the principle of providential *lex talionis*. Gideon pays for his false cult in the loss of his sons, and Shechem pays for its treachery against Gideon by the loss of the city.

The Abimelech narrative, after the frame introduction (Judg. 8:33–35), traces Abimelech's rise to power (9:1–24) and then his demise (9:22–57). He rises to power in Shechem through treachery against the house of Jerub-Baal (i.e., his half brothers by Gideon). Just as it was the custom among ancient pagans to kill off rival claimants to a throne, Abimelech, with the financial support of his mother's Shechemite brothers, hires cutthroats to murder his seventy half brothers at his father's home. One of them, Jotham, meaning "Yah has integrity/is blameless," escapes and curses Shechem in a fable (9:5–21). The purpose of the fable is not to defame kingship but to defame Abimelech and Shechem by likening Abimelech to a shadeless thornbush from which fire bursts forth to kill those who anointed the wretched tree king (see [chap. 24](#)).

The curse finds fulfillment when God sends an evil spirit upon both Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, causing the Shechemites to betray him as they had Gideon's other sons. The Scriptures do not clearly represent the origin of an evil spirit. Throughout Scripture, however, the divine causality

where God appears responsible for evil refers to instances where God confirms and increases evil already present to hasten the divine judgment. For example, he sends an evil spirit on Saul, who has become so tyrannical that even the mighty Samuel fears him (1 Sam. 16:2, 14–23). Walther Eichrodt comments, “God’s power operates ... within the evil which has been begun by the perversion of the creature’s will.”³⁷ The narrator frames Abimelech’s demise with his own theological reflection on the principle of *lex talionis* (Judg. 9:22–24, 56–57).

Abimelech is a type of Saul. Both have their armor-bearers draw their swords and kill them to spare them shame (9:54; 1 Sam. 31:4), and both commit suicide with the presence of an evil spirit from God whose coming hastened their demise (Judg. 9:23; 1 Sam. 16:14). In addition to teaching providential *lex talionis*, the narrator points Israel to their need of a covenant-keeping David, a type of Jesus Christ, not a tyrannical Abimelech, a type of Saul.

F. Jephthah

1. *Structure and Content of Jephthah Narrative*³⁸

The narrator aptly frames the Jephthah narrative with “minor” judges who expand and extend their power bases politically by alliances and privileging their sons to rule by virtue of ancestry, not of God’s gifting. The frame also poignantly surrounds the Jephthah narrative that concerns itself with this “major” warlord’s political aspirations in connection with his only daughter whom he murders.

The narrator structures chiastically the Jephthah narrative into five episodes:

- A Introduction: evil situation at time elders call Jephthah (10:6–16)
- B Jephthah rises to installation as “head” and “commander” (10:17–11:11)
- C Jephthah sends treaty breach lawsuit and defeats Ammon (11:12–28)
- B’ Jephthah falls through sacrifice of his daughter (11:29–40)
- A’ Conclusion: evil situation, Jephthah destroys the Ephraimites (12:1–7)

K. Lawson Younger points out that all five acts are marked by contentions with specific dialogues between: *I AM* and Israel (esp. Judg. 10:11–16), Jephthah

and the elders (esp. 11:7–11), Jephthah and the Ammonites (esp. 11:12–28), Jephthah and his daughter (esp. 11:35–38), and Jephthah and the Ephraimites (esp. 12:1—4).

Episode 1 contains the typical introductory frame elements: (1) Israel worships seven gods, including the god of Ammon (i.e., Milcom/Molech) (Judg. 10:6). “Seven” emphasizes their complete spiritual corruption, and Milcom symbolizes child sacrifice, the issue of this narrative (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5). (2) *I AM* sends the Ammonites to shatter and crush Israel (Judg. 10:7–9). (3) Israel cries out to *I AM* for deliverance (10:10). In the second part of the introduction, *I AM* rejects their cry (10:11–14), and for the first time in the book it is said that Israel repents (10:15–16).

The behavior of the captains and the elders — consulting one another to appoint a “head” over them in return for their granting him political power, instead of consulting *I AM* as to who should lead them without regard to political aspirations (cf. 1:1; 20:18) — however, shows that in truth they are again merely trying to manipulate *I AM* for their selfish advantage. *I AM* deafens them by his silence—he will not be used — and at this point steps off the stage. Whereas the narrator says *I AM* raised up Othniel (3:9) and Ehud (3:15) and through a prophetess summoned Barak (4:6) and through an angel called Gideon (6:14) and Samson (13:5), neither the narrator nor a messenger of *I AM* says that *I AM* raised up Jephthah. The rest of the story is in the hands of Providence, including God’s judgment and grace.

Episode 2 consists of three scenes. In the first, the effete military captains (*śārîm*) offer “headship” (*rōš*) to *whomever* will start the war, lacking the faith to depend on God to respond to their pleas. Robert G. Boling comments, “The trouble with the captains of the force was that none of them wanted to go. The implication is that the high office of judge is here regarded as a protection against the erosion of the good life enjoyed by the captains.”³⁹ Boling also notes their infidelity: “What was irregular, for the period, was the manner of its bestowal, which indicated that Yahweh had been relegated to the position of confirming the elders’ own selection of the highest leadership.”⁴⁰

In the flashback second scene, we learn that Jephthah’s father begat Jephthah by a prostitute and that his brothers by his father’s wife drove him out of any inheritance and into exile, evidently with the consent of the elders (*zākēn*, the decision-making body). While in hardscrabble exile, a band of cutthroats gather round the mighty warrior. War erupts and the unprincipled elders reluctantly call the gifted warrior back to be their commander (*q.šyn*, a commander in a special time of inner confusion and/or outward threat). But Jephthah skillfully negotiates

a verbal agreement with them that installs him also as their permanent political “head” (*rōš*), guaranteeing him an inheritance.⁴¹

In the third episode, Jephthah sends a treaty-breach lawsuit to the Ammonite king (Judg. 11:12–28), in which he argues that Ammon has no historical or moral rights, and hands the battle over to *I AM* to decide the verdict as to who has rightful claim to Gilead (11:27). The legal suit shows Jephthah’s diplomatic skill as head and proclaimer of Israel’s salvation history.⁴² Overwhelmed by the spirit of *I AM*, Jephthah advances to engage the Ammonites (v. 29). God’s spirit overwhelms with power but not faith. Instead, apparently out of a felt need to manipulate God, he makes a rash vow before engaging the battle: “Whatever [or whoever]⁴³ comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph ... I will sacrifice it [or him/her] as a burnt offering” (v. 31).

To be sure, in the pillared houses of Iron Age I (the time of Judges), “the narrower side rooms [on the ground floor] functioned as stables and shelters for livestock”⁴⁴ — but what or who is more likely to come out of the door of the house to greet the victor—an animal or a human being? And if the latter, who is more likely — a slave/maidservant or a joyous wife (who is not mentioned) and/or a daughter? The rash vow comes tantalizingly close to the Ammonite practice of child sacrifice. Would it not have been more appropriate to offer up as a sacrifice a *herem* of the Ammonite towns (cf. Num. 21:2–3)? The episode concludes with *I AM* handing over twenty Ammonite towns to Israel and Jephthah devastating them one by one.

In the fourth episode, to Jephthah’s dismay, his only daughter, a virgin—he has no sons, as the narrator emphasizes by a double notice (Judg. 11:34, 39) — greets her victorious father. Jephthah laments *his* fall, not her death, for now he has no heir to carry on his fame and fortune. His pious virgin insists that he sacrifice her, and he murders her as he had vowed.⁴⁵ Young Israelite women memorialize the daughter, and implicitly shame Jephthah, by commemorating her annually in a four-day ritual.

Tragically, the Levites’ failure to teach the people the Law and/or Jephthah’s unwillingness to hear it cost Jephthah what he held most dearly—an enduring political prominence. The sixth of the Ten Commandments forbids murder, and God does not want a vow that violates his Law and is abhorrent to him. Moreover the Law (Lev. 18:21; 20:2; Deut. 12:31) and the Prophets (Jer. 19:5; Ezek. 20:30–31; 23:37, 39) forbid child sacrifice. In the case of a vow dedicating a child to *I AM*, the Law calls for a monetary payment instead (Lev. 27:1–8; cf. 27:9–13).

The final episode draws the Jephthah cycle to a conclusion with a civil war as

uncalled for as the sacrifice of his daughter. The Ephraimites, instead of celebrating Jephthah's victory, with their sense of a wounded self-importance, contend with Jephthah for not calling them to fight the Ammonites and threaten to burn down his house (cf. Judg. 1:29; 7:24; 8:1; 17:1, 8; 18:2, 13; 19:1, 16, 18). Instead of soothing Ephraim's vanity by diplomacy, as Gideon had done, he argues with them and treats them as violently as he had his daughter. His rash violence slays thousands of Israelites.

2. The Characterization of Jephthah

Jephthah is a mighty warrior, as the captains and elders of Gilead reluctantly recognize and as he demonstrates by his awesome victories over the Ammonites and Ephraimites. He and his Gileadite "renegades" are greater than the whole of arrogant Ephraim. He is overwhelmed by the spirit of *I AM*. He has the stuff of kingship also in diplomacy as exhibited in his treaty-breach lawsuit against the Ammonites. More important than his gifts, however, his lawsuit shows that Jephthah owns Israel's salvation history as his own. He hands over his own welfare into the hands of *I AM* and credits his victory to *I AM* (Judg. 12:3).

But this promising olive tree is spiritually blighted and will die. In his lack of faith, he manipulates the elders with shrewd diplomacy, not through depending on *I AM*, and he seeks to manipulate *I AM* himself with his rash vow. He exacts revenge when offended and does not know the true character of *I AM* or the content of his law. Israel's merciful God thinks best to save Israel and punish Ephraim's pride through this opportunistic, rash, and irascible leader, but such a leader does not long endure.

G. Samson

K. Lawson Younger contrasts Samson with Othniel: "It is a great irony that the worst of the judges in moral character and success in delivering Israel is the best-known judge, while the ideal judge is the least known."⁴⁶

1. Structure and Content of Samson Narrative

Here is an overview of the narrative in outline form:⁴⁷

1. Introductory Frame (Philistine Oppression) (13:1)
- II. Birth: Angel of Lord Announces Wonderful Birth of Deliverer (13:2–24)
- III. Life: Parallel Accounts of Samson and the Philistines (14:1–16:31)
 - A. First Account (14:1–20)
 1. Episode 1: Engagement to Timnite Wife (14:1–4)
 - a. Conversation between Samson and Parents (14:2)
 - b. Parental Objection to Marriage (14:3)
 - c. Question Raised about Possibility of Another Woman; Samson Rejects (14:4)
 2. Episode 2: Action Involving Animal (Lion): Samson's Prowess (14:5–7)
 3. Episode 3: Action Involving Honey: Samson's Gracious Act (14:8–9)
 4. Episode 4: Killing of Thirty Philistines (14:10–20)
 - a. Conversations between Samson, Philistines, and Timnite (Three Characters) (14:10–14)
 - b. Philistines Threaten Third Party to Gain Advantage over Samson (14:15–18)
 - c. Spirit of *I AM* Comes upon Samson, and He Smites Philistines (14:19–20)
 - B. Second Account (15:1–20)
 1. Episode 1': Attempted Sex with Timnite Wife (15:1–2)
 - a. Conversation between Samson and Timnite's Father (15:1a)
 - b. Parental Objection to Marriage (15:1b)
 - c. Question Raised about Possibility of Another Woman; Samson Rejects (15:2)
 2. Episode 2': Action Involving Animal (Foxes): Samson's Prowess (15:3–6a)
 3. Episode 3': Action Involving Foxes: Samson's Vicious Revenge (15:6b–8)
 4. Episode 4': Killing of a Thousand Philistines (15:9–19)
 - a. Conversation between Judahites, Philistines, Samson (Three Characters) (15:9–11)
 - b. Philistines Threaten Third Party to Gain Advantage over Samson (15:12–14a)
 - c. Spirit of *I AM* Comes upon Samson, and He Smites Philistines (15:15–19)
 5. Death (16:1–30)

- a. Samson Escapes from Whore at Gaza (16:1–3)
- b. Samson Betrayed by Delilah (16:4–22)
- c. Samson Topples Dagon and Dies with Thousands of Philistines (16:23–30)
- 6. Concluding Narrative Frame (No Rest) (16:31)

The many striking parallels in the alternating structures point both to God's ordered providence in Israel's history and to Samson's stubborn willfulness. Like Israel, he never learns.

a. Samson's Birth (13:2–24)

The birth narrative features two appearances of the angel of *I AM* to the wife of Manoah, a Danite, announcing the marvelous birth to come (Judg. 13:2–7, 8–23) and the report of Samson's birth and early years (v. 24). The double appearances, like Joseph's double dreams, signify the certainty and the imminence of the birth. In each appearance the angel announces the birth of a deliverer with the instruction that he be a Nazirite from conception (see Num. 6).⁴⁸ Manoah's wife reports the first appearance to her husband, who prays for a second appearance to tell them how to raise the boy. After the second appearance, Manoah offers a sacrifice to the angel who represents *I AM*. The Nazirite law calls for a voluntary separation to *I AM*, but in Samson's case, as in Samuel's, it is involuntary. His conscription is a type of the covenant people's election to be the people of God.

The narrator characterizes the parents as covenant people, but he paints the highly intelligent wife as cynical and her husband as a dimwit. They show their covenant allegiance by offering a sacrifice to *I AM* and raising their son, whom they name Samson ("Little Sun"), as a Nazirite from the time of conception. The wife shows her intelligence and her husband his stupidity in their contrasting recognition of the angel. She reports to her husband, "He looked like an angel of God, very awesome" (Judg. 13:6), but he is so spiritually blind, he sees only a man (v. 16b). He fails to catch on to the angel's identity, even though the angel tells him that if he offers an offering to him, he should offer it to *I AM*; that his name is "beyond understanding"; and the angel ascends in the sacrificial flames (vv. 18–20). Only when the angel fails to reappear does Manoah realize the "man" was the angel of *I AM* (v. 21)! Then, though believing they would have the announced child, Manoah expects to die on the spot (v. 22)! His wife bypasses the obvious and insightfully reasons that if *I AM* had meant to kill

them, he would not have accepted their sacrifice (v. 23).

But the wife's recounting of the angel's birth announcement betrays her cynicism. The angel emphasizes that she is barren (Judg. 13:3), but unlike Hannah, she does not pray for a child — she is resigned to her fate — and when she recounts what should have been a wonderful announcement, she incredibly omits the miraculous nature of the birth. Correlatively, unlike Hannah, after the birth she has no praise. Her cynicism and despair resonate with that of the men of Judah who have resigned themselves to Philistine dominion (15:11). The angel announces her Nazirite son would begin the deliverance of Israel, but she, cogently but darkly, infers he will die before Israel is fully delivered. Robert Alter comments, "It is surely a little unsettling that the promise which ended with liberation — though, pointedly, only the beginning of liberation — of Israel from its Philistine oppressors now concludes with no mention of 'salvation' but instead with the word 'death.'"⁴⁹ Manoah is even duller. He wants to know how to raise the boy, evidently ignorant of the Law, which details the regulations for Nazirites (Num. 6). The angel ignores his request and holds the wife responsible to raise her son according to "all" (*kôl*) the regulations (vv. 13–14). Apparently Manoah couldn't be trusted to get it right.

b. Samson's Life

J. Cheryl Exum comments that the obviously parallel episodes of Samson's life with their many repetitions as represented in the above outline are "neither redundant nor monotonous. On the contrary, repetition enhances detail, emphasizes meaning, and expands nuances, while at the same time pleasing the ear and focusing the attention."⁵⁰ Samson comes across as a rebellious and vengeful dunderhead, his parents as compromisers, and the Philistines as Mafia types.

The repetition of key words also exposes Samson's character. In the first episode the key word "tell" (*ngd* in Hiphil, Judg. 14:2, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 [2x], 19) tracks Samson's alienation from his parents to his identification with his Philistine wife and her identification with the Philistines, not with Samson. Samson begins his alienation by telling his parents to get him a Philistine wife, who is "the right one for me" (14:1–3; cf. 17:6; 21:25), in spite of their objection that the Philistines are uncircumcised. He further alienates himself from God and his parents by scooping honey from a lion's carcass — his first violation of his Nazirite vows — without telling his parents (14:9). At his wedding he joins his uncircumcised groomsmen in drinking wine at a seven-day

feast (*mišteh*, time of drinking) — his second violation of his Nazirite vow — and tells them a riddle. They force his wife to get him to explain it to her by threatening to burn her and her family to death. For several days he refuses to tell her, saying, “I haven’t even explained [*ngd*] it to my father or mother, so why should I explain [*ngd*] it to you?” (v. 16). But on the seventh day, he tells her, exacerbating his alienation from his parents and his identification with the Timnite. His riddles show that he is not dull by the world’s standards; he lacks the spiritual sense to survive.

The key word in the second account is “do” (*‘sh*) in connection with a revenge motif (Judg. 15:3, 6, 7, 10, 11 [2x]) and shows that Samson is motivated by revenge, not by fidelity to *I AM* or his people. For example, “I merely did to them what they did to me” (v. 11).

c. Samson’s Death

As there are striking parallels between the two episodes of Samson’s life, there are striking parallels in an alternating structure between the reports of his life and his death. In the list that follows, the texts for his life are cited first and then those for his death.

1. Begins with wrong entanglements with Philistine women leading to entanglements with Philistine men and their deaths: 14:1 and 19 (cf. 15:1, 8); 16:1, 4 and 30.
2. Prank with display of strength: 14:5–6; 16:3.
3. Coaxing of riddle/secret: 14:15; 16:5.
4. Challenge from Philistine leaders with threat of burning/promise of money: 14:15 (cf. 15:6); 16:5, 18.
5. Manipulation by wife/woman: 14:16; 16:15.
6. Pressured by woman to turning point: 14:17; 16:16, 17.
7. Handing-over by third party: 15:13; 16:19.
8. Response to being bound: 15:14–15; 16:20.
9. Motivated by revenge: 15:3 (wife), 11; 16:28 (eyes).
10. Prayer for life/death: 15:18; 16:28.
11. Concluding stereotypical frame: 15:20; 16:31b.

The narrative of Samson’ death also consists of three scenes as noted in the outline above. The prostitute scene functions as a counterfoil to the following paramour scene. In both stories there are ambushes in connection with Samson’s

place of sleeping with a woman; in both he tears up the bar/pin. In the first he foils the Philistines; not so in the second.

In the second scene, featuring Delilah's triumph (Judg. 16:4–22), Delilah, the only woman Samson loved, loves money. The Philistines offer her a fantastic sum of money — more than a lifetime of earnings for the average worker—to wheedle out of Samson the secret of his obviously supernatural power. In his final rejection of his Nazirite status, he tells her the secret of his never having used a razor. Shorn of his hair, he is as powerless as the nonelect. James A. Wharton comments: "Our text requires us to see Samson's unshorn hair as a mark of his separation to a lifelong task.... Fidelity to that commission, signalled by keeping the Nazirite obligations, is the true key to Samson's God-given strength."⁵¹ Jephthah foolishly keeps his vow and murders his daughter; Samson foolishly breaks his Nazirite vows and brings death upon himself.

In the death scene, "Little Sun" is captured, blinded, and imprisoned in a black dungeon. Just prior to his death, however, his hair begins to grow and with it his divinely given strength. Clearly, though Samson had been shorn of power, he was not severed from his elect status. In his renewed strength, this Danite single-handedly topples Dagan's temple while dying with the Philistines. He achieves his death at Gaza and his final triumph over the Philistines through prayer. Through Samson's death God fulfills Jacob's prediction about Dan: "Dan will provide justice for his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan will be a serpent by the roadside ... that bites the horses' heels so that its rider tumbles backward" (Gen. 49:17). Though the other tribes did not welcome Samson's vengeful justice, nevertheless, it is *I AM*'s will to mete out his justice against the Philistines through this unlikely warlord (Judg. 14:4). From below, like "a serpent," Samson fatally "bit" Dagan's temple, and his worshipers "tumbled backward" to their death.

2. Characterization of Samson

Like Gideon and Jephthah, Samson is a deeply flawed saint. Having a birth narrative places him among such noteworthies as Moses and Samuel. He is conscripted from conception to serve *I AM*, and until the time of his death, though reluctantly, he owns his involuntary conscription to be set apart to God. Climactically at the end of both the "Samson's Life" episode and "Samson's Death" episode he prays: first for his life at Lehi (Judg. 15:18–19) and then for his death at Gaza (16:30). *I AM* answers both. To be sure, Samson chooses Philistine women, but never their gods. The spirit of *I AM* overwhelms him four

times (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), more than any other warlord (3:10; 6:34; 11:29), marking him as the most charismatic but not as the most in tune with God's Holy Spirit.

But our hero is also an antihero. He does what is right in his eyes, disdaining his parents, his vows, and God; he cooperates and copulates with the uncircumcised; he is a spiteful manslayer and a self-satisfying whoremonger. "He flounders in the great conflict between eros and charisma," says Gerhard von Rad.⁵² Samson's folly in rejecting his parents for Philistine women can be readily seen in the contrast between his worshiping mother and his three self-serving Philistine women: a wife, a prostitute, and a paramour. This prankish, narcissistic womanizer ironically has no children; he squanders his gifts and does not actualize his potential to completely deliver Israel. From the first and progressively Samson breaks his Nazirite vow (touches a carcass [14:5–9; 15:15], drinks wine [14:10], and cuts hair [16:19.]). "At stake in that deliverance [from the Philistines], from the outset, was the demand of Yahweh for unswerving obedience. Even the invincible Samson was defeated when he disobeyed."⁵³ In sum, he mixes his faith with the lust of the eyes (motif of seeing), lust of the flesh (motif of sex), and pride of life (motif of revenge), not with the love of God and Israel. He can only begin Israel's deliverance.

Samson is a type of every covenant person. John Milton referred to him as "O mirror of our fickle state." Moreover, his entire story is a riddle, as E. L. Greenstein notes: "What appears to be Samson is the people of Israel; what appears as the Naziriteship of Samson is the Israelite covenant."⁵⁴ Barry Webb clarifies:

In terms of the whole way it functions in the book of Judges, the story of Samson is the story of Israel recapitulated and focused for us in the life of a single man. As Samson was a "holy" man, Israel was a "holy" nation (Exod. 19:6). As Samson desired to be as other men, Israel desired to be as other nations. As Samson went after foreign women, Israel went after foreign gods. As Samson cried to Yahweh in his extremity and was answered, so did Israel. And finally ... as Samson had to be blinded and given over to the bitter pain of Gaza before he came to terms with his destiny, so too would Israel have to be given over to the bitter suffering of exile in Babylon (cf. Judg 16:21; 2 Kings 25:7). The Samson story mirrors the story of Israel.... In the epilogue we are told that in the time of the Judges "every man did what was good in his eyes" (17:6; 21:25) [and so did Samson, 14:3b].⁵⁵

It is said that the definition of insanity is repeating the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. According to that definition, Samson, Israel, and the human race are insane.

V. DOUBLE EPILOGUE: FAILURE OF THE LEVITES (17:1–21:25)

The book's epilogue fingers the tribe of Levi as the source of Israel's failures to keep covenant with *I AM* during the dark age when warlords ruled. The author selects to narrate—probably as types — a story about an apostate Levite who founds the false cult at Dan and a violent Levite who provokes a bloody civil war that nearly wipes out the tribe of Benjamin. Implicitly, Israel's failure at the altar in her relationship to *I AM* led to her failure in the field. The tribe *I AM* chose to preserve Israel's piety and morality proves to be unfaithful.

In addition to the fact that the epilogue features Levites, not warlords, an inclusio — “in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” — forms a frame around the epilogue (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Finally, the sevenfold frame elements that structured the book's main section are spent at 16:31. The refrain “Israel had no king” separates the epilogue into two parts: “The Idolatrous Levite” (17:1–18:31) and “The Violent Levite” (19:1–21:25). Small, personal failures of these religious leaders escalate to tribal and national dimensions and plunge the nation into political and moral anarchy. The inclusio, involving the last verse of the book, points to Israel's need of a covenant-keeping king to rectify moral and political anarchy.

A. First Epilogue: A Levite and Idolatry in Israel (17:1–18:31)

The first epilogue consists of three episodes expanding from the installation of Micah's cult (Judg. 17:1–6), to the installation of a Levite at Micah's cult (17:7–13), to the installation of Micah's cult at Dan for the tribe of Dan (18:1–31). Micah's cult originates in his violence against his own mother, and its transfer to Dan originates in the violence of the Danites against Micah. An opportunistic young Levite mediates the transition from a family shrine to a tribal shrine.

The narrative is spiced with dramatic irony and tragic failure. An Ephraimite named Micah (“Who Is Like Yah”) dishonors his mother by stealing a large amount of silver from her (17:2), and he is stolen from (18:17). When he returns

to his mother the silver he stole—without adding a fifth as the law required — she blasphemes, “*I AM* bless you, my son!” for she vows to use it to make a carved image (17:3). Thereupon “Who Is Like Yah” makes an idol of him who is incomparable and installs the full paraphernalia of a cult — site, objects, and personnel — to *I AM*, right under the nose of the high priest in Ephraim (18:31), who violates the covenant by not executing the apostates (17:4–7; Deut. 13). Micah thinks his false cult in *I AM*’s name will bring him *shalom* (17:13). Instead, it brings him tragedy. He shows hospitality to Danite spies, and they return as warriors and threaten to murder him (18:2, 14–18). The covetous Danites steal the idol that could not defend Micah and his family to be their cult object to defend the whole tribe.

A young Levite, a Kohathite, who should have been living in one of the Levitical towns of Dan (cf. 18:30; Exod. 2:22; 6:18–20; Josh. 21:5, 20–26), lives as a resident alien in Bethlehem, seeking subsistence where he can find it. Micah befriends him and seduces him to become his priest, and the vain Levite later gladly consents to the seduction of the Danites to be the priest of their whole tribe (Judg. 17:9–12; 18:18–20). The Danites cannot win an inheritance in the Land, but they bankrupt a family not strong enough to defend itself and massacre an unsuspecting city (18:1, 22–24). The narrator saves the best irony for last: the Levite is Moses’ great-grandson Jonathan (17:10–11; 18:30).⁵⁶ Younger comments, “Thus, the problems of religious syncretism and spiritual decay have infected the very institution designed to combat these problems, not to mention one of the most revered households in ancient Israel.”⁵⁷ The fatal contagion of the Levites infects all the tribes.

B. Second Epilogue: A Levite and Violence in Israel (19:1–21:25)

As in the first epilogue, a family situation escalates to a tribal situation, but this time it escalates to national proportions. The first epilogue pertains to an opportunistic Levite and idolatry; the second pertains to a calloused and violent Levite.

The story of the violent Levite has five episodes structured chiastically:

A Rape of the concubine (19:1–30)

B *H*erem of Benjamin (20:1–48)

X Problem oath threatening Benjamin with extinction (21:1)

B' *H*erem of Jabesh Gilead (21:2–14)

A' Rape of the daughters of Shiloh (21:15–25)

This narrative is also spiced with tragic irony. The calloused Levite's concubine (a sexual partner without the rights of a wife)⁵⁸ flees from him to her father, and when the Levite, from Ephraim, tracks her down in Bethlehem, her father entices him to stay and enjoy wine, women, and song for two days more than the normal three days of hospitality. The concubine is a victim of male abuse. Her father obviously has wealth, but refuses to provide her a dowry for marriage, and he does not protect her from her callous husband. Her husband comes with a slave and only two saddled donkeys, leaving his concubine to walk beside the men (19:10). The hospitable no-good father, however, compares favorably with the lack of hospitality the Levite, his slave, and concubine are about to experience in Gibeah.

On their journey home to Ephraim, they fear to bed down in the Canaanite town of Jebus and push on to Benjamite Gibeah, where they bed down in the town square. No resident befriends them; rather, an old man, a resident alien also from Ephraim, takes the three of them in and lavishes them with hospitality. But there conviviality turns into a nightmare. Some homosexual no-goods (Heb. *b'liya'al* “revolutionaries”) demand the old man hand over the Levite so they can gang rape him. Like Lot, forced with two tragic moral choices, the old man, instead of praying to God for deliverance, opts to spare his guest and to hand over to the perverts his virgin daughter. The prayerless Levite seizes his concubine and throws her out to the mob. They rape and abuse her the whole night and at dawn let her go. Too weak to cry out or to knock on the door, she collapses with her hand pathetically reaching out to the threshold.

After the Levite has enjoyed a good night's rest, with chilling routine he gets up and opens the door to be on his way, until he trips over his concubine. Annoyed by the delay, he commands her, “Get up; let's go,” but she does not answer. He picks her up, packs her on a donkey, and completes the journey home.

Upon his return he takes a knife, cuts her up limb by limb, and sends the pieces throughout Israel, provoking a refreshing moral indignation. Younger comments, “There is little doubt that the tremendous moral depravity exhibited in this final conclusion to Judges confirms the inherent moral dangers in idolatry and polytheism.”⁵⁹

The Levite now achieves what no warlord could achieve. The entire nation, except Benjamin, is summoned to Mizpah and rallies as one person. The episode

has two parts: the incitement to battle (20:1–17) and the battle itself (20:18–43).

The Israelites assemble, armed for blood, and the tribal leaders hold court with the heartless Levite as sole witness. His witness is full of halftruths and distortions. Instead of accusing the no-goods (*b^eliya'al*) of Gibeah, he gets his revenge on the inhospitable city by accusing the “citizens” (Heb. *ba'alim*) of Gibeah. He omits mentioning the slave or the old man, lest the assembly think of calling them as witnesses. Instead of testifying that the Gibeahites attempted to rape him, he accuses them of the worse crime of murder. Moreover, by omitting they attempted to rape him, he doesn’t raise any suspicions about the connection between his rape and his concubine’s. He certainly doesn’t mention that he threw her to the mob. He does not explain how he escaped or why they raped his concubine, and no one asks. He gives the impression she died from the rape, but she may have died on the way home from his neglect or been murdered by him when he dismembered her. The Law demands that the elders thoroughly investigate an alleged crime (Deut. 13:14), which entails giving the Gibeahites a chance to present their case. Moreover, in a murder case the Law demands two or three witnesses to convict the accused. The smooth-talking Levite, however, ignores the Law and calls upon the leaders to give a guilty verdict immediately. And they do, becoming more concerned about how to execute the capital sentence than about investigating the crime itself.

Before engaging battle, they put the whole tribe of Benjamin on the defensive. With no opportunity to defend themselves, the tribe of Benjamin receives a demand to hand over the wicked men of Gibeah (*b^enê b^eliya'al*), on the assumption that all its citizens are wicked. The Benjamites reject the high-handed tactics of the other tribes and mobilize themselves for civil war.

The cost in lives of the civil war at Gibeah is horrific. After two days of enduring heavy casualties at the hands of the Benjamites, the Israelites in the heat of battle in effect execute *herem* on all of Benjamin’s towns and on all they find, including all the women. *I AM* is meting out his justice upon the whole nation for its injustices, and especially upon the tribe of Benjamin for first tolerating and then defending a “Sodom” among their towns.

The Israelites not only are foolish in opting for war before diplomacy and in not restraining their killing in the heat of battle, but they have also rashly taken an oath not to intermarry with the Benjamites. Now it dawns on them that the six hundred Benjamites who have escaped will die childless and their brother Benjamin be exterminated.

However, they have also taken a second oath to put to death any Israelite who failed to join them, and in this oath they find a resolution to their dilemma. They

will execute *herem* on Jabesh Gilead, except for virgins, and give them to the six hundred men (cf. Num. 31:17–18). (Virgins will guarantee the offspring are from Benjamin.) But the massacre yields only four hundred virgins, a shortfall of two hundred wives. In other words, they murder a whole city after finding Gibeah guilty of murdering a single woman.

With Pharisaic casuistry the leaders rationalize a way around their second foolish oath to provide wives for the other two hundred Benjamites. When the girls come out to join in the dancing at the cultic center of Shiloh—probably during a religious festival and perhaps after a Canaanite custom — each remaining Benjamite bachelor will abduct one of them. In that way the fathers of the virgins will not have given their daughters in marriage. While technically the elders have circumvented the oath, in fact they have violated its intention. If their hypocrisy has legitimacy, why did they not do this in the first place instead of exterminating Jabesh Gilead?

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warned, “Be careful when you fight a monster, lest you become a monster.” The final epilogue shows that the nation overreacts with punitive measures so wanting in moderation that anarchy is total. Benjamin is almost exterminated. Jabesh Gilead, whose refusal to join the assembly is the same as their own guilt in not helping one another in battle, is an especial victim — the population is almost entirely wiped out, its marriageable virgins carried off. The premeditated large-scale abduction of virgins is brought off at the cultic center Shiloh, and that during a religious festival! What Israel needs is a righteous king.

VI. CONCLUSION

As noted above, the narrator summarizes the theology of the book's main body by the framework consisting of four essential elements: (1) Israel's sin, (2) *I AM*'s judgment, (3) Israel's cry, and (4) God's sending of a "deliverer." This cycle, however, is premised on *I AM*'s testing Israel by leaving the Canaanites to teach the inexperienced generations that follow Joshua how to wage holy war.

A. Test of Faith

The pedagogic test (*nsh*, cf. Gen. 22:1), not "tempt," is in fact a lesson on living by faith in *I AM*. The issue each generation must face is whether it will walk by sight or by faith in the reality of a covenant-keeping God. On the political horizon of sight, the covenant people see pagans not only unwilling to give up an inch of ground, but determined, if they can, to either plunder or assimilate God's people. Israel's enemies are led by tyrants who have names like "The Double-Wicked," are armed with hundreds of iron chariots, constantly use new technologies, and are so numerous they are like locusts. The pagan has no faith in *I AM*, scoffs at salvation history, and lives by an ethic that believes in oneself or some other god, such as wealth or military might. Against such odds even men like Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah, heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, tremble, but by faith they overcome their fears and prevail. They prevail, however, not by magic, but by using whatever they find in their hands with which to fight.

B. Sin

Israel's lack of faith leads to debauching Canaanization. The process begins with the small leaven of not driving the Serpent/Canaan from the Garden/the Land. Covenant people should be spiritually strong and practice *bērem* on the Canaanites and

not be spiritually weak and tolerate the Canaanite leaven. (As Edmund Burke

said, “The only thing needed for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”) The book of Judges teaches that the Canaanite leaven gradually leavens the whole lump. If Baal’s altar is in Gideon’s own backyard, we can assume others exist throughout the Land. Baal is so strong among the Israelites that even the mighty Gideon fears to take him on. Even Israel’s warlords and the tribe of Levi lead them into idolatry and fight out of vengeance and self-ambition, not for God’s glory. Apart from Deborah, none sing *I AM*’s praises. They are slow to believe, choosing to do what is right in their own eyes (i.e., evil) rather than learn God’s laws and obey them. Tragically, by not practicing *hërem* on the Canaanites right at the beginning, Israel ends up practicing *hërem* on brothers.

Canaanite religion, however, cannot be separated from Canaanite self-serving behavior. Canaanites manipulate their fertility deities with the purpose of narcissistically acquiring more life. Its religion knows nothing of love of the true and holy God and trusting him to be good and to do what is right, or of true, sacrificial love of one’s neighbor.

Neglect of *hërem* is only the beginning of neglecting God’s law. Eventually the nation falls into total anarchy because it loses its inspired catechism. This is partially so because the nation’s leadership fails. Levites, who should have taught the nation the Catechism, become materialistic and opportunist, neglecting the word of God and not teaching the people. Gifted warlords, who should have furthered the kingdom of God, degenerate into leaders motivated by self-protection and/or a desire to secure their own political power bases and/or to revenge themselves. Political leaders without God’s Torah become moral fools, doing what is right in their own eyes. Parents also fail in knowing the Law and are either unable or unwilling to communicate their faith to their children. Generations grow up not knowing *I AM* or his Word.

C. Punishment

Because the Israelites do not keep their covenant obligations joyfully and gladly, *I AM* brings the covenant curses on them. Because they fail to act justly, he punishes them justly. They are cursed in their cities and cursed in their fields and defeated in battle. They live in miserable caves, losing the fruit of their land and their cities to their oppressors. They grope as blind men in black dungeons.

The hand of *I AM* is unmistakable. His prophets, who prove their authenticity by accurately predicting the future, proclaim the covenant curses. The idolater Gideon loses his seventy sons in a bloodbath; the treacherous city of Shechem

goes up in smoke; the opportunist Timnite, who betrays Samson to save herself from being burned to death, is burned to death; the men of Sodom-like Gibeah are killed; the unjust leaders suffer horrific military losses.

D. Cry

Suffering at the hands of cruel oppressors who shatter and crush them, Israel cries to God who, for his own glory and Israel's good, had conscripted the nation to his service. But their cries are bogus, no different from their cries to other gods (Judg. 10:14). In one breath they say, "We have sinned" (v. 15), and in the next breath they appoint a leader without looking to God (v. 18).

E. Deliverer

Though Israel has no just right to be saved, *I AM* takes pity on his elect people. He raises up prophets and gifted warriors and empowers them with his spirit to lead them in battle and to save them. He gifts them in speech and diplomacy, if only they would use it. By faith they drive the Canaanite gods from the field and reclaim the land with altars to *I AM*. One man by himself kills thousands of the uncircumcised Philistines and pulls down the temple of Dagan. "Through faith [they] conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised" (Heb. 11:33). And this is all the covenant of grace remembers about them! These heroic and antiheroic warlords point to the need of a covenant-keeping king. The book concludes pointing toward Jesus Christ to end human anarchy.

VII. *I AM*'S SPIRIT IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

God's spirit is his empowering presence to establish his kingdom on earth. The Scriptures commonly speak of *I AM*'s spirit (*rûaḥ*) coming upon Israel's leaders (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13; 19:20, 23) and then their doing superhuman feats as though they are driven by the wind with its dynamic power (*rûaḥ*). Its power enabled Samson to tear a lion apart with his bare hands.

A. Old Testament

For the definition of *rûaḥ* and the connection of “wind” and “spirit,” see [chapter 8](#). God's *rûaḥ* is *qualitatively* an aspect of his person, like the spirit of every human being, and *quantitatively* superhuman. The *rûaḥ* of *I AM* refers to his vital power, a supernatural power and capacity. In other words, as God did not reveal to his covenant people before the coming of Jesus Christ that the Messiah is an incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, so also he did not reveal to them until the coming of Christ that the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. For this reason I use lowercase for God's spirit in the Old Testament, and uppercase for God's Spirit in the New Testament.

With regard to function, Israel's historians narrate that God poured out his spirit to establish his political kingdom, not his spiritual kingdom by making its citizens holy. Many warlords are mighty in battle and moral failures within. Israel's prophets anticipate his spirit's inward spiritual function in the future, and the New Testament narrates the fulfillment of that vision. Moses yearns for the day when all the house of Israel will possess the empowering presence of *I AM*'s spirit to prophesy, and Joel promises the fulfillment of Moses' prayer after their exile. God's gift of his spirit in the Old Testament depends solely on his goodwill. That spirit invades reluctant leaders. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit comes upon all who ask, and the measure of his gifts depends on God's election and human responsibility. The exilic prophets envision a new covenant whereby all the house of Israel will have God's Spirit to obey his *tôrâ*.

1. Primary History

In the Primary History the spirit — or wind from God — in connection with God's word, transforms the primeval chaos into cosmos (Gen. 1:2) and enables human life (Gen. 6:3, 17; 7:15, 22; Num. 16:22). God's spirit creates exceptionally gifted people: Joseph to interpret dreams (Gen. 41:38); Bezalel and others to provision the cultus (Exod. 28:3; 31:3; 35:21, 31); the elders to administer (Num. 11:25); the pagan prophet, Balaam, to prophesy (Num. 24:2); Joshua to lead (Deut. 34:9); Saul and David to be kings (1 Sam. 10:6; 16:13); and David to compose psalms (2 Sam. 23:2).

Moses prays that all the people will have God's spirit to prophesy (Num. 11:29), and God's spirit is given in varying measures: a much greater measure to Moses than the elders (11:17, 25) and a double portion to Elisha to make him leader among the prophets (2 Kings 2:9). The latter occurred through Elisha's dogged perseverance (2 Kings 2:9–10). On the other hand, God may take away his spirit (Judg. 16:20; 1 Sam. 16:23–24; cf. Ps. 51:11 [13]).

God's spirit is mediated in varying ways: sudden impulse upon reluctant individuals (see above) and by the laying on of hands, as in the case of Moses and Joshua (Deut. 34:9). The presence of God's spirit may be initially manifested in ecstasy, changing one into another person (Num. 11:25; 1 Sam. 10:6). This occurred to Saul both in his election (1 Sam. 10:6) and in his rejection (1 Sam. 19:23–24).

2. Psalms and Wisdom

There are few references to God's spirit in the Psalter and almost none in the wisdom books. Nevertheless, they represent that God's spirit creates life; the spirit's departure is death (Job 27:3; 33:4; Ps. 104:30; Eccl. 12:7). His spirit is ubiquitous (Ps. 139:7). A human being may mistake a mystic experience with God's spirit (Job 4:15) and God may take his spirit or genius away from the elect (Ps. 51:11 [13]). God's spirit empowers David to prophesy (Ps. 110:1; cf. Matt. 22:43), and people may rebel against and provoke God's spirit (Ps. 106:33).

3. Prophets

The prophets also recognize that God's spirit creates life (Isa. 32:15; 44:3). His presence with Israel is identified with his spirit. The power of his spirit saves

them from Egypt and empowers Moses (Isa. 63:9–14). He will empower Messiah to rule, to teach, and to preach perceptively (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 48:16; 61:1). He enables one to think right (Isa. 11:2; 30:1) and will be given to all Israel that they might have God's words in their mouths (Isa. 59:21). God's spirit empowers Ezekiel to prophesy (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; 37:1; 43:5) and fills Micah with a power for justice (Mic. 3:8). God's spirit in conjunction with Ezekiel's prophesying revives Israel's hope to energize the people to return to the land (Ezekiel 37:1–14). God's spirit energizes the returnees from exile, especially Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jehozadak, to rebuild the nation (Hag. 2:4; Zech. 4:6).

The prophets predicted an eschatological outpouring of the spirit. God promises to pour out his spirit on the descendants of Jacob in quickening and life-giving power (Isa. 44:3–5). This outpouring will effect the transformation of the messianic age when righteousness, peace, and prosperity will prevail (Isa. 32:15). This will also effect what Jeremiah calls the new covenant, when *I AM* will put his spirit into the whole House of Israel to empower them to obey his laws and teachings (cf. Ezek. 36:26–27; 39:29; Joel 2:28f [3:1f]).

On the other hand, God's spirit can be vexed (Isa. 63:10).^{[60](#)}

B. New Testament

The Holy Spirit plays a decisive role in the reconstituting of the people of God. Paul mentions the Spirit 140 times in his letters. He is represented as God's personal presence with and in his people, continuing to empower the people of God with superhuman skills and, after Pentecost, indwelling all believers to live supernatural, godly lives. Although presented primarily as an agency of God, as in the Old Testament, the Spirit's activities and association with the Father and Son show that he is a person (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Cor. 13:14).

1. Synoptics

The nature and functions of the Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels are similar to those in the Old Testament, but it is anticipated that the Spirit, whom Christ identifies with the Father and the Son, will be given in the future to reconstitute the people of God.

Elizabeth and Simeon prophesy by the Spirit (Luke 1:41; 2:25) and Christ is conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the Spirit (1:35). The Spirit

empowers John the Baptist from birth (1:15, 80), empowers Messiah for his messianic mission at his baptism (Matt. 1:18; 3:16; 4:1; 12:18; Luke 4:1, 18), and will empower the disciples (Matt. 10:20; Luke 12:12). The Messiah will baptize Israel with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11), and the postresurrected Christ instructs his disciples to baptize the nations in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). The Spirit will be given to all who ask God (Luke 11:13), and believers individually and collectively will bear holy fruit in living (Gal. 5:22–23) and charismatic proclamation in speaking (1 Cor. 12:1–11). Before the empowering of the Spirit, people came to Israel to be blessed, but now the reconstituted Israel goes to the nations to bless them. In other words, the ministry of missionaries begins with the giving of the Spirit to all the church (Acts 1:8).

2. Gospel of John

The Gospel of John attributes to the Spirit superhuman power and anticipates that God will reconstitute his people by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Christ is empowered for his ministry at his baptism (1:32), and by breathing on the disciples, he empowers them to carry out his commission in anticipation of Pentecost (20:22). Christ will give God's Spirit to believers after his glorification so that they will do even greater works than he (7:39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 15). Finally, a person must be reborn by the Holy Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (3:1–8).

3. The Book of Acts

As Christ had promised, the Holy Spirit is given to the believers at Pentecost, empowering the church to bear witness to Jesus as the Christ (Acts 2). The unique gift of speaking in languages the Jews spoke in the Diaspora bears witness to the progressive giving of the Spirit to Judeans, Samaritans, and Gentiles. This outpouring of the Spirit on all fulfills Joel's prophecy (vv. 1–21). The Spirit will be given to all Israelites who repent vis-à-vis Jesus of Nazareth (vv. 33–38), empowering them to prophesy and bear witness to the Christ in the languages of the Diaspora (vv. 1–13). The Spirit fills Samaritans through the prayer and laying on of hands of Peter and John (8:15–17). Large gatherings of Gentiles are filled with the Spirit while Peter is preaching (10:44), and Peter interprets this as a fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that the ascended Christ would baptize with the Spirit (11:16). Disciples baptized in John's name receive the

Holy Spirit only upon being baptized in the name of Jesus and Paul's laying hands on them (19:6).

4. Paul's Letters

With regard to his nature, the Spirit is a person of the Godhead along with the Father and Son (2 Cor. 13:14). With regard to his function, he empowers them with superhuman powers to bear witness to Christ and to live Christlike lives, a power not available before Pentecost. The coming of the Spirit fulfills the Old Testament expectation (Ezek. 36:26; 37:27). He is the promised Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13) who has come to dwell within all believers (Rom. 8:9–11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 4:6; 1 Thess. 4:8). “The Spirit is the interior expression of the unseen God’s personality and the visible manifestation of God’s activity in the world.”⁶¹ The Spirit is associated with the new covenant administration (Ezek. 36:26–27; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:1–6). He reconstitutes believers as a holy people by convincing (1 Cor. 2:10; Eph. 3:5; 1 Thess. 1:5), washing (Titus 3:5), indwelling them to produce the fruit of the Spirit — especially to love (Gal. 5:16–25) — sanctifying (2 Thess. 2:13), putting sinful practices to death (Rom. 8:13), strengthening to serve (Eph. 3:16; Phil. 3:3), and sealing them in their hope for heaven (Eph. 1:13). The Spirit empowers believers in manifold ways for ministry (1 Cor. 12–14). God’s people are now led by the Spirit, not by the law (Rom. 7:4–6; 8:2–3).

By the Spirit saints simultaneously know the power of Christ’s resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering (Phil. 3:10). “The Spirit establishes the believers as an eschatological people, who live the life of the future in the present as they await the consummation.”⁶² In addition, the Spirit searches all things (1 Cor. 2:10), knows the mind of God (2:11), teaches (2:13), gives life (2 Cor. 3:6), cries out from within our hearts (Gal. 4:6), leads us (5:18), bears witness with our own spirits (Rom. 8:16), has desires opposed to those of the flesh (Gal. 5:17), helps us (Rom. 8:26), intercedes for us (8:26–27), works together with us for our good (8:28), strengthens us (Eph. 3:16), and is grieved by our sins (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does Israel's salvation history during the Dark Ages of the Judges instruct you to live as a Christian in your culture?

1. For the chronology of this period, see both Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 209–39, and Bryant G. Wood, “The Rise and Fall of the 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory,” *JETS* 48:3 (Sept. 2005): 475–90. For an early-date chronology, see now Andrew E. Steinmann, “The Mysterious Numbers of the Book of Judges,” *JETS* 48/3 (Sept. 2005): 491–500.

2. Philip Guillaume, depending on suppositions, not hard facts, and on weighing-up scholarly opinions, not on exegesis, outlined the development of the book of Judges in seven stages. In his review Christoph Levin draws the wry conclusion: “If an outline of this kind is supposed to be alternative to [Martin] Noth’s hypothesis, that hypothesis can look forward to a long life (Christoph Levin, review of Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004], in *Review of Biblical Literature*, November 27, 2004).

3. Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 148.

4. See H. Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution*, trans. L. Plitmann (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989).

5. Riding a donkey in the Levant at this time symbolized being some sort of a ruler.

6. Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 492.

7. They are treated as of one blood from the patriarchs (Judg. 2:1, 12, 17): cf. “people” (‘am, 14:3); “sons of Israel” (*b’nê yis’rā’ēl*, 19:12; NIV, “Israelites”); “brothers” (*’āḥ*, 1:3, 17; 20:23, 28). The loss of a tribe is treated as the loss of family member (20:6; cf. 14:3; 18:14).

8. “They forsook *I AM*, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them” (Judg. 2:12; cf. 21:3). Cf. the expressions “*YHWH* God of Israel” (*YHWH*

‘lohe yiśrā’el, 6:8; 11:21, 23) and “in the assembly of the people of God” (*bqhl ‘m h’llym*, 20:2; cf. 11:23).

9. Expressions include: (1) “all Israel”/“all the sons of Israel” (Judg. 2:4; 8:27; 20:1); (2) “men of Israel” for Gideon’s forces (7:8, 23; 8:22) and forces against Benjamin (20:14); (3) “hand of Israel” (3:30; 11:21); (4) “camp of Israel” (7:15); (5) “misery of Israel” (10:16); (6) “young women of Israel” (11:40); (7) “areas of Israel” (19:29); (8) “inheritance of Israel” (20:6); (9) “no king in Israel” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). These terms occur in all strata of the book including archival judge lists (10:1–5; 12:8–15) and the ancient Song of Deborah (5:1, 3, 5, 7, 9). Pharaoh Merneptah mentions them as “Israel” (1205 BC), the earliest extrabiblical reference to Israel.

10. For an excellent discussion on how to preserve unity in the church, see Thielman’s discussions of 1 Corinthians and Philippians in *Theology of the Old Testament*, 276–90 and 299–322.

11. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 532.

12. I AM’s anger burns against Israel (Judg. 2:14, 20; 3:8; 10:7); ritual mourning becomes a custom in Israel (11:38); disgraceful acts are committed in Israel (20:6); wickedness is removed from Israel (20:13); events happen in Israel (21:3); a man is a priest to a family and tribe in Israel (18:19).

13. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 207. These dates are tentative because they are based on the uncertain date of the Exodus (see n. 1).

14. N = north, etc.

15. D. W. Gooding, “The Composition of the Book of Judges,” *Eretz-Israel*, Archeological, Historical and Geographical Studies, vol. 16, ed. H. M. Orlinsky (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1982), 70–79.

16. D. W. Gooding, Alexander Globe, J. P. Tanner, and Barry Webb all see Gideon as the center of the chiasmus. Dale Sumner DeWitt questionably sees Jephthah as the book’s center (“The Jephthah Traditions: A Rhetorical and Literary Study in the Deuteronomistic History” [Ph.D. diss., Andrews Univ., Berrien Springs, Mich., 1987]). From Gideon onward, the behavior of Israel’s tribal leaders (Abimelech, Japheth, Samson) progressively becomes more questionable.

17. The Abimelech narrative has both continuities and discontinuities with the Gideon narrative. This son of Gideon, who desires the trappings of kingship with its responsibilities, also wants the power of kingship. But whereas Gideon was a deliverer, Abimelech was an oppressor.

18. Perhaps they were called “chariots of iron” because three or four thin plates hung over the front of the chariots to protect the charioteers.

[19.](#) Levant cities at this time were built on hills protected by a wall on the hill. Their water supply was usually in the valley below. To secure the water for their besieged city in time of war and to deprive the enemy of it, they sometimes built tunnels to it and concealed their water supply.

[20.](#) Barry Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 99.

[21.](#) F. E. Greenspahn, “The Theology of the Framework of Judges,” *VT* 36 (1986): 385.

[22.](#) By “major warlords” we mean that within the frame of each there is extensive narrative; by “minor warlords” we mean that within the frame there is scant narrative.

[23.](#) Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

[24.](#) *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., defines murder as “the crime of unlawfully killing a person esp. with malice aforethought.”

[25.](#) For a helpful comparison and contrast of the prose description of the battle and the poetic representation of it, see Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 176–84.

[26.](#) Bryan Gregory, “Who Shall Deliver Us?” (Old Testament 514, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Fla., 2003), 6.

[27.](#) Note the motif of *yad* (“hand”).

[28.](#) “Not a man was left” (4:19) is probably the typical hyperbole of battle reports in the ancient Near East.

[29.](#) Her roles as prophetess and judge (Judg. 4:4) foreshadow Samuel (1 Sam. 3:19–21; 7:15–17).

[30.](#) William Fullilove, “The Poetics of Biblical Narrative in Judges 4” (Old Testament 514, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Fla., 2005).

[31.](#) Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2 [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996], 222–23) say that her “act itself was not morally justified,” and R. Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and D. Brown (*A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testament* [Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems]), accuse her of “murder.” The narrator shows his evaluative point of view and praises, not condemns, her actions by the words of the prophetess within the story in prophecy (4:9) and in song (5:24) and by his characterizations and plot structures. What more could he have said to rebut their arbitrary interpretation?

[32.](#) In this section I lean heavily on J. Paul Tanner, “Textual Patterning in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Case Study in Judges 6–8” (Ph.D. diss.; Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1990).

[33.](#) Barry Beitzel (*Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* [Chicago: Moody, 1985], maps 37, 38) notes that domestication of the camel was a new means of commerce in

this era and that the Midianites played a vital role in spice and incense trade from the interior of Arabia. He continues: “But the camel also offered a new means of war (Judg. 6:5; 7:12; 8:21, 26).” He suggests Gideon’s night attack may have been designed to neutralize this superiority: “the blowing horns would have caused the animals to panic and stampede, and the torches could have been used to set the Midianites’ tents ablaze.”

[34.](#) The angel of *I AM* (*mal'ak* YHWH, lit. “a messenger of YHWH”) calls Gideon to be a warlord. This heavenly messenger who is sent by God as his personal agent to deal with men is treated as God and yet as distinct from God (cf. 2 Sam. 24:16; Zech. 1:12–13). When he appears to Manoah and his wife, they think they have seen God (Judg. 13:21–22; cf. 6:22–23; cf. Exod. 33:20). His appearance is awesome to her but not to him (Judg. 13:6; 11–21); his name is beyond knowing (13:18); he is associated with the worship of *I AM* (13:15). Elsewhere he speaks as God in the first person (Gen. 16:10; 21:18; 31:13; Exod. 3:2–6; Judg. 6:11–18). Many Christians think he is a kind of temporary preincarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Yet it must be borne in mind that in the ancient Near East an earthly royal messenger (*mal'ak*) was fully equated with his sender (Judg. 11:13; 2 Sam. 3:12–13; 1 Kings 20:2–4). He is the king’s plenipotentiary and is to be treated with all the respect and deference expected to be accorded to the king himself. God’s “messenger” (cf. Gen. 21:17; 22:11; 31:11; Exod. 3:2; 14:19; 23:20; 32:34) and his angelic captain (cf. Num. 22:23, 31; 1 Chron. 21:16; Dan. 10:5) were also so treated. The angel of *I AM* calls people to particular assignments (Gen. 6:11–24), including birth announcements of those with a special heavenly mission: Samson (Judg. 13:3–23), John the Baptist (Luke 1:11–20), and Jesus (Matt. 1:20, 24; Luke 2:9). Also, bear in mind that the New Testament writers equate Jesus Christ with YHWH; they never dishonor him by demoting him to the status of a mere angel. In sum, the angel of *I AM* is best regarded as a special heavenly messenger that is so closely related to God’s presence that he is equated with God’s self-manifestation.

[35.](#) Cited by Tanner, “Textual Patterning,” 262.

[36.](#) Webb, *Judges*, 158.

[37.](#) Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster), 178.

[38.](#) In this section I depend heavily on DeWitt, “The Jephthah Traditions.”

[39.](#) Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 195.

[40.](#) Ibid.

[41.](#) Eugen Taübler (*Biblische Studien: Die Epoche der Richter* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1958], 295) defines *roš*: “This designation is taken from the pagan pattern of the surrounding nations in which the tribal chief is the highest kinship head

and on whom the kingdom is established — a precarious recognition of tribal headship.... Jephthah ... is not a king but in a way anticipating kingship, a sheik of highest status.”

[42.](#) DeWitt, “Jephthah Traditions,” 194.

[43.](#) The masculine form in Hebrew may be common, designating either male or female animals (see *IBHS*, 108, §6.5.3a).

[44.](#) Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 34; cf. 29.

[45.](#) Theodore H. Gaster (*Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*, 2 vols. [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], 1:430–32) notes parallels to this story in the popular lore of several peoples. “The best known is probably the Greek legend of Idomeneus, king of Crete. Caught in a storm on his return from the Trojan War, he vowed to Poseidon, god of the sea, that he would sacrifice to him whomever he would first meet when he landed safely on his native shores. This turned out to be his own son. A similar tale was told by the Greeks about Maeander, the son of Ceraphos and Anaxibia. At war with the people of Pessinius in Phrygia, he vowed to the Great Mother that if she granted him victory, he would sacrifice to her the first person who came out to greet him when he returned home. The first to do so was his own son, Archealos, together with his mother and sister.” A compelling parallel is given in 2 Kings 3:27.

[46.](#) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, JSOTSup 98 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 109.

[47.](#) Note the inclusio around his life and death in Judg. 13:25 and 16:31, and the refrain separating his life from his death in 15:20; 16:31.

[48.](#) From *nāzar*, “to separate, consecrate, abstain,” not related to “Nazarene” (from *nešer*, “branch”). The Nazirite abstained from the fruit of the vine (i.e., set apart from earth’s joys), corpses (i.e., set apart from death to the living God), and haircuts (i.e., set apart to the Creator).

[49.](#) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 101.

[50.](#) I am heavily indebted for the analysis of the Samson narrative’s structure to J. Cheryl Exum, “Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga,” *JSOT* 19 (1981). Here I am quoting p. 72.

[51.](#) James A. Wharton, “Secret of Yahweh: Story and Affirmation in Judges 13–16,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 61.

[52.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 334.

[53.](#) Wharton, “Secret of Yahweh,” 63.

[54.](#) E. L. Greenstein, “The Riddle of Samson,” *Prooftexts* 1, no. 3 (1981):

237–60.

[55.](#) Webb, *Judges*, 116.

[56.](#) Cited by Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (New York, Harper, 1998), 223.

[57.](#) Younger, *Judges*, 342.

[58.](#) NIV paraphrases *znh nsʿl* (“to commit fornication against”) by “unfaithful to him.” LXX (cf. Targum), however, renders it *ōrgisthē autō*, m “she was angry/quarrel with him,” reading either *zn^h*. or interpreting *znh* thus. An Akkadian cognate *zenū* m means “to be angry, hate,” favoring the latter explanation. It is rightly the preferred reading in *HALOT*, 1:275, s.v. “II *znh*” because it best fits the Levite’s behavior.

[59.](#) Younger, *Judges*, 348.

[60.](#) See the discussion of an evil spirit sent by God in IV.E of this chapter.

[61.](#) Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 30.

[62.](#) *Ibid.*, 49.

*For an excellent treatment of the theologies of these so-called catholic epistles, see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 512–68.

Chapter 22

THE GIFT OF TRUE STRENGTH: 1 SAMUEL

We understand nothing of the works of God, if we do not take as a principle that he has willed to blind some and enlighten others.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 5.566

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Samuel narrates three tectonic shifts in God's structuring of his kingdom.¹ (1) Israel's liturgical worship shifts from Shiloh to Jerusalem. (2) Israel's leadership changes from episodic warlords to the eternal kingship of David. (3) Israel is transformed from a tribal league to a unified kingdom capable of exercising imperial power over neighboring states. These tectonic shifts determine the contours of Israel's history for the next four centuries and lay the foundation for the next great tectonic transformation of God's kingdom from a people with a geopolitical identity to their true heavenly identity. In that shift the Jerusalem liturgy, David's kingship, and imperialism are types of the heavenly reality.² Once again the narrator builds his theology on a firm historical story line³ and inscribes his message on the heart of his audience through his artistic plot. J. P. Fokkelman analyzes the book's integrated structure as follows:

- I. Section 1: Crossing of Fates Regarding Samuel (1 Sam. 1–12)
 - A. Crossing of Fates of Eli and Samuel (1 Sam. 1–7)
 - B. Crossing of Fates of Samuel and Saul (1 Sam. 8–12)
- II. Section 2: Crossing of Fates Regarding Saul (1 Sam. 13–31)
 - A. Saul Rejected as King (1 Sam. 13–15)
 - B. Crossing of Fates of Saul and David (1 Sam. 16–31)
- III. David (2 Sam. 1–20)
 - A. Rise of David (2 Sam. 1–8)
 - B. Decline of David (2 Sam. 9–20)
- IV. Appendix (2 Sam. 21–24)

Both the Hebrew Bible and the English versions entitle the book(s) “Samuel,” but the LXX and the Vulgate link both parts together with the two parts of Kings, respectively naming them 1–4 “Reigns” (or “Kingdoms”) and 1–4 “Kings.” In spite of Samuel's greatness — he is Israel's first prophet to designate *I AM*'s king—the title “Samuel” is not the most appropriate. Samuel is not the author—his death is recorded in 1 Samuel 25:1— and he figures prominently only in [chapters 1–12](#). David under God is the real hero of this book.

II. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT WITH THEOLOGICAL REELECTION

A. Section 1: Crossing of Fates Regarding Samuel (1 Sam. 1–12)

The crossing of the fates of Eli and Samuel (1 Sam. 1–7) and of Samuel and Saul (1 Sam. 8–12) trace the trajectory of government in God’s kingdom. Rule shifts from the priest and warlord Eli (see 4:18) to the prayerful warlord Samuel (7:16), who becomes a prophet and anoints King Saul.⁴ Whatever the form of government, however, God never relinquishes control of his kingdom. The first section consists of four acts:

1. Crossing of Fates of Eli and Samuel (1 Sam. 1–3)
2. Crossings of the Ark (1 Sam. 4–6)
3. Rule of Samuel: Prayerful Warlord (1 Sam. 7)
4. Crossing of Fates of Samuel and Saul (1 Sam. 8–12)

Act 1 anticipates an “anointed one” (i.e., a king, 1 Sam. 2:10, 35) and act 4 narrates its fulfillment (9:16; 10:1). Act 2 (1 Sam. 4–6) serves as a transition to the rule of Samuel (act 3): the ark and its glory depart Israel in connection with Eli’s fall and return under the rule of Samuel. Acts 3 and 4 conclude with God’s thunderclaps, first against the Philistines (1 Sam. 7) and then against Israel (1 Sam. 12). The external political power influencing acts 2 and 3 is the Philistines: 2 ends with their victory, 3 with their defeat. The foreign power influencing act 4 is Nahash, king of the Ammonites.

1. Crossing of Fates of Eli and Samuel (1:1–4:22)

The end of Judges and the beginning of Samuel are connected by *I AM*’s intervention for the barren wives, Manoah’s wife (1085 BC, Judg. 13) and

Hannah (1045 BC, 1 Sam. 1), by their liturgical setting and by the threat of the Philistines. Manoah's wife functions as a foil to Hannah. Both mothers are barren and depend on divine interventions to give birth to sons, both sons are conscripted from conception to be Nazirites, and both sons deliver Israel from the Philistines. These striking external similarities, however, profile the even more striking differences between these mothers and their sons. Manoah's wife is the beneficiary of an initiative-taking God who, in spite of her cynicism, sends his angel to announce the birth of Samson, but Hannah takes the initiative herself and makes God the beneficiary of her vow. Manoah's wife has no song of praise; Hannah summons her heart to rejoice in *I AM*. Samson, who resents his Nazirite conscription and is motivated solely by vengeance, only begins the delivery of Israel. Samuel performs no Herculean pranks but from childhood embraces his conscription and by prayer leads the army of Israel in triumph. The tepid spiritual condition of Manoah's family essentially fails in its mission to save Israel, while the wholly devoted Hannah and her son — in spite of the prayerless Elkanah—transform the nation from victims to victors.

The utter wickedness of Eli's sons, with their abuse of worship and worshipers — disregard for *I AM* and sexual immorality (1 Sam. 2:12–17, 22) — combines the sin of the idolatrous Levite and the callous Levite in the epilogue of Judges. The inclusio around the epilogue of that book, representing Israel's cultic and moral chaos because “in those days there was no king in Israel,” sets the stage for the establishment of kingship in Israel as recounted in the book of Samuel.

a. Birth of Samuel (1:1–2:10)

Hannah is the heroine of this scene. She asks for, receives, and relinquishes her child (1 Sam. 1, prose) and celebrates *I AM*'s sovereign power in the cause of justice, the essential theme of 1 Samuel (2:1–10, poetry). Against the iterative background of family worship at Shiloh, Penninah, the fertile second wife of Elkanah, by her gratuitous taunts, provokes the childless first wife, Hannah, to pray to “*I AM* of Hosts.” Hannah cries out to God as warrior—the first time God's war title is used (see p. 373) — to act to save her from humiliating barrenness. Hannah's prayer transforms a nation. God commonly uses the gratuitous provocation of the godless to provoke saints to transforming prayer (e.g., Isa. 37:1–4).

To triumph in prayer, however, Hannah has to overcome the obstacles of her husband and the priest. Elkanah, though he loves Hannah, is insensitive to her

desire to bear a child (Prov. 30:15–16). Instead of praying for her, he feels rebuffed that she does not value him more than ten sons! Hannah does not react to his hurtful words with more hurt or resentment. Rather, she turns to prayer.⁵ She reorganizes her life by vowing to give Samuel (meaning “the one asked of God”) back to *I AM* all the days of his life as a Nazirite (see [chap. 21](#), n. 48).

She must also overcome the obstacle of a priest whose dulled vision sees the expression of intensely expressed piety as drunkenness (cf. Acts 2:13). Eli sits on a “chair” (Heb. *kissē*, “throne”), a symbol of his authority, at *I AM*’s “temple” (Heb. *hêkal*, “palace”), another royal term, but his rule represents false strength. He will fall off his throne and break his neck. (Perhaps his fall foreshadows the fall of the House of Saul and of the House of David.) Hannah boldly responds to the authoritative priest that she has not been drinking wine or beer—unlike the callous Levite who drank his fill (Judg. 19:5–10). Perhaps in imitation of Samson’s mother, she turns her privation of not drinking into positive preparation for giving birth to a Nazirite.⁶ She explains her intense piety: “I was pouring out my heart to the *I AM*” (1 Sam. 1:15). In other words, she makes her bitterness “fluid” and pours it out to *I AM*.⁷ Hannah’s changed countenance upon hearing the priestly benediction gives evidence of her believing response. The plot of Samuel is set in motion by Hannah’s faith and strong speech — challenging earthly authorities and convincing heaven.⁸

In response to heaven’s gift of Samuel, Hannah relinquishes the weaned child to temple service. Her jubilant song of praise celebrates True Strength coming to earth through the weak and poor, not the high and mighty:

- A True strength (horn⁹ is the Lord) (vv. 1–2)
- B Fake strength (human/arrogant boast) (v. 3)
- C Strength and weakness fluctuate in people (vv. 4–5)
- X True strength (from God) (vv. 6–7)
- C’ The Lord’s power helps the weak (vv. 8–9a)
- B’ Fake strength (vv. 9b–10a)
- A’ True strength (horn is the king) (v. 10b)

The song’s chiastic structure implies that God’s heavenly strength finds expression on earth in his “anointed.” Paul House says, “Hannah’s assertion that Yahweh ‘will guard the feet’ of the godly but banishes the wicked to darkness (1 Sam. 2:9) prefigures what occurs with the Lord’s protection of David and rejection of Saul.”¹⁰ Her praise for an “anointed” one is the climax of the first scene and functions as a prelude to Samuel’s destiny to anoint a king who comes

to power through trusting in God's true strength and rejecting Saul's false strength; in so doing David gives expression on earth to God's heavenly strength. By commitment to God's true strength and rejection of false strength, God's kingdom comes to earth, the theme of the Bible.^{[11](#)}

b. A New Order in Embryo Replaces the Old Order (2:11–36)

The narrator labels Eli's sons "sons of *Belîyans'al*" (i.e., no-good "revolutionaries," "cutthroats," 1 Sam. 2:12) and validates his label by documenting their impious and gluttonous abuse of the sacrificial system (vv. 13–17). In the midst of this moral and spiritual decadence, however, an unaffected and mostly unnoticed new order of morality and liturgy is taking shape. The little Samuel is introduced wearing a linen ephod — not the priest's divining ephod — that designates him as devoted to the service of *I AM*.

Eli reprimands his wicked sons: "If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against *I AM*, who will intercede for him?" (1 Sam. 2:25). He does not belittle intercessory prayer but argues that God is both the one wronged and the judge, so that unlike arbitration between human beings, no higher authority is available to mediate the situation.^{[12](#)} Eli, however, doesn't back up his reprimand by action or example—he himself is overweight and eats the choicest parts. His political figure is a foil to the successful mothering of a godly woman. Eli's sons lose the favor of God and the people; Samuel grows in both. Behind the secondary causes of providence stands the primary cause, as the prophet historian explains: "His sons ... did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was *I AM*'s will to put them to death" (1 Sam. 2:25; i.e., the time of grace has passed). The narrator connects providence with Samuel's birth and with the death of Eli's house. Fokkelman says, "The birth was engineered in anticipation of the death."^{[13](#)}

The narrator backs up his theological interpretation with an oracle of doom by a man of God (i.e., a prophet) against the gluttonous house of Eli. God had obligated himself to a unique relationship with the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:27–28), but the enjoyment of that relationship was qualified: "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained" (v. 30; see [chap. 11](#) above). God allows Eli to reach old age so that he witnesses his sons' untimely deaths^{[14](#)} and the "distress in my dwelling" (i.e., when Shiloh hears the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant [v. 32]). By cutting off his offspring in the

prime of life, God compensates for the longevity of the corruption and guarantees that none will see the good times David will usher in.

In the place of Eli's house will stand "a faithful priest" (i.e., Zadok, descended from Eleazar; see 1 Chron. 6:8), and "he will minister before my anointed one" (i.e., David, 1 Sam. 2:35; see 2 Sam. 8:17; 15:24; 20:25; 1 Chron. 6:4–8, 50–52; 24:1–3). Matching the punishment to the crime, Eli's offspring, who fattened themselves on the choice parts of God's offering, will beg for food to eat (v. 36). But the scene ends with hope: both Hannah's song at the end of the first scene and this prophecy at the end of the second scene prophesy of the "anointed one."

c. Appointment of Samuel versus Downfall of Eli (1 Sam. 3)

Between 3: 1 and 4:1, Samuel develops from a small temple servant into a national leader. The scene consists of five chiastically structured episodes:

- A Lack of vision: Eli and the boy Samuel are in their sleeping quarters (3:1–3)
- B Lord calls Samuel three times in vain (3:4–9)
- C Lord reveals himself to Samuel: anti-Eli oracle (3:10–14)
- B' Eli calls Samuel, is provided with information (3:15–18)
- A' Samuel is recognized as a prophet; *I AM*'s word goes out from Shiloh (3:19–4:1a)

The three sorts of darkness in episode "A" — no vision, blind priest, and diminishing lamp — symbolize that *I AM* effects his new order in the brink of time. Episode "B" reveals surprising information that the carefully nurtured and tutored temple servant, whom God favored (cf. 1 Sam. 2:26), "did not yet know *I AM*" (3:7). The Hebrew word for theology is "knowledge of God," entailing both objective revelation and inward witness. Parental consecration and liturgical competence are no substitute for personally hearing the word of *I AM*. That voice may be heard today in a burning heart when the Word of God is read (see [chap. 1](#) under "Illumination").¹⁵ Samuel had only heard God's word in the voice of his mentor; as a child I heard it in the voice of my pastor. The two anti-Eli oracles — first by the prophet at the end of the last scene, and then by Samuel in pivotal episode "C" — notify Eli that the fall of his house is certain and imminent. The divine word that judges the house of Eli blesses the life of Samuel (cf. Mic. 5:7–8; 2 Cor. 2:14–16). The book of Samuel focuses on God's

trustworthiness. David and people like Abigail, who stand up against injustices, believe God's word is infallible.

Episode B' begins with Samuel routinely opening the temple doors, but in this case it symbolizes a new beginning. In episode A' Samuel's national stature as a recognized prophet will sustain the presence of God in Israel and the faith of the remnant, when God dismantles the symbols of his presence on the battlefield at Aphek (1 Sam. 4). Similar situations of God's sustained presence through a prophet when liturgy fails occur when a man brings Elisha his firstfruits (2 Kings 4:42) and when prophecy continues God's presence during the Babylonian captivity.

2. Crossings of the Ark (1 Sam. 4–6)

The ark narrative consists of three scenes:

1. Ark captured on battlefield (1 Sam. 4)
2. Ark in Philistine exile (1 Sam. 5)
3. Return of ark to Israel (1 Sam. 6)

a. Ark Captured on Battlefield (1 Sam. 4)

The first scene narrates the battle of Aphek (1 Sam. 4:1–11) and the report of that battle back in Shiloh (vv. 12–22). After initial defeat on the Aphek battlefield, Israel's elders take matters into their own hands. Without consulting God they transport the ark of the covenant to the battlefield as a talisman. They are without excuse; they themselves call attention to their covenant obligations. They hope "the LORD of Hosts who dwells between the cherubim" will bring a division of celestial beings to fight on their side, not realizing that the Philistines are part of his hosts to uphold what is right.

The loss of the ark conveys with terrible import the judgment of God on Israel. It is when Eli hears about its capture, not his sons' deaths, that he falls off his chair, his overweight body breaks his neck, and he dies. And the ark's capture is the concern of his daughter-in-law, who dies in childbirth upon hearing the tragic news. She does not care that she has given birth to a male offspring. She pays attention only to the fact that the ark has been captured.¹⁶ With regard to her naming her son Ichabod (i.e., "without glory"), Fokkelman adds, "The woman has an eye only for the profoundest significance of the situation in which the nation finds itself ..., formulates it perfectly and has the

presence of mind and the courage to immortalize that definition in the giving of a name.”¹⁷

b. Ark in Philistine Exile (1 Sam. 5)

If Israel will not protect *I AM*’s glory, the Lord of Hosts himself will protect it by prophecy and by action. When at the end of Israel’s monarchy the Babylonians level Jerusalem and *I AM*’s temple, taking captive Israel’s ark and king, symbols of *I AM*’s rule, *I AM* validates his sovereignty by amazing prophecies both before the Babylonian conquest and during the Babylonian exile. So also prior to his abandoning the symbols of his rule to Philistia, he prepares the faithful by Samuel’s prophecies (1 Sam. 3). After the Philistines capture the ark, *I AM* demonstrates his sovereignty in the heart of Philistia by protecting the symbol of his rule from defamation. Everybody, Philistia and Israel, must keep hands off the ark. The ark cannot be manipulated or possessed.

After the battle at Aphek, the Philistines install the ark in the temple of their god, Dagan, to symbolize Dagan’s sovereignty over *I AM* and his people. Twice, however, they find Dagan fallen on his face — the second time with his head and hands broken off and lying on the temple’s threshold; the scoundrel’s extremities symbolically have been chopped off as punishment for crime. Dagan’s devotees, however, cannot change their worldview; instead, they enrich the veneration of their no-god, making it a taboo to step on the “sanctified” threshold. With a heavy hand and true strength, God protects his sovereignty, inflicting the five Philistine rulers and their peoples with a squalid bubonic plague, judging by the reference to rats and hemorrhoids (see 1 Sam. 6:5).

c. Return of the Ark to Israel (6:1–7:1)

The Philistine experts of the supernatural determine the ark should be sent back with a guilt offering to make reparation for the damage they have caused *I AM*. The reparation offering consists of five (i.e., to insure completeness for their five lords) gold (i.e., expensive) images of both rats and hemorrhoids (i.e., by voodoo to solidify the tormentors and offer them up to the deity for apotropaic reasons [i.e., to ward off evil consequences]). The manner of transport is so designed to assure that the plague is due to *I AM*, not to chance. Using a new cart (i.e., one never subjected to the profane and so fit for sacred service), two cows that have never been yoked (i.e., normally incapable of pulling together) and with their calves taken away (i.e., against nature the cows will bind themselves

to the cart), the cows must go directly to the Levitical city of Beth Shemesh. In the execution of the plan, the cows proceed to the ark's own territory while lowing (i.e., against their own inclination). The Beth Shemesh harvesters rejoice at the sight because they still think of the ark as a talisman, guaranteeing the security of their crops and thus of their freedom. The observing Philistines, bound by satanic blindness and by their culture, cannot follow their cows to the Lord of life; instead, they turn back to Dagan and the realm of death.

The rejoicing at Beth Shemesh is short-lived, for seventy of their men — presumably Levites who should have known better—desecrate the ark by looking into it and die. Like the Philistines, they too are unable to repent and change their worldview. They should have answered their question, “Who can stand in the presence of *I AM*?” by reflecting upon their salvation history and their covenant obligations (cf. Ps. 15). These Levites are unfit and unwilling to become fit (i.e., holy) to serve *I AM*. Like the Egyptians and the Philistines, they want to be rid of God's presence and so send messengers to Kiriath Jearim to come and get the frightful thing away from them. The people of Kiriath Jearim make themselves fit for God's presence by consecrating Eleazar to guard the ark. The mourning of Beth Shemesh is replaced by blessing on Kiriath Jearim.

3. Rule of Samuel: Prayerful Warlord (1 Sam. 7)

Samuel is now the priest-leader and the ark has returned. This act is the opposite pole of the last scene of act 1 (1 Sam. 4) as the following chiasm suggests:

- A Israel goes to war but suffers defeat (4:1–2)
- B Deliberations of elders of Israel: “Fetch the ark to deliver us” (4:3–4)
- C Philistines hear exultation and become frightened (4:5–7)
- C’ Israel hears of enemy assembled at Mizpah and fears (7:7)
- B’ Israel asks Samuel not to stop praying to God to deliver them (7:8)
- A’ Philistines engage in battle; *I AM* thunders and defeats them (7:9–11)

The ark remains in Kiriath Jearim for twenty years (1 Sam. 7:2). During the reign of Saul, the nation is not fit for God's symbolic presence at a central sanctuary; David will make it fit. The initial spiritual conditions for Israel's deliverance from the Philistines are: yearn for *I AM* without manipulation, put

away foreign gods, commit themselves to *I AM*, and serve him only (vv. 3–4). The second set of spiritual conditions pertain to prayer preparations: pour out water to symbolize the transformation of community and fast from food (vv. 5–6a). The notice that Samuel is leader forms a literary boundary between spiritual conditions and battle (vv. 7–11). Israel’s command to Samuel to “cry out” to *I AM* (Heb., “do not be silent”) is a totally different kind of sound than their war cry at Aphek (4:5). Prayer replaces manipulation and self-confidence. Samuel responds: he offers a suckling lamb (no tokenism) as a burnt offering with prayer (7:9). The plot peaks: the *Lord of Hosts* thunders in holy war, the *Philistines* panic and are routed (v. 10), and the *men of Israel* pursue and slaughter (v. 11). In the denouement Samuel sets up a memorial stone and names it Ebenezer (“Stone of Help,” v. 12).

4. Crossing of Fates of Samuel and Saul (1 Sam. 8–12)

The fourth act is framed by Samuel’s antimonarchic speeches (1 Sam. 8 and 12). Its key words are *seek*, *find*, and *king* (*king* appears 30 times in act 4 versus 1 time in acts 1–3). Its plot develops from the people’s demand for a king to the prophet’s reluctant installation of Saul. The act is of exceptional importance to biblical theology, for its theme pertains to the demotion of Samuel from a prophet-warlord to only a prophet as he installs Saul as Israel’s first king.

Saul rises to power in this act by being privately anointed by Samuel (1 Sam. 9:1–10:16) and publicly balloted at Mizpah (10:17–21) and by rescuing Jabesh (1 Sam. 11). The common denominator of Saul’s reign, from his installation to his death, is that he inexcusably refuses to believe God. The gifted king’s lack of faith in God’s word as spoken by the prophet Samuel escalates from initial timidity at his own election, to murdering *I AM*’s priests, to entering into league with black spirits at his death.

Source critics classically follow Julius Wellhausen, who divides the sources of this act into *koenigsfeindlich* (antimonarchy) versus *koenigsfreundlich* (promonarchy).¹⁸ In [chapter 24](#) we address this *crux interpretum* in arguing that Israel sins in desiring a king: they lack faith in *I AM* to lead them successfully. *I AM*’s leadership demands that they retain covenant fidelity with him, a fidelity of which they are incapable and/or unwilling to sustain. In other words, they refuse to be a prayerful people, looking to God to save them. As a result, God punishes them with a tyrannical ruler, but his grace saves them from foreign oppressors by his anointed king.

a. Elders Ask Samuel for a King (1 Sam. 8)

The failure of even the mighty Samuel to communicate covenant fidelity to his sons sets the stage for this act (1 Sam. 8:1–4). For greed Eli’s sons perverted the cult; for greed Samuel’s sons pervert justice (cf. Exod. 23:6, 8; Deut. 16:18–20; cf. Deut. 10:17). Samuel, like Eli, also fails to take action against his wayward sons (cf. 1 Sam. 12:2). Perhaps his misdirected effort to have his sons succeed him explains his pique at being rejected by the people.¹⁹

b. Seeking and Finding on Two Sides (9:1–10:16)

Saul’s introduction as the son of an outstanding father (*gibbôr ḥayil*) and as a choice man (*bāḥūr*) — like an athlete in his prime—with a regal stature make him the most likely candidate in all of Israel for kingship. This emphasis on his physical and social eminence functions as a foil to David’s introduction, which features his social insignificance but emphasizes his bravery, musical abilities, and excellent speech as well as his good looks (1 Sam. 16:6–7, 10–12, 18). Saul’s regal appearance, however, is the proof of his election to the people, not the initial reason for it (see 10:23–24). The scene (9:1–24) opens with Saul still under the tutelage of his father in the diminished tribe of Benjamin (see [chap. 21](#) above). He is sent out to return straying donkeys, the symbols of the rule of the house of Kish (see [chap. 21](#), n. 4).²⁰ Providence, by means of donkeys and a slave, leads Saul to Ramah, the home of Israel’s great prophet and the town about to become the locus for anointing Israel’s first king. Saul’s quest exceeds expectation, resulting in a rite of passage from a mere son of Kish to a son of the prophet Samuel and finally to the king of Israel. The change is so great that upon his return to Benjamin, people ask what happened to the son of Kish; they reckon him among the prophets, and a man asks, “Who is their [the prophets’] father?” (10:11–12; cf. 2 Kings 2:12; 6:21).

The scene demonstrates that God chooses Saul (meaning, “The One Asked for [by the People]” in contrast to Samuel [“The One Asked for from God”]). In 1 Samuel 9 God works almost entirely behind the scenes. The seeker (of his father’s donkeys) turns out to be the one sought (by his new father, Samuel). Saul comes to Samuel through preternatural events: his slave leads him to the prophet, and young girls welcome him upon his arrival. His slave urges him to persevere in his quest; the slave has knowledge of Samuel’s clairvoyance; and the slave has the money to compensate the seer and the food to sustain master

and slave for their extended search (1 Sam. 9:1–10)! In other words, the slave — like Jeeves — is more competent than his master (cf. Eccl. 10:5–7). Upon their reaching Ramah, Samuel’s hometown, young girls unwittingly become Samuel’s animated welcoming committee, announcing the glad news that he has arrived at just the right time and just the right place, urging him to hurry (1 Sam. 9:11–13). The next person he asks directions of is the seer himself! In fact, the seeker of Samuel is the one Samuel seeks. In other words, a person of faith would see the hand of Providence in all this. Saul does not. Providence is now backed up by Samuel’s amazing prophecies, leaving Saul without excuse for his unbelief. Unbelieving Israel is about to crown the kind of king they deserve.

When Saul learns that he is the one desired to save Israel, he asks, “Why do you say such a thing to me?” His question is both a reproach and an accusation. Divine calls are rightly answered with humility and submission, not arrogance (cf. 1 Sam. 3:10; Isa. 6:8; Luke 1:38). Samuel ignores Saul’s rebuke. Leading Saul into the banqueting hall where Saul is to be feted as Israel’s future king at a liturgical meal, Samuel replaces Kish as the director of Saul’s life.

The scene’s second episode (1 Sam. 9:25–10:16) is made up of a personal conversation between Samuel and Saul, Samuel’s anointing of Saul in private followed by three clairvoyant signs and the prophet’s instruction to begin battle at Gibeah, Saul’s hometown. First, however, Samuel dismisses Saul’s competent slave; Saul must enter the divine realm and the new era without attachment to his father’s house. His new support is *I AM* and his prophet. The three signs escalate from Saul’s meeting two men, to three men, to a whole procession of prophets. At the climax of the third sign, the spirit of God comes upon him.

The first sign occurs at Rachel’s tomb. Where an infant son lost contact with his mother through her death in childbirth, Saul will lose contact with Kish by the prophet’s call to a new life. The second sign occurs at a (sacred?) tree at Tabor in connection with three loaves of bread, three goats, and a skin of wine. Two of three loaves of bread intended for God are given to Saul. The three men recognize Saul is God’s property through anointing. With the fulfillment of the third prophecy at Gibeah and the coming of the spirit of *I AM* upon Saul, Saul is brought into the divine realm of power. In other words, the preternatural events — the liturgical meal prepared beforehand through prophecy, the anointing oil, the amazing signs, and the gripping spirit — are designed to give Saul the psychological support he needs to enter the unknown through faith. The overwhelming oil, *I AM*’s word and spirit, should have assured him of his calling, power, and talents for his unexpected destiny.

In conjunction with Saul’s being gripped by *I AM*’s spirit, Samuel instructs him to do what his hands find to do at Gibeah (1 Sam. 10:7). Since God had

commissioned Saul to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, and the Philistines had an outpost stationed at Gibeah, Samuel's metonymy means to attack the Philistine outpost at Gibeah (cf. 2 Sam. 8:6). After Saul stings the Philistines into action, the anointed king is to rendezvous with Samuel at Gilgal where the prophet will consecrate by sacrifices the full Israelite army for the battle against the Philistine war machine (1 Sam. 10:8). Tragically, Saul fails to act in faith, in spite of all the spiritual assurances (cf. 13:3–4). At Gibeah he falls into ecstasy, an expression of religious enthusiasm in this era of widespread apostasy, showing he is in the grip of *I AM*'s spirit (10:9–13) and under the direction of a different authority than his father (v. 12; see 2 Kings 2:12; 3:14). But when a curious uncle in this prominent family asks this outstanding son what the famous Samuel said to him, Saul remains silent; he lacks faith to engage the battle (1 Sam. 10:12–16).

c. Saul Proves Himself a King (10:17–11:13)

Because at Gibeah Saul failed to reveal his identity as the elect king through battle (see 1 Sam. 10:7), Samuel flushes him out publicly at Mizpah by a national ballot. The scene opens as Samuel causes the people to cry out in distress for help (*šā'aq*, Hiphil; TNIV “summon” is too weak) from *I AM* so that in the posture of national repentance the king is announced. However, even though chosen by lot, Saul hides himself among the baggage, his third refusal to accept his supernatural election (see 9:21; 10:16). The people require a special revelation from God to find him, and having found him by revelation, the people show no reluctance to hail him as their king. At this point Samuel sets forth the regulations of kingship within Israel's covenant relationship with *I AM* (see 12:12–15, 20–25 for details; cf. Deut. 17:14–20). The epilogue presents two responses to the king. The valiant men (men of standing), whose hearts God has touched to match the king's heart (1 Sam. 10:26), form a new community around him, but the troublemakers (*b'ne b'liya'al* cf. Eli's sons, 2:12), who refuse to acknowledge the divine choice, despise him.

Saul proves his military competence with the relief of Jabesh (1 Sam. 11:1–13).²¹ According to the Dead Sea Scrolls (see n. 21) and Josephus, the siege of Jabesh Gilead was but part of a larger campaign by Nahash, king of the Ammonites, to subjugate Israel in Transjordan and inferentially to humiliate their God. If the Jabeshites surrender, Nahash will gouge out their right eyes, leaving only their left eyes, which is typically screened by the warrior's shield. However, the seven thousand besieged Jabeshites have a secret scheme. In a ruse

they ask Nahash for a week to send messengers “throughout Israel” to deliver them. Nahash, feigning to be a good sport who wants to play a fair game, is so confident that the time is too short and that Israel is so timid and fractured that he allows them the handicap. But the besieged send the messengers directly and only to Gibeah, for they are uniquely related by maternal blood to Gibeah (Judg. 20–21), Saul’s hometown (1 Sam. 10:26), and they probably know Israel anointed Saul king there precisely to deliver them from the Ammonites (12:12). As the Jabeshites hope, when Saul hears the message, the spirit of *I AM* grips him and he rallies the weeping nation and slaughters the Ammonites, all in about four days. In sum, Saul saves Jabesh, turns the grief of Gibeah to joy, restores the honor of Israel and of *I AM*, and heals a fractured nation. But Saul engages battle because of the irresistible grip of *I AM*’s spirit, not because he willingly obeys the prophet.

In the epilogue the new king further heals the divided nation. He rejects violent and punitive death for those who had despised him at the national ballot because punishment cannot be combined with salvation. For the moment, the otherwise narcissistic hero seems uniquely to point away from himself and to give tribute to Israel’s God, but in truth he is upstaging the prophet. The people had asked Samuel what to do about the troublers, and without warrant but with impropriety, Saul gives Samuel’s verdict. His words out of his own mouth will condemn him when he later wants to hand his victorious son over to death (1 Sam. 14:39).

d. The Inauguration of Monarchy at Gilgal (11:14–12:25)

The nation now solemnly gathers around their prophet, Samuel, and their king at the holy place of Gilgal to “reaffirm [Heb. *ḥdš*, ‘renew’] the kingship” — that is, to restore and repair that which already exists between *I AM* and Israel and to adjust it to monarchy. This statement is a summarization of the particulars that follow (1 Sam. 11:14): cultic sacrifices by people and Saul with joy and Samuel’s stern speech. It is time to restore *I AM* as King by formulating an inclusive doctrine uniting the monarchy of *I AM* with that of his regent.

Samuel’s speech (esp. 1 Sam. 11:13–15) fills in the gap left in 10:25.²² He introduces his speech by establishing historical proof of his impeccable rule (12:1–5). The main body (vv. 6–15) proves the choice of a king is as sinful as the former choice of Baals and Ashtoreths (vv. 6–11).²³ The new condition of

monarchy will prove either good or bad according to their fidelity to the Mosaic covenant (vv. 14–15). The king must serve under the rule of *I AM*, just as Samuel had; he is not above God’s law. In conclusion, Samuel calls upon the Lord to validate his speech by thunder and *I AM* responds, even though it is the dry season, which is characterized by drought (12:16–18). The people repent (v. 19), and Samuel counsels them not to turn away from *I AM*. The solution to sin for his people never involves their distancing oneself from God but to turn to him in faith with wholehearted obedience lest they be swept away (vv. 20–25).

B. Section 2: The Crossing of Fates of Saul and David (1 Sam. 13–31)

In premonarchic Israel, *I AM*’s spirit is revealed exclusively in the person of the leader, such as Moses or a warlord. With the establishment of the monarchy, a “bifurcation” of the divine spirit occurs in two types of leaders: the king representing *I AM*’s reign on earth, and the prophet, *I AM*’s plenipotentiary linking the heavenly court with the king’s court. The prophet mediates the kingdom in at least three ways: he chooses the king, he rejects the king when necessary, and he directs the king in holy war.²⁴ Since the prophet is the mediator between heaven and earth, he has priority over the king.²⁵ In this section the prophet’s priority over the king is tested and proved.

1. Saul Rejected as King (1 Sam. 13–15)

The act consists of two scenes: two rounds between Saul and Samuel. At the end of the first round, Saul’s dynasty is rejected; and at the end of the second round, he himself is rejected. Its message: the king’s true strength is by faith in *I AM* who makes his will known through the Book of the Law, the priestly Urim, and the word of his prophets. Saul doesn’t inquire of *I AM*’s Urim, keep covenant, or obey his prophet.

a. Round 1 between Saul and Samuel (1 Sam. 13–14)

The scene consists of two episodes. In each Jonathan, son of Saul, by faith initiates deliverance by attacking the Philistines, whereupon Saul reacts. Jonathan’s faith initiatives function as a foil to the unbelieving Saul and drive

apart the king and the crown prince. In the first episode Saul continues to disrespect Samuel's authority, and in the second his pride leads him to scheme Jonathan's death.

(1) Saul Loses His Dynasty (13:1 - 22)

Saul has surrounded himself with an elite corps of three thousand men (see 1 Sam. 13:2; 14:52), but fails to follow Samuel's injunction to do what his hand finds to do at Gibeah (see 10:7). Instead, he sends his troops — apart from his elite corps — home and does not consult I AM. When Jonathan, however, precipitates the battle by attacking the outpost at Geba,²⁶ Saul must act, for Israel has made itself a stench to the Philistines. Saul rallies Israel to do battle, calling them "Hebrews" to remind them that they are subjects — second-class citizens, deprived of their own sovereign state, similar to their situation in Egypt. The Philistine war machine mobilizes and Israel quakes, hiding themselves in caves or fleeing the land (13:5 - 7). According to the military hyperbole of this sort of battle report, the Philistines' chariots alone equal in number Saul's soldiers.

The second sequence of events (1 Sam. 13:8–15a) presupposes Samuel's instruction in 10:7: after beginning battle at Gibeah, the king with his army is to rendezvous with Samuel at the sacred site of Gilgal.²⁷ Samuel, however, delays coming, probably to test Saul's faith and obedience to his prophetic word. Finding himself in an extreme crisis—his army has fled, leaving Saul with only six hundred men — Saul offers sacrifices to begin the battle without waiting for Samuel. Samuel finally arrives and finds that Saul has disobeyed his instruction to wait. For Saul's disobedience, Samuel rejects Saul's dynasty. This first clash between the prophet and the king begins the crossing of fates from Saul to David. *I AM* is looking for one after his own heart (*coram deo*, i.e., one who completely surrenders to God's will). Such a person does not despair at false strength (i.e., the hard realities of sight) but relies on God's true strength (i.e., sees the situation from faith's perspective of the transcendental situation). Saul lacks the faith that radically alters the perception and judgment of reality.²⁸ Saul's reasonable defense of his actions (13:11–12) shows that leadership demands absurd obedience (see Gen. 22). Samuel does not attempt to refute him. He simply says, "You acted foolishly. You have not kept the command *I AM* your God gave you" (1 Sam. 13).

(2) Saul Schemes to Kill Jonathan (13:23–14:46)

The scene now shifts to Gibeah where Saul is left with his six hundred men.

Israel's situation is desperate, for, apart from Saul and Jonathan, they are without iron swords and cannot stop the scorched earth policy of the Philistine raiding parties.²⁹ In this episode (1 Sam. 13:23–14:23) Jonathan, without telling his father beforehand, again creates the conditions for deliverance by attacking the Philistine garrison at Micmash. While Saul was staying at Gibeah with his six hundred men and not inquiring of the priest Ahijah [= Ahimelech], Jonathan is climbing the slippery and thorny cliffs with only his armor-bearer.³⁰ Jonathan's assertion to his cohort, "Perhaps the *I AM* will act in our behalf," respects *I AM*'s liberty to act apart from the priestly instrument. His further assertion that *I AM* can save "by many or by few" (contra 13:11) contrasts his true reasoning by faith with Saul's false reasoning by sight. Jonathan also faces the superiority of the Philistines, the flight of Israel's troops, and their shortage of arms.

Upon engaging the Philistine outpost, the numinous panic of holy war overwhelms the Philistines and the earth quakes. Saul does not act quickly, decisively, or spontaneously to exploit the splendid possibilities. Instead, probably suspecting that Jonathan precipitated the battle and being hypersensitive to what could be interpreted as insubordination, he calls for a muster to establish the absence of Jonathan and his armor-bearer. But the tide of war has so changed that the heretofore cowering Israelites reappear to take part in the battle. The feckless king starts too late and then stops seeking God's will through the ephod, for God's will is so obvious in the Philistine panic and self-destruction. The narrator, not Saul, gives all glory to God: "*I AM* rescued Israel that day" (1 Sam. 14:23).

The hypersensitive king determines to isolate the hero and seeks to kill him (1 Sam. 14:24–46). The conflict between Saul and Jonathan takes place during the night. The king, probably knowing that Jonathan could not hear his father's oath, forbids his famished troops to eat any food, even though they are in hot pursuit of the Philistines (v. 24). A general who withholds food from his army during battle is not quite right in the head. Nevertheless, the army obeys (vv. 25–26); but Jonathan, unaware of the oath, disobeys (v. 27). When Jonathan learns of the oath, he repudiates it because it caused Israel to lose a decisive victory. At that the whole army pounces on the captured Philistine food supply and in their haste even transgress the Law, which forbids Israel to eat blood (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26–27; 17:10, 12; 19:26; Deut. 15:23; Ezek. 33:25). Thereupon Saul builds an altar and substitutes religious ritual for a victorious battle.

The king now proposes pursuing the Philistines by night, and the army amazingly agrees. The general who allowed his army no food by day now allows them no rest by night. The priest proposes they seek an oracle. *I AM* does not

answer—he will not participate in the religious debacle. Saul organizes a religious ballot to sentence Jonathan to death for his “sin.” He lines up Jonathan and himself against the rest of the army (1 Sam. 14:40), for he already knows Jonathan is guilty (see v. 27). The army responds as God had, with silence — neither will they participate in Saul’s charade. When the lot shows Jonathan broke the oath, Saul sentences the crown prince to death. His verdict in fact condemns him, for it directly contradicts his earlier verdict, “No one shall be put to death today, for this day *I AM* has rescued Israel” (11:13). If that verdict is true of those who trouble Israel, how much more is it true of a son that saves them? The army sees the contradiction—how can God be against the one through whom he gave the victory (see 14:23)? — and so saves Jonathan from their mad king and his false religion.

The epilogue (1 Sam. 14:47–52) notes that Saul was a successful warrior. The king lost his throne for lack of obedience to God, not for his lack of gift. The narrator does not say, as he says of David, “*I AM* gave [him] victory wherever he went” (2 Sam. 8:6, 14).

b. Second and Final Rejection of Saul as King (1 Sam. 15)

In this important scene, Saul strikes his true colors and his doom is sealed. Its key words, *qôl* (lit. “voice,” “message”) and *šāmaʿ* (“hear,” “listen”) (vv. 14, 19–20 [*qôl* = “bleating,” “lowing”], 22 [*šāmaʿ* with *qôl* = “obey”], 24), sound the scene’s theme. In the scene’s prelude Samuel commands Saul to execute *herem* upon the Amalekites (vv. 1–3), but Saul and his soldiers spare the best animals and Agag, the Amalekite king (vv. 4–9). Both the king and his army are not innocent in their token religion. Because Saul has turned away from God in not executing *herem*, God regrets (*nāḥm*; not “repents,” for there is no moral deficiency) that he made Saul king (vv. 10–11). God always responds with appropriate morality to the free human response (see 1 Sam. 13). It is unclear why Samuel “was troubled” (Heb. *wayyihar lishmāʾel*, lit., “Samuel was angry”). Was he angry with God for electing Saul? Was he angry with Saul for his folly? Or was he angry about the frustrating situation in which he found himself?

Twice Samuel accuses the king of disobedience, and twice Saul claims obedience and blames the army for keeping animals for sacrifice. But the prophet rebuts Saul’s disclaimer with the simple observation that the sheep are bleating, and he places obedience above sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:12–23). In the third

round (vv. 24–26), Saul asks to be forgiven, but his confession is not a clear confession: he still blames the army and does not own up to sparing Agag. Samuel refuses to rejoin Saul in worship (v. 26). In the fourth round (vv. 27–34), Saul again repents and Samuel grants his interim support — he does not completely undermine the king before he selects a new one (v. 31). In the conclusion (vv. 32–35) Samuel, after executing *I AM*'s command to kill Agag, separates from Saul. In this scene Saul's disrespect for *I AM*, his priest, and his prophet is underscored by Saul's setting up a monument to honor himself after the battle (v. 12). The man God chose to punish Israel has great human strength but no faith. He is not the stuff that brings about God's will on earth as in heaven.

2. David's Rise and Rejection by Saul (1 Sam. 16–19)

The king who failed at God's altar now fails in his reign over Israel. The three scenes of act 2 narrate David's divine election and his laying hold of God's true strength by faith and his threat to the kingship of Saul, who trusts his own false strength.

a. David the New King (1 Sam. 16)

The opening scene of act 2 consists of two episodes: Samuel anoints David king at Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1–13) and David arrives at Saul's court in Gibeah (16:14–23, esp. vv. 21–22). The two episodes are linked by two missions to Bethlehem in a quest for David: by a prophet sent by *I AM* and by messengers sent by the king. Each presents a positive view of David: through Samuel's eyes (v. 12) and through Saul's servant's eyes (v. 18). In the first episode, David is elected by *I AM*'s word, anointing, and spirit; and in the second, he is chosen ironically by Saul himself (vv. 14–23, esp. 21–22)! Finally, in the first episode, *I AM*'s spirit grips David (v. 13), and in the second that spirit leaves Saul (v. 14). In the first episode, Samuel resists God by being too slow (vv. 1–3) and then by being too fast (vv. 6–9).³¹ His being out of step with *I AM* stands in striking contrast to Samuel in the preceding section. Even spiritual giants fall into the abyss of despair.

I AM's question to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul ...?" (1 Sam. 16:1), infers a lapse of time between God's rejection of Saul and his election of David and expresses God's exasperation with his prophet. *I AM*, who knows the human heart, takes the initiative to overcome Samuel's spiritual stagnation. God

commands his grieving prophet to fill a ceremonial ram's horn with anointing oil and go to Jesse of Bethlehem to anoint one of his sons as king whom *I AM* has chosen for himself (Heb. *lî melek*). The double command "to fill" and "go" stresses the urgency that Samuel rouse himself from his lethargy. God's choice of David "for myself" contrasts with Saul's choice "for them" (the people; 8:22; cf. 8:18; 12:13).

Samuel resists because the road from Ramah to Bethlehem passes through Gibeah, Saul's hometown, and Saul, knowing he has been rejected by the prophet, dogs every step of the prophet lest he anoint another. That Samuel fears the king more than God both implies that Saul has already developed a harsh and arbitrary administration and is symptomatic of Samuel's more serious spiritual torpor. "The prophet now fears the prince more than the command of his God"³² *I AM* does not discard his prophet but encourages him, allowing him in holy war against the king to tell Saul the halftruth that he is going to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice (see p. 515n12). Upon Samuel's arrival at Bethlehem, the town elders, knowing of the rift between the king and the prophet, also fear for their safety. But Samuel reassures them, telling them he has come in peace to offer a sacrifice. But his command that they consecrate themselves (i.e., outward rituals for spiritual preparation) shows the exclusive and ceremonial character of the feast. Samuel himself consecrates Jesse and his sons to participate in the feast that will take them into the realm of the sacred.

At the feast the prophet gets ahead of God in wanting to anoint Jesse's firstborn son, who like Saul is regal in stature, but God corrects him; he is not to choose by outward appearance or by human conventions, but by a person's heart (i.e., inward, spiritual characteristics). Presumably by faith, Jesse has all his sons appear before Samuel, but God has chosen none who is present at the feast. Finally, Jesse, with Samuel's urging, calls for David who in his family's judgment is so insignificant that he is not worthy to be invited to the feast. But David is God's chosen king; he is "ruddy and handsome," showing that although God looks at the heart, not outward appearance, it does not follow that God chooses the ugly. As in the case of Saul, David's outward appearance confirms, not influences, the divine choice.

Samuel anoints David as his brothers look on, and the divine spirit rests on David.³³ David, whom *I AM* described as having a heart to do God's will, is accused by Eliab as having a wicked heart (1 Sam. 17:28), exposing his own wicked heart. David is a type of Jesus Christ, whose brothers also did not believe in him (John 7:5). In any case, David knows of his election by the prophet's word, the pouring of the consecrating oil upon his head, and the coming of the

powerful presence of God's spirit. On those assurances he risks his life on behalf of God's kingdom.

Likewise, Jesus Christ encourages humans to have faith in him as God's Son, by pointing to the testimonies of John the Baptist, of God's word to him at the coming of the Holy Spirit upon him, and of his messianic works (see John 5:31–47). So also believers risk their lives on the firm foundation of the promises of God's Word, the convincing work of the Spirit that accompanies those promises, and their spiritual transformation. In the second episode, David comes to the royal court through his musical talents to soothe Saul's psychoses.

b. A Shepherd Boy as Champion (1 Sam. 17)

A tension exists between the two introductions of David into Saul's service. In 1 Samuel 16:14–22 Saul sends messengers to Jesse to ask him to send David to his court, but in 17:55–58 Saul repeatedly asks of David "Whose son is he?" Moreover, in 16:6–9 David's father and brothers are named, yet in 17:12 the narrator names the family as though the reader is unfamiliar with the names.³⁴ These are transparently two sources, and the final author felt no need to conceal this or to smooth it over. This "binocular vision by montage" gives two complementary representations of David: as elected by *I AM*'s initiative with the divine spirit descending and David ascending to heroic greatness through gift and faith.³⁵ The two accounts are linked by 16:18 and 17:15. The naming of David in 16:18 as a warrior prepares the way for David's victory over Goliath in [chapter 17](#), and 17:15 notes that David went back and forth between Jesse and Saul (see 16:22).

The second scene opens at the front lines of the Philistines and Israelites in a showdown battle (1 Sam. 17:1–3). Goliath, a gargantuan champion standing about six feet nine inches and a veteran of many battles,³⁶ destabilizes the static standoff between the armies (vv. 4–7). The giant calls for a man to fight him and derides *I AM*'s army. Trial by a single combat is well attested in the ancient Near East as expressing the will of the deity. The Philistine giant represents false strength: "The Philistine embodies belief in armaments, the ideology of reliance on military force, the desire for invulnerability."³⁷ King Saul, standing about six feet to six-feet-six and Israel's most experienced fighter, is the obvious Israelite warrior to confront, but Saul cowers before the Philistine machine. Even Jonathan, who earlier by faith took on a whole Philistine garrison, does not step forward. Israel's security in a king has failed to save them, and none in the crisis has faith in the God of Israel's covenants. Even the stalwarts of faith sometimes

falter.

Jesse sends the anointed David to the front with food for his warring brothers and for their commanders (1 Sam. 17:12–22). Perhaps he intends more than this mission, for Jesse knows that his son, who delivered his sheep, has been anointed as king to deliver *I AM*'s flock. Upon David's arrival at the front, he hears Goliath's defiance and observes Israel's fearful flight from him. David rebukes the soldiers for their lack of faith in Israel's Glory whom the Philistine champion has defied. His interest is solely in the honor of God, not in any material rewards, such as marriage to the princess the king dangles before them.

David's challenge to the army comes to the attention of Saul, who summons David in order to evaluate his capability to take on the giant. Saul essentially repeats Goliath's false view of true strength: an inexperienced youth is no match for a professional warrior. But David recounts to the king how he repulsed animal attacks both on himself and his flock. He sees his vocation as a warrior on the front lines the same as his being a shepherd in the field. More fundamentally, David realizes that his deliverance from the jaws of wild animals is from *I AM*, as will be his deliverance from Goliath's javelin. In David's mind, Goliath sealed his doom when he defied the armies of the living God.

Impressed with David's faith and frankness, ironically Saul sends David to battle with *I AM*'s benediction: "*I AM* be with you," which will be Saul's undoing. Saul sets up an obstacle by putting his armor on David—he keeps putting himself on Goliath's terms of reference by believing in weapons and war experience. David rejects the armor. The scene peaks in the confrontation of the two warriors' speeches regarding their gods and in their dexterity (1 Sam. 17:40–51). By a well-aimed shot with his sling and fighting under the banner of *I AM*'s name, David makes Goliath's conventional spear and armor look ludicrous; he dispatches the fallen giant with the giant's own sword.

The denouement has three parts: the army of Israel routs the Philistines and David decapitates Goliath (1 Sam. 17:51b–54); Saul asks whose son David is (vv. 55–58); and Jonathan and David become spiritual friends (18:1). The resolution of the tension between Saul's earlier awareness of Jesse and his later unawareness of him lies in the fact that Saul is not asking for a label but for David's true identity. In ancient Israel it was more important to learn of the tribe and clan to which someone belonged than that person's individuality. Saul, appreciating David as a gifted singer who comforts him, is indifferent to David's family pedigree. But the king cannot be indifferent to the family of a warrior who saves the nation and to what the future might hold for him; he even offered to make the hero his son-in-law. Moreover, Saul is aware of the prophet's forecast that he will be replaced by a better man than he, a man after God's own

heart. David has proved himself greater than both Saul and Jonathan, and David testifies he is a man after God's heart. Saul's repeated questions suggest a process in his psyche that takes him from amazement to uneasiness.

The third part of the denouement contrasts Jonathan's and Saul's relationship to David. Jonathan relates to David lovingly, in surrender to him. Jonathan takes off his robe and other royal regalia to symbolize his self-renunciation to serve a greater (cf. John 3:27–30); his gesture publicly displays that he recognizes David has the right to Israel's throne.³⁸ Because Jonathan loves David as himself, he is free to give him care and esteem because he does not need to use him to affirm himself. David relates to Jonathan lovingly. Out of their love for one another—a love that is stronger than death—they become one in spirit and make a covenant (see 19:1; 20:8, 13–16, 41–42; 23:18) to guarantee that nothing can break their holy, spiritual friendship that issues into protecting one another, each in his own way. Whereas Saul's armor did not fit David, Jonathan's armor fits David like a glove and bestows glory on him.

In contrast, Saul relates to David enviously and uses him to advance his own esteem. That he “kept David with him” (18:2) is Saul's first step toward his suppression of David and alienation from others. Saul has no words of praise for *I AM* or for David; he is incapable of love because he does not love himself. In truth, people cannot love self until they dare to know that they are loved by God; only then are they free of the ulterior motives of getting attention and love from another.

c. Spear and Trap (1 Sam. 18)

The third scene narrates the rapid crystallization of the Saul-David relationship (1 Sam. 18:6–30). David's success arouses jealousy and fear in Saul (vv. 6–16); twice he explodes against David (vv. 6–11). The first explosion occurs inwardly in Saul's self-talk as he is returning home from the battle. The women greet him singing, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” The laws of Hebrew poetry require that the greater, Saul, be named first and the lesser, David, second, and that the smaller number be mentioned before the higher. The women use this convention and express the truth, but the women came out to lionize David, not to demean their king. In any case, the ditty makes Saul jealous of David, the beginning of his escalating enmity against David until Saul's death.

Saul's inner jealousy leads to his second explosion. The next day while Saul is in his house and under the influence of the evil spirit and while David plucks the

harp with both hands to relieve Saul's frenzy, Saul grips his false strength and hurls it at him to murder him. Twice the agile athlete eludes the spear because the God of true strength is with him. In the epilogue Saul promotes David to command a thousand men, hoping that in some campaign he will be killed. Instead, David succeeds and grows in popularity.

In the next episode Saul in his false strength sets two traps. He first offers David the princess in exchange for David's fighting bravely, again hoping David will be killed in battle (1 Sam. 18:17). Saul defaults on his offer to give David his older daughter (v. 19), giving her to another, even as he had defaulted in not giving her to David for killing Goliath (see 17:25). Like Laban he barter away his daughters in marriage, ruining their chances of a happy marriage.

The love for David of Michal, Saul's younger daughter, opens up the opportunity for Saul again to set yet another trap, this time through duplicity. Although David twice paid for his daughter, Saul now wants no other than the suicidal price of a hundred Philistine foreskins. The price is appropriate for a warrior: David will scalp the Philistines of their potency. Moreover, as a relative of Saul, should he survive, he will become a marked man to the Philistines. This time David will not be lied to. Before the allotted time, he pays twice the bride price to doubly prevent Saul from going back on his word. Instead of killing David, Saul now has him as his son-in-law. The epilogue summarizes the irony of Saul's loss in this power game with David (1 Sam. 18:28–30). The man of false strength intended to kill the man of true strength, but weaker David defeats the stronger enemy and wins universal popularity and love from Jonathan and Michal, Saul's children, who rescue him from their deranged father.

d. Saul Openly Seeks David's Death (1 Sam. 19)

The three episodes in 1 Samuel 19—Jonathan rescues David (vv. 1–7), Michal rescues David (vv. 8–18), and the divine spirit rescues David (vv. 19–24) — have the common denominator that the king in his false strength now openly — no longer covertly—acts to kill David, but God's true strength protects him. The first two episodes are closely connected through the key words “pursue”/“seek” (vv. 2, 10) and “kill” (vv. 1, 2, 6, 11, 15, 17) and through the theme of David's protection by Saul's two children. The last two episodes are connected by Saul repeatedly sending messengers to capture David (vv. 11, 14, 15, 20, 21) and by David's making good his escapes. In sum, David is protected by Jonathan, Michal, Samuel, and *I AM* himself.

In the first episode, Jonathan mediates a stay of execution (1 Sam. 19:1–7).

Saul speaks to Jonathan and his attendants to enlist their support to fulfill his blood lust. Out of his heart he now speaks. But Jonathan warns David and designs a plan so that David will overhear his pleading with his father not to do this wrong and so be assured of Jonathan's loyalty to David. Saul yields — for the moment.

In the next episode, David's success in war again is the fuse to the powder keg of Saul's pathology. And again, while David is plucking the harp, Saul hurls his spear to kill him. To use Freudian terms, Saul's superego, which accepts the compelling logic of Jonathan's argument, is no match for the id (the forces of envy and madness under the influence of an evil spirit). *I AM* has sealed Saul's doom. That night David makes good his escape after Michal warns him (1 Sam. 19:11) and provides pretexts involving her idols to make good David's escape. She later lies to Saul about her hoax to save her life from her crazy father.

In the third episode, David flees to Samuel at Ramah (1 Sam. 19:18–24); he is falling back upon God through the one who anointed him. Saul seeks to capture David but cannot penetrate the spiritual protection of Samuel and his prophetic guild. Three times Saul sends agents to capture David, but each time *I AM*'s spirit eliminates them by ecstasy; all must bow to the numinous Strength (19:19–21). Finally, the incorrigible king himself goes to Naioth and the divine spirit strips him naked even before he reaches Samuel and David. He is even less a match for *I AM*'s spirit than his messenger. This scene has striking similarities to his original encounter with Samuel at Ramah: (1) he must ask the way to find Samuel; (2) he does so in the context of a well/cistern; (3) as he climbs a hill, the spirit of God falls upon him; and (4) the people ask in amazement, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" These similarities highlight the divine providence and the discontinuities between the first and last encounters between Samuel and Saul. His first quest ends in his elevation as the guest of honor; here it ends in his humiliating degradation as he walks stripped and naked. There the people ask their question in amazement that the son of Kish has left his own family to enter positively into the numinous realm that separates him from his old affiliations to become the spirit-empowered king. Now they ask in amazement that the once proud king has entered negatively into the numinous realm that strips him of his royal insignia. The charisma of youth may turn into spiritual tragedy in old age without a spirit of contrition for choosing pagan strength and rejecting divine strength.

3. David Flees the Court (20:1–23:13)

In all of the scenes of this and the following acts (1 Sam. 20:1–31:13), *I AM* protects and increasingly exalts David even in his flight from the vastly more powerful Saul because David is righteous and Saul is guilty. Moreover, David trusts God to honor his prophetic anointing of him and Saul resists David's obvious election.

a. Covenant with Jonathan (20:1–21:1)

Jonathan is compelled to choose between David and Saul. Their faith in *I AM* and love for each other based on true virtues creates a conjunction that can conquer everything. As a result of this contract with Saul's son, David makes a clean break with Saul's court. The scene has two episodes: preparation agreements (1 Sam. 20:1–23) and implementations of it (20:24–24:1). David places his life and his innocence in Jonathan's hands, knowing that Jonathan is just (vv. 1–11). Jonathan places the future of his house in David's hands, knowing that David is the elect of God and will show *hesed* when he becomes king. Spiritual friendship sustains both in the crisis.

David exposes Saul's heart to Jonathan by a ruse. David will go to Bethlehem to celebrate an annual family festival, a festival that competes with the one Saul invited him to. If Saul irrationally flares up at David's choosing his own family festival over Saul's festival, it should be clear to Jonathan that his father is determined to harm David. Upon learning of David's choice, Saul loses his temper and even seeks to kill Jonathan. Jonathan's heart is with David, but he must remain loyal to his father since *I AM* has anointed him and has been with him too. He puts duty before affection. If David will not touch Saul because *I AM* anointed him, how much less will his son betray him.

b. David's Flight (21:2–23:13)

David cannot stay forever with Samuel; it will not be too long before Samuel dies (25:1). In the first episode of this scene, David deliberately flees east to Nob, the home of Ahimelech the priest (1 Sam. 21:2–9), because the conqueror of Goliath knows he can claim the victor's right to Goliath's sword that has been housed in the priestly sanctuary there as a trophy. He also knows that he can obtain the sanctuary bread to sustain him in flight. When he arrives Ahimelech (= Ahijah of 1 Sam. 14) trembles, aware of the deteriorating relationship between the tyrannical king and his superlative commander. The man of true strength by faith used a sling and stones and will now use a sword. He does not

reject human means.

In the second episode, David flees west to Achish, king of Gath (1 Sam. 21:10–16; Ps. 34). The Gittite king's attendants realize the golden opportunity to seize the man who brandishes Goliath's sword. David feigns madness, and the stupid king lets slip between his finger "the golden opportunity of liquidating the man who will later prove to be the only one who can break the Philistine might."³⁹

In the third episode, David flees to the caves of Adullam (1 Sam. 22:1–5; cf. Pss. 57, 142). Here two groups join David: his family, who remain loyal to him, and outlaws, who for various reasons have reason to leave the established order. Saul, who does not even spare his own family (1 Sam. 20:33), will certainly follow the ancient Near Eastern custom of killing off potential rivals to his throne (cf. 24:21; 1 Kings 2). David sends his parents to find refuge with the king of Moab. The king of Moab probably offers his parents asylum because Saul is his enemy and is glad to side with Saul's rival (1 Sam. 14:47), and/or David's father has roots in Moab (cf. Ruth). The prophet Gad, who accompanies David, warns David to leave his Adullam stronghold.

In the fourth episode (1 Sam. 22:6–23), the slaughter of Nob, Saul escalates his vendetta against David into a civil war. The enlargement is fantastic. Saul calls a formal meeting of all his officials to announce his fatal decision to destroy David. This council leads to assembling Saul's elite corps of three thousand soldiers (24:2) against David's motley army of hundreds (22:2, 20). In his paranoia Saul accuses all of his officials of siding with David because they are motivated to get the property and jobs David will give them when he becomes the sitting monarch. In truth they trust false strength, not true strength. Saul is consumed with self-pity and presumes his defeat, assuming they are motivated by the same greed as he. His officials remain silent—they love David. But Doeg the Edomite, a mercenary who works for pay, not for principle, reports that Ahimelech provided David with a sword and food (see Ps. 52).

Saul sends for the priest and asks him to defend the help he has given David. Ahimelech rationally explains that he had consulted *I AM* for David many times to assist him on his missions for the king, so it should come as no surprise that he assisted the honored warrior on his most recent visit. But the despot, without investigating Ahimelech's claim, rules that the priest and his whole family must die. He executes the *herem* against the priests at Nob that he should have executed against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3). Is he striking back at *I AM* for depriving him of kingship for not killing all the Amalekites?⁴⁰ In truth Saul unwittingly confirms the prophetic word regarding True Strength, whom he does

not trust (2:31). The king's officials, who for once fear God more than their king, courageously refuse to execute the verdict against *I AM's* priest, so Saul orders Doeg to do his dirty work. One of the priests, Abiathar, escapes (22:20) and takes to David the holy ephod, making it possible for David to consult God through the priest and to save him from the king's savagery. In the preceding episode, we learned that David had the support of a prophet; now he has the support of the priest.

In the fifth episode, God hits back at Saul for his savagery against his priests by rescuing David from him through the ephod that Abiathar brings (1 Sam. 23:6).⁴¹ Ironically, Saul condemns the priest Ahimelech for using the oracle on behalf of David and now, as an important consequence of killing the priest, the oracular device, which probably was not even consulted, has ended up permanently in David's hands.⁴² David admits to Abiathar that he is responsible for allowing Doeg's betrayal, not for misleading Ahimelech (1 Sam. 22:22; Ps. 52).

Since the Philistines are fighting against Keilah in Judah, David consults God about whether to relieve the town. David's men understandably resist taking on a battle that rightfully Saul should fight, especially while Saul is seeking David's life. Their reluctance makes David's spirit and vision shine brighter. With *I AM's* go ahead, David fights against the Philistines and relieves Keilah (1 Sam. 23:1–6). In other words, while Saul is decimating Nob, David rescues Keilah. Saul uses the sword to murder a whole family; David uses the sword to save a whole town.⁴³ Fokkelman notes, "Morally it is absurd that he [Saul] is going to wage war against a commander who has just liberated a town of Israel from the Philistine power."⁴⁴

By David's entering Keilah, Saul can trap him within Keilah's walls. David is no Samson who can lift the town gates out of their sockets at night! The people of Keilah are now faced with the difficult choice of following the man of faith who saved them from defeat or of remaining loyal to men of fake strength who will persecute them if they range themselves on the side of their deliverer. Again David consults God and learns that they will opt to buy off their own destruction (cf. 2 Sam. 20), and so he leaves. Without rancor or avenging himself, David accepts that nominal Israel — and that is most of the nation — live by fake strength, not by true faith, the faith that God upholds what is right.

4. David in the Wilderness of Judah (23:14–26:25)

Act 4 takes place in the strongholds and hills of the Desert of Ziph. "Day after

day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands” (1 Sam. 23:14). The wilderness denotes space that is uninhabited and not arable. In this act it is a sort of desiccated scrubland.

The act consists of three scenes: Saul and David meet at the cave of En Gedi (23:29–24:23); a woman saves David from avenging himself at Maon (1 Sam. 25); Saul and David meet in the wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam. 26). In the inclusive scenes of this act, David becomes the hunter and Saul the hunted, first accidentally (1 Sam. 24) and then intentionally (1 Sam. 26). In these two episodes, David has opportunity to avenge himself against his nemesis, but trusting God’s integrity, power, and justice, he refuses to do so. In the center scene, a woman’s intervention prevents David from avenging himself against a good-for-nothing rich man who trusts in fake strength. In other words, the common denominator of these three scenes is that David retains his innocence and true strength by not avenging himself for the wrongs done to him. Vengeance is True Strength’s prerogative and glory alone (Deut. 32:35; Ps. 94:1; Rom. 12:19).

We learn from seven of David’s lament psalms composed during his flight from Saul that *I AM* is disciplining his chosen king to depend on God’s true strength, not his own strength, to do what is right (Pss. 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 142). Similarly, Israel is also disciplined to a life of humility and trust in the wilderness (Deut. 8:1–4, see [chap. 17.II.D.2.d.\[2\]](#)), as is our Lord, who likewise was tested in the wilderness by Satan (Luke 4:1–13). Christians should not be surprised to find themselves in a “wilderness” where God teaches the life of faith (see [chap. 14](#)).

a. Saul and David Meet at En Gedi (23:14–24:23)

The scene opens in Horesh in the Desert of Ziph (1 Sam. 23:14–17), where Jonathan visits David to strengthen his faith in God: “You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father knows this.” By contrast the Ziphites come to King Saul and seek to ingratiate themselves with the king who can dole out favors for their giving away David’s hiding places. As Saul is closing in on David, providentially a messenger calls Saul back to fight invading Philistines. The scene peaks in a chance meeting of Saul and David at a cave in En Gedi (23:29–24:1). Saul enters a cave to relieve himself unaware that David and his men are holed up in the back of the cave. In Saul’s vulnerable posture, David’s men, who lack theological scruples, read the situation as unambiguous providence that God has handed Saul over to David. At first David yields to their

temptation and cuts off a portion of Saul's robe, an act that symbolizes his rejection of Saul's kingship. But David's heart palpitates, warning him that he is acting without faith. He dare not touch God's anointed property (23:6). God must bring honor to himself by deposing the one he has consecrated to himself (26:10).

After rebuking his men for their unbelief, David calls out to the departing Saul, holding up the portion of his cloak he has cut off as proof of his loyalty to his king. The righteous elect for the first time has the upper hand politically and militarily, and the wicked king must acknowledge it. Confronted with his own royal cloak in David's hand, even Saul is made to see his own rejection and David's election. The innocent anointed one has the power to become the hunter but uses his power to uphold justice and to restore his king to sanity. But Saul returns to his darkness rather than retain his sanity in David's company.

b. Abigail Saves David from Avenging Himself (1 Sam. 25)

Samuel dies, but *I AM* provides David with an intelligent wife to protect him. Surly Nabal (meaning "fool") is like a king in a region of Maon where Saul had set up a monument to himself (1 Sam. 15:12). He has such large herds (25:2) that it is unlikely anyone equals him in wealth, and on the occasion of sheep shearing he gives, as it were, a "royal banquet" (v. 36). "Fool" knows David has a whole band around him and that he has worked with his herdsmen to give them protection. Although his wife believes that God has chosen David to replace mad King Saul (vv. 29–30), Fool trusts in fake strength, not in the true strength of God's word. He regards David as an ambitious, upstart warlord (see vv. 10–11), not as God's chosen.⁴⁵

The scene takes place at sheepshearing time, a time for hospitality and festivity (1 Sam. 25:36). His royal banquet, in which he seems to carouse alone, by social courtesy should have included the young men that protected him. The opportunity, however, exposes his meanness (v. 3). When David's ten messengers ask Nabal to show them favors, he shrieks insults at them, refusing even to give them water. Fool's own servant (v. 14) and even his wife publicly satirize him as a *bēliya'al*, an "outlaw" against what makes a good society. In fact, though David is the political outlaw, the hard-fisted businessman is the moral outlaw and resists the coming of God's kingdom.

David explodes against Fool and sets out on a bloodbath against his entire household. Upon learning of David's intention to avenge himself, Abigail obeys

God rather than her husband (cf. Acts 5:29) and goes to meet him, sending before herself a placating gift. Upon meeting David, she appeals to David's self-interest in the light of providence. First, however, she defuses his anger against the recent past by bowing before him and pointing to the divine providence that protected David from heretofore avenging himself (1 Sam. 25:23–27; cf. [chap. 24](#)). She assures him that God will destroy his enemies, including Fool. Second, she points to David's future, noting he should not dirty his hands, because *I AM* will secure his royal destiny and the destruction of his enemies, and at that time David will want a good conscience (1 Sam. 28–31). When Fool awakens from his drunken stupor and his wife tells him what she has done, he suffers a stroke and dies. David, who has had Michal taken from him, now marries wise Abigail. *I AM* counters every move Saul takes against David.

c. Saul and David Meet in the Wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam. 26)

In the third scene, David intentionally stalks the king, and his speech is more truculent. The duskiness of the cave concealed David from Saul in the first scene; the darkness of night does not protect Saul from David's faith initiative to penetrate Saul's camp and capture his water jug and spear, symbolizing his rule over Saul's life and death.⁴⁶ Ahimelech the Hittite, who refuses to join David in this risky venture to bring the king to his senses, serves as a foil to the courage of David and Abishai in this breathtaking feat. And Abishai is a foil to David's faith to live by the sound theological principle not to touch *I AM*'s anointed but to depend on God who anointed Saul to depose him. In the cave Saul was squatting; in the camp he is lying prone in torpor. Saul is probably defeated psychologically, for he does not properly guard his life while camping along a road in crafty David's territory. The narrator agrees with David's theological scruple: "*I AM* had put [David's enemies] into a deep sleep" (1 Sam. 26:12). David summarizes the truth in vv. 22–24. He returns Saul's spear but keeps the water jug so that Saul cannot refresh his pursuit.

5. Saul's Demise (1 Sam. 27–31)

In this act the story line alternates between David and Saul. Scene 1, the David thread, pertains to David's fortunes at Ziklag: he is a vassal of the Philistines (part A, 1 Sam. 27) and a savior of Ziklag (part B, [chaps. 29–30](#)).

Scene 2, the Saul thread, pertains to Saul's final rejection (part A, [chap. 28](#)) and death (part B, [chap. 31](#)).

a. Part A₁: Vassal of the Philistines (27:1–28:2)

David anticipated his seeming defection to the Philistines in his preceding speech to Abner/Saul: "They have now driven me from my share in *I AM*'s inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods.'" After David's defection to Achish, he asks the stupid ruler that he and his army of six hundred men, along with their families, be given their own place. Achish gives them Ziklag. Having more space for freedom of action without oppressive supervision, David is well positioned to execute raids against Judah's southern enemies, including the Amalekites. He executes *herem* so that none can contradict his lies to Achish that he is raiding the southern regions of Judah.

David's defection and lies are fraught with moral ambiguity. One can defend the morality of his action by arguing: (1) his fighting against Judah's enemies conforms with Israel's mandate to execute *herem* upon these enemies. In fact, Saul lost his crown because he did not exact *herem* against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3). (2) His missions against these enemies are successful. (3) Deception is acceptable in war (see p. 515n12). On the other hand, the arguments against the morality of his actions are stronger: (1) David is acting out of fear, which is incompatible with the faith that pleases God (27:1). (2) He does not consult *I AM* to gain his assent, even though David has the priest's oracular device. He later inquires of God whether to pursue the raiding Amalekites (30:7–8). (3) God marvelously protected him thus far; why not now? (4) When God blesses with wealth, he adds no trouble to it (Prov. 10:22), but Ziklag was plundered and its families captured, prompting mutiny. David recovers his faith when he seeks to recover the families (1 Sam. 30:6). In other words, David's practices at Gath and Ziklag are not normative for faith and practice.

The episode peaks when David's double game is subjected to an unambiguous and terrible test: Achish demands David fight with him against Israel (1 Sam. 28:1–2). The narrator contents himself at this point with David's double entendre response to Achish: "Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do," but instead of hearing it as the threat that it is, the stupid Achish makes David his bodyguard (Heb., "keeper of his head")!

b. Part B₁: Saul's Final Rejection at Endor (28:3–25)

The action moves from the Philistine camp to Saul's camp. In Saul's world a king does not engage in battle without consulting the deity. But filled with fear, Israel's king has no legal contact with the deity: by dreams (in the private sector) or Urim (in the cultic sector—the priest is with David) or a prophet (Gad is also with David). God cannot be made to speak either then by spiritism or today by exegesis. The Word of God is only a vehicle in Christ's hands. Saul has reached the nadir of rejection, marked by the silence of God. Desperate for divine direction, Saul consults a medium (i.e., a person who makes contact with familiar spirits), even though he rightly had earlier banned them from the land.⁴⁷ Symbolically he contacts her in the dark of night and puts on other clothes, entailing he has taken off his royal attire and other insignia of his dignity. When he asks her to bring up Samuel from the realm of the dead, the black magic professional recognizes Saul's identity. Assured the king will not punish her, she sees a “spirit” (Heb. *ʾlōhîm*, “a divine being” or “numinous figure”) coming up out of the ground, and Saul hears Samuel confirm his earlier oracle consigning Saul to lose his kingdom. The fact that the medium sees Samuel but does not hear him and that Saul hears Samuel but does not see him—and according to the Midrash, Saul's attendant experienced neither⁴⁸—show that we are in the realm of the invisible, parapsychological world of spirit, not the outward, visible, real world. Even the spiritual world into which the conspirators have nefariously entered is under the rule of True Strength. Overwhelmed by his final rejection and knowing that his end will come in battle on the morrow, Saul symbolically falls prostrate to the earth. After hearing Saul, the medium gives him his last supper in striking contrast to the festal meal Samuel gave him at their first supper (1 Sam. 9:22–24).

c. Part B₂: David Recovers Ziklag (1 Sam. 29)

The action returns to the Philistine camp where the commanders debate whether David is an angel or a devil (Heb. *śāṭān*). Achish contends for the former, but the less gullible think the latter more likely and dismiss David. Upon the return of David and his men to Ziklag, they discover to their dismay that the Amalekites have burned the town and have taken their wives and children captive. David consults *I AM* through the ephod, pursues the Amalekites, and with the providential aid of a dying and abandoned soldier from the Amalekite raiding party who turns informant, recovers everything—emphasized by threefold repetition in verses 16, 18, and 19 to point to *I AM*'s watchful care over David. This scene is all about plunder. David recovers all the plunder, and the

soldiers give all the livestock to him, but David does not enrich himself. Instead, he distributes it to the fatigued soldiers who stayed behind to watch the baggage during the battle and to the cities of Judah, showing his recognition that *I AM* gives salvation and that his loyalty remains with Judah, not Philistia.

d. Part A₂: Saul's Demise (1 Sam. 31)

Once again the narrator returns to Saul, this time in his fatal encounter with the Philistines on the mountains of Gilboa. As the Israelites flee before the Philistines, the Philistines press hard upon Saul. Since he is mortally wounded and his armor bearer will not kill him, Saul falls upon his own sword so that the Philistines cannot abuse him. Unlike the righteous, he does not seek refuge in *I AM* in his death (Prov. 12:28). On the next day the Philistines dismember him and dishonor the Lord's anointed, among other things, by fastening his body and that of his sons to the walls of Beth Shan. The Jabeshites take down his body and honor in his death the king who saved them from Nahash (1 Sam. 11).

The Chronicler defines what is meant by trusting in God's true strength and by rejecting fake strength: "Saul died because he was unfaithful to *I AM*; he did not keep the word of *I AM* and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of *I AM*. So *I AM* put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse" (1 Chron. 10:13–14). Faith that brings in God's kingdom perseveres in obeying *I AM*'s word through the Book of the Law and prophets, and it looks to *I AM* for guidance. Such a person rules in God's kingdom. In other words, faith in True Strength prevails over the fake strength of human machinations. This is the theology of 1 Samuel.

THOUGHT QUESTION

From the prophet-historian of Samuel's photographs of the soul, what do you learn for your social choices from the lives of Hannah, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, and David?

[1.](#) In this chapter I lean heavily on J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (hereafter *NAPS*), 4 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981–86).

[2.](#) The book's unified story line and artistic plot, which intertwines David's life with the lives of Samuel and Saul (1 Sam.) and then chronicles David's rise and decline (2 Sam. 1–20), suggests that though the book is divided into two books in our English Bibles, it is in fact one book. Not until the fifteenth century AD was the Hebrew text divided into two books. The book is probably a literary bifid — that is, although one book, its almost two equal halves are designed to fit two scrolls. The first scroll appropriately ends with the death of Saul and Jonathan, and the second begins with David's elegy for them. The anonymous narrator probably depends on the written records of the prophets Samuel, Nathan, and Gad (1 Chron. 29:29). The book's long, verbatim dialogues and meticulously recorded details of characters and events validate the notion that the book's sources contained eyewitness accounts of its historical data. Higher critics commonly hypothesize large, discrete blocks of material within the book: the ark narrative (1 Sam. 4–6; 2 Sam. 6), the history of David's rise (1 Sam. 16–2 Sam. 5), and the court history of David (also called “the succession narrative” [2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2]). More important, however, the final work is certainly an artistic literary unity. Even more important, the divinely inspired narrator is omniscient, knowing the thoughts and actions of God in heaven — such as his sending an evil spirit to torment Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) — and of the hidden human heart — such as Saul's scheme to kill David (1 Sam. 18:17). A probably earlier form of the book was edited into the Deuteronomistic history during the exile. The succession narrative (2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2) shows beyond reasonable doubt that the books of Samuel and Kings are edited into a unified whole (see [chap. 25.I](#)).

[3.](#) Kenneth Kitchen argues for the following dates: Eli, a contemporary of

Samson (1080–1060 BC): 1102–1062; Samuel: 1062–1042 (his sons ruled in the south ca. 1045); Saul, emending the obviously corrupt text of 1 Sam. 13:31 to read thirtytwo years: 1042–1010; David: 1010–970 (Ishbaal ruled in the northern kingdom 1006–1004); Solomon: 970–930. The information from external sources for these characters is almost nil because the Assyrians had no contact with them, and from Egypt we have virtually no historical inscriptions mentioning Palestinian powers between Rameses III (ca. 1184–1153) and Sheshonq I (ca. 945–924). Nevertheless, the Tell Dan inscription (ca. 825) and with virtual certainty the Moabite Stone (ca. 825) mention the “house of David,” implying David’s role as a personal dynastic founder. Kitchen finds David’s name in a list of Sheshonq I (ca. 925) as well. Kitchen also finds that the narrative about Israel’s three kings of the united monarchy fits their ethos: (1) Saul’s regime compares with the ethos and practices of Levantine kingship. (2) David’s “empire” belongs to a particular type of “mini empire” that existed only in the interval between 1180 and 870 and at no other time in the first millennium. (3) Solomon’s foreign relations, revenues, and buildings fit the historical horizon of his day. Kitchen also argues that the physical archaeology of tenth-century Canaan is consistent with the existence of a unified state on its terrain. In this light Kitchen draws the conclusion: “In short, the testing of the biblical text against external dates (texts and artifactual contexts) shows precious little fantasy and much realistic agreement in practical and cultural aspects” (Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 81–158).

[4.](#) For significance of the anointing ritual, see “Messianism” in [chap. 30](#).IV.

[5.](#) NAPS, 31.

[6.](#) Ibid., 47.

[7.](#) Ibid.

[8.](#) Ibid., 40.

[9.](#) The “horn” of various animals (rams, wild oxen) is a symbol of pride and strength (cf. Ps. 75:10).

[10.](#) Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 229.

[11.](#) Sacral anointing was widely practiced in the ancient Near East and in Israel, applying to both sacred objects and sacred personnel, usually with reference to the king. His anointing symbolized his consecration to and authorization for divine service and a promise of divine empowerment for that service. From the Hebrew word *māšaḥ*. “to anoint,” is derived *Messiah* and its Greek equivalent, *Christ[os]*.

[12.](#) His statement underscores God’s grace of sending Jesus Christ as the

mediator between God and mortals (1 Tim. 2:5).

[13.](#) Cited in L. M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12* (Decatur, Ga.: Almond, 1985), 127.

[14.](#) See Hophni, Phinehas, and Ichabod (1 Sam. 4); Ahijah (1 Sam. 14 [= Ahimelech]), assassinated priest of Nob (1 Sam. 21–22), and his son Abiathar, who joined the abortive coup of Adonijah (1 Kings 2:26–27).

[15.](#) George Martin, *Reading Scripture as the Word of God: Practical Approaches and Attitudes*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1982).

[16.](#) NAPS, 229.

[17.](#) Ibid., 231.

[18.](#) “Scholars have bungled the potential unity of 9:1–10:16 from the very start by the sticking on of labels, which posits that here a Volkstuemliche Sage [folktale] has been combined (read: bumbling thrown together by an editor) with eigentliche Geschichtserzaehlung [truly historical]” (ibid., 321).

[19.](#) Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 421.

[20.](#) As a member of a wealthy family, Saul plows with oxen, not donkeys (see 1 Sam. 11:5; cf. 1 Kings 19:19).

[21.](#) 4QSama, LXXL, and Josephus (*Antiquities*, 6.68–71) probably preserve an original reading that is found between [chaps. 10](#) and [11](#): “Now Nahash, the king of the Ammonites, had been oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites grievously. He gouged out the right eye of each of them and struck terror and dread in Israel. No men of the Israelites who were across the Jordan remained whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But 7,000 men had escaped from the Ammonites and entered Jabesh Gilead. About a month later, Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-Gilead” (see 11:1ff. in TNIV). Fokkelman (*NAPS*, 4:459–61) argues that the reading is secondary, but his arguments are not convincing.

[22.](#) J. Robert Vannoy, *Covenant Renewal at Gilgal: A Study of 1 Samuel 11:14–12:25* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack, 1977), 259.

[23.](#) It is important to notice that the threat of Nahash is not part of the cycle of God’s judgment. The cycle here is: (1) sin (ask for a king in response of Nahash [see v. 17]); (2) judgment (implicit — see above): a king of their choice (see 8:10–18); (3a) if serve *I AM*; (4a) “good”; (3b) if do not serve *I AM*; (4b) punishment. The cycle is not according to the pattern of Judges, which would be: (1) sin: you asked for a king; (2) judgment — Nahash (in parallel with Sisera, etc.); (3) cry to the Lord; (4) deliverer.

[24.](#) V. Philips Long, *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence*, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars

Press, 1989), 97.

[25.](#) Shermayahu Talmon, “The Biblical Idea of Statehood,” in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. G. Rendsburg *et al.* (New York: KTAV, 1980), 239–48.

[26.](#) For equation of Gibeah with Geba, see J. M. Miller, “Geba/ Gibeah of Benjamin,” *VT* 25, no. 2 (April 1975): 145–66.

[27.](#) Long, *Reign and Rejection of King Saul*, 97.

[28.](#) *NAPS*, 2:42.

[29.](#) The Philistines have a monopoly on iron, allowing Israel to use iron only for peaceful purposes (1 Sam. 13:19–22).

[30.](#) The armor-bearer carries the weapons for the different stages of battle as a caddy carries the various clubs of a golf champion for the different stages of the course.

[31.](#) M. Kessler, “Narrative Technique in 1 Samuel 16:1–13,” *CBQ* 32 (1970): 543–54.

[32.](#) *NAPS*, 2:115.

[33.](#) Regarding an evil spirit coming upon Saul, see [chap. 21](#).IV.E.

[34.](#) The LXX lacks vv. 12–31 and vv. 55–58, relieving the tension.

[35.](#) *NAPS*, 2:203.

[36.](#) J. Daniel Hays (“Reconsidering the Height of Goliath,” *JETS* 48/4 [Dec. 2005]: 701–14) makes the textual case that Goliath was six-feet-nine versus the average male height at his time of between five feet and five-feet-six.

[37.](#) *NAPS*, 4:148.

[38.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:198.

[39.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:366.

[40.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:410.

[41.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:408.

[42.](#) *Ibid.*

[43.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:422.

[44.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:426.

[45.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:476–77.

[46.](#) *Ibid.*, 2:529.

[47.](#) *I AM*’s prophets, such as Samuel, rejected these dark spiritual forces because it presupposes they have dominion over the future apart from *I AM* who upholds justice.

[48.](#) Midrash on 2 Sam. 24:5 (in the edition by S. Buber, Vilna 1925, 75–76).

Chapter 23

THE GIFT OF THE DAVIDIC COVENANT: 2 SAMUEL

There are two principles, which divide the wills of men, covetousness and charity. Not that covetousness cannot exist along with faith in God, nor charity with worldly riches; but covetousness uses God, and enjoys the world, and charity is the opposite.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 8.571

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of 2 Samuel narrates the apotheosis of David and the decisive moment in salvation history when *I AM* establishes the house of David forever over God's kingdom. Second Samuel is all about David, from Saul's death to David's decline. It opens paradoxically with the Philistine vassal and God's anointed king at Ziklag killing an Amalekite who fabricates a self-serving report that he killed Saul and has brought the royal crown to David. The mendacious Amalekite functions as a foil to David: David shows respect for *I AM*'s anointed by killing the Amalekite body stripper who shows disrespect for God's anointed. In this first scene, David is represented as showing supreme respect for the mad king who has been pursuing him to death without cause. Israel's sweet singer's sincere national and personal funerary dirge for Saul and for Jonathan genuinely eulogizes these two heroes who stood shoulder to shoulder until death on behalf of Israel. Despite appearances, the Philistine vassal at Ziklag remains loyal to Israel's king.

Second Samuel adds two sections to 1 Samuel: section 3, "The Rise of David" (2 Sam. 2–8) and section 4, "The Decline of David," the latter sometimes labeled the "succession narrative" (2 Sam. 9–20). An appendix intercalates (2 Sam. 21–24) into the succession narrative (2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2). Section 3 peaks when *I AM* entrusts his kingdom forever to the house of David. Section 4 tests that covenant. *I AM*'s other covenants — the Noahic, Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and new — are immediately tested by the failure of its beneficiaries: Noah got drunk; Abraham in unbelief fathered a child by Hagar; Israel worshiped a golden calf; Peter denied Jesus Christ. Shortly after the Davidic covenant, David took away a wife's purity and murdered her husband, but in spite of David's gross sin and its contribution to his psychological decline, *I AM*'s unconditional covenant with David stands. David's sin and spiritual funk point to a greater son of David, the Son of God whose eternal person sits on the heavenly throne of which David's earthly throne in Jerusalem is a type. He fulfills the Davidic covenant.

II. SECTION 3: RISE Of DAVID (2 SAM. 2–8)

As in the case of Abraham, before obligating himself with an unconditional covenant to David, *I AM* enjoys a warm personal relationship with his beneficiary (see [chap. 12](#) above).¹ As a reward for David's years of faithful service, God obligates himself to give King David an eternal house. The reward is packed full of God's grace; the eternal return is incalculably greater than the temporal investment (see Matt. 19:29).

Section 3 of Samuel consists of two acts: "*I AM* Consolidates David's Kingdom at Hebron" (2 Sam. 2:1–5:5), and "*I AM* Establishes David's Throne Forever at Jerusalem" (2 Sam. 5:6–8:18). These acts are closely linked in similarities and in contrasts, and together they show the warm partnership between *I AM* and his anointed king.

1. David changes his capital from Hebron to Jerusalem (see 5:5), a move that affects the rest of salvation history.

2. God sanctions David's actions at the beginning of each act (2:1 [by *I AM*]; 5:9–10 [by the narrator]).

3. The numerical and geographic notices regarding David's two periods of rule at Hebron (2:11) and at Jerusalem (5:4–5) tightly link David's rise both chronologically (7 + 33 years respectively) and spatially.

4. The name *I AM* is mostly absent from act 1; instead, he acts mightily behind the scenes through extraordinary providence. In act 2 *I AM* is mentioned repeatedly and emphatically.

5. The two lists of David's wives and the sons born to them at Hebron (3:2–5) and Jerusalem (5:13–16) function as a sign of *I AM*'s continuing blessing on David. Many wives and sons in David's world signify wealth, rank, and a future prosperity through the prospects of a well-manned dynasty.

6. Both series of wives and their sons are given after narratives of David's decisive military victories, first over the house of Saul (2:8–3:1) and then over the Jebusites (5:6–10).

7. In act 1 the generals — Joab for the house of David and Abner for the house of Saul — take to the field of battle.

8. In act 2 Joab disappears and David himself leads his army against foreign powers: Jebus (5:6–16), Philistia (5:17–25), and a whole list of victories in ancient Near Eastern annalistic style ([chap. 8](#)).

9. David's ascent nearly peaks in act 2 when he functions as the liturgical leader (6:1–19), just prior to his receiving the eternal covenant (2 Sam. 7).

10. Michal, daughter of Saul, is at the center of both acts: first as a pawn in remarriage and attraction to David (3:12–18; 6:20–23) and then as a barren wife repudiated by David for her despising his liturgical enthusiasm.

A. *I AM* Consolidates David's Kingdom at Hebron (2:2–5:5)

Each of the three scenes of act 1 ends in death: Asahel, Abner, and Ish-Bosheth all die. The act can be viewed as having a chiastic structure:

- A David is anointed king of Judah at Hebron
- B Abner makes Ish-Bosheth king in Mahanaim
- C Civil war, battle of Gibeon; Abner kills Asahel
- D Abner—Ish-Bosheth conflict over Rizpah, Saul's concubine
- E Michal is the pawn that symbolizes transfer of power
- D' Abner hands over Israel to David because of Rizpah
- C' Joab kills Abner because of his brother
- B' Ish-Bosheth no longer has Abner's support and is liquidated
- A' David is anointed king of Israel at Jerusalem

A/A': anointings give unity to the act; B/B': Abner wants to be king maker twice; C/C': Abner's self-ambition causes much bloodshed; D/D': *I AM* uses arrogant Abner—as he had his proud cousin, King Saul — to promote David through Abner's self-regard. E: the extradition of Michal marks the transfer of power from the house of Saul to the house of David.

This act continues the message of 1 Samuel: God blesses the lowly anointed one who trusts in True Strength, but his wrath rests on the proud and haughty who trust in fake strength. David never touches the formerly all-powerful Saul, yet Providence, through the moral ambiguity of others, fulfills his promise to give David, not Saul's successors, the throne of his kingdom. J. P. Fokkelman comments: "Joab serves him on the battlefield, the women give him a potential dynasty in the form of sons, Abner organizes the transfer of Israel; and the assassins bring Ish-Bosheth's head to him. Without doing almost anything, he buries all these Saulides in emergency graves in Hebron, the place of his throne!"²

David's fruitful wives contrast markedly with the tragic women in the house of Saul. (1) Saul's concubine Rizpah is taken by Abner (2 Sam. 3:7). (2) Saul's daughter Michal is handed over to David and remains barren (3:15; 6:23). (3) A female porter (according to the Greek text) dozes while assassins enter the house and kill Ish-Bosheth. (4) A wet-nurse, upon hearing of Saul and Jonathan's deaths, flees, but Jonathan's son falls out of her arms and is crippled for life (4:4).

1. Abner Precipitates a Trial by Battle (2:1–3:5)

Israel has two kings, one too many. David is accepted as king by the house of Judah (2 Sam. 2:1— 4; 10b — 11), and David calls upon the men of Jabesh Gilead to accept him as their king (2:4b–7). Abner, who like Saul believes in human, not divine, strength (1 Sam. 14:50), creates a northern kingdom under Ish-Bosheth, son of Saul. The crown prince has primogeniture rights to Saul's throne but lacks the prophetic designation (cf. 1 Sam. 16:1–13), charisma (2 Sam. 3:11), and popular recognition that David enjoys (2 Sam. 2:17), all three of which are essential criteria for kingship (see [chap. 22](#) above). In spite of these glaring lacks in Ish-Bosheth, Abner creates a civil war to contest by battle the right of *I AM*'s chosen king to the throne.

Joab, David's nephew and commander in chief, like David, believes in *I AM* (2 Sam. 2:18) and leads David's men to victory against Abner. The narrator provides an exemplary description of the battle. Fleet-footed Asahel, Joab's brother (23:24), perishes by underestimating Abner and overestimating his own ability. Asahel relentlessly pursues Abner to secure first place on the battlefield. But Abner, to prevent a reprisal by Joab, yells to Asahel to back off (2:22). Asahel refuses, and so Abner violently kills him (2:23). The incident shows that Abner is strong, sensible, mature, and humane. He is no crazy fighter. Indeed, Abner ends the battle by calling out to Joab to cut off his pursuit to spare more bloodshed and bitterness (2:26). Like Saul, his cousin has an exceptional gift but no faith in *I AM*.

2. Abner Is Murdered (3:6–39)

The second scene opens with Ish-Bosheth rebuffing Abner for having sex with Saul's concubine, a sign that Abner aims to replace Saul. When Abner's self-advancement is stalemated by Ish-Bosheth's questioning his right to the concubines, the ambitious general thinks he has a better chance for advancement

by siding with David. He plays God and proudly claims to have the power to “transfer the kingdom” (2 Sam. 3:10). He condemns himself for resisting *I AM*’s anointed when he says, “... if I do not do for David what *I AM* promised him on oath” (3:9). Had he respected Samuel’s authoritative voice, this powerful and gifted man could have saved Israel much bloodshed. Also, he could have spared his own family much heartache. His transfer of Michal from her second husband, Paltiel, to David symbolizes his handing over of Israel to David. The transference is just, for David secured Michal by risking his life (3:14; cf. 1 Sam. 25:44), and he does not violate the law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, for David’s separation from Michal was involuntary. Nevertheless, the transfer is inhumane. Michal is a victim, a pawn, in Abner’s game of playing God as a king maker. His high-handed tactics cost Michal and Paltiel the true love they enjoyed together (2 Sam. 3:16). Abner not only resists God; he also resists the elders of Israel, for he admits to them, “You have wanted to make David your king” (v. 17). Because it now suits him, the hypocrite tries to make God dance to his tune: “Now do it, for *I AM* promised David ...” (v. 18).³ Gifted Abner’s self-ambition causes many to die and suffer.

As Abner feared, Joab retaliates and stabs Abner in the stomach; but whereas Abner fights publicly and honestly, Joab murders his rival privately by deception (2 Sam. 3:22–27).⁴ Because both generals are guilty, each in his own way (i.e., of treason and of murder), David resolves the situation by pronouncing a curse on Joab’s house — that is, he turns to God to punish Joab (vv. 28–29). Ultimately, Joab’s crime did not go unpunished (1 Kings 2:5–6, 28–35). Moreover, David publicly distances himself from Joab’s dastardly deed: he commands all the people to mourn Abner (2 Sam 3:31–32), composes a lament for Abner (vv. 33–34), takes an oath to fast in mourning (vv. 35–37), and evaluates Abner to be a prince (v. 38). In an *inclusio* he again pronounces a curse on Joab (v. 39). The people obey their king and in their collective judgment acquit him of wrongdoing. David further distances himself from Joab in the funeral procession, placing Joab in front of the bier and himself behind it.

3. Ish-Bosheth Is Murdered (4:1–12)

Recab and Baanah, leaders of bands of raiders that serve Ish-Bosheth, treacherously turn against their king. They come to the house of the crown prince in the heat of the day while he is asleep in his bedroom. According to the Septuagint, while a female porter (*hē thyrōros*) of the house dozes, the treacherous brothers sneak by her and assassinate the crown prince and

decapitate him. They bring his head to David claiming themselves as those whom *I AM* uses to avenge David's enemies. Instead of receiving David's commendation, they receive his rebuke. *I AM*, David argues, who rescues him from all his troubles, does not need disloyal cutthroats to save his anointed. Instead of the reward they had hoped for, David cuts off their hands and feet, the parts of the body that carried out the murder. David's attendants bury Ish-Bosheth's head in Abner's tomb. Ironically, Abner and Ish-Bosheth, adversaries first of David and then of each other, are buried in a common tomb at Hebron, David's capital. The scene ends with all the tribes of Israel identifying themselves as David's kin, unanimously proclaiming David as their real leader even under Saul's rule, and confessing that *I AM* has chosen David (2 Sam. 5:1–5).

B. *I AM* Establishes David's Throne Forever at Jerusalem (5:6–8:18)

The entire second act has a sacral character. *I AM*'s name appears in act 1 only in 2 Samuel 2:1, but in this act his name appears constantly. Its sacral character shows *I AM*'s spiritual intimacy with David. Because *I AM* was with David, the king took Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6–12). *I AM* twice answers David in oracles that present the strategy to defeat the Philistines (5:17–25). In [chapter 6](#) *I AM* manifests himself against Uzzah in a *numen tremendum* (6:6–14). *I AM* “had given [David] rest” (7:1) forms the background for God's words to David and David's words to God (2 Sam. 7). The narrator credits *I AM* with David's victories that enable the chosen king to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant (8:6, 14). Fokkelman says, “There is indeed no other Act in the books of Samuel which so clearly puts God forward as agent as this one does.”⁵

1. Scene 1: Jerusalem: The City of David (5:6–6:23)

The first two scenes (2 Sam. 5–6, 7) feature Jerusalem: captured (2 Sam. 5), sanctified by God's presence (2 Sam. 6), and designated as God's eternal dwelling place (2 Sam. 7).

David captures Jerusalem, taking up his residence there, and enlarges it “because *I AM* [is] with him” (2 Sam. 5:10). When Hiram king of Tyre sends messengers and materials to build David a palace, “David knew that *I AM* had

established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel” (5:11–12). At approximately the same time that David is besieging Jerusalem, the Philistines attack Israel’s newly anointed king. David asks for and receives oracles from *I AM* to defeat the Philistines (5:17–25); they are not heard of again during David’s reign.

In [chapter 6](#) the name *I AM* occurs twenty-one times and the name David, twenty-two times. Four times it is said that David worships “before *I AM*.” *I AM*’s eternal dwelling place is designated the “City of David” to stress that the ark is housed on crown lands and so permanently connected with *I AM*’s anointed. Fokkelman notes that the episodes of [chapter 6](#) occur in an alternating structure. In the following schema, *P* stands for “Procession” and *C* for “Conflict”:

- A P: Record of a great national procession (vv. 1–5)
- B C: Irreverence for God by Uzzah (vv. 6–11)
- A’ P: Record of a procession resumed (vv. 12–19)
- B’ C: Scorn for David by Michal (vv. 20–23)⁶

The conflict episodes end in the deaths of Uzzah and of Michal respectively, and teach lessons on proper worship. Unlike David, both Uzzah and Michal lack enthusiasm. God wants enthusiasm and spontaneity from his worshipers, including all kinds of music “before him.” Uzzah is formalistic in worship; all aspects of worship must be orderly—oxen must not stumble. Michal stands completely outside the worship scene with no identification with *I AM* and his anointed king. Moreover, though Uzzah stands within the worship scene, he substitutes human regulations for God’s law. *I AM* orders Levites, not oxen, to bear his ark (cf. 1 Kings 8:3). For nominal worshipers enthusiastic reverence is an oxymoron. Yet *I AM* demands reverence/awe by obedience to his word without quenching the spirit of enthusiasm. *I AM*, while demanding reverence and attention to detail, is also spontaneous and free, as seen in his blessing Obed-Edom the Gittite, who is probably a circumcised Philistine mercenary under Ittai (see 2 Sam. 15:19–22). The God who demands reverence/awe in worshiping him is also free to show grace where he will.

David learns to harness his enthusiasm with reverence. After *I AM* kills Uzzah for his false worship, David assures his fellowship with God and his favor before proceeding by sacrificing a bull and a fattened calf every six steps in the procession, one less than the sacred number to stop short of presuming upon the divine. He is girded with a linen ephod, probably a loincloth, to show he is an acceptable temple servant (cf. 1 Sam. 2:18b). He exercises the holy office of

sacral king.

“Michal daughter of Saul,” not “Michal wife of David,” identifies herself as belonging to the royal blood of a different tribe and family than David. She looks down on David “through a window,” a scenic description of her worldview in which she considers herself better than *I AM*’s enthusiast.⁷ She mocks David’s wearing the ephod loincloth and regards his taking off of his royal robe and appearing in only a priest’s loincloth as demeaning himself before the young women. But David knows his true stature before *I AM* as God’s chosen king, and he rebukes her: even if he should lose his self-esteem, the slave girls will not abandon him. Michal’s abandoning David makes her less worthy than the slave girls who recognize David’s election and his true greatness. Michal “had no children,” probably because she becomes a bitter grass widow in the new palace. The estranged relationship between David and Michal reminds the audience that loving *I AM* with all the heart sometimes entails hating family (Luke 14:26). Hebrew culture highly values family solidarity, but true worshipers act in unconventional ways — including distancing themselves from family—to give God first place in their adoring service of him. The estrangement of husband and wife also functions as a foil to the warm intimacy between *I AM* and David that forms the background to God’s reward to David of an everlasting covenant (cf. Mark 10:29–30).

2. Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7–8)

The climactic scene of the book of Samuel opens with David in his palace at “rest from all his enemies” who had thwarted his rise to the throne and his announcing to Nathan, *I AM*’s prophet, that he desires to build a “house” (i.e., temple) for *I AM*. David aims to honor *I AM* and may be asserting his legitimacy as Israel’s king, since temple building was a royal prerogative.⁸ The threefold messenger formula, “thus says *I AM*” divides God’s oracular and pastoral response through his plenipotentiary messenger into three parts (2 Sam. 7:5, 8, 11). First, God turns down David as the king to build his temple. David is a warrior who sheds blood; a temple symbolizes peace without bloodshed (vv. 5–7). Second, *I AM* addresses David as “my servant,” an accolade bestowed on such noteworthies as Moses and Joshua. The metaphor denotes: (1) responsible obedience to God’s direction, (2) faithful dependence on God’s care, (3) personal intimacy of trust in one another, and (4) humility.⁹ In a preamble in the intimate style of “I-you” address, *I AM* reminds David he chose him while still a shepherd boy to be his *nāgîd* (“sacred leader”) and cut off all his enemies. *I AM*

now covenants with David that during David's own lifetime he will give: (1) him a great name (i.e., having an international dimension, v. 9b), (2) Israel a secure place from wicked oppressors (v. 10), and (3) him rest from all his enemies (v. 11a). These promises are realized in 2 Samuel 8.

The third part pertains to two sets of future blessings on David after his death (2 Sam. 7:11b–16; cf. 1 Chron. 17 and Ps. 89). The beneficiary is David as indicated by “you” (singular). *I AM* summarizes the future covenant blessings by “I will establish a *house* for you” (a play on the word; see 2 Sam. 7:5). The first set of future promises pertain to Solomon: (1) *I AM* will raise up offspring “who will come out from your own body,” a reference to Solomon, not Jesus Christ. (2) *I AM* will establish his kingdom (i.e., the sphere of his authority, v. 12b) and (3) the throne of his kingdom (i.e., the symbol of his rule, v. 13). (4) *I AM* will be his father and he will be God's son (vv. 14–15) — that is, God will discipline David's son according to his son's covenant fidelity (v. 14), but *I AM* will never take his *hesed* (“loving-kindness,” entailing his preserving Solomon's kingdom and throne) away from him (v. 15). In other words, while the covenant is unconditional, the king's experience of its blessings depends on his obedience to the Mosaic covenant. The unconditional Davidic covenant is not a *carte blanche* to David's descendants to do as they please without regard to the moral boundaries of the Ten Commandments.

The second set of future promises pertain to the remote future: (1) David's house (i.e., his dynasty, not necessarily Solomon's)¹⁰ will endure (Heb. *ne-man*: “to be permanent, to endure”)¹¹ forever, (2) his kingdom will endure forever, and (3) his throne will be established (Heb. *nāḵôn*) forever (2 Sam. 7:16).

In sum, the Davidic covenant contains a total of ten blessings: three fulfilled in David's lifetime; four in the lifetime of his son Solomon, and three in his remote future. David responds to the oracle with a long prayer (2 Sam. 7:18–29) of thanksgiving and praise (vv. 18–24) and with a petition that God keep his promise of a lasting dynasty “so that your name will be great forever” (v. 26). In other words, God's renown is tied up with David's renown. To this day *I AM* and his chosen king remain famous through the fulfillment of the covenant promises in the eternal son of David, Jesus Christ, whose throne in heavenly Jerusalem rules an eternal kingdom that today encompasses the earth.

The annalistic survey of David's successful international military campaigns confirms the covenant. The refrain “*I AM* gave David victory” (2 Sam. 8:6, 14) divides the campaigns into two parts: an enumeration of four relatively northern campaigns against Philistia, Moab, Zobah, and Damascus (vv. 1–6) and of the campaign against Edom in the south (vv. 13–14). The Aram-Edom connection

(see 2 Sam. 10) is interrupted in verses 7–12 by an enumeration of the booty that David devotes to *I AM* at Jerusalem. The refrain and intercalation puts the annals into the sphere of the sacred. A register of David's state officials draws the chapter to its conclusion (vv. 15–18). That David's sons are priests (NIV, "royal advisers") probably means they are officials mediating between *I AM* and his people.¹² In short, in section 3 the heavenly kingdom of God's will being done on earth broke loose during David's lifetime. Section 3 presents the already aspect of God's kingdom coming to earth; section 4, its not-yet aspect. The Lord's exemplary prayer, "Thy kingdom come," has an eschatological accent. The already aspect of that coming kingdom gives assurance and desire for its consummation.

III. SECTION 4: DEMISE OF DAVID (2 SAM. 9–20)

Sections 3 and 4 of the book of Samuel present a remarkable contrast of David under *I AM*'s hands of blessing and of discipline respectively.¹³ David has steadily ascended until his apotheosis in *I AM*'s bestowing on him an everlasting covenant to rule Israel; in this section he crashes morally and psychologically. The narrator strikingly contrasts the two sections by his summary of David's officials at the end of each section (2 Sam. 8:15–18 and 20:23–26). In the second he gaps, not blanks, the introduction to the officials: "David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people" (8:15),¹⁴ and he ominously adds, "Adoniram ... was in charge of forced labor" (see 1 Kings 12:18). In the exile Israel will look back longingly on the David of section 3 and hope for someone better than the David of section 4.

David's conquest of the Ammonites in 2 Samuel 8 occurs in connection with his rise (i.e., *I AM* is with him); in [chapters 10–12](#) that conquest features in his adultery with Bathsheba and his cover-up murder of her husband. Section 4 develops under the long shadow of that sin. Fokkelman notes, "The work's main character, King David himself, loses almost all initiative after his sin— He no longer acts but is acted upon; disasters overcome him."¹⁵ David himself sentences a rich man who stole a poor man's lamb and ate it to return fourfold. David figuratively steals and eats a lamb (i.e., Bathsheba) and restores fourfold (i.e., the deaths of his illegitimate son by Bathsheba, and then in order of his sons' primogeniture rights to the throne, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah). Source critics call section 4 the "succession narrative." According to Leonhard Rost, the *Thronfolgegeschichte* (Succession History) is written "*in maiorem gloriam Salomonis*." More precisely, however, it teaches that what a man sows, he reaps.¹⁶ The prophet Nathan appears at three crucial interventions (2 Sam. 7; 12; 1 Kings 1). In the first he presents the everlasting Davidic covenant; in the second, the everlasting sword in the house of David; and in the third, he safeguards the throne for *I AM*'s beloved Solomon. Nathan is present at both David's apotheosis and his fall.

A. David's Fall (2 Sam. 9–12)

1. The David-Ziba-Mephibosheth Triangle (9:1–13; 16:1–4; 19:25–31)

The David-Ziba-Mephibosheth triangle contrasts David's *hesed* toward Jonathan before his adultery with his lack of *hesed* after his sin with Bathsheba. The triangle is introduced at the beginning of this section because it pointedly and poignantly illustrates the decline of David from a perceptive and wise king to an imprudent and harsh king. The issue in this triangle is whether David makes a proper verdict in adjudicating a dispute between Ziba, Saul's servant, and Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson.

The first episode (2 Sam. 9) opens with David desiring to show *hesed* to Jonathan through his crippled son, Mephibosheth (1 Sam. 20:14–17; 23:16–18; cf. 2 Sam. 2:5). David learns from Ziba, a servant of Saul, of Mephibosheth's condition. David summons the son of Jonathan, and though crippled in both feet, and thus with great difficulty, Mephibosheth falls facedown to bow before the king, a posture not credited to Ziba. David shows Jonathan's son *hesed* by restoring to him Saul's sizable possessions (2 Sam. 9:6–13), granting him a place "always [to] eat at my table" (i.e., a place of warmth, care, and honor), and directing Ziba to care for Mephibosheth's estate.

In the second episode (2 Sam. 16:1–4), Ziba brings supplies to sustain David in his flight from Absalom and accuses Mephibosheth of not meeting David because he is a traitor. Mephibosheth allegedly says, "Today the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather's kingdom" (v. 3). David rewards Ziba by giving him Mephibosheth's property.

In the third episode (2 Sam. 19:25–31), Mephibosheth meets the triumphant king after the death of Absalom. The narrator depicts Mephibosheth's mourning appearance: "He had not taken care of his feet or trimmed his mustache or washed his clothes from the day the king left until the day he returned safely" (19:24). This is not the decorum of a man who is rejoicing because he expects to inherit a kingdom. Mephibosheth testifies that he intended to meet David in spite of his being crippled, but Ziba betrayed him. Nevertheless, with exceptional grace the wronged master rejects the notion of making an appeal to the king for his favor, for, he says, he has no right to the property in the first place. The king, however, instead of exonerating Jonathan's slandered son, curtly and coldly resolves the conflicted testimony by splitting the property between them. Mephibosheth retains his dignity and rejects the solution, giving up all his property to Ziba while incredibly retaining his devotion to David; he will not be

put on a par with a corrupt and greedy servant.¹⁷ David's lack of perspicacity beggars description.

2. War, Sex, and Violence (2 Sam. 10–12)

David's sin with Bathsheba is intercalated into the narrative of his war against the Ammonites (2 Sam. 10:1–19; 12:26–31). While Joab besieges the Ammonite king at Rabbah, David remains at home. Seeing Bathsheba bathing, David lusts for the body of the wife of Uriah, a Hittite member of David's elite warrior corps of Thirty (23:24, 39). She is a daughter of Eliam, son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, who is also listed among "The Thirty" (23:34; cf. 16:23). David sends for her; she apparently consents to have sex with the king (cf. Deut. 22:23–27) and becomes pregnant (2 Sam. 11:2–5).

David tries to cover up his crime — it would be obvious at the least to his servants whom he had sent to fetch Bathsheba to his bed — by summoning Uriah home from the front at Rabbah to enjoy his wife and make it appear he fathered the child (11:6–13). But the Hittite unwittingly refuses to play along and go to his house. Fokkelman says, he "refuses the luxury, safety and pampering of the home front and opts for the hard and dangerous existence at the war front."¹⁸ Even though David makes Uriah befuddled with drink, Fokkelman rightly surmises, "Uriah has so much made these values [of the Mosaic covenant] his own that even an excess of drink does not cause him to slip up morally."¹⁹

Foiled by the loyal and principled Hittite, the unfaithful, unprincipled David sends him back to Joab carrying his own death sentence: "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die" (2 Sam. 11:15). Although David did not intend it, other loyal soldiers died along with Uriah (v. 17). After receiving the report of Uriah's death from Joab, David tells Joab not to let the deaths upset him but to press the attack against the city and destroy it (v. 25). After a proper period of mourning for her husband, Bathsheba becomes David's wife and gives birth to a son (vv. 26–27).

Nathan now confronts David to bring the king to his senses by telling him an allegory. A traveler came to a rich man (i.e., David), but the rich man, even though he has a herd (i.e., many wives and concubines, 2 Sam. 12:8; 16:21), is so greedy that he is unwilling to spare his own lambs to feed the traveler. Instead, without pity the rich man takes the beloved lamb (i.e., Bathsheba) of a poor man (i.e., Uriah) to feed the traveler. David, not realizing the story is an allegory against him, is enraged and sentences the rich man to death but not before he

restores the theft fourfold as Exodus 22:1 demands (cf. Luke 19:8). Nathan's reply has become a classic: "You are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:7). By his allegory Nathan brings out of David his real nature and cures him of his discordant conduct. David's real sin, as Nathan explains, is that he despises God's word; and in his penitential psalm, David agrees: "Against you, you only, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4). Sin is a transgression of God's law, and so all sin is against God, and only the Lawgiver can forgive transgressors (Ps. 51:4 [6] ; Mark 2:5–6; see [chap. 16](#) above). God's trumping of justice by mercy to a repentant sinner is part of Torah. The Mosaic law is only a part of the Primary History, all of which is catechistic teaching.

The king's sin has a national dimension, and he must be punished publicly. His crime with the sword against Uriah is answered with God's "sword [that] will never depart" from David's house, probably a reference to the violent deaths of the first three successors to David's throne (Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah) and possibly a reference to future traumas (2 Sam. 12:10; cf. 2 Kings 11:1; 12:20). Moreover, although David committed adultery in secret, *I AM* will make the whole nation witness Absalom's incest with David's wives on the roof of his palace (2 Sam. 12:11–12).^{[20](#)}

David confesses his sin and repents, and although justice demands he be put to death, God's mercy is greater than his justice (2 Sam. 12:13–15). God nullifies the death sentence the king pronounces against himself. Out of his abounding love, grace, and mercy (Ps. 51:1; cf. Exod. 34:6), God forgives David so that sinners will know he is the God of grace, not of wrath, and be turned back to God (Ps. 51:13). David's forgiveness is exemplary. He hands over his classic penitential psalm, Psalm 51, to the chief musician for all Israel to sing. The proverb expresses the universal truth: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

Nevertheless, because David showed utter contempt for *I AM*,^{[21](#)} the child must die. David showed cynical indifference toward the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 11:25), but after his repentance he deeply considers death (12:15–23). He is no longer alienated from God or from himself.^{[22](#)} David rejects prayer and fasting for the dead because it is futile (v. 23). His statement regarding the dead child, "I will go to him," means that upon David's death he will go the realm of death that the child has already entered and that there is no hope of the child returning to him in this life. A. F. Kirkpatrick comments, "How far this falls short of the Christian hope of the Resurrection of the Body, and the Life Everlasting!"^{[23](#)}

After Bathsheba gives birth legitimately to Solomon, *I AM* through Nathan begins the succession narrative. R. P. Gordon comments on the fact that God

himself named the boy “Yedidiah”: “Since near eastern kings sometimes claimed divine patronage from birth as proof of the legitimacy of their rule, we may have already in this statement the suggestion that Solomon was marked out as Yahweh’s nominee to succeed David on the throne.”²⁴

The narrative now returns to the siege of Rabbah (2 Sam. 12:26–31). The intercalation in the war narrative teaches several lessons: (1) self-indulgence in war is dangerous; (2) political victory is more enjoyable when combined with personal victory; (3) settling accounts with an enemy’s crimes can wait, but settling accounts with crimes against God cannot wait; and (4) as long as David is loyal to his soldiers on the battlefield away from Jerusalem, he is on the right path.

B. Chips Off the Old Block: Rape and Murder (2 Sam. 13–14)

As in the cases of the idolatrous priest and the callous priests in which private sins in the home have national repercussions (Judg. 17–21), so also Amnon’s rape of his half sister, Tamar, in the royal palace will lead to a national civil war. Gordon notes: “Herewith begins a tale of woes that dogs the royal house throughout much of the remainder of 2 Samuel. The story of Amnon’s violation of Tamar ... provides the necessary background in that it explains why Amnon the crown prince was murdered on Absalom’s orders, and why Absalom became estranged from his father (14:33).”²⁵

Woes dog the royal house, because in the scenes of act 2, which precede Absalom’s revolt (act 3), David is blind and inactive with regard to his sons, and in the scenes after the revolt, David is self-absorbed with his own flesh and blood. Imperceptive, indecisive, and increasingly self-absorbed, he stumbles into one tragedy after another and finally plunges the nation into two wars: a revolutionary war and a civil war.

1. Amnon Rapes Tamar (13:1–22)

As David lusted for Bathsheba, so now Amnon, his oldest son (2 Sam. 3:2–3), lusts for his half sister Tamar. Functioning as a foil to David, Amnon’s cousin Jonadab is “a very shrewd man” (v. 3). Unlike David he notes Amnon’s haggard appearance and wheedles out of Amnon that he is “love-sick” for Tamar.

Jonadab devises a scheme for Amnon to have sex with Tamar. Amnon will feign to be so sick that even his father will take note and come to him. Amnon will tell his father— while keeping a straight face — that the king can help cure his son by sending Tamar to his house to prepare “two heart-shaped pastries” (Heb. *šty lbbt*²⁶ [TNIV, “special bread”]) in his sight (i.e., while he is lying in his bed) and then feed him from her hand (i.e., leaning unsuspectingly over the bed to spoon-feed him). The plan is diabolically cunning, for her presence there is by the permission of the king, who could scarcely refuse a sick son. Jonadab outwits the king, who dances to his tune (see vv. 32–33, 35).

In a coldly planned sex crime, when Tamar enters Amnon’s house, the prince orders everybody out, and after he inveigles her into his bed chamber, he rapes the innocent virgin. Her rebuke, “Such a thing should not be done in Israel” (13:12) shows that “Israel drew a clear distinction between itself and its Canaanite environment, especially in the realm of sexual conduct.”²⁷ The scene is a classic illustration of the modern proverbs “Idle hands are the Devil’s workshop” and “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton).

Tamar proposes marriage as better than rape, saying, “The king ... will not keep me from being married to you” (2 Sam. 13:13) even though it contravenes Israel’s catechism (Lev. 18:9; 20:17; Deut. 27:22). The real power behind the girl, however, is her full brother Absalom, not the king. Absalom’s statement to her, “Don’t take this thing to heart” (v. 20), probably means she is not to take legal action because it will do no good. He anticipates his father’s neglect to adjudicate the wrong. Tamar is left a “desolate” (i.e., dehumanized and ruined for life) woman. Whether David should be faulted for cooperating with Amnon’s suspicious scheme is debatable, but that he becomes furious and does not execute his dissolute and unrepentant son, who by his rape violated his sister’s person and by his incest violated parental authority, is incontrovertibly inexcusable.²⁸

2. Absalom Murders Amnon (13:23–38)

As David murdered Uriah after his sex crime, so now Absalom murders Amnon. In this scene David dances to Absalom’s tune and is again outwitted by shrewd Jonadab. Absalom asks the king and all his officials to join him and his brothers at a sheepshearing festival (2 Sam. 13:23–25). He deliberately asks too much, so that when he asks that only Amnon join him with his other brothers, the king finds himself again in a position where it is difficult to refuse his more

modest but urgent request. Though suspicious of Absalom's motives, David buckles and grants permission. At the festival Absalom's servants murder Amnon (vv. 28–29) — this is the first fulfillment of Nathan's prophecy. Someone leaks the news report to David that all his sons have been killed, but Jonadab sees through the disinformation so that the death of only one son will not seem so bad to the king. David's shrewd nephew has insights into characters and situations that the king should have. He reads David's children like a book. The father is blind and out of touch, while the younger generation outwits the king who is supposed to have preternatural powers of insight (cf. 14:20; Prov. 25:2–3).

3. Parable of the Woman of Tekoa (13:39–14:24)

After the murder Absalom flees to Geshur. And “King David longed intensely to march out against Absalom, for he was grieved about Amnon.... Joab son of Zeruiah discerned that the king was ill-disposed toward Absalom” (translation mine).²⁹ To reconcile the king to Absalom, Joab, whose interests pertain to the state, not to David's emotions, resorts to a ruse similar to Nathan's allegory. He sends to the king a wise woman who feigns to be a grieving widow with a story that demands the king's verdict (2 Sam. 14:2–5). One brother fatally struck another in the field (i.e., Absalom struck Amnon, but his guilt for avenging his sister cannot be decided) (v. 6). The others in the clan (i.e., the other heirs apparent to the throne) want the killer to be handed over to them to get rid of the heir (i.e., Absalom) (v. 7a). However, if they get their way, her husband (David) will be left without an heir to immortalize him (v. 7b). In other words, there is a clash of duties between questionable justice to avenge the death (Exod. 21:12) and mercy to preserve the man's name. The husband is the real victim in this killing. The king procrastinates and refuses to decide the case (2 Sam. 14:8). The wise woman, however, insists that he issue a verdict to prevent the avenger of blood from killing her only son (vv. 9–11a). The king swears to protect her and her son from the avenger (v. 11b).

The wise woman now springs the trap. By his verdict the king condemns himself for not bringing back Absalom and protecting the heir apparent to David's throne. Since death is like spilled water that cannot be recovered, God devises ways to preserve vulnerable life and to restore a banished person so that he not remain estranged from him. In other words, David should so value Absalom's life that he would devise a way to protect him and bring back his banished son to him instead of going forth to kill him (2 Sam. 14:12–14). In the

clash between questionable justice and mercy, mercy should be given priority. To give the king time to get over her painful interpretation, she ironically flatters him: “The king is like an angel of God” (i.e., he has preternatural powers of discernment). Her praise is ironic, for this is the very power he lacks with regard to his children. Nevertheless, her praise is fitting with regard to Joab, for the king amazingly discerns Joab’s hand behind the woman’s charade (v. 19). The king thereupon brings Absalom back. As in the case of Nathan and Bathsheba/Uriah, mercy wins over law, compassion over vengeance. This too is part of the biblical catechism.

Tragically, however, David rules that Absalom “must not see my face” (2 Sam. 14:24). He executed the oath but not its spirit. The icy situation creates a new impasse. The undertaking has only half succeeded. David’s blindness, insensitivity, and indecisiveness in his dealing with his sons contribute to fulfilling Nathan’s prophecy. Providence works in connection with human freedom, and fake strength dulls one’s moral sense and ices relationships.

4. Absalom’s Public Praise and Palace Reconciliation (14:25–33)

Absalom has public praise but not palace reconciliation. He is celebrated like a successful politician today: he is handsome and has gorgeous hair, and he has three sons and a beautiful daughter. Joab, however, refuses to do anything to thaw the icy situation between the father and his popular son; Joab cares about the state, not about relationships. Desperate for his father’s affection, Absalom sets fire to Joab’s barley field to get Joab’s attention to mediate a reconciliation. As a result, father and son are formally reconciled by the father’s kiss, but David “sidesteps repentance and justice, and in this way he probably contributes to the [second] fulfillment of the prophecy of Nathan (12:10–12).”³⁰

C. Absalom’s Revolt (15:1–20:26)

1. Absalom Rebels and David Flees (15:1–16:14)

Emotionally isolated from his father, Absalom connives to steal the warm affection of the nation and lead a revolt against his cold father (2 Sam. 15:1–12). He rides in his chariot with fifty men running ahead of him (i.e., with the pomp

of a megalomaniac) early in the morning (i.e., the time of meting out justice) to the side of the road leading to the city gate (i.e., to greet plaintiffs and defendants). He ingratiates himself with both plaintiffs and defendants: he asks what is their hometown, assures all that their cases are good ones, and treacherously complains that they will not get justice until he is appointed judge over the land (i.e., king) to justify them. To use Freud's terms, he has a death wish for his father. And so, according to the narrator, the con man "stole" the hearts of the people. Gordon says, "It is surprising that Absalom's venture was not nipped in the bud, once he had made such a public declaration of intent,"³¹ but in fact this is but another example of David's blindness and indecisiveness that is leading the kingdom to the brink of ruin.

Absalom gets permission from the appeasing king to go to Hebron to fulfill a vow he had made four years earlier. His sincerity should have been questioned: Why the delay? Why now? Why Hebron where David began his kingship? Three times the rebellious prince uses the Lord's name in vain (2 Sam. 15:7–8). The king asks no questions, and ironically the king pronounces a benediction of "peace" on the rebel bent on war against him. At Hebron, Absalom covertly sends messengers throughout the land to proclaim him king at the sound of trumpets, the normal method of announcing a new reign (cf. 1 Kings 1:34, 39; 2 Kings 11:14) and the signal for revolt. It is first heard at Hebron and then by relay across the land. He goes to Hebron with two hundred men who are innocent but undoubtedly screened to assure their loyalty to Absalom. While offering sacrifices (before battle?) he sends for Ahithophel the Gilohite, probably Bathsheba's grandfather (see p. 663).

Upon finally hearing of the revolt from a messenger, the king, who closes his eyes to the reality of his children, flees Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:14). He would not be safe in a city with potential moles and assassins, nor could he withstand a siege there by the whole nation. Loyal to David in his orderly flight are seven groups: his whole household, proselyte Cretans, Philistines, and six hundred Gittite men (ca. 2,500 people altogether), Zadok the high priest, the whole countryside of onlookers who show their solidarity with the king by their tears, and Hushai. Ittai, the Gentile king of the Gittites, expresses their faith in *I AM*. Having counted the cost, he says "as surely as *I AM* lives" he will be loyal to death to the anointed king (cf. Luke 7:9). Zadok offers sacrifices asking God's support for the refugees. David sends Zadok back to Jerusalem and resigns himself to God's hand (2 Sam. 15:26). This is a war between faith in True Strength and belief in fake strength.

But faith is not apart from means. David sends back Zadok and Abiathar, who could take advantage of their privileged status as priests, to spy on Absalom.

Upon hearing of Ahithophel's perfidious defection, David flees to God in prayer (Ps. 3). His answer comes to him in the form of Hushai, whom David sends back to the palace to defeat by his brilliant rhetoric Ahithophel's brilliant logic (2 Sam. 15:32–16:14). The two sons of the priests serve as messengers for both the priest and the counselor to keep David informed of what is happening in Jerusalem.

David's second meeting occurs in connection with Ziba (see above, pp. 662–63), and his third with Shimei, a member of Saul's clan (2 Sam. 16:5–14). Shimei's curses upon the king and his accusations that David is guilty of bloodshed against Saul's house shows why the narrator took pains to defend David's innocence in relation to Saul and his house. Abishai wants to kill the man who curses the king, but David gives three reasons not to kill him: (1) David is currently under judgment (v. 10); (2) if his own son seeks his life, it is not remarkable that the son of his enemy seeks it (v. 11); (3) God will repay the wrong (v. 12).

2. Absalom's Two Counselors (16:15–17:23)

The narrative of the war council at Absalom's court has a chiastic structure:

- A Absalom-Hushai: loyalty tested/feigned (16:16–19)
- B Ahithophel's first counsel, concerning the concubines (16:20–22)
(aside: disclosure by the narrator) (16:23)
- B' Ahithophel's second counsel, concerning plan of war (17:1–4)
- A' Hushai — Absalom: alternative advocated/accepted (17:5–14a)
(aside: disclosure by the narrator) (17:14b)

Hushai's defense of his loyalty brilliantly exposes Absalom's pride. He says, "Long live the king!" without naming the king (2 Sam. 16:16; contra 1 Kings 1:25, 31, 34, 39 where the name is added). He calls the king "the one chosen by *I AM*" (certainly not Absalom), and asks, "Should 1 not serve the son? Just as 1 served your father, so 1 will serve you" (2 Sam. 16:18–19). In other words, he continues to serve the father while serving the son. But Absalom cannot hear the double entendres.

Ahithophel's counsel to Absalom to have sex with his father's concubines on the roof of the palace (2 Sam. 16:21; cf. 12:11) is an ancient equivalent of modern rebels taking over the national radio station. The news spreads like wildfire that Absalom has made himself a stench to his father and that the coup

d'état is for real. Moreover, his counsel gives insight into the diabolical nature of the rebels. The narrator's first aside compares Ahithophel's words with the word of God to show that Hushai's efforts would not be successful without God's help. God is responsible for the peripeteia. Ahithophel's second counsel to strike David immediately with twelve thousand men—possibly to involve all twelve tribes in the coup — is the right military strategy and must be defeated. Whereas Ahithophel rightly pointed to David's present weakness, Hushai points to David's strength and the bravery of his men versus the potential fear of Absalom's army. Whereas Ahithophel stuck to the facts, Hushai embellishes his speech with rhetorical figures. He counsels safety in the numbers of a full army, not a mere twelve thousand guerilla fighters. He draws his speech to conclusion, picturing Absalom leading the battle with all Israel rallying around him and so panders to the pride of the megalomaniac. In the second aside the omniscient narrator credits *I AM* with the incredible success of Hushai's speech. David's spy system works; he is warned to get across the Jordan and so escapes that night.

Ahithophel is so brilliant that he now realizes the coup will fail. The narrator's details of his preparations for hanging himself to escape a humiliating execution for treason show him to be a great statesman in full control of the situation but unable to humble himself before *I AM* and find eternal life (cf. Matt. 27:5). He is buried with dignity in his father's tomb but without faith and eternal life and probably becomes a type of Judas, whose fate is the greatest tragedy in the Bible (Pss. 41:9; 69:25; 109:8; Acts 1:12–20).

3. Battlefield and Report (17:24–19:1)

The narrator sets the stage for the battle in Transjordan. David locates himself in Mahanaim, and Absalom camps in Gilead. David organizes his troops under three commanders: his nephews Joab and Abishai by his mother's sister Zeruiah, and Ittai. Absalom's commander is Amasa, his nephew by his mother's sister Abigail. In other words, this is a family feud. As David's commanders leave the city, he enjoins them "be gentle with the young man" (2 Sam. 18:5). The king still does not get it; to David it is more a rebellion of youth than a rebellion against God and state. In the battle in the forest of Ephraim, the trees fight for *I AM* of hosts and devour more than the sword. The gorgeous hair of Absalom ensnares him in a tree and leaves him hanging in midair, symbolizing his failure to achieve his fulfillment on earth as a king and having no transcendental dimension. Whereas Ahithophel saddles his donkey to go to his death with

dignity, Absalom's mule kept on going, leaving the pretender to the throne to hang helplessly. A soldier coming upon Absalom refuses to disobey the king's command not to kill Absalom, but Joab plunges three javelins through David's son; the general has had his fill of David's half-hearted measures with his incorrigible sons that always lead to further disasters. Fokkelman comments, "Joab is acting in David's own interest, of which he has a better understanding."³²

Earlier a self-ambitious and vain Absalom erected a monument to himself in the King's Valley, but now Joab's troops dishonor him by tossing his corpse into a pit and heaping rocks over it. The narrator notes that Absalom had no son; evidently his unnamed sons in 2 Samuel 14:27 preceded him in death.

The narrator now slows down the action to allow the audience to enter into a pivotal change in David's psyche. Heretofore in this section of the book of Samuel David has been blind and indecisive about his son but nevertheless a man of faith who looks outward and is concerned with the kingdom of *I AM*. But now he becomes a man who apart from faith in *I AM* and praise looks inward and yearns for the well-being of his sons more than for the kingdom of God. He goes from bad to worse. From here on David is off-balance and out of step with his true supporters and the kingdom of God. When the messengers from the battlefield arrive with the news of victory, he only asks, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" (2 Sam. 18:29). Learning of Absalom's death, he goes to a room above the gate to grieve instead of sitting in the gate to welcome the victors. He wishes that he who represents *I AM* and Torah had died instead of his spoiled and incorrigible son who despised God and his moral absolutes. He feels no concern that the kingdom of God has been restored; he is concerned only with his misfortune as a father.³³

4. Scene 4: Joab Intervenes (19:2–16)

Joab now intervenes on behalf of the state to move David from his private room above the gate to a public position. He fulminates against David for humiliating the troops, putting all the blame on David and taking no account of his own insubordination (v. 5). Instead of leading David gently from his emotional depression, Joab harshly and too extremely accuses the king of loving those who hate him and wishing his son were alive and his army dead (v. 6). Instead of assuring him of his loyalty, he threatens that unless David encourages his army, there will not be a man left to support David, evidently including himself (cf. 1 Kings 1:7). The king then takes his seat in the gate and the army

appears before him (v. 8), but David remains emotionally alienated from Joab.

Surprisingly the northern tribes take the initiative to restore David to his kingdom. However, they argue foolishly. They say, “David fled,” putting David in a negative light and taking no blame for their siding with Absalom. They say of Absalom, “whom we anointed” (2 Sam. 19:10), apparently unaware that they condemn themselves for playing God, whose prophets designate his chosen king. They coldly dismiss Absalom’s death, saying simply that he “died in battle” (i.e., “these things happen”), and they take no responsibility for his death. David asks of Judah why they are the last to restore him since they are his “own flesh and blood” (v. 12), stirring up old tribal jealousies that will again divide the empire. Tragically he again puts family interests above the national good. David hits back hard against Joab, foolishly making Amasa commander of the army because he too is his “own flesh and blood.” Once again, the king for personal reasons sides with his son Absalom over the national good. David’s invitation to Judah to bring him across the Jordan is interpreted by the northern tribes as certain proof of their inferior standing in David’s estimation. “It is for this reason that ... the aftermath of one rebellion sees the instigation of another” ([chap. 20](#)).³⁴ David’s blind love for family again is leading the nation to ruin.

5. *Three Conversations at the Jordan (19:16 [17]–40 [41])*

Shimei meets the returning triumphant king at his crossing of the Jordan and feigns friendship. He admits he sinned against David, but so did Saul—without repenting. Abishai, David’s loyal general, is the only one in these meetings who mentions *I AM*, noting Shimei sinned against *I AM* by cursing his anointed. But David pardons Shimei, again implicitly siding with his enemy against his loyal commanders. David asks, “Should anyone be put to death in Israel today?” (2 Sam. 19:22) but does not mention that *I AM* rescued him, unlike the situation in 1 Samuel 11:13, and he offers *I AM* no praise for his deliverance. David’s oath to Shimei, “You shall not die,” is less than sincere, for he later kills him on a technicality of having Solomon, not himself, kill him.

David next meets Mephibosheth, and David fails miserably in showing him *hesed* (2 Sam. 19:25–30; see above). By contrast his contact with Barzillai the Gileadite, who supported David in Mahanaim, is warm and productive (vv. 31–41).

6. Civil War (19:40–20:23)

Not surprisingly David's preferential treatment of the Judeans to bring him symbolically back to his throne because they are his own flesh and blood leads to antipodal reactions in the North and South. In this short section, we are given insight into the tensions that existed between Judah and the other tribes and that is finally responsible for the division of the kingdom soon after the death of Solomon about a half century later (1 Kings 12). When the northern tribes ask with words of reconciliation why their brothers, the Judeans, bring the king across the Jordan to his throne, the Judeans add wood to the fire that David started, answering he is their own flesh and blood. The northern tribes claim to have ten shares in the king, for they are looking at the king from the viewpoint of the state, not from kin relationships. David, however, lets the fire grow by offering no apology for putting tribalism above national interests.

Sheba then leads Israel to secede (2 Sam. 20:1–2). Through his folly the king divides his kingdom against itself. Nevertheless, the narrator labels Sheba a troublemaker, guarding against a simple conclusion that David's stupidity justifies the secession. David again sides with Absalom over Joab by foolishly naming Amasa his commander in chief instead of Joab. David commands Amasa to meet him at Jerusalem within three days to pursue Sheba before the rebel can fortify himself within a walled city. But Amasa fails, and by his dillydallying allows Sheba to fortify himself in Abel Beth Maacah; his sympathies are not with David. David thus appoints Abishai commander in chief.

Joab then encounters Amasa at the great rock in Gibeon (2 Sam. 20:8). But why is Amasa, who previously sided against David and is already dangerously and inexcusably late in meeting the king, at the place where the house of Saul contested David's right to be king? He should have been with the king at Jerusalem. As Joab had covertly killed Abner (2 Sam. 3:30), he now covertly kills Amasa. Paradoxically Joab acts disloyally to David but in fact is loyal to him, for David seems blind to reality. Following Joab is understood as being loyal to David. This combination of factors suggests that Joab continues to act in the interest of the state, not out of a personal desire for status and fame. Joab now usurps Abishai's role with Abishai's full consent. Joab does not assume command alone. After a woman persuades the people in the city to cut off Sheba's head, they throw it to Joab. Joab returns to the city and by his military skills is again made David's indispensable commander.

IV. APPENDIX (2 SAM. 21–24)

Section 4 ends with the kingdom in disarray and facing an uncertain future.³⁵ The book's appendix, however, leaves the book's audience with a reminder of David's greatness and of their hope in the house of David in spite of the king's escalating failures at the end of his reign. The appendix stands structurally apart from the chronological development of tracing David's rise and fall. Rather, as is well-known, its six pericopes are structured chiastically:

- A Story (short): David's prayer *in extremis* regarding Gibeonites (21:1–14)
- B Annals (short): David's four heroes from Gath (21:15–22)
- C Poetry (long): David's song of praise (22:1–51)
- C' Poetry (short): David's last words (23:1–7)
- B' Annals (long): David's mighty men (23:8–39)
- A' Story (long): David's prayer *in extremis* regarding plague (24:1–25)

A/A'. The framing prayers of David while Israel is under God's wrath present an important dimension of the ideal king's relationship to God. Ronald Youngblood notes the interlocking of the first and last stories. Both stories present David in extreme circumstances praying effective intercessory prayers, and both show that God's grace is greater than God's wrath. Both involve a three-year famine (2 Sam. 21:1; 24:13) and the statement "God/ I AM answered prayer in behalf of the land" (21:14; 24:25).³⁶ The collection of David's petitions in the Psalms offers many examples of David's praying *in extremis*, but in Samuel we find only one brief example (15:31). The chronology of these stories is unknown and unimportant for the narrator's purpose.

B/B'. The anecdotes of the annals of David's heroes and mighty men pertain mostly to feats against the Philistines and so probably date to the time of David's ever-steady ascent to power in sections 2 and 3. The annals form a fitting conclusion to a work, just as they drew section 3 of Samuel to conclusion (cf. 2 Sam. 8).

C/C'. David's prayers (2 Sam. 21:1; 24:10) and his praises (22:1–51; 23:1–7) rightly frame David's heroes (21:15–22; 23:8–39), for they subsume the

secondary cause of human strength under the primary cause of divine strength. Since David's hymn celebrates *I AM*'s deliverances from the hand of Saul and all his enemies who opposed his ascendancy to the throne, we should assume it was composed shortly before the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7). The hymn rounds off the whole and befits a long-established king. By definition, "last words" (23:1) bring closure.

A. David's Prayer *in Extremis* Regarding Gibeonites (21:1–14)

The episode of the Gibeonites shows David's power in prayer, a *sine qua non* of sacred kingship in the ancient Near East.³⁷ The point is made by its inclusio: "David sought the face of *I AM*" (v. 1) and "God answered prayer in behalf of the land" (v. 14). The scene opens with *I AM*'s wrath against Israel expressed in a devastating three-year famine (cf. Ps. 4). *In extremis*, reminding the audience of Hannah's motive to pray (see p. 627), David prays for God's favor. Through a divine revelation the king learns that Saul put many Gibeonites to death in spite of Israel's oath to spare them (Josh. 9:15, 20–21). David asks the Gibeonites how he can make amends so that they will mediate God's blessing, not wrath, upon Israel. The Gibeonites demand according to ancient Near Eastern practices the death of seven (i.e., all) of Saul's sons and that their corpses bodies be exposed.³⁸

With the exception of Jonathan's son, because of David's oath of *hesed* to Jonathan, the king complies with their request for propitiatory justice. The king, however, executes propitiatory justice with mercy. Rizpah, the mother of the seven sons, protects the corpses of her sons from birds and wild animals in order to save them from ignominy and the curse of being covenant violators.³⁹ To honor her devotion, David makes the long journey to Jabesh Gilead to recover the bodies and to bury them with dignity in Saul's tomb. The message: God answers the king's prayer but not apart from propitiatory justice and mercy. A reader must not deconstruct the message by attributing it to David's ulterior motives.

B. David's Four Heroes (21:15–22)

The annals of David's heroes and of his thirty mighty men mirror one another and serve similar purposes.⁴⁰ The first annals present anecdotes of extraordinary individual acts of bravery by four of David's "officials" (Heb. *ʿabādāyw*, NIV "men"; v. 15) and/or "men" (Heb. *ʾanšē*, v. 17) over four descendants of Rapha in Gath (2 Sam. 21:22). Rapha is the eponymous ancestor of peoples distinguished for their strength and stature. The second annals begin with anecdotes of incredible acts of heroism by the most distinguished elite and then lists the names of the thirty mighty men. These annals highlight David's exemplary bravery and leadership in section 2 of Samuel. These elite warriors hold a man in honor according to his gallantry (see 21:18), and they esteem the king the greatest as can be seen in the inclusio of anecdotes. The first anecdote (21:15–17) pertains to their rescue of David and their oath not to let him go out to battle again because "the lamp of Israel will not be extinguished" (v. 17). The last anecdote (23:13–17) pertains to three mighty men who risked their blood and broke through the Philistine ranks to draw water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem to fetch for David the drink he yearned for from this well. David poured out the "blood" offering to *I AM*. These annals also show the intimacy between David and his elite peers. David's men so love and respect him that they are willing to risk their lives to death for him (cf. Rom. 5:7). A great leader not only has a vision and a strategy to achieve his vision, but he also commands the devotion of his followers. If David's followers devote themselves to their deaths for him, how much more should the followers of Jesus Christ son of David take up their cross for him?

C. David's Song of Praise (22:1–51)

David's hymn forms an inclusio with Hannah's. Both hymns begin by figuratively using "horn" for strength, and both refer to God as "Rock" and have the theme of "deliverance" (Heb. *yšns*). In prospect of David's reign, Hannah praises *I AM*, believing his true strength defeats false human strength; and in retrospect upon his reign, David celebrates that truth. Samuel Terrien analyzes the hymn's form as having four chants:

- First Chant: Victory of *I AM* (vv. 2–20)
- I God of my salvation (vv. 2–4)
- II Dread of death (vv. 5–6)
- III Voice of the suppliant (v. 7)

IV Divine wrath (vv. 8–9)
V Descent of *I AM* (vv. 10–12)
IV' Fire and thunder (vv. 13–14)
III' Voice of *I AM* (vv. 15–16)
II' Primal waters (vv. 17–18)
I' God of my salvation (vv. 19–20)
Second Chant: Human and divine rectitude (vv. 21–32)
Third Chant: Praise for king's athletic prowess (vv. 33–43)
Fourth Chant: A royal commitment to praise (vv. 44–51)

D. David's Last Words (23:1–7)

The poem with the superscription “last words of David” (2 Sam. 23:1) — and so addressed to the king's offspring — begins with David attributing his inspiration to God (vv. 1b–2). God's oracle through the inspired singer asserts that when one rules in righteousness, he becomes like the light of morning (vv. 3–4). David concludes with a reflection that his house is right with God in contrast to that of evil men who are destined to destruction (vv. 5–7).

E. David's Thirty Mighty Men (23:8–39)

See above, “David's Four Heroes.”

F. David's Prayer *in Extremis* Regarding Plague (2 Sam. 24)

Once again the divine wrath against Israel is expressed in a famine, and once again the king—this time in connection with his penitence—saves the nation with a prayer (see 2 Sam. 21:1–14). The narrator blanks the reason why *I AM* is angry with Israel in this episode, and he also blanks why, according to the Chronicler, he chose to punish Israel by allowing Satan to incite the king to sin (24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1; cf. Job 1:12; 2:6–7; 2 Cor. 12:7). At the same time, *I AM* will use the king's penitential prayer to heal the people. In this way the story

teaches the corporate solidarity of Israel with their king: his sin entails their punishment and his penitence entails their healing.

More specifically the king sins by numbering his troops. Commenting on the parallel story in 1 Chronicles, Raymond Dillard explains that David's census impugns the faithfulness of God in the keeping of his covenant promises — "a kind of walking by sight."⁴¹ In a psalm that David probably composed in connection with this sin of census taking, David confesses, "When I felt secure, I said, 'I will never be shaken'" (Ps. 30:6 [7]). David's conscience smites him; he repents of his hubris and petitions God for forgiveness (Ps. 30:10).

I AM responds by giving the king three options of decreasing duration and increasing intensity: three years of famine, three months of fleeing before the enemy, or three days of a plague in the land. David throws himself on God's great mercy (Neh. 9:19, 27, 31; Ps. 119:156; Dan. 9:18) rather than fall into human hands.⁴² Through the sword of the angel of *I AM* (see Judg. 6:16; cf. 2 Kings 19:35 = Isa. 37:36), God destroys in a plague seventy thousand soldiers⁴³ to symbolize his complete and full depletion of David's human confidence. *I AM* relents from continuing the plague in connection with the loving shepherd's second confession of his sin, his willingness to die with his family for his flock and his offering of sacrifices on the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite. David buys the threshing floor and offers sacrifices on the altar where in the past Abraham had offered up Isaac and where in the future priests would offer sacrifices on the temple altar. In response to the king's penitential prayer and sacrifices, *I AM* stops the plague. Dillard comments:

At the place where Abraham once held a knife over his son (Gen. 22:1–19), David sees the angel of the Lord with sword ready to plunge into Jerusalem. In both cases death is averted by sacrifice. The temple is established there as the place where Israel was perpetually reminded that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin (Heb. 2:22). Death for Isaac and for David's Jerusalem was averted because the sword of divine justice would ultimately find its mark in the Son of God (Jn. 19:33).⁴⁴

In other words, the book of Samuel ends with a picture of the future King whose sacrifice for sin saves the kingdom.

V. CONCLUSION

Second Samuel continues to contrast bringing God's rule to earth through faith in True Strength and not by trusting in the fake strength of human machinations. David displays true faith in *I AM* by remaining loyal to *I AM*'s anointed even in death ([chap. 1](#)). He worships *I AM* by offering him enthusiastic reverence ([chap. 6](#)), gives the temple priority over his own palace ([chap. 7](#)), sings songs of praise ([chap. 23](#)), prays *in extremis* ([chaps. 21, 24](#)), repents of his sin ([chap. 12](#)), and in cases of ambiguity puts mercy before justice ([chaps. 12, 14](#)).⁴⁵ It is not that *I AM* acts without means: he gifts David ([chap. 22](#)), raises up around him gifted peers ([chaps. 21, 23](#)), and works through providence ([chap. 15](#)). *I AM* shows David grace upon grace. David's throne is established and his enemies buried in his capital without his raising a hand ([chaps. 2–3](#)). He triumphs over all his enemies without a defeat ([chaps. 5 and 8](#)). God packs with grace his reward for the king who thus loves him. He expands his servant's rule to its fullest dimension, gives him an eternal dynasty, adds no sorrow to it, and makes his wife fecund.

However, David also illustrates the tragic consequences of discounting God's word. After his sin against God and wrong against Uriah the Hittite, though forensically forgiven, he loses his first four sons. Paradoxically this is so because he gives priority to his own flesh and blood, not to the kingdom of God. Conflicted in his priorities, David is easily duped by Amnon and Absalom and loses his zeal for justice (2 Sam. 13). He also loses moral discernment in his adjudicating the conflicting testimonies of Ziba and Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9, 19). Jonadab shows up David's loss of political astuteness (2 Sam. 14, 20). Conflicted in his priorities, David fails to act decisively. As a result of David's spiritual and psychological funk, Absalom murders Amnon, leads the nation in a bloody revolution (2 Sam. 15–18), almost causes the entire army (including David's outstanding commander, Joab) to desert him, and provokes a civil war (2 Sam. 19). Joab exemplifies that the kingdom of God comes through pastoral care, not just through power and good sense.

Abner, Ish-Bosheth, Michal, Amnon, Absalom, Ahithophel, and Ziba exemplify fake strength. All, consumed with pride and/or selfish ambition, refuse to honor God's anointed king and/or to show loyal love to others. Michal dies without bearing a child, and the rest, except Ziba, suffer an untimely death.

The prosperity of Ziba through wickedness, the impoverishment of Mephibosheth through unrighteousness, and the rape of Tamar without redemption point to the reality that ultimate justice lies in a future beyond the grave.

THOUGHT QUESTION

What do David's relationships to God (in his rise and decline), to Israel, to friends such as Joab, to non-Israelites (such as Nahash and Ittai), and to his family teach you in your relationships to God, to the church, to Christian and nonChristian friends, and to your family?

[1.](#) In this section I lean heavily on J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (hereafter *NAPS*), vol. 3: *Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990).

[2.](#) Ibid., 3:143–47.

[3.](#) Ibid., 2:89.

[4.](#) Ibid., 3:103.

[5.](#) Ibid., 3:155.

[6.](#) Ibid., 3:177.

[7.](#) Ibid., 3:196.

[8.](#) Arvid Kapelrud, “Temple Building: A Task of Gods and Kings,” *Orientalia* 32 (1963): 56–62.

[9.](#) Fokkelman, *NAPS*, 3:214.

[10.](#) The pronoun “you/your” is singular with reference to David.

[11.](#) *HALOT*, 63.

[12.](#) For discussion of this problem, see Fokkelman, *NAPS*, 3:262n106.

[13.](#) In this section I lean heavily on Fokkelman, *NAPS*, vol. 1.

[14.](#) Ivan de Silva in a personal communication.

[15.](#) Fokkelman, *NAPS*, 1:417.

[16.](#) Leonhard Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids*, BWANT 42 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926). The Latin phrase translates as “to the greater glory of Solomon.”

[17.](#) *NAPS*, 1:39–40.

[18.](#) Ibid., 1:55.

[19.](#) Ibid., 1:56.

[20.](#) An Assyrian vassal treaty reads, “May Venus, the brightest of the stars, make your wives lie in the lap of your enemy before your eyes” (Moshe Weinfeld, cited by Robert P. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel* [Sheffield: JSOT 1984],

258).

[21.](#) Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 166. M. J. Mulder, “Un Euphemisme dans 2 Sam xii 14?” *VT* 18, no. 1 (1968): 108–14.

[22.](#) Fokkelman, *NAPS*, 1:91.

[23.](#) Cited by Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 259.

[24.](#) *Ibid.*

[25.](#) *Ibid.*, 261–62.

[26.](#) *HALOT*, s.v. “lbbh,” 2:516.

[27.](#) Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 55.

[28.](#) Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 264.

[29.](#) This translation is preferable to NIV, “And the spirit of the king longed to go to Absalom, for he was consoled concerning Amnon’s death,” because: (1) “spirit” is not in MT and may have been supplied in other textual traditions for reasons of interpretation as in NIV; MT cannot be explained away. (2) Absolute *ys.*, often connotes “going out to battle” (Gen. 14:8; Num. 1:3, 20ff.; Deut. 20:1; 23:10; 1 Sam. 8:20; 18:30; 2 Sam. 18:2–4, 6 et al.). It also occurs frequently in the Qumran literature as a technical military term (1 QM 1:13; 2:8; 3:1, 7 et al.). (3) I can find no Hebrew parallel for “spirit longed to go to.” What exactly does that mean? (4) *Kî* more likely means “because,” rather than “concerning,” after *nibham*. (5) In 14:1 the gloss “the king’s heart longed for Absalom” interprets the ambiguous Hebrew “his heart was upon” in light of its questionable interpretation of v. 39. The translation in the text interprets it in light of the less questionable interpretation.

[30.](#) NIV Study Bible note on 2 Samuel 14:33.

[31.](#) Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 270.

[32.](#) Fokkelman, *NAPS*, 1:246–47.

[33.](#) *Ibid.*, 265.

[34.](#) Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 287.

[35.](#) I rely heavily in this section on Ronald Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[36.](#) *Ibid.*, 1052.

[37.](#) Throughout the ancient Near East it was believed the gods sent rain because they favored the king. Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria (ca. 675 BC), claims, “Since the time that I sat on the throne of my father, my progenitor, Adad, has loosed his downpours, Ea has opened his fountains, the forests have grown abundantly” (Bruno Meissner, *Assyrische Jagden auf Grund alter Berichte und Darstellungen* [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1911], 23). Pharaoh

attributes the bountiful harvest reaped during his reign to his good and magical relations with the grain god: “It is I who produced the grain, (because) I was beloved by the grain god. No one was hungry in my years” (cited by Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett [New York: Seabury, 1978], 256). When a crisis, such as drought and famine, struck, it was expected the king would be potent in prayer. An Egyptian text reads, “Everything proceeding from the lips of his majesty [i.e., the Pharaoh], his father (the god) Amon causes to be realized there and then.” Of the Assyrian king it is said, “His prayer will be well-received by the god” (cited by John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* [Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1976], 195).

[38.](#) I. Schapera (“The Sin of Cain,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, ed. B. Lang [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 28) says: “If the original offender was no longer alive, vengeance could be exercised even upon his descendants. Two covenant curses read: ‘The progeny of the transgressor shall be obliterated; and the corpse of the transgressor will be exposed’ “ (Robert Polzin, “ ‘HWQY’ and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel,” *HTR* 62 [April 1969]: 228n4).

[39.](#) C. Fensham, “The Treaty between Israel and Gibeonites,” *BA* 27 (September 1964): 100; cf. Jer. 34:20.

[40.](#) In 21:19 the MT reads, *‘elhānān ben-yar‘ē ‘ōr‘gīm bêt hallahmî ‘et golyāt ... ‘ōr‘gīm* (“Elhanan son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite killed Goliath the Gittite ... weaver”), but 1 Chron. 20:5 reads, *‘elhānān ben-yā ‘ir ‘et lahmi ‘ahî golyāt ... ‘ōr‘gīm* (“Elhanan son of Jair killed the brother of Goliath ... weaver”). MT’s *Jaare-Oregim* (“forests of weavers”) is hardly a personal name. Moreover its *y‘yr* transposes *y* of *y‘yr*, creates *‘ōr‘gīm* dittography from the end of the verse, and confounds *‘ahî* with *‘et*.

[41.](#) Raymond Dillard, “David’s Census,” in *Through Christ’s Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1985), 104–5.

[42.](#) Merchants drive food prices up to exorbitant heights in famine.

[43.](#) Hebrew *ns‘am* in Samuel commonly means “soldiers,” not common people.

[44.](#) Dillard, “David’s Census,” 107.

[45.](#) J. R. R. Tolkien captures this truth in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo, the hero, complains that it is a pity that Bilbo, from whom he inherited the ring, did not kill the malicious Gollum when he had the chance. Yet, as the prophet-like Gandolf anticipates, that pity in the end spared Gollum to unwittingly save Frodo from the evil Ring.

Chapter 24

THE GIFT OF KINGSHIP

We run carelessly to the precipice, after we have put something before us to prevent us from seeing it.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 2.183

I. THE NATURE OF KINGSHIP

The inauguration of monarchy as recorded in the book of Samuel relies on earlier canonical statements regarding kingship, and subsequent canonical literature develops that theme. To trace the trajectory of that theme, we need first to lay a firm foundation of defining “kingship” to distinguish that form of leadership from other forms, such as that of Moses and the warlords. Furthermore, a biblical theologian must decide whether kingship is God’s gift to Israel and/or a concession to their unbelief.¹

Kingship in Israel is similar to kingship in the nations surrounding it. Israel’s elders tell Samuel, “Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam. 8:5). Tomoo Ishida, from his survey of the dynastic principle in the monarchies in the nations surrounding Israel at that time, draws four conclusions about the nature of kingship in Israel’s world.²

A. Divine Election

First, kingship entails divine election. Ishida notes, “Presumably, elective monarchy [i.e., divine election] was instituted in the earliest phase of monarchy both in Mesopotamia and in Anatolia in proto-historic times.”³ In Israel *I AM*’s prophets designated the king: Samuel anointed Saul (1 Sam. 10:1) and David (16:1, 12–13); Nathan anointed Solomon (1 Kings 1:38–39); Ahijah designated Jeroboam (11:29–40), and so on. This function of the prophet terminates with John the Baptist, who designated Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, Israel’s long-awaited ideal, eschatological king (see [chap. 30](#) below). Israel’s symbolic ritual of anointing the chosen king with fragrant oil found its realization in the coming of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus saw at his baptism as a dove descending on his anointed shoulders (Matt. 3:11–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:15–22; John 1:29–34).

Some warlords, however, such as Abimelech, the son of Jerub-Baal (Judg. 9:6; cf. 8:22), and some of Israel’s kings — especially shortly before Assyria conquered the northern kingdom — usurp Israel’s throne by assassinations without prophetic warrant. *I AM* condemns Israel: “They have set up kings without my consent” (Hos. 8:4).

B. Designation by Popular Assembly after Victory

Ishida continues, “Under special circumstances, the ruler of the city-state in Syria-Palestine [of which Israel was a part] was designated by the popular assembly in the second millennium B.C.”⁴ This elevation to kingship in Syria-Palestine usually occurred after the elected gave proof of his being a hero in a victorious military campaign. Samuel’s designation and anointing of both Saul and David are immediately followed by their victories (1 Sam. 11, 17). The people immediately confirm Saul as their king at Gilgal after he defeats the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:14–15). In the case of David, however, their confirmation has to wait. Though David demonstrates himself a greater warrior than Saul, and though Samuel impeaches Saul, the tyrant clings to his throne and David refuses “to touch” *I AM*’s anointed. Consequently, the men of Judah make a compact with David only after Saul’s death (2 Sam. 2:4), and all the tribes of Israel crown David after *I AM* providentially defeats the house of Saul (2 Sam. 5:1–3).

C. Dynastic Succession

Ishida adds a third qualifier to his definition of kingship: “There is no evidence for ... a non-dynastic monarchy in the ancient Near East in the historic period.”⁵ Ishida’s proposition contradicts Martin Noth’s influential theory that the original and distinctive feature of the Israelite kingship was based on charisma, not on heredity, and that a later hereditary conceptualization of monarchy was a deviation from the genuine Israelite tradition.⁶ In fact, the dynastic principle could have been put into effect in the case of David through his marriage to Michal, daughter of Saul, after all of the sons of Saul were killed (1 Sam. 31:2; 2 Sam. 4:5–6; 21:8–9). Ishida compares this marriage to that of the general Haremhab with Mutnodjme: “In the transition between the 18th and 19th dynasties of Egypt, this pharaoh married a princess of royal blood with the intention of bringing legitimacy to the royal throne into his House, which sprang from a commoner.”⁷

D. Authorization of an Overlord

Ishida's fourth qualification is a possible, not an essential, element: "The dynastic principle, together with the divine election, and, *if necessary*, the authorization of the overlord, was the most important ideology for legitimization of royal authority in every monarchy in the ancient Near East."⁸ The authorization of an overlord is especially applicable to the kings of city-states under Hittite or Egyptian rule. In Israel and Judah such authorization becomes an exceptional factor under special circumstances. King Rezin of Aram and Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, attempt to put an unnamed son of Tabeel on the throne of Judah as their puppet king in Ahaz's stead to form a coalition against the expanding Assyrian Empire (Isa. 7:1–4). Legitimization by an overlord also becomes a factor just before Israel's fall to Assyria and of Judah to Babylon. Hoshea, king of Israel, became a vassal of the Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser (Shalmaneser's father; 2 Kings 17:3), and Pharaoh Neco replaces Jehoahaz, son of Josiah, the people's choice, with Eliakim (Jehoiakim), son of Josiah, his choice (2 Kings 23:30–34). Nebuchadnezzar replaces Jehoiachin with his uncle, Mattaniah/Zedekiah (24:15–17).

II. THE DESIRABILITY OF KINGSHIP

Is monarchy in the inspired narrator's evaluative view the best form of government? J. J. M. Roberts notes, "It is fairly common today for biblical scholars to characterize monarchy as an essentially alien development in Israelite history."⁹ He continues, "The implications of such a stance are profound because many of what have been taken to be central biblical themes owe their existence or their peculiar biblical shape to the imperial theology first developed in the Davidic-Solomonic court."¹⁰ Not least of these themes is the messianic expectation: "The royal theology's claim that God had chosen David and his dynasty as God's permanent agent for the exercise of the divine rule on earth was the fundamental starting point for the later development of the messianic hope."¹¹ Is the Christian message that Jesus is the Messiah based on a royal theology that is alien to the true religion of the Old Testament? Is his rule based on what was historically sheer apostasy, "a malignant growth in the body of genuine Yahwism"?¹² Does Jesus represent an inferior form of government, a less than ideal rule, in God's economy?

On the one hand, several speeches reported by the Deuteronomist — Gideon's refusal of kingship (Judg. 8:22–23), Jotham's fable (Judg. 9), and Samuel's three reports at Ramah (1 Sam. 8:10–22), Mizpah (10:17–25), and Gilgal (11:14–12:25) — inform the common notion that monarchy is an alien development in the history of Israelite religion. These texts merit exegetical review and need to be supplemented with other texts, such as Genesis 17:6, 16, that speak unambiguously of monarchy as God's blessing.

A. Gideon's Refusal of Kingship (Judg. 8:22)

"The Israelites said to Gideon, 'Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson — because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.' But Gideon told them, 'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. *I AM* will rule over you.'" Scholars usually see this account as one of the clearest statements in the Old Testament against kingship. Here we need to distinguish story from plot. On the story level a charlatan, not a credible character, makes it, and in the plot

the narrator immediately undercuts it.

In the people's view, a slayer of kings is fit to be king. In effect they ask Gideon to rule (Heb. *māšal* them as a king, for they want him to found a dynasty, a *sine qua non* of kingship. They sin not in asking for a king, but in rejecting *I AM* to rule, relieving them of their covenant obligations and of depending on God to raise up warlords. They credit Gideon, not *I AM*, with victory, and they want the stability and security of human politics, not the true security of faith in the immortal, invisible God. If Gideon's reply, "*I AM* will rule over" aims to honor the covenant and faith in *I AM*, Gideon is heroic. But Gideon is less than credible, for he does not correct their honoring him, and he does not point them to *I AM* to choose their king, presumably by prophetic designation (Deut. 17:15). Gerald Gerbrandt makes the argument: "The message of 8:22–23 is not that kingship is incompatible with Yahwism," but rather, the sin is Israel's motivation behind their request: "because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian."¹³ Despite the consistent emphasis of the Gideon cycle that *I AM* had to overcome Gideon's disbelief that *I AM* would deliver Israel through him, the people inexcusably attribute the victory to Gideon, not to *I AM*, and Gideon does not correct them.

Māšal ("to rule") signifies "a socially sanctioned ruling authority" and connotes order, management, and determination of proper functions and position of persons, institutions, events, and social mechanisms (Gen. 1:18; 24:2; Prov. 6:6–8; 23:1–3). It denotes the activity of God, a king, or lesser administrators ; of a master and a slave; and of the socially powerful over subordinates. God's rule does not exclude a human agent. God always rules through some agency, be it a prophet, priest, judge, or king. Israel's priesthood during the time of rule by warlords has failed to provide the nation the leadership it needs, and Gideon could have supplied the rule the nation desperately needed in a way in keeping with Israel's covenant. In short, Gideon's reason for not accepting kingship is not credible.

Moreover, monarchy is not incompatible with theocracy in Israel any more than it was regarded incompatible with the rule by a god elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia the king was accepted as the agent or regent of the real king, the deity, and that seems to have been the view of the Deuteronomist as well. He represents Samuel at Mizpah as drawing up the *mišpat* ("regulations," NIV; "right and duties," TNIV) of the kingdom, probably a treaty specifying the rights and limitations of the kingdom under the Mosaic law so that *I AM* remained Israel's real king (1 Sam. 10:25). This is certainly the case when Samuel at Gilgal confirms Saul's kingship and regulates his kingship with *I AM*'s rule: "if both you and the king who reigns over you follow *I AM* your

God — good!” (12:14). The Deuteronomist labels those who rejected Saul’s kingship as “scoundrels” (10:27 TNIV, Heb. *bēliya‘al*¹⁴

On the plot level, the narrator deconstructs Gideon’s answer from ambiguous piety to unambiguous poppycock. After his pious sounding phrase, “*I AM* will rule you,” the narrator represents Gideon as immediately subverting *I AM*’s kingship. Gideon’s cult includes a pagan god ephod, an illegitimate divining instrument in contrast to that worn by *YHWH*’s high priest at the central sanctuary. He assumes a pagan king’s symbol of power from the plunder—gold and royal garments from his people. He must have had a harem to sire seventy sons (Judg. 8:30–31). Gideon fails because he refuses to be a covenant-keeping ruler (see above). He retires to Ophrah to enjoy the economic and personal benefits of a powerful and wealthy ruler but with no further efforts at using his power for the national or even tribal good. His false kingship is memorialized in the name he gives his prominent son — Abimelech (i.e., “my father is king”). In short, Gideon undermines his own credibility by substituting a false rule for *I AM*’s rule.¹⁵ The Deuteronomist can hardly be thought to have put his own point of view into the mouth of such a charlatan. Accordingly, the main narrative of the book of Judges does not contradict its epilogue, which promotes monarchy (see below).

B. Jotham’s Fable (Judg. 9)

Scholars used to interpret Judges 9, which contains the story of Abimelech’s abortive kingship and Jotham’s fable mocking his kingship, as a polemic against kingship, but moderns tend to disagree. In Jotham’s fable the trees (i.e., the people) take the initiative to anoint a king for themselves. They first go to valuable trees (i.e., to make capable men their king) — the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine. These all decline the opportunity to be king because they can better serve the community by bearing their fruit than by holding sway over other trees. Finally, they approach the thornbush (i.e., Abimelech), probably the well-known buckthorn, a scraggly bush that was a constant threat to farming. He promised them the only thing he had to offer—shade (i.e., protection). Jotham interprets his parable by saying that if the men of Shechem acted honorably in anointing Abimelech over them, good — may they find joy in his only potential virtue. But if they did not act honorably, then let them experience their decision’s potential to do great damage, namely, to catch fire and destroy everything.

First, note that the fable takes kingship for granted. Barnabas Lindars says,

The institution of kingship is a presupposition of the fable just as sowing corn [i.e., “wheat”] is a presupposition of the parable of the sower. The fact that the fable tilts at a particularly unfortunate situation does not of itself constitute an objection to monarchy as such. The sarcastic attitude of the fruit-trees is necessary to their function in the fable but does not necessarily express the opinion of the composer of the fable. There is no suggestion that the trees were wrong or foolish to seek for themselves a king.¹⁶

Even the otherwise worthless thornbush could be useful if it provided shade.

Moreover, the fable ridicules Abimelech and, above all, indicts the men of Shechem, not the institution of kingship per se. “The point of the passage,” says Gerbrandt, “is not that kingship is a crime, but that when kingship is based on crime and the abuse of force, ... then the inevitable outcome of such a kingship will be destruction.”¹⁷

Indeed, the fable can even be read as an indictment against capable men for not accepting kingship. Eugene Maly says that it is directed “against those who refused, for insufficient reasons, the burdens of leadership.”¹⁸ Dale DeWitt agrees: “The fable is thus full of irony: the bramble is worthless, even harmful; it takes the kingship while the fruitful plants, which could have fulfilled the people’s needs, refuse.”¹⁹

C. Political and Moral Anarchy (Judg. 17–21)

The appendix of the book of Judges affirms kingship by its inclusio that implies that Israel’s lack of kingship contributes to its moral anarchy during the dark age of the warlords: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (17:6; 21:25). The author makes his meaning unmistakably plain in this inclusio, with which he draws his work to its conclusion. Within that frame, which links moral anarchy with the nonroyal political anarchy, priests emerge as boorish materialists, depraved Benjamites gang rape a Levite’s concubine, and the nation’s elders overreact without following the Law and with punitive measures so wanting in moderation that the tribe of Benjamin is spared from total annihilation only by a large-scale, premeditated annihilation of the whole city of Jabesh Gilead. Virgins are abducted at a religious festival at Shiloh,

Israel's liturgical center. In the light of this political anarchy, what else could the refrain, "There was no king in Israel," in a book about warlords and an appendix about priests mean other than that Israel needs a king as a better model of government than that offered by priests and charismatic warlords. The combination of the political and moral assessment surely means that had there been a king, he would have curtailed the anarchy that characterized Israel's dark age of warlords. The refrain "Israel had no king" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) functions as a threshold to the book of Samuel, which presents the inauguration of kingship in Israel.

D. Samuel's Reports (1 Sam. 8–12)

Source critics classically follow Julius Wellhausen, who divides the sources of 1 Samuel 8–12 into *koenigsfeindlich* (antimonarchy) versus *koenigsfreundlich* (promonarchy).²⁰ Here I first present the data,²¹ allowing "+" and "–" to signify respectively promonarchy and antimonarchy biases and their locations (in bold face), and then reflect on how to reconcile the apparently conflicted narrative.

A (–) 8:1 – 22	Speech: People request a king; Samuel warns people	Ramah
B (+) 9:1 – 10:16	Story: Saul's journey to Ramah	
A (–) 10:17 – 27	Speech: Samuel chooses Saul by lot	Mizpah
B (+) 11:1 – 13	Story: Saul's first exploit at Jabesh Gibeah	Jabesh
A (–) 11:14 – 12:25	Speech: Samuel sets forth terms of monarchy	Gilgal

In sum, Samuel's antimonarchy speeches are interfaced with promonarchy stories. The antimonarchy speeches at the sites of his circuit pertain to Israel's sin in choosing a king and God's punishment of Israel through their king. The promonarchy stories pertain to God's actions behind the scenes to raise up the king as a deliverer from foreign oppression, an institution that will expand *I AM*'s kingdom to the full dimensions of the Abrahamic covenant—from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates.

1. *Israel's sin*. Heretofore in the epoch of warlords Israel has rebelled against God's rule by turning to idols (Judg. 2:10–13), but as the final sin of that period, Israel rebels against God's rule by depending on a king, not God, to save them from foreign oppression. Consequently, Samuel's speeches are all about the dangers of the monarchy. God thunders his approval of his prophet as the climactic conclusion of this act.²² It needs to be underscored, however, that the people sin in their reason for desiring a king: their lack of faith in *I AM*'s ability to lead them successfully.²³

2. *God's judgment.* God judges the apostate nation for requesting the best human specimen to replace him by giving them a tyrannical king (1 Sam. 8:10–18; 10:17–19). They want a king like other nations, and they ironically get one; his excessive taxes and mistreatment of his people described in 8:11–17 have analogies among Israel's Canaanite neighbors. Even the mighty Samuel fears for his life before this mad king, and David is spared from the insanely jealous king's sword only by the skin of his teeth. Deliverers from within Israel could save them from foreign oppressors, but who can save them from their own ruthless kings?

3. *God's salvation.* In his grace God will use the same king that punishes the nation for its unbelief to deliver them from oppressors without. In the final scene of this section, God delivers Israel from the Ammonites through his Spirit-endowed king (1 Sam. 11:11), and in the next act he continues to deliver them (see 14:47–48). God uses human sin to advance his own sovereign design without holding the guilty guiltless. He uses Israel's rejection of him and Samuel as an occasion to expand Israel from a petty nation into an empire, but he first punishes Israel with a tyrant. He uses the Assyrians to punish his people (Isa. 10), whom he later punishes (Isa. 14). The malefactors of Jesus Christ bring salvation but are consumed in the conflagration of Jerusalem (Mark 13; 1 Cor. 2:6–10). God's choice of Saul functions both as a judgment upon the people for their final sin of disloyalty (antimonarchy speeches) and, at the same time, of God's grace to save Israel from foreign oppressors (promonarchy stories). In his abundant grace, True Strength will save the Israelites from Saul's false strength by giving them faithful David, who possesses true strength.

III. GENESIS—NUMBERS

The books of Genesis and Numbers unequivocally anticipate kingship as God's good gift to the patriarchs and/or the nation. If one takes canon seriously as an important element in theological evaluation, then this unequivocal praise of monarchy must influence the way the theologian evaluates kingship in biblical theology.

A. Creation Narratives

Humanity was created to rule the earth as God's regent. This mandate for humanity finds its proper fulfillment in the Son of Man (i.e., a heavenly Adam who does not misrule the regency). In God's common grace, God blessed the first Adam to reproduce prolifically and to subdue the earth. But the first Adam rebelled against God when tempted by Satan and fell into sin, and as a teaspoon of salt poured into a glass of pure water defiles all the water in the glass, so Adam's sin defiled the whole human race and the culture it created. God in his sovereign grace, however, promised Eve an offspring who would defeat the Serpent and implicitly bring into existence a kingdom that trusted God's word as truth and God's character as good. In the past, before the coming of Jesus Christ, that kingdom existed in shadow form in the hearts of the pure over whom David ruled. Today it is being fulfilled in the church under the rule of their ascended King, Jesus Christ. In the future, God's irrupting kingdom will find its consummation in a regenerated earth (Rom. 8:20–21) (see above).

B. Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11)

In Genesis *I AM* unconditionally obligates himself to bless (i.e., to empower) the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah — to sire kings. His promise to Abraham that he will father nations and kings is part and parcel of *I AM*'s beneficent and gracious grant to his friend for his years of faithful service (see [chap. 13](#) above). God's promise to make him into nations probably refers to both

his spiritual and physical progeny. Sarah, however, gave birth genetically only to the nation of Israel through Isaac and to the kingdom of Edom through Isaac. God's promises to Abraham that "kings will come from you"²⁴ (Gen. 17:6) and to Sarah that "kings of peoples will come from her" (17:16), when taken together, must refer to Isaac and/or Esau. In Genesis 15:4 this same expression refers expressly to contrast physical lineage with nonphysical. The promise probably refers exclusively to the kings of Israel and of Judah from Isaac because the descendants of Esau play no role in salvation history (Gen. 36:31–39). In any case, this promise is God's reward, not penalty, to Abraham and Sarah for their faithful service.

This interpretation that looks favorably upon kingship is further validated by the promise to Jacob, "and kings will come from your body" (i.e., "the seat of virility," Gen. 35:11). The NIV renders the same expression in 1 Kings 8:19 (= 2 Chron. 6:9) by "your own flesh and blood."

C. Testament of Jacob (Gen. 49:8–12)

In the "Testament of Jacob" (Gen. 49:8–12) the promise of kingship is narrowed to Judah. Exegetes normally regard this as a royal oracle by understanding *šēbet* as "scepter" and *m^hōqēq* as "ruler's staff" (v. 10). The imagery in the rest of the oracle supports these interpretations, and the descent of the eternal house of David from Judah validates it.

This royal oracle begins with Judah's elevation above his brothers through his conquest of his enemies, symbolized by his hand being on their neck and his being pictured as a fearsome lion: the king of beasts returning from the prey (Gen. 49:8–9). Its centerpiece features his progeny establishing an everlasting dynasty.²⁵ By striking hyperbole the oracle celebrates the prosperity of the kingdom. Wine, the symbol of prosperity and joy, will be so abundant that the affluent king will tether his hungry donkey to the precious vine and his voracious colt to the choice branch. He will use wine as scrub water and have eyes darker than wine (or that sparkle like wine) and teeth whiter than milk.

Jacob rewards Judah with kingship because Judah exemplifies Israel's ideal of kingship. The brother who at his beginning of the Joseph narrative sells Joseph into slavery later *voluntarily* offers himself to become a slave in the place of Benjamin because of his compassion for his father (Gen. 44:33–34). Joseph *involuntarily* was sold into slavery. Judah is the first person in the Bible to offer himself as a substitute to suffer the penalty for another.

D. Balaam Oracles (Num. 23:9, 10, 21; 24:7, 17)

Balaam escalates his four oracles against Balak, king of Moab, by increasing the specificity and intensity of the vanquishing of Moab by Israel and their king. Balaam begins with “seeing” Israel as a nation dwelling apart from the nations and at its end in splendid prosperity (Num. 23:9–10). His second oracle matches Israel’s positive splendor with the absence of misfortune and misery. This is so because the King/king is among them. The ambiguity between the heavenly King and his earthly monarchy may be intentional (23:21). Balaam’s third of these escalating oracles is unambiguously of human royalty (24:7b). The Septuagint paraphrased this verse to mean, “A man shall issue from his seed, and he shall have dominion over many peoples; and he shall be higher than the kingdom of God, and his kingdom shall be exalted.” His fourth and climactic oracle features Israel’s king as a star who will rule the nations (24:17–19). The “star” was a frequent ancient Near Eastern metaphor for kingship (cf. Isa. 14:12; Rev. 22:16).

IV. DEUTERONOMY

A. Introduction

The Deuteronomistic history, when rightly interpreted, reflects a unified concept of kingship. To understand its concept, however, it is important to distinguish his view of the institution of kingship from his view of individual kings. The Deuteronomist favors monarchy as the best form of government in contradistinction to other forms, such as rule by charismatic warlords. The book of Judges, as argued, is an apology for kingship, more specifically, a monarchy from Judah, not Benjamin. In the book of Samuel the Deuteronomist endorses God's choice of the house of David forever. In the book of Kings he endorses and rejects individual kings but never rejects monarchy as an institution or the house of David as the divinely authorized ruler of Judah.

But the Deuteronomist insists on the king's loyalty to *I AM*— that is, to his stipulations in the Mosaic covenant. Central motifs of his history are “land” and “covenant.” His message regarding the land is that *I AM* unconditionally grants the patriarchs the land, but their descendants' entrance into it and retention and enjoyment of it depend on their keeping covenant. In this light, as Gerbrandt contends, “the king's responsibility was to guarantee Israel's continued existence on the land, and ... this responsibility was fulfilled within Israel by being the covenant administrator due to the role of the covenant for Israel's existence on the land.” The king was “to lead Israel by being the covenant administrator; then he could trust Yahweh to deliver. At the heart of his covenant was Israel's obligation to be totally loyal to Yahweh.”^{[26](#)}

B. Charter for Kingship (Deut. 17:14–20)

Moses introduces *I AM*'s charter for kingship with the prophetic anticipation that after Israel is settled in the land, they will request God to set a king over them like all the nations (Deut. 17:14). Their request for a king is not necessarily

wrong. In other passages they innocently request from *I AM* food (12:20) and a prophet (18:15). Their sin lay in wanting a king “like all the nations.” The Deuteronomist represents these nations as a temptation and snare to Israel from which Israel must keep itself pure. Had Israel asked for prophets to be “like all the nations” — and other nations had them—this too would have been censured as disloyalty to *I AM* and his covenant.

But Israel’s kingship is also unique. Israel’s other sacred personnel—priests and prophets — and its liturgical institutions such as temple, sacrifices, and even the anointing of kings are also found among the other nations, but because of Israel’s covenants, these sacred personnel and liturgical institutions significantly differ from the other nations. Israel cannot adopt these institutions without adaptation to Israel’s covenants. In the rest of this statute, *I AM* meets precisely this need. He reinterprets kingship in a way appropriate to his rule.

Israel’s designation of their future king must meet two conditions (Deut. 17:15). First, *I AM* must choose him. Although later the nation confirms that designation, the king must first have *I AM*’s sanction by prophetic appointment. Second, the chosen king must come from the loins of the patriarchs (v. 15). In other words, he must be born and raised to assimilate and practice Israel’s world and life views. A foreigner will not be nurtured from infancy with Israel’s worldview and values.

Three prohibitions aim to make the king dependent on *I AM* to ensure his loyalty to God and thereby to separate him from the nations. First (Deut. 17:16), he is not to multiply horses (his military sanction) or return to Egypt to get them, “for *I AM* has told you, ‘you are not to go back that way again.’” Second (v. 17a), he is not to multiply wives (his political sanction), “or his heart will be led astray.” Third (v. 17b), he is not to multiply wealth (his economic sanction), for if he has too much he may say, “Who is *I AM*?” (Prov. 30:9). On the positive side, the royal charter proscribes that the king must copy the Law under the tutelage of the Levites and that he read it regularly (v. 18). This is necessary so that the king learns of *I AM* and learns to obey his covenant, and so that he does not consider himself above his brother nor depart from the Law.

C. Books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth

Joshua succeeds Moses as one of the two founders and leaders of the theocratic state. Both were eyewitnesses to *I AM*’s mighty acts in Israel’s formative period while in Egypt and the wilderness and during the conquest of

the land. God chose both men to lead the nation at this time. Moses mediated the covenant that provided the conditions for Israel to enter, settle, and retain the land, and Joshua keeps the covenant that accomplishes Israel's entrance into the land. He also renews the covenant after they have taken the land (Josh. 24). The Deuteronomist consciously links the two unique founders of Israel by a series of parallel episodes: God promises to be with both (1:5). Both lead Israel across a formidable body of water that amazingly dries up and so are exalted in the eyes of the people (3:7). Both take off their sandals in the presence of *I AM* (5:13–15), intercede for the people when they sin (7:7), possess the land and distribute it (12:7–8; 14:1–5), bless the people (22:6), and mediate the old covenant ([chap. 24](#)).

Joshua models the kind of leadership kings are to exercise: keeping the Law, taking responsibility for Israel's entering into the land and keeping it; and being formally inducted into office (Deut. 34:9). (Regarding the book of Judges, see [chapter 21](#) above.)

The biographer of Ruth draws his biography to conclusion with the elders of Bethlehem blessing Boaz with offspring like the patriarchs of Israel and with fame in Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11–12). The coda (4:13–22), which closes the book with David's genealogy (4:18–22), roots that offspring in Judah and climaxes with the name of Israel's most famous king, David, the last word of the book. Moreover, the blessing of the elders links Ruth with Rachel and Leah, Jacob's wives, and the elders link Boaz with Perez and Judah. Thus, the ancestry of David is linked through Perez with the patriarchs, Jacob and Judah. In this way the prophet-biographer links David with the Abrahamic covenant, which had been handed down to Jacob, and more specifically with Jacob's testament, which crowns Judah with kingship.

Ruth's biographer begins his work with an emphatic reference to Ruth's in-laws as "Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah" (Ruth 1:2). The collocation of these three place names, as in Micah 5:2, reminds the connoisseur of the Davidic tradition of David's ancestors and cradle (cf. 1 Sam. 16:1; 17:12). In sum, the narrator begins and ends his biography of Ruth and Boaz, David's ancestors, with allusions to David, suggesting his book functions within the canon of Scripture as David's birth narrative. Surprisingly, the Primary History does not give David's genealogy, but the Chronicler later gives it (1 Chron. 2:13–15). In addition to establishing David's physical origins from ancestors destined for kingship, the inspired biographer points to David's spiritual heritage. Both Ruth and Boaz are a cut above others. Boaz by birth and nature is a *gibbôr ḥayîl* "a mighty man of valor," and Ruth, who begins her career as a *šiphâ* (Ruth 2:11,

13), the lowest menial slave girl of Moabite extraction, by dint of virtue is finally acclaimed in Israel as an *ʿēšet ḥayil*, “a competent and noble woman,” a worthy match for Boaz. Both parents are characterized by industry, prudence, pluck, and humility, and above all they show *ḥesed* (“unfailing loyalty”) to *I AM* and to the needy. Boaz sacrifices himself to give Ruth’s deceased husband social immortality, and the noble couple handed over their baby to Naomi to support her in her old age. This is David’s “holy” roots.

V. BOOK OF SAMUEL

We dealt with the theology of kingship in the book of Samuel in [chapters 22](#) and [23](#). Here we add only that the Davidic covenant fulfills, confirms, and supplements the Abrahamic covenant. Instructively, the two covenants are remarkably similar in style and content. Both are unconditional and both are *I AM*'s grants as rewards to faithful servants, yet their eternal rewards far exceed their investments of a single lifetime of serving *I AM*. Nocturnal visions are the vehicle for their revelations (Gen. 15:1, 12; 2 Sam. 7:4). The center of attention in each is the son to be born. J. P. Fokkelman argues that the choice of “seed” (*zera*⁵) links the two covenants because the phrase “from your own body” occurs uniquely in Genesis 15:4 and 2 Samuel 7:12, apart from Genesis 16:11. George Mendenhall rightly comments: “In David, the promise to the patriarchs is fulfilled, and renewed.”²⁷ Although both covenants are unconditional with reference to their enduring seed as an institution, the enjoyment of the provisions of these covenants by their individual sons is conditioned on their obedience to the Mosaic covenant. Their descendants will inherit the enjoyment of these rewards only to the extent that they are loyal to *I AM* and obey the stipulations and commandments of the Mosaic covenant.

Both covenants are exceptional: they see into the most remote future with precision, and their content dictates the future course of history forever. Historians are generally agreed that it would make little difference today whether Napoleon ever lived. By contrast, it makes a profound difference to the history of all humanity whether Abraham and/or David lived. Walt Kaiser plausibly interprets *tôrat hā'ādām* (2 Sam. 7:19) in David's response to the covenant by “a charter for humanity” that impacts all nations.²⁸

In fulfilling his covenant within David's lifetime to give him a great name and Israel a secure place and rest from all their oppressors, *I AM* is also fulfilling his covenant promises to Abraham with regard to “seed” and “land.” With regard to the seed, by the time Solomon assumes his father's throne, Abraham's seed has become like the “dust of the earth” (2 Chron. 1:9), the “sand on the seashore” (1 Kings 4:20), and the “stars in the sky” (e.g., 1 Chron. 27:23), the standards of comparison for the multitude of Abraham's promised descendants (Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 22:17). With regard to the land, David's military victories expand the land

that Solomon inherited from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates (1 Kings 4:21), which reflects God's covenant with Abraham.^{[29](#)}

The Davidic covenant also supplements the Abrahamic covenant. *I AM* promises unconditionally to both Abraham and David an eternal posterity: to Abraham an enduring nation; to David an enduring dynasty to rule that nation. Indeed, David's eternal dynasty mediates the kings whom *I AM* promised to give from Abraham and Sarah's own bodies.^{[30](#)}

VI. BOOK OF KINGS

The book of Kings is also about kingship, as its title suggests. Jerome Walsh suggests its narrator structured the book of Kings according to the following chiastic pattern:^{[31](#)}

- A Solomon and the united monarchy (1 Kings 1–11)
- B Separation of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 12)
- C Kings of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 13–16)
- X The Omrid dynasty (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 11)
- C' Kings of Israel and Judah (2 Kings 12–16)
- B' Fall of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17)
- A' Kingdom of Judah alone (2 Kings 18–25)

A. Solomon and the United Kingdom (1 Kings 1–11)

The chiastic structure of “Solomon and the United Monarchy” reinforces the Deuteronomist’s views of the monarchy. Walsh analyzes its striking chiastic structure thus:^{[32](#)}

- A A prophet intervenes in the royal succession (1:1–2:12)
- B Solomon eliminates threats to his security (2:13–46)
- C Early promise of Solomon’s reign (3:1–15)
- D Solomon uses wisdom for people (3:16–4:34)
- E Preparations for building the temple (5:1–18)
- F Solomon begins building the temple (6:1–38)
- X Solomon builds “rival” buildings (7:1–12)
- F' Solomon completes building the temple (7:13–51)
- E' Solomon dedicates the temple and is warned by God (8:1–9:9)
- D' Solomon uses wisdom for himself (9:10–10:29)
- C' Tragic failure of Solomon’s reign (11:2–13)
- B' Lord raises up threats to Solomon’s security (11:14–25)
- A' A prophet determines the royal succession (11:26–43)

A/A'. *I AM* chooses the kings to rule his kingdom by prophetic designation. In A, God, through Nathan, chooses Solomon, not Adonijah. In A' Ahijah of Shiloh designates Jeroboam I to establish a rival kingdom in the north; he is later supported by Shemaiah the Shilonite (1 Kings 12:22–24; cf. 2 Chron. 12:15–16).

F/F'. The set of mirror images (*F/F'*) shows that God kept the first three promises of the Davidic covenant with regard to David's immediate future in his seed, Solomon, who established his throne and kingdom and built the temple.

B/B', *C/C'*, *D/D'*. These three sets of mirror images show that *I AM*'s blessings rested on Solomon (B) when he was a covenant keeping king (*C/C'*), but when he dethroned *I AM* from his rightful place (X), *I AM* disciplined him with human rods, as the covenant had cautioned (*B/B'*). In other words, the promise or failure of kingship depends on the character of the king, according to the decree of the Davidic covenant. Solomon, son of David, secured his throne and kingdom in connection with building the temple. But when the chosen king interrupts building the temple to build royal palaces (X), and when he put his wives' foreign gods in place of *I AM* (*C'*), and when he uses his gift of wisdom for self-regard (*D'*), *I AM* raises human rods to discipline him by destabilizing his rule (*B'*).

X. The pivot suggests that when Solomon put his royal building projects, which represent his self-regard, before *I AM*'s temple, which represents *I AM*'s regard, he undermines the kingdom of God. As a result of his double-mindedness his biography becomes a peripeteia.

A'. Because Solomon replaces righteousness with wickedness, *I AM* disciplines him by the likes of the revolutionary, Jeroboam. Nevertheless, the light of David's dynasty continues to shine in Judah (1 Kings 11:12–13).

B. Separation and Fall of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 12; 2 Kings 17)

From its beginning to its end, the northern kingdom fails because none of its twenty kings is loyal to *I AM*. In 2 Kings 17 the Deuteronomist himself steps onto the stage to address his audience and to explain to them that this kingdom fails because all its kings refuse to subordinate themselves to *I AM*'s rule as expressed in the Mosaic covenant and as interpreted by his prophets. He holds these kings responsible for Israel's failure to retain the land.

C. Kings of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 13–16; 2 Kings 12–16)

The success or failure of kingship depends on the character of the king. Of the Judean kings, the Deuteronomist gives high marks to six of them because they remain loyal to *I AM* and keep his covenant apart from their neglect to remove the high places in his worship. To a large extent, these kings succeed in foreign affairs. That they are judged “good” in spite of the high places to *I AM* shows that the Deuteronomist’s main concern is with the content of worship and that the place of worship is a subsidiary concern.^{[33](#)}

D. The Omrid Dynasty (1 Kings 16:21–2 Kings 11:21)

The Omrid dynasty functions as a foil to the Deuteronomist’s ideal kingship. This dynasty has no prophetic authorization, usurps Israel’s throne by assassinations and by force of arms (1 Kings 16:15–22), institutes licentious Baal worship as the official state religion (16:29–33), exploits the people without regard for Israel’s covenant values (1 Kings 21), and comes to a tragic end (2 Kings 10). The awesome miracles of Elijah-Elisha function as a polemic against its institution of Baal worship as the state religion and show that *I AM* never lost control of his kingdom.

E. Judah Alone (2 Kings 18–25)

By contrast to the house of Omri, Josiah and Hezekiah of the house of David represent the Deuteronomist’s ideal for kingship. Gerbrandt uses these two kings as the basis for getting at the Deuteronomist’s view of the king’s role and of kingship itself. They surpass other kings because they even remove the high places to *I AM*. Of each king the Deuteronomist says there was none like him before or after (2 Kings 18:5; 23:25). As Solomon is incomparable with respect to wisdom, Hezekiah is incomparable in his trust in *I AM* and Josiah is incomparable in obeying the Law of Moses. The apparent contradiction highlights the Deuteronomist’s ideals: trust in *I AM* and obedience to his covenant.

This section also displays both the conditional and unconditional nature of the

Davidic dynasty. Because of the sin of Manasseh, the southern kingdom lost the land but, nevertheless, even in exile Jehoiachin is set above all the other kings. When one finishes the book of Kings, he asks, “But how does it turn out? Did God’s promises fail?” The Deuteronomist, a prophet-historian, concludes his work with the account of the elevation of Jehoiachin, not with the fall of Jerusalem and tragic fate of Zedekiah and his sons. Believing in the immutability of God’s promise that the life of David would never be extinguished, he draws his work to conclusion with a glimmer of hope in God’s grace: “He [Evil-Merodach] spoke kindly to him [Jehoiachin]³⁴ and gave him a seat³⁵ of honor higher than those of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes³⁶ and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king’s table.”³⁷

VII. BOOK OF CHRONICLES

A. Structure and Content

Section 1 of Chronicles, “Roots of Privilege and Responsibility for God’s People” (1 Chron. 1:1–9:34), contains the massive genealogies that introduce these books.³⁸ The genealogies are shaped to highlight Judah, the Davidic dynasty, and the centralization of worship at the temple. They serve to emphasize that the postexilic community is linked with preexilic Israel and continues to be the people of God. More specifically, according to Pratt, they aim to teach postexilic Israel their roots of privilege and responsibilities as God’s people.

Section 2, “The Ideal United Kingdom” (1 Chron. 9:35–2 Chron. 9:31), teaches postexilic Israel to learn God’s patterns for their kingdom from the model reigns of David and Solomon. More precisely, the Chronicler idealizes the unification of all Israel under the house of David.

Section 3, “Blessing and Judgments in the Divided Kingdom” (2 Chron. 10–28), teaches postexilic Israel to learn the way of judgment and blessing by their day-to-day remembering of the examples of Judah’s kings during the divided kingdom. More precisely, the Chronicler instructs his audience to keep the Mosaic covenant in connection with the Davidic dynasty.

Section 4, “Blessings and Judgments in the Reunited Kingdom” (2 Chron. 29–36), continues the same lesson but now in their day-to-day remembering of events that occur after reunification.

B. Perspective with Regard to Monarchy

Scholars agree that the Chronicler sought to direct the restoration of God’s people during the postexilic period. They are also agreed that the books of Chronicles have David and the Davidic dynasty as a central theme.³⁹ Robert Noth says, “The person and dynasty of David forms the heartbeat of all the

Chronicler's theology."⁴⁰ Scholars differ, however, in their understanding of the Chronicler's reason for regarding David and Solomon highly in their contribution to the restoration of the postexilic community. Some think the Chronicler's perspective was theocratic (i.e., to establish the nation according to postmonarchical concerns with the cult and Law as the center of hope); others think it was eschatological. The issue is partially tied up with the debated issue of dating the Chronicler.

Those who regard the Chronicler as also the author of Ezra-Nehemiah or regard Chronicles as having been written after their reforms — in either case about 400 BC — tend to see the book's focus as theocratic. In this scenario the Chronicler regards the Davidic dynasty as failed and only of historical interest. For him, according to this point of view, the enduring significance of David and Solomon lay in their establishing the temple and its cultus. The temple and all that is associated with it remain the only enduring expressions of God's rule, not David's dynastic succession. In other words, according to these scholars, the Chronicler aims to reconstruct the nation on the priests, not on kingship.

Other scholars think the book was composed when the second temple was built between 520 and 516 BC. These scholars tend to see the Chronicler's perspective as eschatological as well as theocratic. According to this point of view, the Chronicler regards the Davidic dynasty as central to the nation's restoration and future. His aim, they argue, coincides with the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, who pin Israel's hopes on Zerubbabel. In short, kingship is central to the nation's restoration. The following arguments support the eschatological perspective:

1. The Chronicler saw the Davidic dynasty as perpetual, "forever" (1 Chron. 17:12, 14, 23, 24, 27; 22:10; 28:7, 8; 2 Chron. 13:5).
2. Abijah, the successor of Rehoboam, condemns Jeroboam for his failure to acknowledge the enduring Davidic covenant, which he describes as "a covenant of salt" (i.e., an eternal covenant).⁴¹ According to that covenant, undoubtedly also the Chronicler's point of view, "the kingdom of *I AM* ... is in the hands of David's descendants" (2 Chron. 13:8). Moreover, as Abijah continues to argue, the temple and its sacred personnel, the priests and Levites, are inseparable from it.
3. It is hard to suppose the Chronicler's vision was not open to a vision of a future that is in line with the messianic expectation found in the postexilic prophets and in the Psalter, which was also probably compiled at this time.

VIII. BOOK OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

I discuss the structure and content of Ezra-Nehemiah in [chapter 27](#). Suffice it here to comment on that book's perspective with regard to monarchy. The reformers Ezra and Nehemiah reconstruct the postexilic community according to the Mosaic covenant, not according to the Davidic covenant. Their autobiographies and the narrator who compiled them into the book of Ezra-Nehemiah are almost totally silent about kingship, and therefore many devalue the importance of kingship in this book. However, an eschatological perspective on kingship is implicit and the absence of an emphasis on kingship can be explained.

First, one has to keep in mind their political context. Apart from the return under Zerubbabel, the events of these books occurred during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes, whose major concern was to suppress rebellions, such as Xerxes had confronted from the Greeks, and that he himself confronted from the Egyptians. Ezra and Nehemiah enjoy the Persian king's favor only to the extent that they do not threaten his kingship. At one point Artaxerxes stops a premature rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall when he suspects that Jerusalem has the political aspiration to be independent from Persian taxation (Ezra 4). It should come as no surprise, then, that the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is written—such as not featuring the house of David—so as not to arouse the Persian king's suspicion and cause the reformers to lose favor with him.⁴²

Second, it should be borne in mind that this is a time of Gentile dominion. Beginning with Jeremiah, God's covenant people realize they have to live peacefully under Gentile domination until God delivers them from it. They hope for a future, not a present, restoration of the good Israel enjoyed under King David.

Third, the genealogies subtly single out the line of David, showing a consciousness of its continued existence. The reference to the "holy race" in Ezra 9:2 suggests a connection with Isaiah 6:13, where the holy seed is the stump that remains after the purging of Israel. This and other allusions show that they preserve a hope open toward the future.

Fourth, Ezra's confession and petition (Neh. 9:5–37) clearly pertain to a restored monarchy. Mark Thronveit's analysis of this prayer as having a chiasmic structure illuminates its eschatological perspective:

A Praise (v. 5b)

B Confession of past sins, pitting God's grace against Israel's rebellion (vv. 6–31)

X Petition: Take away our hardships (v. 32)

B' Confession of present sin (vv. 33–35)

A' Lament: We are in great distress as slaves to foreign kings (vv. 36–37)

The pivot (X) and lament (A') show great dissatisfaction with Persian rule and point the community's hope toward a future that outlasts the Persian Empire. The confession (B) in the form of historical retrospect traces Israel's history from creation to Israel's conquest and settlement in the land. Significantly, the confession of the present sin (B') includes the monarchy. In coded language Ezra prays for deliverance from the Persian kings and for the restoration of Israel. He begins this section with "Now, God." He refers to God as one "who keeps his [lit., 'the'] covenant and his [lit., 'the'] *hesed*," probably a reference to all his covenants with Israel (cf. Neh. 1:5), including the Davidic. Indeed, *hesed*, is used in the Davidic, not Abrahamic, covenant. Ezra addresses God in these terms to move God to deliver Israel from their hardship, which he specifies as the hardship on "our kings and leaders" (Neh. 9:32). He petitions (X) God to deliver them from "the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress" (v. 37). The reformers obviously look forward to a future involving a restoration of David and his good times.

IX. BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS

The books of the prophets are rich in their depiction of a future ideal scion from the house of David. We restrict ourselves here to reminding the reader of some of the most famous of these oracles.

He will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. (Isa. 9:6–7)

The Spirit of *I AM* will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of *I AM*. (Isa. 11:2)

“The days are coming,” declares *I AM*,
“when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,
a king who will reign wisely
and do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
I AM Our Righteousness.” (Jer. 23:5–6)

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,

from ancient times....

He will stand and shepherd his flock

in the strength of *I AM*,

in the majesty of the name of *I AM* his God.

And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be their peace.” (Mic. 5:2–5)

X. BOOK OF PSALMS

As we shall see in [chapter 30](#), the book of Psalms is a collection mostly of royal prayers and petitions. Psalm 2 celebrates the king's coronation; Psalm 18, his victories over all his enemies; Psalm 45, his marriage; Psalm 72, his universal rule in time and space; Psalm 101, his ideal cabinet; and so forth. Psalm 72, "Of Solomon," echoes the personal and universal promise of God to Abraham to make his name great and to make him a blessing to the nations by focusing them on the house of David:

May his name endure for ever;

may it continue as long as the sun.

All nations will be blessed through him,

and they will call him blessed. (v. 17; cf. Gen. 2:2–3; Ps. 2:7–8; Isa. 55:3–5)

XI. New TESTAMENT

During the exile and the intertestamental periods, the concept of kingship is significantly modified into the concept of Messiah (see [chap. 30](#)). Suffice it here to note Christ's royal lineage, his royal titles, and the New Testament perspective of a realized eschatology vis-à-vis the Davidic covenant in Jesus Christ.

A. The Royal Lineage of Jesus Christ

The birth narratives of Jesus Christ emphasize his lineage from Abraham and David, but his royal lineage in Matthew (1:2–17) differs from that of Luke (3:23–38). Some suggest that Matthew has Joseph's line and Luke represents Mary's, but Luke specifically starts with "Joseph." It may be that Matthew is giving his legal ancestry to the throne of David through Joseph and that Luke is giving his physical lineage through Mary.

B. The Royal Titles of Jesus Christ

The royal titles of Jesus Christ include Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man. In [chapter 32](#) I devote an entire section (section IV) to the title Messiah. The title Son of God is used in three different ways in the New Testament: (1) with reference to his descent from David, the way the term is used in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:14; John 1:49); (2) with reference to his conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:35); and (3) with reference to his preexistence with the Father as an eternal member of the Trinity, who is an aseity (John 17).

Jesus appropriated to himself the title Son of Man in Daniel 7:13, though in Daniel the epithet refers to the kingdom of Israel in contrast to the bestial nations that ruled prior to the advent of the kingdom of God in the Messiah. In any case, Jesus is the quintessential expression of that kingdom. Because Jesus identified himself as the Son of Man who rides the clouds, the religious leaders of his day

accused him of blasphemy and crucified him, unwittingly fulfilling a necessary prerequisite of the true Messiah who would rise from the dead (Matt. 26:64, 65; Mark 14:62–67). The title is used sixty-nine times in the Synoptic Gospels and twelve times in the Gospel of John to refer to Jesus Christ. It is the title Jesus preferred.

C. Jesus Christ and the Davidic Covenant

Today *I AM*'s covenant with David is made even more certain and complete in Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Peter 1:19). First, Jesus Christ establishes the covenant on the human side. This Son is God's Amen to the covenant's conditional aspect. Jesus Christ is impeccable: he is "stick-proof" to sin. Along with his Father, he is worthy of praise, honor, glory, and power (Rev. 5:13). Second, Jesus Christ, by his eternal person and by his resurrection and ascension establishes it on the divine side. He rightly sits on David's throne in heavenly Jerusalem, of which the earthly throne was always only a type (cf. Acts 2:33–34; Heb. 12:22–24). From this throne, by the Spirit he presently rules in the hearts of the elect saints from all the nations. By fulfilling this covenant in a way far beyond what David could have thought or asked for, today both David and *I AM* are universally renowned. Though the covenant is now being fulfilled, it awaits the consummation when heavenly Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God to the renewed heaven and earth (Rev. 21).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does the nature of kingship in the Ancient Near East enrich your understanding of Jesus Christ as your King? How do the unconditional and conditional natures of the Davidic covenant instruct you in your own relationship to God and to the world through Jesus Christ?

[1.](#) Case literature on kingship is vast. David M. Howard Jr. (“The Case of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” *WTJ* 52 [1990]: 114) presents a helpful bibliography for entree into the discussion.

[2.](#) Tomoo Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology* (New York and Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977), 7–25, esp. 25.

[3.](#) Ibid.

[4.](#) Ibid. This was not the case in Egypt. The Egyptians believed that Re founded the monarchy from which the pharaoh descended when Re made the universe. The Mesopotamians thought monarchy descended from heaven after the gods created people and animals.

[5.](#) Ibid.

[6.](#) See Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Univ. of Sheffield Press, 1981).

[7.](#) Ibid., 73.

[8.](#) Ibid., 25, italics mine.

[9.](#) J. J. M. Roberts (“In Defense of the Monarchy: The Contribution of Israelite Kingship to Biblical Theology,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr. *et al.* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 377), cites S. Hermann (*A History of Israel in Old Testament Times*, 1st ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975], 132) as fairly representative of this view: “All this confirms the common view that the monarchy was a later phenomenon in Israel, forced on it by historical circumstances and essentially alien to its original nature.” Roberts (387nn1–3) presents a helpful history of scholarly opinion about the place of the monarchy in the history of Israelite religion.

[10.](#) Ibid., 377–78.

[11.](#) Ibid., 378.

[12.](#) Ibid.

[13.](#) Gerald E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship according to the Deuteronomistic History* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 127.

[14.](#) Heb. *b'ne b'liya'al* denotes “revolutionaries” (those opposed to right [i.e., moral and/or political order]).

[15.](#) Dale Sumner DeWitt, “The Jephthah Traditions: A Rhetorical and Literary Study in the Deuteronomistic History” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews Univ., Berrien Springs, Mich., 1987), 300.

[16.](#) Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 365.

[17.](#) Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 132.

[18.](#) Eugene Maly, “The Jotham Fable — Antimonarchical?” *CBQ* 22 (1960): 299–305.

[19.](#) DeWitt, “Jephthah Traditions,” 306.

[20.](#) See [chap. 22](#)n17.

[21.](#) Adopted from Matitahu Tsevat, “The Biblical Account of the Foundation of the Monarchy in Israel,” in *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies: Essays on the Literature and Religion of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: KTAV; Dallas: Institute for Jewish Studies, 1980), 77–99; D. J. McCarthy, “Inauguration of Monarchy in Israel: A Form Critical Study of 1 Samuel 8–12,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 401–12.

[22.](#) J. P. Fokkelman curiously pits the narrator’s viewpoint against the prophet. According to Fokkelman, the narrator sides with the people against Samuel, whom he regards as piqued by taking their rejection personally. See J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, vol. 4 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1933), 488.

[23.](#) Gerbrandt, *Kingship*; J. Robert Vannoy, *Covenant Renewal at Gilgal: A Study of 1 Samuel 11:14–12:25* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack, 1977), 34–40, 149–80, 227–232. Howard (“The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” 103n8) documents that within evangelical circles, a number of scholars have argued in the same direction.

[24.](#) Normally the phrase *ys' min* with reference to the birth of children is qualified in the case of the father by *mimmē*^c (2 Sam. 7:12; 16:11), *mēh^alāšim* (Gen. 35:11), and *yārēk* (Exod. 1:5), and with reference to the mother by *mērehem* (Num. 12:12) or “from between her feet” (Deut. 28:57). In 2 Kings 20:18 (= Isa. 39:7) *ys' min* is supplemented by *šer tōlîd*..

[25.](#) Samuel's telling Saul, who is from the tribe of Benjamin, that his house could have been established forever had he obeyed the prophet (1 Sam. 13:13–14) raises a theological problem for some. Eugene H. Merrill (*Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 209–10, 325) resolves the problem by appealing to 1 Kings 11:38. As God established the house of Jeroboam alongside the house of David, he would have established both the house of Saul and the house of David. Alternatively, it is better argued that the destinies determined by God are fulfilled through human sin. God's designs are never trumped by sin.

[26.](#) Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 101–2.

[27.](#) George Mendenhall, *IDB*, 1:718.

[28.](#) Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 152–55; and William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 152.

[29.](#) Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), 58.

[30.](#) Mendenhall, *IDB*, 1:718; R. E. Clements, *Abraham and David: Genesis XV and Its Meaning for Israelite Tradition* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1967), 55ff.; B. Mazar, "The Historical Background of the Book of Genesis," *JNES* 28, no. 2 (April 1969): 75.

[31.](#) Jerome T. Walsh, *I Kings*, ed. D. W. Cotter (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996), 373.

[32.](#) *Ibid.*

[33.](#) Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 12.

[34.](#) ^{ʾittô tōbôt} could also mean "he established a covenant with him" (Ezek. 17:16). Subjugation to the Babylonian emperor was indeed punitive, but the purpose of the punishment was to train the vassal in the ways of covenant fidelity. Subjugation was preparatory to the reestablishment of full Davidic sovereignty.

[35.](#) *Kissē*, or "throne" (cf. Ps. 18:44–45).

[36.](#) Putting aside his prison clothes signifies a change of status beyond that which any inmate undergoes upon his release (cf. Lev. 16:4, 32). In Zech. 3:1–7 the angel of *I AM* orders a change of clothes for the high priest Joshua, who only then receives the diadem. Joshua's change of clothing is preparatory to his assumption of his august office.

[37.](#) J. D. Levenson, "The Last Four Verses in Kings," *JBL* 103 (September 1984): 353–61. Gerhard von Rad says, "To be sure, nothing is expressed in

theological terms here, but something is hinted at, and with great reserve. But for all that is happening is mentioned which had the significance of an omen for the Deuteronomist, a fact from which Yahweh can start again, if it be his will. At all events, the passage must be interpreted by every reader as indication that the line of David has not yet come to an irrevocable end” (Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* [London: SCM Press, 1963]).

[38.](#) For Chronicles, I depend on Richard L. Pratt Jr., *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1998).

[39.](#) Cited by Howard, “The Case for Kingship in the Old Testament Narrative Books and the Psalms,” 26n23.

[40.](#) Robert Noth, “Theology of the Chronicles,” *JBL* 82/4 (Dec. 1963): 376.

[41.](#) H. G. M. Williamson, “Eschatology in the Chronicler,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 115–54. H. C. Trumbull, *The Covenant of Salt as Based on the Significance and Symbolism of Salt in Primitive Thought* (New York: Scribner, 1899). In his magisterial work on salt, M. Kurlansky (*Salt: A World History* [New York: Walker and Co., 2002], 7) comments, “Salt was to the ancient Hebrews, and still is to modern Jews, the symbol of the eternal nature of God’s covenant with Israel.”

[42.](#) David L. Petersen (*Haggai and Zechariah 1–8: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984], 104–6) suggests that Haggai was very careful in his formulation of the expectation that God would elevate Zerubbabel to royal honor so as not to stir up political problems with the Persians.

Chapter 25

THE GIFT OF GOD'S HISTORY-SHAPING WORD, PART 1: 1 KINGS

Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck;
through thought I grasp it.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 6.385

I. introduction to 1 and 2 kings

The book of Kings¹ narrates the tragic decline of Israel's truly golden age under Solomon (ca. 960 BC) to its tragic exile four centuries later under Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. God's kings, who have the temporal power to rule Israel through their political might, including thousands of foot soldiers and hundreds of iron chariots, turn their false political strength against *I AM* and his covenants because they believe that might, not faith, is right. God's prophets represent true spiritual strength: their weapons in the ninth century were awesome signs and wonders and prophecies and then, from 760 BC onward, preaching the likes of which the world had never heard ([chap. 28](#)). They represent *I AM*'s historic covenants, guaranteeing the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham and David, and at the same time bringing blessings and curses upon the nation according to the Mosaic covenant. The book of Kings shows beyond question that the prophetic word is mightier than the king's sword. Through Israel's unbelief *I AM* robes himself in wondrous glory.

Though the prophets have only words in their mouths, not swords in their hands, *I AM* maintains his rule through his spiritually energized-by-faith friends and Israel's conscience. Prophets, not kings, dominate the acts and scenes of his book. The theology of the implied prophet-historian can be seen by his changes of pace and focus. He treats the kings tersely within the broad focus of regnal formulae that cover these four centuries, but he slows down the pace of his narrative considerably and focuses closely on the miracles and prophecies of Elijah and Elisha at the pivot of his book. These mighty prophets represent true strength and the kingdom that prevails. Israel is without excuse for not recognizing that *I AM* rules, and the nation's captivity is long overdue and more than just. In other words, the book of Kings reinforces the theology of Deuteronomy: the covenant renewal document that establishes the nature and the conditions of the irrupting kingdom of God by showing that *I AM* upholds his covenants.

The implied author, probably the Deuteronomist and unquestionably a prophet-historian (see [chap. 2](#)), begins his book with the closing days of David's rule (ca. 970 BC) and draws it to conclusion in the thirty-seventh year of Jehoiachin's exile (560), shortly after which he wrote the book, for he makes no mention of the return from this exile (ca. 539 BC). His opening chapter draws

the succession narrative in 2 Samuel 9–20 to conclusion, showing that a common hand wrote and/or combined the two books. His own explicit references² and the book’s high level of intertextuality³ testify to his use of a wide variety of written sources, each of which probably had its own history. The implied prophet-historian selects, rearranges, combines, and reshapes his sources to demonstrate to his exilic and universal audiences (see [chap. 2](#) above) that *I AM* keeps his unconditional covenants to Abraham and David, but Israel’s kings fail to keep the Mosaic covenant and thus lose their right to enjoy the privileges of those covenants in the Land.

The author is obsessed with history as seen in his attention to detail⁴ and in his chronologically successive “regnal formulae,” which provide the framework for his work.⁵ The formulae have two halves: the first presents the king’s accession to the throne and the second records his death. During the divided kingdom, the accession notices typically include a king’s synchronism with the opposing king, age at succession (Judah only), length of reign, capital city, and name of queen mother (Judah only). The death notices typically include source citation, death and burial notice, and notice of succession. The regularity of these formulae contributes much to the sense of coherence of the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

Most important, however, the accession and death notices form a frame around each king, enabling the prophet-historian to evaluate theologically in an orderly and meaningful way whether a king has done what is right or evil. If the king does what is right (i.e., keeps the Mosaic covenant), he experiences covenant blessings. But if he does evil (i.e., disobeys Moses and the prophets), he suffers covenant curses (e.g., 1 Kings 14:22–26; cf. 2 Kings 17), though occasionally God’s grace delays the punishment. The writer’s litmus test of a king’s obedience pertains to the first specific commandment of Deuteronomy: to have but one central sanctuary (Deut. 12). In short, for this writer history and theology are inseparable, for the theological principles of Israel’s covenants determine the course of history. Paul House says, “The issue is truth and how truth impacts history.”⁶ The structural regnal formulae, repeated again and again with each king, shouts the writer’s message: *I AM*, not the king, rules Israel in accordance with his covenants. *I AM* keeps fidelity both with his unconditional Abrahamic and Davidic covenants as seen in his keeping a light shining in the house of David and with the conditional Mosaic covenant by executing its blessings and curses.

The narrator begins his evaluations by characterizing the spiritual double-mindedness of Solomon—his love of *I AM* and his marriage to an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 3:1–3; cf. 7:8–9; 11:1). Solomon’s double-mindedness and his

increasing addiction to foreign women ultimately lead to the political division of his kingdom.⁷ During the period of the divided kingdom, the writer arranges his record of events that occurred concurrently by alternating between the North and the South.

II. EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGICAL REELECTION OF 1 KINGS

As noted in the preceding chapter, the book of 1 Kings has a chiastic structure with a pivot on the Omrid dynasty for reasons stated above:

- A Solomon and the united monarchy (1 Kings 1–11)
- B Separation of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 12)
- C Kings of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 13–16)
- X The Omrid dynasty (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 11)
- C' Kings of Israel and Judah (2 Kings 12–16)
- B' Fall of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17)
- A' Kingdom of Judah alone (2 Kings 18–25)

AIA'. Solomon's divided heart leads to the division of his kingdom. After the fall of the northern kingdom, Judah experiences both the best and worst of kings. Hezekiah trusts God more than any other king, and Josiah obeys the law more perfectly than any other, but Manasseh is so bad that his reign guarantees Judah's exile, and the sins of Josiah's sons, the last kings of Judah, effect the Babylonian exile.

BIB'. No king of the northern kingdom does what is right. At best the kings follow the false cult of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, their first king. Even Jehu's reform of purging the realm of Baal worship and of the house of Omri only effect the reinstitution of Jeroboam's idolatry.

X. The house of Omri does more evil than any kings before or after them, for they institute as the state religion the depraved Canaanite fertility cultus of Baal and his consort Asherah. In this crisis *I AM*'s power triumphs over the temporal power through his cometlike prophets Elijah and Elisha.

A. Solomon and the United Monarchy (1 Kings 1–11)

Recall Jerome Walsh's chiastic pattern for Solomon's reign (see p. 693).

- A A prophet intervenes in the royal succession (1:1–2:12)
- B Solomon eliminates threats to his security (2:13–46)
- C Early promise of Solomon’s reign (3:1–15)
- D Solomon uses wisdom for people (3:16–4:34)
- E Preparations for building the temple (5:1–18)
- F Solomon begins building the temple (6:1–38)
- X Solomon builds “rival” buildings (7:1–12)
- F’ Solomon completes building the temple (7:13–51)
- E’ Solomon dedicates the temple and is warned by God (8:1–9:9)
- D’ Solomon uses wisdom for himself (9:10–10:29)
- C’ Tragic failure of Solomon’s reign (11:2–13)
- B’ Lord raises up threats to Solomon’s security (11:14–25)
- A’ A prophet determines the royal succession (11:26–43)

The pattern depicts vividly the role of the prophets’ history-shaping word and role of *I AM*’s history-shaping spiritual rule in accord with his covenant. The peripeteia (X) of Solomon’s rule from good to bad (B — D/B’ — D’) comes about through his double-mindedness, his lack of wholehearted devotion to *I AM* as represented by his palace complex, the account of which interrupts the account of his temple building.

A/A’. Solomon’s reign depends on a prophet’s divine word: Nathan’s words place him on the throne (1 Kings 1:11— 27) and Ahijah’s words divide the kingdom (11:29–40). The prophets effectively shape Israel’s destiny by their performative speech that crowns Israel’s kings.⁸

B/B’. Section B is framed by “was firmly established” (1 Kings 2:12, 46b), a divine passive in Hebrew grammar. Solomon says, “[I AM] has established me securely on the throne” (2:24). The silent providence of God establishes Solomon on the throne of all Israel as it had David in his rise to the throne of all Israel (2 Sam. 2:1–5:5; see [chap. 23](#) above). In B’, however, the narrator breaks his silence and explicitly states that *I AM* raised up Hadad and Rezon as adversaries to destabilize Solomon’s throne (1 Kings 11:14–25). *I AM* upholds his spiritual rule as represented by his word through his providence.

C/C’. These two sections contrast “Solomon showed his love for *I AM* by walking according to the statutes of his father David” (1 Kings 3:3) and “King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women” (11:1) from nations with which he was not to intermarry. They lead him astray (i.e., to break fidelity with *I AM*, 11:1–4). The wisest man who ever lived before Jesus Christ (3:12) dies a fool because he stopped listening to instruction (Prov. 19:27). Again, God shapes Israel’s history in accord with his basic commandment to love *I AM* with the

whole heart.

DID'. Whereas in section B Solomon wisely uses his sword for death to establish his kingdom, in D he even more wisely uses the sword to preserve the life of a prostitute's baby. By his wise administration, he fulfills the Abrahamic covenant with respect to both Israel's numerous seed (cf. 1 Kings 4:20 with Gen. 22:17; 32:12) and the dimensions of the land (1 Kings 4:21; Gen. 15:18; 17:8; Deut. 1:7; 11:24). The whole nation enjoys this prosperity: "The people of Judah and Israel ... ate ... drank and ... were happy" (1 Kings 4:20). By contrast his splendor as depicted in D' is self-indulgent— "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth" (10:23) — and he uses his excessive wealth to enrich himself, not his people, some of whom he subjects to harsh labor (*sebel*, 12:4; cf. 11:28), though not to slave labor (Heb. *mas* ; 9:21). Indeed, he fractures the covenant by multiplying horses, making the people return to Egypt, taking many wives, and accumulating large amounts of silver and gold (10:26–11:1; see "Piety and Prayer," [chap. 26.II.N](#)).

EIE'. Building the temple for the worship of *I AM* is the most important act in the reign of the wisest of kings. In both the preparation and dedication of the temple, Solomon recognizes that *I AM* kept his promise to David regarding his son and the building of the temple (1 Kings 5:4–5; 8:24). Foreigners help build the temple and foreigners come to worship *I AM* there (5:1–12; 8:41). Today Gentiles as living stones also build the temple of God, the church. In other words, the temple stands as living proof that *I AM* keeps fidelity with his verbal agreements and so shapes history.

FIF'. The writer underscores the importance of the temple by giving a surprisingly detailed coverage of its dimensions, material, architectural structure, and furnishings. Solomon's renaissance excels the centuries-later Italian renaissance in purity of religion and in craftsmanship. For example, Hiram's skill in bronze exceeds by far that of the Italian renaissance bronzesmith Benvenuto Cellini.^{[9](#)}

X. The narrator structurally, not necessarily chronologically,^{[10](#)} interrupts his narrative about building the temple with an account of his building his own palace complex to suggest subtly the division of Solomon's heart. His own palace is considerably longer and more than twice as wide (1 Kings 6:38 and 7:1; 6:2 and 7:2). As his love becomes increasingly divided, his wisdom also becomes increasingly devoted to his own splendor, not *I AM*'s.

1. A Prophet Intervenes in the Royal Succession (1:1–2:12)

a. Solomon Becomes King (1:1–53)

The narrative that begins this book continues the succession narrative (2 Sam. 9–20). David’s loss of sexual potency (1 Kings 1–4) signals to his officials that he is no longer politically capable. The prophet Nathan designated at Solomon’s birth, before he did good or evil, that he is the son of David, who is “loved by *I AM*” (2 Sam. 12:24–25), and presumably the king’s successor. Adonijah, however, contests the divine election. He has fake, not spiritual, power, a primogeniture right to the throne.¹¹ In the story, he asserts himself with an emphatic “1” and positions himself with chariots (1 Kings 1:5), and the narrator adds in faint praise that he is very handsome (1 Kings 1:6; cf. 1 Sam. 9:2; 16:12; 2 Sam. 14:25–26). He gets the support of very powerful men from his father’s regime (1 Kings 1:7), has a father that “never interferes” (v. 6), and conspires behind everyone’s back (v. 9–10). To be sure, he offers sacrifices, but they are no more acceptable to God than those of Absalom (2 Sam. 15:7–12).

The prophet Nathan does not stand by as a passive spectator. With divine wisdom he skillfully maneuvers by his speeches to Bathsheba and David to undermine Adonijah’s fake strength and to awaken David with true spiritual strength to keep his inviolable oath to place Solomon on the throne in his stead (1 Kings 1:11–21; cf. Exod. 20:6; Lev. 19:12; Josh. 9:15, 18, 20; Judg. 11:30, 35; Eccl. 5:4–7). The righteous priest Zadok, with oil from David’s sacred tent, anoints God’s chosen. Only after the pretender seeks mercy from the new king to spare his life does Solomon, who up to now has been passive, speak and show he is a potentate “who has mastered the art of posing threats, keeping others in suspense and remaining non-committal”¹² (1 Kings 1:41–53).¹³ In sum, *I AM* rules Israel through spiritual political speech that overcomes carnal political maneuvering. *I AM*’s beloved son of David reigns — not the pretender who sought to usurp the throne by human strength—in accord with *I AM*’s word at Solomon’s birth.

b. David’s Charge to Solomon (2:1–12)

David, emphasizing the conditional aspects of the Davidic covenant, in his final words to Solomon, instructs Solomon to be a strong man, to walk according to the Law of Moses, and to be wise (cf. Deut. 31:7–15; Josh. 1:1–9). In this way Solomon can finish up the loose ends from the past.

2. Solomon Eliminates Threats to His Security (2:13–46)

The key word of this act is *kwn*, “established,” at the beginning, middle, and end (1 Kings 2:12, 24, 45, 46). Adonijah and his conspirators, Joab and Abiathar, as well as Saul’s insubordinate relative, Shimei, play into the wise king’s hands to eliminate them justly. All are guilty of being disloyal and/or insubordinate to the king and so worthy of death. Their follies also enable Solomon to fulfill his father’s last commands to him. First Solomon eliminates Adonijah (2:13–25). The pretender condemns himself when he says, “The kingdom was mine,” showing he has not relinquished pretensions to the throne. Though he says *I AM* gave Solomon the kingdom, the passionate pretender is not sincere, for his request to wed Abishag is tantamount to asking for the throne (see 2 Sam. 3:6–7; 12:8; 16:20–22). He is worthy of preemptive death for his disloyalty and threat to the divinely chosen king.

Solomon removes Abiathar, who was part of the conspiracy against Solomon (1 Kings 2:26–27), and makes Zadok the sole priest (2 Sam. 8:17; 15:24–35; 20:25), fulfilling the prophecy at the time of Samuel (1 Sam. 2:35). Joab also plays into Solomon’s hand. Fleeing to the altar for mercy (1 Kings 2:28–35) to find asylum there, he publicly exposes his guilty conscience of being a disloyal traitor to David and the divinely elected king and so worthy of death. The right of asylum at the altar was extended only to those who accidentally caused someone’s death (cf. Exod. 21:12–14). By Joab’s execution the house of David finally clears itself of the innocent blood of Abner and Amasa.

Shimei, Saul’s relative (not the one in 1 Kings 1:8), also plays into Solomon’s hand. Solomon wisely confines him to Jerusalem so that he cannot build a power base in Benjamin. Shimei, however, is harsh and rash (Deut. 23:15). By searching for his runaway slaves in Gath, he shows himself to be both a harsh master over the slaves and, more importantly, insubordinate to the divinely appointed king and so worthy of death. His execution also satisfies the demands of justice for his earlier cursing God’s chosen king (2 Sam. 16:5–13; 19:18–23; 1 Kings 2:8).

In sum, according to his covenant and the words of Nathan, *I AM* providentially establishes Solomon’s rule and eliminates all threats to it through the folly of the unfaithful and the wisdom of the faithful.

3. Early Promise of Solomon’s Reign (3:1–15)

Although the narrator says Solomon showed his love for *I AM* by walking according to the statutes of David, his narrative shows Solomon is not wholly committed (1 Kings 3:1–3). He marries Pharaoh's daughter, who needs her own palace (see 7:8) and so delays the building of the temple, a delay that keeps the people at the high places. His later destruction is being sown in his present disloyalty. He begins by being slack on God's law, tolerating worship of the Lord at the high places (3:2; cf. 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35) and he ends up being drawn into full-blown apostasy at them (11:7–8; cf. 2 Kings 18:4; 21:3–9).

In his first encounter with *I AM*, Solomon asks for wisdom (1 Kings 3:4–14), which comes as a surprise, for he already knows the Law and shows himself wise. In other words, the Mosaic law and his natural wisdom (2:6) are insufficient for ruling God's kingdom that represents righteousness and justice. For that he needs a divinely given wise and discerning heart. His wisdom is God's reward for his first having a heart that loves *I AM*. His new heart enables the supreme judge to know what is right and just and fair in matters too fine to be caught in the mesh of the Law and too small to be hit by the broadsides of the prophets. In this case, *I AM* rules through the petition of his king.

4. Solomon Uses His Gift for the People (3:16–4:34)

The newly coined king shows he has a discerning heart by his wise rule. The king speaks as the oracle of God, for he is the highest court of appeal and the foundation of all administration and justice (cf. God's sovereignty and morality in Prov. 16:1–9 and the king's in 16:10–15). Solomon displays his gift of wisdom in four areas: his judicial wisdom, as in the case of two mothers (1 Kings 3:16–28); his administrative wisdom in his administration of the land (4:1–19); his mercantile wisdom in his receiving the wealth of the nations (4:20–28); and his vast onomastic abilities and aptitude for coining proverbs (vv. 29–34).¹⁴ House says, "It is crucial to understand that all these achievements are a divine gift that flows from reverence for God and for God's law."¹⁵

With regard to the wealth of the nations, the large area Solomon rules approximates the ideal extent of Israel's dominion as *I AM* promised in Genesis 15:18. The nations within this area bring Solomon tribute and are subject to Solomon's rule (1 Kings 4:21–25). The picture of all Israel living in peace and prosperity foreshadows the ideal king and the messianic banquet (cf. Matt. 8:11). Provan comments, "All tribal dissension is banished, and Israel and Judah are united around the king's table as the symbol of their unity."¹⁶ Moreover, his

taxation is not regarded as oppressive. Solomon mars the glorious picture by multiplication of horses (see Deut. 17:16). This is another time bomb ticking away within his kingdom. Nevertheless, *I AM*'s verbal covenant to Abraham shapes Israel's history.

5. Solomon's Temple and Palace (5:1–9:9)

The narrator devotes almost half of his narrative to Solomon's building of *I AM*'s temple, because the temple symbolizes the irrupting kingdom of the only God on earth, the theme of the Bible. This one place of worship reinforces the truth that there is only one God, not many, and avoids Israel's temptation to serve other gods, for many high places may tempt the unwary (Deut. 12:1–9; Judg. 10:6). The temple's architectural features contain both cosmological and royal symbols that teach *I AM*'s absolute sovereignty over the whole creation and his special headship over Israel. Its basic pattern replicates the tabernacle (see [chap. 16](#)). The Hall of Justice is probably on the south side of the temple that faces east — that is to say, at God's right hand (cf. Ps. 110:1).

The dedication of the temple marks the high-water mark in the irruption of God's kingdom as narrated in the Old Testament. Solomon chooses to dedicate the temple during the fall festival and convenes Israel's leadership to accompany the priests as they carry the ark and all the sacred furnishings into the temple. By this symbolism the transhistoricity of Israel as a theocracy is affirmed. Solomon connects Israel's celebration of living in booths on their way to an established kingdom with the fulfillment of their pilgrimage and the replacement of the nomadic tent with the temple. The pilgrim's vision of glory, based on God's promise, was not a mirage. The ark with the two stone tablets that Moses placed there connects the people with their history and meaning — to express among the nations the moral will of *I AM* that ordered Israel's life (cf. Deut. 4:5; 9:9; 10:2). God is not tied down to any sanctuary, but this solid structure is fitting for an established kingdom.

Solomon addresses the people and demonstrates that his building the temple fulfills the incomparable God's promise to David that his son would build it (1 Kings 8:12–21). Raising his hands in prayer to *I AM*, the wise king recalls that the Davidic covenant stipulates that a son of David will sit on the throne if he obeys the Mosaic covenant (8:22–26). Before offering his petitions, Solomon reflects theologically upon God's ubiquity and yet his unique presence in the temple. He resolves the tension by affirming God's omnipresence (cf. Ps. 139:7–10; Jer. 23:23–24; Acts 17:24–28) and by affirming God's special providential

care for Israel as expressed by placing his name in the temple (1 Kings 8:29). As such the temple is the focal point of worship, which includes both praise and petition.

Solomon offers up seven petitions for *I AM*'s attention: (1) to uphold justice for the individual (1 Kings 8:31–32); (2–4) upon the nation's repentance to forgive Israel for the sins that cause disaster; to deliver Israel from political and natural disasters; and to teach the people what is right (vv. 33–40); (5) to hear the foreigner so that all people will worship Israel's God (vv. 41–43);¹⁷ (6) to give victory in war over enemies (vv. 44–45); and (7) when the nation is defeated and in exile and they repent, to forgive and uphold the cause of justice for the nation. Solomon begins by asking justice for the individual and ends by asking justice for the nation. The three disasters (defeat in war and exile, famine, and plague) are taken from covenant curses (Lev. 26:14–35; Deut. 28:15–33). But prayer looks for removal of the curses with repentance (Lev. 26:40–45). In other words, Solomon holds out hope of restoration beyond failure; grace will have the last word in shaping Israel's history. His words in prayer help shape Israel's destiny in accordance with the covenant that promotes justice. In his second address to the people, the king mediates God's blessing on them (1 Kings 8:54–61). Finally, he dedicates the temple with sacrifices and festivities (vv. 62–66).

In *I AM*'s second address to Solomon, he responds: Solomon's prayer is heard and *I AM*'s name is placed in the temple (1 Kings 9:1–3); the future of the temple and of Solomon's dynasty and the land are conditional upon obedience (vv. 4–5); and the consequences of sin are inevitable (vv. 6–9). The presence of the temple is not a talisman to prevent disasters due to covenant infidelity. God's threats and promises according to his character determine the shape of Israel's future. House comments: "The central sanctuary helps the people do God's will, not aids Yahweh in doing Israel's bidding."¹⁸

6. Solomon Uses His Gifts for Himself (9:10–10:29)

The theme of Solomon's glory is picked up again but now colored by foolishness. In the first anecdotal narrative of this section, Solomon does not deal fairly with Hiram. His failure in his devotion to *I AM* transforms his wisdom to folly. The influx of food described in 1 Kings 4 is replaced by an influx of luxury goods, and Solomon's use of all this wealth is entirely self-indulgent. The queen of Sheba, not Solomon, praises the name of *I AM* for his wisdom (1 Kings 10:1, 9). Jesus cites this queen in his indictment of his own

people for not giving praise to God for his Son's greater wisdom (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31).¹⁹ Solomon's great throne illustrates his extravagant lifestyle, which weighed heavily on his subjects (1 Kings 12:4). The narrator follows his report of Solomon's accumulation of gold and horses (10:14–29) with Solomon's apostasy, suggesting that excessive wealth is the soil for apostasy, as Moses had warned (see Deut. 8).

7. Tragic Failure of Solomon's Reign (11:1–13)

The prophet-historian now openly criticizes Solomon by returning to the marriage/worship theme of 1 Kings 3:1–3. Solomon's sins have found him out. He has loved and held fast to Pharaoh's daughter and many other foreign women who have turned his heart away from *I AM* so that he has desecrated the temple by worshiping detestable gods at their shrines (11:1–8). His heart is not like David's (v. 4), who never worshiped a false god and, when confronted with his wrongdoing, repented (2 Sam. 12:1–13). In his anger, He Who Shapes History by his Word first foretells and then tears away a substantial part of the kingdom from David's dynasty (1 Kings 11:9–13). *I AM* preserves Judah as a lamp burning in Jerusalem — a lamp burned all night in wealthy homes²⁰ — to keep his commitment to David, and he takes from him ten other tribes to keep the Mosaic covenant (11:29–39).²¹ Tragically, Solomon does not repent and renounce his harem.

8. I AM Raises Up Threats to Solomon's Security (11:14–25)

Correlatively to Solomon's failure and in accordance with the conditional nature of the Davidic covenant, *I AM* destabilizes Solomon's kingdom. *I AM* raises up Hadad of Edom from the south (1 Kings 11:14–22; cf. 2 Sam. 8:13–14) and Rezon of Damascus from the north (11:23–25), and Ahijah prophesies a throne for Jeroboam within the kingdom.

B. Divided Kingdom (1 Kings 12:1–16:22)

In spite of disloyal kings, *I AM* rules Israel's history as shown by the words of the prophets. Beyond all human control, what *I AM* wills comes to pass in

accordance with his covenants.

1. Reign of Jeroboam I (931–910 BC) (12:1–33)

a. Introduction

The writer uses a chiastic pattern to structure his narrative about Jeroboam:

- A1 Ahijah of Shiloh announces Jeroboam's kingship (11:26–40)
- A2 Closing formula for Solomon's reign (11:41–43)
- B Political disunity: Rejection of Rehoboam (12:1–20)
- C A Judahite prophet's confirmation (12:21–25)
- X The sin of Jeroboam: Cultic innovations (12:26–33)
- C' A Judahite [Shemaiah] prophet's condemnation (13:1–10)
- B' Prophetic disunity: Rejection of Judahite prophet (13:11–32)
- A1' Ahijah of Shiloh announces Jeroboam's downfall (14:1–18)
- A2' Closing formula for Jeroboam's reign (14:19–20)

A/A'. A northern prophet from the old cult center at Shiloh announces the beginning and the termination of Jeroboam's kingship; his prophetic word shapes the northern kingdom's history for the next two centuries.

B/B'. The two units present God's judgment: on a king for his disobedience to *I AM*'s covenant and on a prophet for his disobedience to *I AM*'s personal revelation. As for the disobedient king, Rehoboam is rejected by the northern tribes because he refused the advice of the elders who had served his father Solomon and had heard Solomon's wisdom. In keeping with Israel's ideal of kingship, they advised him to serve the people by imposing justice (Deut. 17:14–20; Ps. 72), not by insisting on his royal prerogatives. But Rehoboam listened to the young men who had grown up with him and represented a new order of tyranny based on human, not spiritual, strength.

As for the disobedient prophet, God hands him over to a lion to be killed because he listened to an old prophet instead of listening to God, who told him not to eat and drink. A prophet must be free of human obligations and speak without fear or for favors. If a man of God cannot escape a prophetic oracle of judgment, how much less an apostate king (1 Kings 20:36; Prov. 11:31)?

C/C'. A Judahite prophet confirms Jeroboam's divine right to divide the kingdom because of Rehoboam's sin, but another Judahite prophet condemns Jeroboam's false liturgy and predicts its destruction by Josiah.

X. The sin of Jeroboam brings about the reversal of both Ahijah of Shiloh's prophecies regarding Jeroboam from favorable to unfavorable and of Judahite prophets who first confirm his reign and then condemn it (cf. Jer. 18:1–12). *I AM* rules in accordance with the Mosaic covenant.

b. Kingdom Torn Away

Rehoboam goes to Shechem to settle the question of whether Israel will crown him king (1 Kings 12:1–4). Shechem is the place of covenant renewal under Joshua (Josh. 24:1–27) and where Joseph's bones are buried, the final act of the exodus — that is, this is a good place to reflect on Israel's identity and direction. Are they a free people in the Sworn Land or slaves under harsh labor, a heavy yoke, and a tyrant? Throughout the Old Testament, the expression “heavy yoke” is characteristically used of the oppression of Israelites by foreign rulers (Lev. 26:13; Deut. 28:48; Isa. 9:4; 10:27; 14:25; Jer. 27:8, 11; Ezek. 34:27). Its use in connection with Solomon is an indictment against him for imposing harsh labors on his own people.

Rehoboam threatens even greater oppression; he looks like a Pharaoh redivivus, and Jeroboam's coming up from Egypt makes Jeroboam look like Moses. As noted in [chapter 24](#) (see p. 681), under special circumstances the ruler of states in Syria-Palestine is designated by the popular assembly at this time. This is one such special circumstance. *I AM* damns Rehoboam to reject the judicious advice of the elders to serve the people with justice and instead to listen foolishly to his young advisers and so fulfill his history-shaping word (1 Kings 12:15; see 11:31, 35, 37; cf. Exod. 4:21; 7:3–4, 13 et al.). The northern tribes secede from Rehoboam's harsh authority. *I AM* again ironically uses human folly to fulfill his word and show his rule over Israel.

Israel's making the golden calf after their exodus foreshadows Jeroboam's apostasy after freeing the northern tribes from Rehoboam's tyranny (1 Kings 12:25–33). The prophets who anointed and confirmed Jeroboam envision a political division of the kingdom for only a time, not a theological division for even a moment (cf. Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 34:23; 37:15–28; Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11–12). Jeroboam by his rival cult dashes their hope; their hope for a unified kingdom is finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ and his church (Eph. 4:4). Jeroboam refuses the prophetic vision of Jerusalem as the worship center of all Israel, for that vision frustrates his dynastic ambition. Moreover, he lacks faith that if he embraces their view he himself will survive. In his self-talk, he fears that if the people continue to offer sacrifices at Jerusalem, they will kill him and give back their

allegiance to Rehoboam. Jeroboam's godless advisers counsel him to set up an alternative liturgy in the north. In other words, Jeroboam fears the people, not God, and believes human advisers more than God's word.

The prophets contend that the kings of the north as well as of Judah are subject to the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant, including its regulations for Israel's worship. Since there is only one God, that covenant specifies there be only one worship center and liturgy. More than one sanctuary suggests there is more than one God, and another liturgy reimages God, even if it is in the name of *I AM* (cf. 2 Kings 17:29–41), and constitutes idolatry (see “Monotheistic Creed,” [chap. 26](#). II.E). The “sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat,” according to the Deuteronomist, reimages the invisible Aseity as a golden, grass-eating calf and sets up a liturgy of the king's own imagination, not a liturgy revealed by *I AM* to represent himself. The turncoat changes from being like Moses to being like Aaron. Moreover, Jeroboam's image of *I AM* by a bull connotes that *I AM* is another fertility deity and will attract to itself fertility practices. John Bright rightly comments that the “bull symbol ... was too closely associated with the fertility cult to be safe.”²² In other words, Jeroboam tries to establish a syncretistic religion that satisfies the worshipers of *I AM* by worshiping in the name of *I AM*, and at the same time satisfies worshipers who crave fertility, not justice, by a symbolism that represents their lusts. With the exception of Ahab, who forsakes *I AM* totally to worship the fertility deity Baal, every subsequent northern king embraces the “sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat” (1 Kings 13:34; 14:16; 15:26, 30; 16:2; 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29; 13:2). The unrelieved apostasy of the northern kings leads ultimately to Israel's exile out of the land as Moses and *I AM*'s prophets had threatened (2 Kings 17:21–23).

Solomon builds his temple in response to a prophetic promise about both his temple and his dynasty. By contrast, Jeroboam's temple evokes two judgment oracles by two of *I AM*'s prophets at the beginning and end of his reigns, each with an immediate prophetic sign to confirm a more remote prophecy (1 Kings 13:2–3; 14:7–13). These oracles find fulfillment in the destructions of Jeroboam's dynasty and his temple. The earlier judgment, by a prophet from Judah, predicts that Josiah (ca. 620 BC) will desecrate Jeroboam's apostate altar three centuries later by burning human bones on it, making it unfit for continued use as a sacred precinct (2 Kings 23:16). His oracle is truly amazing evidence that *I AM* shapes and rules Israel's history according to his covenants (1 Kings 13:1–6; cf. 2 Kings 23:15–20). The Judahite confirms his oracle by a sign (i.e., the altar is destroyed on the spot, an earnest of the ultimate destiny of Israel's apostate worship) and by a miracle (i.e., Jeroboam's hand is withered and restored to show that he dies spiritually but is reaffirmed politically as king).

Another prophecy and a miracle also confirm the power of prophecy. An old prophet at Bethel predicts that because the prophet from Judah disobeys God by tarrying to eat and drink, he will be mauled and killed by a lion for not obeying God's word. Its fulfillment is accompanied by a miracle: instead of the lion attacking the donkey and instead of these animals running away or the lion even touching the corpse, people find the lion standing by the body and the donkey. Nevertheless, the old prophet confirms the authenticity of the prophet from Judah by instructing that his body be laid to rest with his "brother" (2 Kings 23:17–18). If even the godly perish, what will the ungodly do (cf. 1 Kings 20:35–36; Prov. 11:31)? Unmoved, Jeroboam persists in his sin (1 Kings 13:33–34), thereby ironically assuring that the prophecy against his dynasty and his false cult will come to pass.

The prophecy of Jeroboam's demise occurs in connection with his son's illness (1 Kings 14:1–5). He tells his wife to disguise herself and to consult Ahijah about his sick son, hoping the prophet will cure the boy. His gift of bread, which is fit only for a commoner, and his instruction that she disguise herself show that he does not respect the prophet and that until now he ignores the prophet — the prophet is blind! Blind Ahijah proves he is a true prophet; he recognizes the ironically disguised queen. On account of the sin of Jeroboam, Ahijah prophesies a cursed end of Jeroboam's dynasty — dogs and birds will eat the carcasses of his descendants (vv. 6–11; cf. Deut. 28:26). In the immediate future, the boy will die as soon as Jeroboam's wife steps over the threshold upon her return home (vv. 12–13) — the only son graciously spared from the curse. And in the remote future, Israel will go into the exile, as Moses had earlier prophesied (Deut. 28:63–64; 29:28). The fulfillment of the immediate prophecy confirms the truth of the remote prophecy. In sum, Jeroboam's rank idolatry and disobedience to God's word affects himself, his house, and his land.

2. Three Kings of Judah (14:21–15:24)

During Rehoboam's rule (931–913 BC; 1 Kings 14:21–30) Judah engaged in Canaanite rituals that involved phallic stones and male shrine prostitutes, not covenant obedience, in an attempt to ensure fertility (cf. Exod. 23:24; Lev. 26:1; Deut. 12:3; 16:21–22). His Ammonite mother is mentioned in both halves of the regnal formula to imply her influence on Solomon's son (1 Kings 14:21, 31). The reader should assume that Providence sent Shishak, king of Egypt, to plunder Rehoboam's Jerusalem.

Abijah, son of Rehoboam (913–911 BC; 1 Kings 15:1–8), also does gross

evils, but *I AM* allows him to make Jerusalem strong for David's sake. Asa (911–870 BC, 1 Kings 15:9–24) expels the Canaanite pagan fertility influence and restores the temple but retains high places, albeit to *I AM*. Unfortunately, instead of employing the spiritual strengths of prayer and praise and seeking a prophetic word, he bribes in false human strength the Aramean king Ben-Hadad to give him relief in his continuous, nugatory war skirmishes with Baasha.

3. From Nadab to Omri (15:25–16:34)

Nadab, son of Jeroboam (910–909 BC; 1 Kings 15:25–32), continues his father's apostasy, and he and his whole family are killed by Baasha, unwittingly and so ironically fulfilling Ahijah's prophecy. Jehu prophesies the same fate for Baasha and his house. Zimri thereupon assassinates drunken Elah, son of Baasha (886–885 BC; 16:8–14), and he too unwittingly and ironically fulfills the history-shaping prophetic word (16:3–4). In 885 BC Zimri, after a reign of only seven days, commits suicide after his army deserts him for Omri (16:15–20). The narrator allows his audience to draw the conclusion that the wages of disobedience to God's word is death.

C. House of Omri (1 Kings 16:21–2 Kings 10:27)

Omri's usurpation of Israel's throne without prophetic warrant begins the worst dynasty in Israel's history. His house establishes Baal worship as the official state religion and ends in a bloodbath without a survivor but not before the nation endures famine, sword, and fire according to the history-shaping words of *I AM*'s prophets.

1. Omri (885–874 BC) (1 Kings 16:23–28)

Omri continues the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, but he “sinned more than all those before him” by arranging the marriage of his son Ahab with Jezebel,²³ introducing Baal worship as a sanctioned state religion. Of Omri's accomplishment the narrator notes only that he bought the hill of Samaria and dismisses his other worldly accomplishments known to some extent from extrabiblical sources.

2. Ahab (874–853 BC) (16:29–22:40)

a. Opening Regnal Formula (16:29–34)

The prophet-historian evaluates Ahab as Israel's worst king because he marries Jezebel and makes Baal worship the state religion in Israel. He will pay handsomely for his sin. The writer adds that Hiel rebuilt Jericho at the cost of his firstborn in fulfillment of a prophecy given at the time of Joshua (Josh. 6:26). He does so to represent the striking reversal between Israel's triumph under Joshua and their tragedy under Ahab and to assure that *I AM*'s prophecies against Ahab will be fulfilled in shaping Israel's history.

Baal worship continues as the state religion of the north throughout the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah. Ahab's son Jehoram reinstitutes the sin of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, but does not purge the realm of Baal worship. *I AM*'s powerful prophets, Elijah and Elisha, confront these worst kings.

b. Elijah (17:1–19:21)

Against the atrocities of the house of Omri, the prophet-historian slows down the pace and focuses narrowly on Elijah and Elisha, the successively faithful prophets of *I AM*, in two cycles (1 Kings 17:1–19:21; 2 Kings 2:1–8:15). Their awesome miracles and prophecies magnify *I AM*, vindicate the Mosaic covenant, and leave Israel condemned for their impiety toward *I AM* and their immorality toward their fellows. *I AM* does not fail; Israel does. The Elijah cycle has three acts and a janus to the Elisha cycle.

(1) *Elijah and the Draught* (17:1–24)

The first act of the Elijah cycle opens with Elijah pronouncing a drought on Ahab's realm while *I AM* sends ravens to care for his prophet at the Kerith Ravine (1 Kings 17:1–6). Elijah's opening words, "There will be neither dew nor rain ... except at my word," points unmistakably to the theology that *I AM* alone is God and that his prophets shape history by their spiritually energized words. Whereas drought in the Baal myth is due to the rain god's death, holy *I AM* withdraws his beneficent presence, bringing infertility to the apostate land. However, *I AM*, who controls creation — rain and ravens — provides bread and meat for his faithful prophet even in an inhospitable ravine.

In the second scene, Elijah obeys the word of *I AM* and finds asylum in the area of Tyre and Sidon, Jezebel's homeland! Here he feeds during the drought a Canaanite woman and her son. Her faith in Elijah's promise of food is so great that she feeds the prophet what was supposed to be the last supper for herself and her son. In other words, she is ready to die to follow the word of God. As a reward, according to the word of *I AM*, her flour and oil are never used up.

In the third scene, Elijah raises the widow's son from the dead, the first resurrection in the Bible and the supreme covenant blessing. Her question of Elijah, "Did you come to remind me of my sin?" (1 Kings 17:18) confesses her faith in God's judgment; and Elijah's prayer that God revive the boy, accompanied by his lying on the boy and rising three times, confesses his faith in God's presence in death. Elijah crossed the political border of Baal worship and prevailed through the faith of a Canaanite woman to provide food for Elijah and her family. Now he crosses the border of Mot (the death god in Canaanite mythology) and again prevails.

(2) Elijah and the Prophets of Baal (18:1–40)

The second act opens by recounting a conversation between Obadiah, Ahab's majordomo, who is searching for grass to keep his war horses alive, and Elijah upon the prophet's unexpected return to the drought-stricken land (1 Kings 18:1–15). Obadiah is a "devout believer in *I AM*" (v. 3), but his experience in the drought is unlike Elijah's. While Jezebel kills off prophets, of whom Elijah seems unaware, Obadiah protects a hundred of them in a cave and supplies them with food. For Obadiah there are no miracle ravens or jars. He hangs a question mark over whether God will intervene (cf. Heb. 11:32–38). In other words, the experiences of believers vary greatly in the kingdom of God's history-shaping word (see "Remnant of Israel," [chap. 26.II.D](#)).

In the second scene (1 Kings 18:16–40), Ahab accuses Elijah of being the "troubler" of Israel. The difference between the prophet and the king lay in their different worldviews. The sinful king, unlike the godly prophet, has no faith in covenant blessings and curses and/or *I AM*'s prophets and interprets the world from his idolatrous point of view. Ironically, while he rejects the prophet's worldview, he blames Elijah's word for the drought. The first contest on Mount Carmel validates for all Israel, represented by Elijah's twelve-stone altar, Elijah's worldview as informed by Israel's covenants. Although the writer is critical of high places, yet in this setting of Baal worship, it is much the better of two evils. Elijah prevails over the false prophets of Baal, the storm god of thunder and fire, and keeps covenant by mandating the death of false prophets

(Deut. 13:13–18; 17:2–7) to purge the land of idolatry (Deut. 13:5).

The third scene (1 Kings 18:41–46), which peaks with Elijah running ahead of Ahab's chariots to Jezreel before the storm hits and makes the road unfit for Ahab's chariots, draws the act to a fitting climax. Although Obadiah paints Ahab as someone to be feared, Elijah dominates him from the moment he meets the king. Ahab speaks only once (18:17), and Elijah silences him. Otherwise, Ahab does what Elijah says (18:19–20, 41–42, 45) or watches from the sidelines so quietly as to be invisible (18:21–40). The king is as impotent as the god he worships.

(3) *Elijah and I AM at Horeb (19:1–21)*

Elijah wins the battle, not the war. In the third act of the Elijah cycle, Jezebel is the Amazon leading the demonic forces of Baal and Asherah in their war against *I AM* and his prophet. Jezebel's curse on herself if she does not murder Elijah provokes for Elijah a crisis of faith. *I AM* is conspicuous by his absence. Elijah fears Jezebel's oath, instead of trusting in *I AM*'s invisible presence, and flees for his life. His depression is so deep that he toys with suicide. *I AM* twice sends his angel to meet the fleeing Elijah with food to sustain him on his forty-day journey through the wilderness to Mount Horeb. His journey replicates Israel's forty-year wilderness journey, sustained by heavenly food, to the same mountain. On the same mountain—perhaps even in the same cave—where *I AM* revealed his glory to a distraught Moses (Exod. 34:1–9), God now encounters Elijah, who also only partly understands and accepts his ways. *I AM*'s revelation to Moses majors on his grace to repentant sinners and minors on his punishment of the guilty who refuse that grace. In his revelation to Elijah, *I AM* majors on his total destruction of the mass of guilty and minors on his grace toward the remnant.

I AM reveals his kingdom plan in an alternating structure of symbols in creation (1 Kings 19:9–13) and their interpretation in a sweeping history of the house of Omri (vv. 13–18):

- A Setting: at the cave, and the word of *I AM* came (19:9a)
- B *I AM*'s question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:9b)
- C Answer: "I have been very zealous ... kill me too." (19:10)
- D Then *I AM* said (19:11a)
- E Wind ... not in the wind (19:11b)
- F Earthquake ... not in the earthquake (19:11c)
- G Fire ... not in the fire (19:12a)

H Sound of sheer silence (19:12b–13a)
A' Setting: at the cave a voice came (19:13b)
B' Question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:13c)
C' Answer: "I have been very zealous ... kill me too." (19:14)
D' Then *I AM* said (19:15a)
E' Anoint Hazael (19:15b)
F' Anoint Jehu (19:16a)
G' Anoint Elisha (19:16b)
E'' Hazael kills (19:17a)
F'' Jehu kills (19:17b)
G'' Elisha kills (19:17c)
H' 7,000 have not bowed to Baal (19:18)

The strict parallelism in setting the stage for the two halves of the revelation (A–D/A'–D') prepares the audience to connect the dots between the symbolic revelation of God's destructive power in creation (E–H) and its interpretation in history (E'–H'). The successively destructive wind, earthquake, and fire symbolize the succession of *I AM*'s retributions against the house of Omri through the sword of Hazael from without the land and through the bloodbath of Jehu within the land. Any members of the house of Ahab left untouched by the campaigns of Hazael are killed by Jehu, and should any survive Jehu's purge, Elisha's oracles will complete the purge. Each agent of destruction carries on the unfinished aspects of the preceding one. Since Elijah's spirit inaugurates each successive political instrument, his powerful words bring down the house of Omri.

The parallelism puts beyond reasonable doubt that the "gentle whisper" represents the seven thousand Israelites whom "*I AM* reserves in Israel—all who have not bowed down to Baal." Seven represents the remnant as complete and perfect, implying their divine election. One thousand represents a large, indefinite number. Although he is among a minority, Elijah is totally mistaken when he thinks he alone is faithful.

Since God does not represent himself as present in the destructive wind, earthquake, and fire, we should assume that the "gentle whisper" (or "a voice barely audible") represents his presence. To be sure that *I AM* is responsible for the destructive forces of nature, representing the destructive politics that will annihilate the House of Israel — he sends Elijah to anoint these destructive agents — his unique presence is realized in the remnant. God's rule over surd evil (i.e., destructive forces of nature) and the political evil (i.e., agents of death) pertains to his universal kingdom, where he exercises his sovereignty over

everything yet he is not uniquely present to provide and protect. His rule over the hearts of his indefinitely large, perfect number of believers pertains to his particular kingdom, where he exercises sovereignty in the hearts of those who love him, a realm he does provide for and protect (see [chap. 6](#)).

Elijah's role is now to prepare the way for others by anointing Elisha, Hazael, and Jehu. In truth he literally anoints none. He effectively calls, not anoints, Elisha (1 Kings 19:19); Elisha effectively calls, not anoints, Hazael (2 Kings 8:7–15); and “a man from the company of the prophets” at Elisha's instruction anoints Jehu (2 Kings 9:1–13). Perhaps “to anoint” is either assumed in the first two callings or is a metaphor for “to effect by word,” and, since Elijah passes on his spirit to Elisha, Elijah through Elisha secondarily “anoints” Hazael and in a tertiary prophet anoints Jehu. In any case, *I AM* effects his will by the words of his prophets.

(4) Elijah Calls an Enthusiastic Elisha to Be His Attendant (19:19–21)

That Elisha is called while plowing with twelve yoke of oxen shows he is a very wealthy man. Nevertheless, when called he leaps at his opportunity. He leaves his source of income, abandons his parents with a kiss, and ironically, when Elijah tells him to go back, he burns his bridges so he can't go back. That is, he slaughters his oxen and burns his plowing equipment to cook food for the people. Here is the kind of disciple — one who counts the cost and commits himself without reservation— Jesus is looking for (see Mark 1:16–20; 2:14; 8:34–38). The fulfillment of the other prophecies about Hazael and Jehu must wait until 2 Kings 8–10.

c. Ahab's War against Aram (20:1–43)

The writer, having ended the Elijah cycle, returns his focus to Ahab. The story about an anonymous prophet in this act and a later story about Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kings 22:1–40) underscore that Elijah is not the only one left and that Ahab and Israel are accused by two and three accredited witnesses so that the Judge's sentence is just. The act opens with the Aramean king, Ben-Hadad 11, together with thirtytwo other kings besieging Samaria (1 Kings 20:1–12). Ahab's cause looks hopeless, but he has the decisive advantage that *I AM* promises him victory. *I AM* defeats Ben-Hadad so that—as an anonymous prophet of *I AM* says to Ahab — “you will know that I am *I AM*” (v. 13). This recognition formula is used when Israel is in great duress so that a skeptic like Ahab will know that *I AM* is God, not that he will know God by faith (see [chap.](#)

[13](#) above). This rationale explains why this narrative about unbelieving Ahab resembles Israel's ancient wars, including history-shaping promises and fulfillment (Josh. 6:2, 16; 8:1, 18; Judg. 7:2; 18:10; 2 Chron. 13:16; 16:8; 18:5, 11, 14). Following the word of the prophet, Ahab sends junior officers²⁴ to lead the army and strike the first blow, making Ahab's victory with only a remnant army of seven thousand against such a horde more miraculous (1 Kings 20:13–21).

The second scene narrates a second battle (1 Kings 20:22–30) that is a *déjà vu* of the first, but this time, as the prophet explains, so that the Arameans may know that *I AM* rules the whole world—valleys as well as mountains. Israel inflicts heavy losses on the Arameans, even though they are led by an experienced officer, and *I AM* demonstrates his rule with an exclamation mark: a wall collapses on what remains of the Aramean army.

The third scene (1 Kings 20:31–43) demonstrates that Ahab cannot change his worldview; he continues to depend on the fake power of man, making an alliance with the ungodly Ben-Hadad instead of executing *herem* (v. 42; Heb. *hermî*, “my *herem*” [“I had determined should die” (TN1V)]); cf. Lev. 27:28; Deut. 7:2; 20:17; Josh. 6:17; 7:1, 20–26; 1 Sam. 15:1–33). For opposing *I AM* in order to support *I AM*'s foe, Ahab forfeits his life. A dramatic parable guarantees Ahab's fate: a prophet who refuses to obey and strike another prophet is himself killed by a lion. If a disobedient prophet does not escape death, how much more ungodly kings who refuse to obey God's word (cf. 1 Kings 13:11–34)? The message is clear: *I AM*'s faithful prophets, not unfaithful kings, rule Israel and determine their destiny.

d. Naboth's Vineyard (21:1–29)

The next act opens with Ahab coveting Naboth's vineyard and offering to buy it. Naboth cannot sell his vineyard because it is a sacred “inheritance of my fathers” (1 Kings 21:3). Unlike Canaanite kings who thought all the land belongs to the royal family and is entrusted to their subject, Naboth believes that the land belongs to *I AM* and that he gives portions of it as permanent usufructs to each Israelite family (see [chap. 18.II.B.3.c](#); Exod. 19:3–8; Num. 14:8; Deut. 8:7; 34:1). If he sells it, he cuts off his descendants from their heritage from God (Lev. 25:23; Num. 27:1–11; 36:1–12). Jezebel, believing might is right, enlists the support of corrupt elders and nobles as judges and of at least two scoundrels as witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:5–6; 19:15). They successfully frame Naboth, accusing him of and judging him for the capital offense of cursing God

and king (Exod. 22:28; Lev. 24:15–16). After they stone Naboth and his sons to death (2 Kings 9:26) and bury him outside the city to avoid ritual impurity (Lev. 24:14; Num. 5:2–4), Ahab takes possession of Naboth's vineyard.

Ahab's abandonment of *I AM* for Baal leads to his abandonment of ethics as expressed in the Mosaic covenant and his embracing of a life view that demands no moral rectitude. Baal's mother was Anat, his wife Astarte (= Asherah), both of whom were goddesses of sex and war. William F. Albright describes Anat's violence as narrated in a Baal epic:

After filling her temple ... with men, she barred the gates so that none might escape, after which "she hurled chairs at the youths, tables at the warriors, footstools at the men of might." The blood was so deep that she waded in it up to her knees—nay, up to her neck. Under her feet were human heads, above her human hands flew like locusts. In her sensuous delight she decorated herself with suspended heads, while she attached hands to her girdle. Her joy at the butchery is described in even more sadistic language. "Her liver swelled with laughter, her heart was full of joy, the liver of Anat (was full of) exultation (?)." Afterwards Anat "was satisfied" and washed her hands in human gore before proceeding to other occupations.²⁵

Elijah, representing *I AM* and his covenant, confronts Ahab with the sentence that dogs will eat the carcasses of those belonging to Ahab (1 Kings 21:24). But Ahab walks humbly, becoming only a typical sinner, not the vilest, and so the merciful God delays the fall of his house to the reign of his son (vv. 27–29).

e. Ahab Killed at Ramoth Gilead (22:1–40)

The prophet Micaiah ben Imlah predicts the death of Ahab in his illfated attack against Ramoth Gilead. Before the attack Jehoshaphat agrees to join Ahab in battle but only after prophetic consultation (1 Kings 22:1–5). Four hundred false prophets, probably of Jezebel and the goddess Asherah, eager to please their beneficiary by flattery and by upbeat spin counsel war, but a rightly skeptical Jehoshaphat insists on hearing from a prophet of *I AM* (vv. 6–8 ; cf. Jer. 29:8–9). Ahab fingers Micaiah ben Imlah, who at first goes along with false prophets, for he will not cast pearls before swine (1 Kings 22:9–15). When challenged to tell the truth, Micaiah identifies the false prophecy as due to a lying spirit, the agent provocateur, from *I AM* (see 1 Sam. 16:14–15) to induce

Ahab into defeat and so hasten his death. 1 *I AM* gives the false prophets over to this delusion because they do not love the truth and choose to speak from their own hearts (Jer. 14:14; 23:16, 26; Ezek. 13:2; 2 Thess. 2:9–12). Ahab incarcerates the unbowed Micaiah (1 Kings 22:17–28), and in the battle a random arrow kills Ahab and confirms Micaiah as the true prophet (vv. 29–36). At Ahab’s burial in Samaria, dogs lick up the blood on his chariot as Elijah had prophesied (21:19). The story underscores the hardness of Ahab’s heart against God’s word, that all prophecy, whether true or false, is under *I AM*’s rule according to his covenant, and that true, not false, prophecy shapes Israel’s history.

3. Jehoshaphat (870 [873]- 848 BC) (22:41–50)

The writer now shifts for the moment exclusively to Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. Within the regnal formula, the writer notes some of his successes and his failure. Like his father, Asa, Jehoshaphat removes shrine prostitutes but not the high places and politically rules Edom. But Jehoshaphat, perhaps out of pride, lacks Solomon’s wisdom to use foreign sailors to man his fleet, and as a result, his fleet heading for Ophir is wrecked in port. We will meet Jehoshaphat again in 2 Kings 3 and later learn that his son Jehoram forms a marriage alliance with the house of Ahab by marrying Athaliah, Ahab’s daughter (2 Kings 8:16–18).

4. Ahaziah Son of Ahab (853–852 BC) (1 Kings 22:51–2 Kings 1:18)

Ahaziah son of Ahab worships both Baal and *I AM* as reimagined by Jeroboam son of Nebat (1 Kings 22:51–53). The king sends messengers to consult Baal-Zebub (“lord of flies,” a parody on his real name, Baal-Zebul, “Baal is a prince”), a local manifestation of Baal at Ekron, to inquire whether he will recover from his injury. (Baal-Zebub stands behind the New Testament figure of Satan [Matt 10:25; 12:24, 27; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, 18–19].) Elijah intervenes and sends the messengers back with an oracle sentencing Ahaziah to death for consulting a pagan deity rather than *I AM*. Ahaziah responds by sending a captain and fifty messengers to capture Elijah and force him to retract the curse or to negate it by carrying it with him into death. Elijah calls fire down from

heaven and consumes the messengers.

This scenario occurs two times, and on the third attempt to capture him, the captain asks Elijah to spare their lives and come with them. *I AM* instructs Elijah to go, whereupon Elijah repeats his judgment oracle to the king and *I AM* fulfills it. The story again shows that God's prophets are greater than satanic powers and that they shape Israel's destiny, even calling down fire from heaven. Elijah stands behind the representation of the two prophets in Revelation 11:1–6, who stop the rain and kill with fire those who try to harm them. The king who worshiped the god of fertility has no offspring. It remains for Ahab's younger son, Jehoram, to fulfill Elijah's prophecy that God will bring disaster on Ahab's house in the days of his son (2 Kings 1:17–18; cf. 1 Kings 21:28–29). Ahaziah dies in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 3:1) and the second year of the coregency of Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, with his father. This Jehoram introduced Baal worship into Judah (2 Kings 8:16–24).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How has God's history-shaping word impacted the narrative of your life?

1. The book's division into two books is occasioned by how much text could fit on an ancient scroll, not by dictates of content, unlike the literary bifid of the books of Samuel. Since the book's messages (see pp. 738–52) and my theological reflections on Chronicles depend on the book's complex and relatively unknown narrative, I recount that narrative in connection with theological reflections.

2. Cf. 1 Kings 11:41; 14:19, 29; 2 Kings 13:8. Statements scattered through the book depict actions or institutions that the writer said continued “to this day” (e.g., 1 Kings 9:21; 12:19; 2 Kings 8:22) but that had disappeared or ended by the time of final composition.

3. E.g., 2 Kings 18:17–19:37 and Isa. 36:1–38:38; 2 Kings 24:18–25:30 and Jer. 52:1–34.

4. Cf. 1 Kings 5, 7.

5. We have no reason to doubt the author's credibility. With reference to the 350 years of Israel's history after the division of the kingdom, out of twenty foreign rulers mentioned, all but two are attested in external sources, and from 853 onward, nine out of fourteen Israelite kings are named in external sources, and of the five missing men, three are ephemeral (Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah) and two reigned (Jehoahaz, Jeroboam II) when Assyria was not active in the Levant. Nine of the Hebrew kings are mentioned on seals and bullae. A comparison of episodes mentioned in the Bible and ancient records shows the combined accounts enrich, not contradict, one another. Finally, other ancient texts show clear affinities to the annalistic nature of the book of Kings. Kenneth A. Kitchen (*On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 61) presents a convenient chart summarizing the correlation of the archaeological data, external written sources, and biblical data.

6. Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 259.

7. After the division of the kingdom, the narrator presents the kings of the opposite kingdom until their chronology advances beyond that of the synchronic

king of the other kingdom. For example, he treats Jeroboam I (Israel: 930–909 BC) and then in synchronism with him, the kings of Judah: Rehoboam (930–913), Abijah (913–910), and Asa (910–869). Now that he has advanced beyond 909 BC, he returns to the kings of Israel synchronic with Asa.

[8.](#) Similarly, a minister may performatively say, “I pronounce you man and wife,” or “I baptize you in the name of....”

[9.](#) *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, trans. J. A. Symonds (New York: Modern Library, 1927).

[10.](#) Note the chronological sequence in 2 Chron. 2–4.

[11.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 3:2–5a; 13:28; 18:14.

[12.](#) J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (hereafter *NAPS*), vol. 1: *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 380.

[13.](#) *NAPS*, I:380.

[14.](#) As an Adam figure, he names all within his realm to bring it under his dominion; as a sage, he coins proverbs to bring social relationships under his dominion. In Egypt, wisdom literature flourished from the Old Kingdom down to the Late Dynastic Period and Hellenistic rule. In Mesopotamia, proverb collections exist both in Sumerian and Akkadian. Some Akkadian and Eblite texts are purely onomastic (see Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 76n41).

[15.](#) House, *Old Testament Theology*, 253.

[16.](#) Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 56.

[17.](#) The Sumerians (ca. 3000 BC) dedicated their temples with the expectation that nations from all over the earth would bring offerings to the gods for which they built their temples (see Moshe Weinfeld, “Zion and Jerusalem as Religious and Political Capital,” in *The Poet and the Historian*, ed. R. E. Friedman (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 113–15).

[18.](#) House, *Old Testament Theology*, 255.

[19.](#) The reference to Solomon’s using precious imports for building the temple is an anachronism and rightly placed in brackets in the NIV (10:11–12).

[20.](#) See Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 15 – 31* at Prov. 31:18.

[21.](#) The missing tribe could be Simeon (Josh. 19:21), Levi (Josh. 21:1–42; 2 Chron. 11:13–14), or Benjamin (1 Kings 12:21; 2 Chron. 11:12).

[22.](#) John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 238.

[23.](#) Jezebel (“not a prince”) is a parody on her name Abizebel (“my divine father is a prince”). *Zebel* “prince” is an appellation for Baal, who is called

zbl b'ar (“prince, lord of the land”). Josephus (*Against Apion*, 1.18) cites Meander the Ephesian that Jezebel’s father, Ethbaal (“with him is Baal”) king of the Sidonians, was a priest of Astarte, who came to the throne by the murder of the usurper Phelles.

[24.](#) For the meaning of *na’arim* see N. Avigad, “The Contribution of Hebrew Seals,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr. *et al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 205.

[25.](#) William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel; The Ayer Lectures of the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, 1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1942), 75–76.

Chapter 26

THE GIFT OF GOD'S HISTORY-SHAPING WORD, PART 2: 2 KINGS

Religion is so great a thing that it is right that those who will not take the trouble to seek it, if it be obscure, should be deprived of it.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 5.573

I. EXPOSITION OF 2 KINGS

A. Elisha Cycle (2:1–8:15)

1. *Elisha Succeeds Elijah (2:1–25)*

In the Elisha cycle, the prophet-historian slows down the pace of his narrative and narrows the focus even more than in the Elijah cycle to glorify *I AM* and to condemn faithless Israel. By Elisha's miracles *I AM* authenticates himself as Israel's true King and this enthusiastic disciple of Elijah as leader of his particular, or mediatorial, kingdom. *I AM*'s universal kingdom, where his covenants are unknown or rejected, embraces all kingdoms and peoples (see [chap. 6.I](#)). In the universal kingdom he humbles the proud and exalts the lowly. On the one hand, in wrath he makes fools of kings and army officers, brings mauling bears on jeering children, and inflicts the unfaithful with leprosy. On the other hand, in tender love he proclaims good news to the lowly, feeds the hungry, cures the sick, raises the dead, and gives the barren children. His particular kingdom, where his covenants are accepted by faith, paradoxically is also universal: it embraces a general and a female slave, a rich woman without children and a poor woman with children, nations and a prophet's floating axhead, victors and martyrs. God magnifies himself in small and big matters, leaving none in Israel, especially the kings, with an excuse for impiety and immorality.¹ This amazing history merits a telling in detail.

Elisha succeeds Elijah at about the time of Ahaziah's death in Israel and during the coregency of Jehoshaphat and his son Jehoram in Judah. The cycle opens with all the company of prophets aware that "today" *I AM* will take Elijah away from Elisha. Elijah failed to persuade Elisha at his calling to go back to his farming and so escape the sufferings of his prophetic mission (1 Kings 19:20). Now, on their parting day, Elijah tries to shake him off, first at Gilgal, then at Bethel, and finally at Jericho. At each site Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind with the other prophets, either to test his perseverance or to dissuade him from assuming Elijah's despondent leadership. Elisha, however, insists on staying

with him until their parting (2 Kings 2:1–6). After smiting and crossing the Jordan, Elijah asks what he is seeking, and Elisha responds, “a double portion of your spirit” (v. 9). He is asking to be his firstborn heir and to be his successor as head of the company of prophets (Gen. 25:31; Deut. 21:17), not to have twice as much of Elijah’s spirit. Elijah replies that if Elisha perseveres to the end and sees Elijah’s departure, he will become Elijah’s heir (2 Kings 2:7–15).

Suddenly Elisha sees Elijah ascending in a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and cries “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” (2 Kings 2:12). “Father” is a term of respect for a religious authority (Gen. 45:8; Judg. 17:10; Matt. 23:9); it will later be conferred upon Elisha (2 Kings 6:21; 13:14), and at the time of his commissioning, he will see the divine army that fights for the new “father” (see 2 Kings 6:8–23; 7:6). At Elijah’s departure, Elisha tears up his own cloak, severing himself totally from his past. He takes up Elijah’s cloak as his permanent possession (1 Kings 19:19), and parting the waters with it, he walks through the river on dry ground, showing his cachet to be Israel’s new leader, as Joshua had showed himself the successor of Moses (Exod. 14:13–31; Josh. 3:1–17). The prophets who are watching bow in recognition of his credentials to be their new leader, but they are unaware of the ascension. Elisha instructs them not to search for Elijah’s corpse; nevertheless, they search intently but vainly and by doing so prove that Elisha’s words are true and reliable.

2. Elisha Heals Bitter Waters for Prophets at Jericho (2:19–22)

Elisha performs his first miracle for the company of prophets at Jericho. According to the covenant curse, Jericho’s waters had turned bad; its normally good land, unproductive (Deut. 28:15–18). Elijah asks for a new cup, one undefiled by profane use, and for salt in the cup. According to Mark Kurlansky’s masterful work on salt, it is “the symbol of the eternal nature of God’s covenant with Israel.”² Elijah uses the preservative to heal the spring of water forever.

Elisha’s miracles are often performed for the company of the prophets, showing that he is Elijah’s heir and their superior (see 2 Kings 2:23–24; 4:38–41). He represents Israel’s true strength.

3. Bears Maul Children of Apostate Bethel (2:23–25)

If Elisha’s first and gracious miracle at Jericho shows the eternal nature of

Israel's covenants, his judgmental curses on the disrespectful "little children" (*n^{ec}ārîm q^tannîm*, not "youths" [NIV] or "boys" [TNIV]) at Bethel is an earnest that covenant curses will also fall on the whole nation. Although the judgment may appear harsh, the children's curse is deserved; otherwise *I AM* would not have allowed mauling bears to kill forty-two children who jeered at his anointed spokesman and prophet (Prov. 26:2). From there Elisha journeys to Mount Carmel and Samaria to resume Elijah's ministry (2 Kings 2:25).

4. Jehoram Son of Ahab (3:1–3)

The first half of the regnal formula for Jehoram (NIV, TNIV: Joram) son of Ahab occurs at 2 Kings 3:1–3; his death is recorded in 9:23–26. Though Jehoram son of Ahab participates in the cult of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he tolerates the Baal worship of Jezebel, which is symbolized by the sacred stone of Baal (3:2; 9:22; 10:18–28).

5. *I AM* Lures Klings of Israel and Judah to Defeat in Edom (3:4–27)

The scene opens with Jehoram forming an alliance with Jehoshaphat to subdue a revolt by Mesha, king of Moab (2 Kings 3:4–8).³ The next scene occurs in the Desert of Edom (vv. 9–12), the allies' route of attack, because the king of Edom is only a deputy or governor appointed by Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:47; 2 Kings 8:20). In the desert, however, they find themselves without water, and Jehoram's guilty conscience makes him realize his plight is *I AM*'s judgment. Jehoshaphat condemns himself by asking only now to consult a prophet of *I AM*, not, as he had with Ahab, at the beginning of their campaign (1 Kings 22:7). When an officer informs him of Elisha's presence, Jehoshaphat further condemns his lukewarm attitude toward prophets, saying, "The word of *I AM* is with him" (2 Kings 3:12).

Music sometimes plays a part in the attainment of the prophetic state (cf. 1 Sam. 10:5–11), and here Elisha asks for a harpist and then predicts that the ditches he instructs the kings to dig will be filled with water without wind or rain. He also predicts to the kings, "You will attack [*hikkîtem* not 'overthrow' (NIV)] every fortified city" (2 Kings 3:19). They are to so totally devastate Moab that even the protection of good trees is not sanctioned (cf. Deut. 20:19–20). The faithless kings hear what they want to hear in the prophecy.

When the ditches mysteriously fill with water and look like blood from the reflected sunlight and/or from the color of Edom's soil, Moab mistakes the water as the blood of feuding allies and attacks them. The allies then invade and devastate Moab. To turn the tide of battle, the king of Moab sacrifices his heir apparent on the city wall of Kir Hareseth, the capital of Moab (v. 27; Isa. 16:7; Jer. 48:31, 36). The superhuman fury of the Moabite troops turns the allies back. Instead of misleading Israel through an evil spirit, as in the case of Ahab (1 Kings 20), *I AM* by an ambiguous prophecy lures the wicked king and the forgetful king into defeat. They attack every city and devastate the land, but they do not overthrow the capital as they had assumed the prophecy meant.

6. The Prophet's Greatness/Miracles/Acts of Power (4:1–44)

a. Widow of a Prophet Whose Cruse of Oil Never Fails (4:1–7)

The next four miracles — providing oil, raising the dead, curing sickness, and providing food — in addition to his earlier miracle of supplying water, associate Elisha with Elijah and show that Elisha is Elijah's firstborn heir. His miracle of providing oil for the widow of a devout *prophet* to pay off her creditor and redeem her sons from slavery (cf. Lev. 25:39–46) replicates Elijah's miracle of providing oil for the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7–15).

b. Shunammite's Son Restored to Life (4:8–37)

Where kings fail to recognize *I AM*'s authority, ordinary women, as seen in this and the previous vignette, reveal true faith. Here, in response to unwavering faith, the tender heart of the prophet and the tender heart of *I AM* for his faithful are revealed. The single-mindedness and persistence of a well-to-do woman to care for the prophet sway Elisha to meet her suppressed desire to bear a son for her husband who is old. When the miracle boy suddenly dies, the husband has no faith, asking his wife, who is setting out to find Elijah, "Why go to him today?" The believing woman, however, seeks out the prophet and persists until he comes with her to raise her son from death.

The miracle replicates Elijah's miracle for the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings

17:7–24): (1) miraculous provision of food/son, (2) unexpected death of son, (3) distress of mother, (4) prophetic intervention by stretching out on the child, (5) restoration to life, and (6) woman’s acknowledgment of the prophet.

c. Elisha Cures Death in Pot for Prophets at Gilgal (4:38–40)

Elisha’s curative powers over food for the *prophets* at Gilgal match his curative powers over water for the prophets at Jericho.

d. Elisha Feeds One Hundred People with Twenty Loaves (4:42–44)

Recognizing Elisha as *I AM*’s legitimate representative rather than the apostate priests at Bethel, a man brings to Elisha twenty loaves of bread. Elisha multiplies the bread to feed one hundred people.

7. Elisha Heals Naaman and Afflicts Gehazi (5:1–27)

This act has two scenes of equal length: Naaman is healed (2 Kings 5:1–14) and Gehazi afflicted (vv. 15–27). *I AM*’s universal rule includes a general of the Syrians. He was a great man “because through him *I AM* had given victory to Aram” (v. 1). By curing him of his leprosy (*m^ešōrā^c*, a disease that makes skin flake off like snow), *I AM* also demonstrates his rule over deadly disease. In every sense of the word, Naaman is outside the camp — a Gentile and a leper (Luke 4:27). As in the cases of Rahab and Achan respectively, a faithful foreigner is brought into *I AM*’s fold and an Israelite within the fold becomes an outsider.

The first scene opens with a captive Hebrew slave girl who, knowing of Elisha, tells the general’s wife that Elisha can cure Naaman. The second scene opens with the general in Israel learning that *I AM*’s prophet, not Israel’s king, has the power to heal. He comes to Elisha with pomp and ceremony and a stupendous amount of gold, thinking the prophet is at his beck and call. Instead, he learns that the key to his healing is his humility to obey the prophet’s words to dip himself in Israel’s Jordan River seven times, the divine number. The scene closes with the general leaving the prophet in a rage.

The third scene presents the humbled general dipping in the Jordan. He is changed from a man standing on his own dignity and power to one who accepts the authority of the word of God, the worldview that extends healing and covenant faithfulness beyond Israel's borders. Naaman confesses true Israel's confession, "no God — except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

The fourth scene presents a conflicted Naaman. His conversion from the worship of Rimmon ("Pomegranate," a parody on the god's real name, Ramanu, i.e., "Storm God") marks a strategic moment in the changing of *I AM*'s role in Israel's holy war (see [chap. 14](#) above). The Lord of Hosts now wages war against Israel through an Aramean commander who converts to the religion of Israel's God but who does not defect to the apostate state of Israel, whose official state religion has degenerated to Baal worship. How is Naaman to retain theological loyalty to *I AM* while retaining political loyalty to his pagan king, which entails his bowing with the king in the temple of Rimmon? He resolves his conflict by standing in the temple of Rimmon on the soil of the people of Israel who represent the only true God. In this way he bears testimony to his own faith in *I AM* while accommodating his culture. Elisha, representing *I AM*, assuages his conscience by granting the great general forgiveness for his compromise (cf. 1 Kings 8:41–43).

The scene that follows compares the outsider's faithfulness with an insider's faithlessness. Gehazi takes money from Naaman behind Elisha's back. Elisha rebukes him, for his attendant obscures the free grace of God and blurs the distinction between true prophets, who serve *I AM* alone, and false prophets, who serve self. The servant of *I AM* must serve in a disinterested way so that the observer is not hindered from giving glory to God. As a result of Gehazi's serving self, rather than *I AM*, the former insider is afflicted with the leprosy of the former outsider.

8. Elisha Makes an Axhead Float (6:1–7)

A growing band of disciples is gathering around their leader, necessitating a larger meeting place. In the process of building, one of the *prophets* loses his expensive iron axhead in the water. Elisha, the greatest of them and one who raises the dead, now raises the axhead from the water. *I AM* is concerned with a lowly carpenter and a mighty general, with private and public matters.

9. Elisha Defeats the Aramean Raiding Bands (6:8–

33)

In this act the narrator returns the audience to the international arena of politics. While Naaman retains loyalty to the Syrian king, Elisha retains loyalty to Jehoram son of Ahab to defeat the ungodly Aramean king. In the first scene, the clairvoyant prophet knows the king of Aram's military movements and warns the king of Israel, enabling him to check the Arameans' every move. In the second scene, having learned that Elisha is the informant, the Arameans surround the city where Elisha lives with horses and chariots to capture the prophet. To Elisha, who has seen *I AM*'s might and his chariot of fire, the Aramean chariots mean nothing (cf. 1 Kings 20:23–30 and 2 Kings 2:10–12).

Elisha's servant, though, is terrified by the Arameans' show of strength. Elisha prays that *I AM* will open his servant's eyes to see that the horses and chariots of *I AM* protecting them are greater than those of his would-be captors (cf. Gen. 32:1–2; Pss. 34:7; 91:11–12; Matt. 18:10; 26:53). The scene closes with Elisha also praying to *I AM* to strike the attacking army with blindness. In other words, Elisha prays that the servant's eyes be opened to heavenly realities and his enemy's eyes be blinded to earth's realities. In the final scene, Elisha deceptively leads the blinded would-be captors as captives into Samaria and instructs Israel's king to wine and dine the captors and send them home, a miracle and grace so great that Aramean raiding bands cease invading Israel. Elisha does not ask Jehoram son of Ahab to execute *herem* because Israel's king is himself unholy.

10. Elisha Predicts the Lifting of the Siege of Samaria (6:24–7:20)

The act opens some time later with a famine in besieged Samaria so great that its citizens are reduced to cannibalism. Jehoram son of Ahab is aware that only *I AM* can help, but he refuses to repent. The arrogant king is determined to kill Elisha, whom he foolishly holds responsible in some way (cf. 1 Kings 18:10, 17; 21:20). Elisha tells the elders — who sit with Elisha in his house in their recognition that he, not the king, has real power—that the king is sending messengers to kill him. Elisha delivers himself, predicting that his would-be captor will see a miraculous relief of the famine but will not eat of it.

The siege's conclusion is designed to demonstrate clearly *I AM*'s authority. Four lepers enter as victors into the abandoned camp of the Aramean army that

had been besieging the city. *I AM* had deluded the Arameans into thinking Israel had hired a great army of mercenaries. The plundering lepers, now conscience stricken, tell the city watchman the good news, but faithless Jehoram first believes that the word of the lepers is part of the Aramean war plan to draw him out of the city. He will not believe the word of the prophet. Nevertheless, the king verifies the defeat and the people stampede to the plunder, killing the officer Jehoram put in charge of the gate. The writer states the act's moral: "As *I AM* had said ... as the man of God had foretold ... as the man of God had said ... that is exactly what happened" (2 Kings 7:16–20).

11. The Shunammite's Land Restored (8:1–6)

The Shunammite woman (cf. 2 Kings 4:8–37) had departed the famine-stricken land for seven years, during which time her property was confiscated. Providentially, it happens that when she arrives to ask the king, probably Jehu, for justice, he has just heard of Elisha's miracles on her behalf and gives her back everything. *I AM* provides for the faithful widow who provided for the prophet.

12. Elisha Predicts Hazael Will Succeed Ben-Hadad II and Afflict Israel (8:7–15)

The act opens with Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, sick. In striking contrast to Ahaziah, king of Israel, who consulted Baal-Zebub (2 Kings 1:2), the pagan king sends Hazael to consult *I AM* through Elisha. However, Hazael comes bearing an extravagant gift and labeling Ben-Hadad as Elisha's son, all to influence the prophecy favorably. Because Ben-Hadad aims to use *I AM*'s power to glorify himself, Elisha tells Hazael to lie to Ben-Hadad that he will recover and predicts that in truth Hazael will replace Ben-Hadad. Elisha weeps for his people as he turns from being a prophet of salvation to a prophet of judgment, predicting in detail Hazael's ruthless killings against Israel (see 2 Kings 9:14–16; 10:32; 12:17–18; 13:3, 22). Subsequently, Hazael, without warrant, takes Elisha's prediction as license to murder his king. Elijah's prophesied ministries of judgment by Hazael and Elisha have begun (1 Kings 19:15–16).

B. Two Kings of Judah (8:16–29)

1. Jehoram Son of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah (848–841 BC) (8:16–24)

The foolish involvements of Jehoshaphat — first with Ahab in his battle against Ramoth Gilead (1 Kings 22:1–38) and then with Jehoram son of Ahab in his campaign against Edom (2 Kings 3:1–27) — almost lead to his death. But when he forms an alliance with the house of Omri in the marriage of his son Jehoram with Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, he nearly destroys the house of David. In connection with that unholy marriage, Jehoram introduces the depraved religions of the house of Omri into Judah. The compromising king loses Edom and barely escapes with his own life. *I AM* does not destroy Judah only for the sake of the Davidic covenant.

2. Ahaziah Son of Jehoram, King of Judah (841 BC) (8:25–29)

Ahaziah, the son of the unholy marriage between Jehoram and Athaliah, fully conforms the state religion of Judah to the cultic and moral sins of Ahab. A chip off the old block, Ahaziah allies himself with Jehoram son of Ahab in battle against Hazael. As Ahab was killed and Jehoshaphat barely escaped with his life in their campaign against Ramoth Gilead (1 Kings 22:37), similarly in this misadventure Jehoram son of Ahab is wounded, and later both he and Ahaziah will lose their lives at the hand of Jehu.

C. The Sevenfold Bloodbath of Jehu (841–814 BC) (9:1–10:27)

The last act of the house of Omri drama opens with Elisha continuing his ministry of judgment by designating a surrogate prophet to anoint Jehu as king of Israel, whose mission is to purge Israel of the house of Omri and of Baal worship. For the most part, Jehu's executions find warrant in Deuteronomy 13:12–18. Jehu crystallizes the religious/political issue in Israel: "How can there be peace as long as all the idolatry and witchcraft of ... Jezebel abound?" (2 Kings 9:22). Elisha symbolizes the significance of Jehu's anointing by telling his surrogate to run immediately from him (9:1–13).

Jehu begins his bloodbath at Jezreel, killing Jehoram son of Ahab (2 Kings 9:14–24). To fulfill Elijah’s prophecy, Jehu tells his chariot officer to throw Jehoram’s corpse on the field that Ahab had confiscated from Naboth (vv. 25–26). Second, without prophetic authorization, Jehu kills a fleeing Ahaziah, king of Judah, who is visiting Jehoram son of Ahab as he is recovering from his wounds in their earlier battle together against Hazael (vv. 27–28). Hosea criticizes Jehu for his excessive massacre (Hos. 1:4). Third, he kills Jezebel, the patron of the fertility cult. While adorned as a prostitute looking out her window, eunuchs throw her down to her death, and her skull, hands, and feet — all that dogs left of her carcass — are buried at the plot in Jezreel as Elijah had predicted (1 Kings 21:23–24). Fourth, Jehu orders the guardians of Ahab’s sons in Samaria to slaughter their seventy wards and send their heads to him at Jezreel. He puts them in two piles and, without taking responsibility for their deaths, asks the townspeople, “Whose heads are these?” to make it appear that there are spiritual forces larger than he that fulfill Elijah’s prophecies (2 Kings 10:1–11). Fifth, on his way to Samaria, he meets forty-two relatives of Ahaziah who, unaware of Jehu’s coup, are on social visit to their relatives by marriage in Samaria. Like Ahaziah they are at the wrong place at the wrong time and are slaughtered (vv. 12–14). Sixth, in company with Jehonadab son of Recab, a purist clan (cf. Jer. 35), Jehu continues on to Samaria where he kills the remainder of Ahab’s sons. Seventh, he completes the purge of Baal worship by killing all the ministers of Baal and destroying all the symbols of that fertility deity’s worship (vv. 18–27). But though Jehu destroys the house of Omri in his bloodbath, as Elijah predicted, *I AM* is not present, for none knows the God of grace (1 Kings 19:9–18).

D. The Divided Kingdom (10:28–17:41)

1. Jehu King of Israel (841–14 BC) (10:28–36)

Not knowing *I AM* personally, Jehu returns to the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat (2 Kings 10:29), but for purging the land of Baal, *I AM* rewards him with a dynasty of four generations. Hazael now begins to reduce the size of Israel, including his taking Transjordan.

2. Joash Son of Ahaziah, King of Judah (841–825)

BC) (11:1–12:21)

As a revenge for Jehu's slaughter of her Baal-worshipping son, Ahaziah, Athaliah determines to kill off the house of David. She succeeds in killing all but the infant Joash; Jehosheba, half sister of Ahaziah, steals the infant king ahead of time and gives him to the care of his nurse. *I AM*'s promise to the house of David hangs on the thread of the baby (cf. Exod. 2:1–10; Matt. 2:13–18). When the boy turns six, Jehoiada the priest stages a coup around the boy king (2 Kings 11:4–12), has Athaliah killed (vv. 13–16), and reinstates the worship of *I AM* by renewing the covenant between *I AM*, king, and people (vv. 17–21).

Joash does what is right as long as Jehoiada lives (2 Kings 12:1–2); he also repairs the temple of *I AM*. He turns the work over to the priests and then has to discharge them for their misuse of the building funds to gratify their greed, not to repair the temple (vv. 4–16). He allows the priests to keep the funds they misappropriated, but his royal secretary takes over the management of the funds. Later Joash uses the temple objects to buy off Hazael (vv. 17–18), apostatizes to Baal worship after the death of Jehoiada (2 Chron. 24:17–24), and is assassinated by his own officials (2 Kings 12:19–20).

3. Jehoahaz Son of Jehu, King of Israel (814–799 BC) (13:1–9)

Jehoahaz son of Jehu continues the evil of Jehu's house, but no prophet—though Elisha is still alive—confronts him. Hazael reduces Jehoahaz's army to ten chariots so that he cannot respond quickly to an attack. Like the warlords of the earlier epoch, he cries out to *I AM* without real repentance, but the gracious God sends a deliverer—perhaps the Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III—to break Hazael's stranglehold on Israel.

4. Jehoash Son of Jehoahaz, king of Israel (799–782 BC) (13:10–25)

The regnal formula for Jehoash son of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:10–13) indicts the second generation of Jehu for continuing Jehu's apostasy. After the regnal frame, the writer atypically presents an anecdote; the king weeps over the dying Elisha and calls the prophet "my father" and cries out, "The chariots and

horsemen of Israel!” In other words, the king acknowledges the powerful prophet is Israel’s real ruler and strength. As a reward, Elisha symbolically arms the king to defeat the Arameans by placing his hands over the king’s hands as he shoots an arrow. In a second symbolic gesture, the prophet tells the king to strike arrows into the ground, but the king does so less than enthusiastically; the destruction of the Arameans will be incomplete.

Elisha dies and is buried in a tomb. Some Israelites, surprised by a band of Moabite invaders, throw a corpse they are burying into Elisha’s tomb. The corpse revives, symbolizing that as Elijah outlasts death, so also Elisha’s power lives on even after death. The resurrection foreshadows Israel’s resurrection beyond the exile. God is unwilling that Israel should die; their corpse will revive.

The writer interprets the resurrection incident by following it with the account that Jehoash defeats Ben-Hadad II, Hazael’s successor, three times because of *I AM*’s covenants with the patriarchs. Heretofore he has emphasized the conditionality of the Mosaic covenant, but now he features the unconditionality of God’s covenants with the patriarchs, which is analogous to his covenant with David. God’s mercy on Israel, not justice, will have the final word.

5. Amaziah Son of Joash, King of Judah (796–767BC) (14:1–22)

Amaziah does what is right but, like Asa, leaves the high places (2 Kings 14:1–4). He keeps the law (Deut. 24:16), executing his father’s assassins but not their sons, contrary to the culture of those days (2 Kings 14:5–6). Unfortunately, his victory over Edom (v. 7) puffs him up and leads him into an uncalled for war against Jehoash, who plunders Jerusalem (vv. 8–14). The writer inserts here the second half of Jehoash’s regnal formula (vv. 15–16) to contrast the peaceful death of Jehoash with his following narrative of the violent assassination of Amaziah (vv. 17–20). In this way the narrator shows the innocence of the king of Israel and the guilt of the king of Judah.

6. Jeroboam II Son of Jehoash, King of Israel (782–73 BC) (14:23–29)

Though evil, Jeroboam son of Jehoash, the third generation of Jehu’s dynasty, expands the kingdom to its Solomonic dimensions. This is so because

of God's grace to spare, not destroy, Israel; otherwise there is none to save it.

7. Azariah Son of Amaziah, King of Judah (767–740 BC) (15:1–6)

Azariah (also known as Uzziah) does what is right but does not remove the high places. *I AM* afflicts him with leprosy.

8. Beginning of Israel's Last Days (15:7–31)

Zechariah son of Jeroboam (752 BC), who represents Jehu's fourth generation, is assassinated by Shallum (751), who in turn is assassinated by Menahem (751–741). The spurned God complains, "They set up kings without my consent" (Hos. 8:4). During Menahem's reign, Tiglath-Pileser 111 (a.k.a. Pul), founder of the Neo-Assyrian dynasty, appears in Israel for the first time; Menahem buys him off. He is succeeded by Pekahiah (742–740), who is assassinated by Pekah (740–731). During Pekah's reign, Tiglath-Pileser takes Galilee and Gilead and exiles their people. Pekah is assassinated by Hoshea.

9. Two Kings of Judah (15:32–16:19)

Jotham son of Azariah/Uzziah (740–732 BC) does what is right, yet leaves the high places (15:32–38). But his son Ahaz (732–715) embraces the fertility worship of the kings of Israel, follows the detestable fertility religions of the Canaanites whom *I AM* had driven out before Israel, and even sacrifices his own son (16:1–4).⁴ When Rezin of Damascus and Pekahiah of Samaria besiege him to replace him with a puppet king who, unlike Ahaz, will join them in their coalition against Assyria, Isaiah counsels the irresolute Ahaz to trust in *I AM* and resist the coalition. Instead, Ahaz bribes Tiglath-Pileser to attack Damascus. The results of Ahaz's becoming a vassal of the Assyrian are devastating. Ahaz, with the compliance of the priest, reimages the temple of *I AM* according to the Assyrian cult and his own aesthetic tastes.

10. End of Israel (17:1–41)

Hoshea (731–722 BC) begins his reign as a vassal of the Assyrian king.

Later, “easily deceived and senseless” (Hos. 7:11), he turns to Egypt and rebels. Assyria retaliates, capturing Samaria —marking the end of the northern kingdom — imprisoning its king, and according to the Assyrian annals, carrying Israel’s noble families, not its farmers, into exile. Ahijah predicted Israel’s fall at its beginning when Jeroboam inaugurated his apostate cult (1 Kings 14:15; 2 Kings 17:1–6). The narrator now summarizes his theology (2 Kings 17:7–23; see “Covenant Obligations and Material Rewards,” p. 743). He draws his history of the northern kingdom to conclusion by noting that the king of Assyria resettled the towns of Samaria with foreigners (17:24–41). As an apotropaic measure against the lions that *I AM* sent as judgment against the pagan settlers (1 Kings 13:24; 20:36; Amos 3:12), the king sends back priests of *I AM* to instruct the settlers how to worship *I AM*. The resulting religions are a syncretism of *I AM* worship with the pagan religions of the settlers, which, of course, violates the exclusive nature of true *I AM* worship. The immigrants and their compromised religion evolved into the Samaritans whose cult center is Mount Gerizim (John 4:20). The land is now called Samaria (2 Kings 17:24), and the people are no longer to be called Israelites (v. 34).

E. Judah Alone (18:1–25:30)

1. Hezekiah (715–686 BC) (18:1–20:21)

Hezekiah begins his coregency with apostate Ahaz in 729 and becomes sole king in 715. He does what is right, just as his father David, which is also said of Asa (1 Kings 15:11), Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:43), Amaziah (2 Kings 15:3), and Josiah (2 Kings 22:2). But none of these are like Hezekiah in his trust in *I AM*. In war, *I AM* is with this second David, who also defeats the Philistines (2 Kings 18:8). Hezekiah’s importance to the inspired narrator can be gauged in the quantity of material that he devotes to this highly praised king (cf. the parallel narrative in Isa. 36–39).

a. Hezekiah Delivered from Assyria (18:5–19:37)

Hezekiah lives in the context of Assyrian domination of the ancient Near East, including Assyria’s destruction of Samaria (2 Kings 18:9–12). He rebels against Sennacherib in 705 when Sennacherib replaces Sargon II; but when

Assyria attacks in 701, Hezekiah fails to live according to the will of *I AM*, repents of his rebellion, and tries to buy off his attacker. In spite of Hezekiah's tribute, Sennacherib demands his complete surrender and besieges Jerusalem. At the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, where Isaiah had called on Ahaz to exercise faith and Ahaz refused, Sennacherib's commander asks Hezekiah and his officials, "On what are you basing this confidence of yours?" (v. 19). This is the issue of Hezekiah's life and of the battle. The Assyrian argues that Egypt is worthless (vv. 19–21; cf. Isa. 30:1–5; 31:1–3), Hezekiah removed *I AM*'s high place (v. 22), and his army is a joke (vv. 23–25). He claims *I AM* told him to invade (v. 25). Did he know the judgment oracles of Isaiah and Micah? Turning to the people on the wall, he offers them a choice: trust *I AM* and Hezekiah and die, or trust in the Assyrian who has conquered every god and enjoy a life in a new promised land (vv. 26–37). Hezekiah remains confident that *I AM* will keep his promise to deliver Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kings 20:6), and the people obey their king.

Hezekiah asks Isaiah to pray, and Isaiah predicts the Assyrian king will return to his own land and be assassinated (2 Kings 19:1–7). The field commander withdraws for the moment to confront Tirhakah, the Cushite king of Egypt, but continues to threaten Hezekiah (vv. 8–13). Now Hezekiah himself prays to *I AM* to deliver Judah "so that all kingdoms on earth may know you alone, *I AM*, are God" (vv. 14–19). *I AM* assures Hezekiah through Isaiah that he has heard his prayer (vv. 20–34): he will respond to Sennacherib's pride and blasphemy (vv. 20–24); he planned the Assyrian invasion long ago (vv. 25–26) and will now turn him back. As a sign to Hezekiah to bolster his faith, *I AM* promises that, after the invasion is turned back, a remnant will survive and take root and prosper in Jerusalem (vv. 29–31). Climactically, Isaiah prophesies that the Assyrians will be turned back without so much as an arrow being shot (vv. 32–35). Miraculously, the angel of *I AM* fulfills the prophecy (cf. Gen. 19:15; Exod. 12:12, 23; 2 Sam. 24:16): he smites 185,000 Assyrians, probably with a bubonic plague, judging from Herodotus's account of the incident (2 Kings 19:35–36), and Sennacherib returns to Assyria where his sons assassinate him (v. 37).⁵

b. Hezekiah Delivered from Illness and Prediction of Babylonian Exile (20:1–21)

The story of Hezekiah's deliverance from a terminal illness is another important pericope on God's sovereignty, as shown by fulfilled prophecy, and

on the power of prayer. Hezekiah's healing stands in marked contrast to the death of Jeroboam's sick son, Abijah (1 Kings 14:1–18), and of Ahaziah, who died of his own injury (2 Kings 1:2–17; cf. 8:7–15). The writer dischronologizes the scene, which occurs in 703 BC before the deliverance of Jerusalem in 701, in order to put Manasseh's reign into its theological context: *I AM* predicts the exile before Manasseh's reign, the contingent event that dooms Judah to exile.

Isaiah predicts Hezekiah will die of his sickness (2 Kings 20:1), but Hezekiah's earnest prayer changes things (vv. 2–3; see [chap. 29.V.F](#)). Isaiah now predicts he will live another fifteen years (vv. 4–6). Sovereignty and healing also include medicine; Isaiah prescribes a poultice. In answer to Hezekiah's request for a sign — presumably to bolster his faith—*I AM* makes the shadow on his steplike sun clock back up ten steps to symbolize his recovery (vv. 7–11). Hezekiah had been slipping into the shadow of death and now miraculously recovers light and ground. This healing and miracle fortify Hezekiah to believe *I AM*'s additional prophecy that he will deliver Jerusalem from Sennacherib in 701 BC (v. 6).

Hearing of Hezekiah's healing, the king of Babylon sends Hezekiah a letter and a gift (a bribe?) to induce Hezekiah to rebel with him against Assyria. Hezekiah now stumbles: to impress the Babylonian envoys and express his willingness to join the rebellion, he shows them his armory and treasury. (This was before he stripped the temple in 701 to bribe Sennacherib.) But the same treasures that might induce a treaty might also provoke an invasion. Hezekiah errs in seeking to strengthen Judah's security by friendship with Babylon and Egypt instead of finding strength in *I AM* alone (cf. Isa. 7:1–17; 30–31). Isaiah predicts the Babylonian exile (20:15–19). This took place in 598 and 586 BC. Incredibly, Hezekiah calls the prophecy good, for he will have peace and prosperity in his lifetime (cf. 2 Kings 19:29–31); and in so doing, he shows he loves himself more than the kingdom of God.

2. Manasseh (687–642 BC) (21:1–18)

Manasseh son of Hezekiah is very evil: he introduces into Jerusalem the pagan cult worship of the fertility deities Baal and Asherah. He even sacrifices his own son (2 Kings 21:1–9). In fact, he leads his nation to do “more evil than the nations *I AM* had destroyed before the Israelites” (v. 9). *I AM* sends his slaves, the prophets, to announce the total destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 10–15). The narrator indicts Manasseh himself for shedding “so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end” (v. 16; cf. 9:7, 26, 33; Heb. 11:37). His

sinful reign lasts longer than any other king's, making the stain indelible and judgment inevitable. He is buried in the garden of Uzza, the name of the man who epitomizes being struck down for being irreverent (2 Kings 21:17–18).

3. *Amon (642–640 BC) (21:19–25)*

Amon, as evil as his father, is assassinated by his officials and buried in the garden of Uzza. The people in turn kill the conspirators and place Josiah on the throne.

4. *Josiah (640–609 BC) (22:1–23:30)*

Josiah is a true son of David; indeed, he keeps the law more perfectly than any other king of Judah (2 Kings 22:1–2). In 622 BC the Book of the Law (see [chap. 17](#) above) is found while workmen are repairing the temple (vv. 3–10). A similar situation occurred with me. I was asked to teach a Sunday school class of a very large church on the topic of evangelical theology. When I began to teach, I discovered that no one in the class of one hundred adults had brought a Bible. Seizing the opportunity to teach dramatically that evangelicals build their world and life view on the Bible, I refused to teach until everyone had a Bible in hand. Not only did no one have a Bible, but no one knew where to find Bibles; the class's anxiety became palpable. The class president hastened to find a janitor who led us to a back closet in the second basement where the old pew Bibles had been deposited. After blowing off the dust, we distributed the Bibles. None of that class doubted the Law could have been lost in the temple during the reign of Manasseh!

Upon hearing the Law, Josiah repents and orders the priest and royal officials to inquire of *I AM* about the Law. They consult the prophetess Huldah, a contemporary of the writing prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah, and she predicts the covenant curses will be exacted upon Judah but Josiah will be spared from seeing the punishment (2 Kings 22:11–20).

Josiah reforms all Israel: he renews the covenant (2 Kings 23:1–3), destroys Baal worship in Jerusalem (vv. 4–14), desecrates pagan sites and objects in the northern kingdom by placing them in proximity to graves (vv. 15–20), celebrates Passover (vv. 21–23), and rids the land of mediums and spiritists (vv. 24–25). Nevertheless, *I AM* resolves to destroy Jerusalem because the stain of Manasseh's sins remains. Josiah is killed in an uncalled for battle against Pharaoh Neco and is spared from seeing the fate of his sons and of Jerusalem

(vv. 28–30).

5. Josiah's Offspring and the Fall of Jerusalem (23:31–25:7)

Unlike Josiah, all his offspring do evil as their fathers had done; all rebel and suffer dire consequences. This is so because *I AM* is meting out the judgment that his prophets had threatened in their judgment oracles against Jerusalem. His judgment is executed principally against the sins of Manasseh.

The people bypass twenty-five-year-old Eliakim son of Josiah for twenty-three-year-old Jehoahaz son of Josiah (609 BC), probably because of his anti-Egyptian stance (2 Kings 23:31–35). In any case, he is exiled to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco, who puts his older brother, whom he renames Jehoiakim, on the throne. Jehoiakim (609–598) at first becomes a vassal to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (23:36–24:7), but then rebels. He is deported to Babylon, but only after the Babylonians and others have devastated the land. Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim (598–597) surrenders himself and Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Babylon plunders Jerusalem of its former treasures, carries into exile Israel's middle and upper classes, and rules David's former kingdom from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates River. The Babylonian now puts Zedekiah son of Josiah on the throne of Jerusalem as his puppet king (24:18–25:7). When he rebels, Nebuchadnezzar sacks Jerusalem and burns it to the ground, kills Zedekiah's sons before his eyes and then blinds him, carries him and the rest of Jerusalem's stalwart citizens into exile, executes the priests and royal officials, and carries off as loot the temple's liturgical objects.

6. After the Fall of Jerusalem (25:22–26)

Nebuchadnezzar appoints a certain Gedaliah as governor over the people left behind. The governor is assassinated for collaborating with the Babylonians. Fearful of Babylon's reprisal, the rest of the people flee to Egypt, an unwitting enactment of one of the curses of the covenant—a return to Egypt, the land of bondage and slavery (Deut. 28:68). In any case, they lost their patrimony from *I AM*.

The narrator, however, does not close his work with a voice of doom but with a note of hope. Jehoiachin is yet alive and well. Symbolically his prison clothing is removed (cf. Lev. 16:4, 32; Zech. 3:1–7), and he is given a seat of

honor higher than the other captive kings.

II. THEOLOGY

Dennis McCarthy says, “The past is considered, the future scanned, and the sequence of events explained so as to give a practical guide for man’s activity.”⁶ Here are some of the Deuteronomist’s teachings for our edification.

A. Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God takes three interrelated forms: his universal kingdom, the perishing kingdom of national Israel, and the enduring spiritual kingdom that exists as a remnant within national Israel but transcends it. These three play a prominent role in *I AM*’s revelation to Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:9–18). Those in the first two aspects of his kingdom know his power, but only those in the third know his intimate presence.

B. Universal Kingdom of God

I AM’s universal kingdom refers to his exercise of sovereignty in everything. That kingdom is represented in God’s revelation to Elijah by the three destructive symbols—wind, earthquake, and fire — and by their interpretation: the sword of Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha (see [chap. 25.II.C.2.b](#) [3]). In other words, *I AM* rules over nature and politics. All are subject to him, but Ahab and his ilk do not have the faith to know *I AM*, and so do not experience his protection and provision; in that sense, *I AM* is absent. In fact, however, as his revelation about Israel’s future shows, God is active in these judgments. God’s spectacular demonstrations of his power in nature illuminate his awesome power to overthrow kingdoms in the political arena.

C. National Israel

In spite of the developing divisions between the king’s political power and

the prophet's spiritual power, and between the unrighteous state of Israel and the righteous remnant within it, the Old Testament consistently regards Israel as a unified community. The heirs of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants are called *bēnê yisrā'ēl* ("children of Israel"/"Israelite"; cf. Deut. 1:3; 3:18; 4:44–45; 23:17[18]; 24:7; 29:1; 32:49, 51, 52), the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut. 1:9–10). They are brothers (Deut. 3:18) and sisters (Deut. 23:17). As members of one family and as a corporate solidarity, they experience the curses and blessings of the Sinaitic covenant.

The election of all Israel to represent *I AM*'s rule among the nations remains a primary datum of the Deuteronomistic history. This kingdom of God is unified by the subjects' common story, history, and covenants. The unconditional Abrahamic covenant guarantees the continued existence of national Israel until it is replaced by Christ and his church (Matt. 21:33–46; see [chap. 20](#) above). This kingdom of God is represented in part by the Mosaic liturgy, the priests, and the temple—sometimes a force for good, as in the case of Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:4–21), and other times a force for evil (2 Kings 22:11–20) — but, above all, after the monarchy, by the king. He is the breath in their nostrils, and he leads the nation in its religion. David and Solomon in his early years lead Israel to keep covenant and fulfill, not consummate, the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant (1 Kings 4:21). Manasseh leads them into gross sins and exile (2 Kings 21:9), but Josiah leads them to renew the covenant and celebrate Passover (23:23–25). As the king goes, so goes the nation. The prophets treat the nation as a unity, but the experience of God's personal (protective and provisioning) presence cannot be assumed in nominal Israel.

Today the church, which transcends political and ethnic boundaries, inherits national Israel's covenants. At Christ's parousia, all of ethnic Israel, by their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, will be incorporated into the true church (see [chap. 20](#) above). Until then national Israel serves as a warning to the nominal church (1 Cor. 10).

Elisha's first two miracles confirm Israel's covenants. The first miracle, involving salt, speaks of their unconditional and eternal nature (2 Kings 2:19–22); the second, bringing judgment upon children, confirms their conditional aspect of blessings and curses (2:23–25).

D. Remnant of Israel

I AM's abiding kingdom pertains to the exercise of his sovereignty among

people who volitionally subject themselves to his rule. The citizens of this kingdom experience the blessings of Israel's unconditional covenants because by faith in *I AM*, who in these last days becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, they keep the Mosaic covenant that is written on their hearts. On the one hand, God's presence in this kingdom at the time of Elijah is so small and inconspicuous by comparison to the universal and national kingdoms that it is represented by a thin whisper. On the other hand, this kingdom is much larger than Elijah reckons. God numbers it symbolically as seven thousand. Thousand stands for a large, indefinite number, and seven stands for completion. They are called "the people of the land" in 2 Kings 11:14. This spiritual remnant within Israel by faith knows *I AM*, and in that sense God is present.

This spiritual kingdom transcends political boundaries. It includes Obadiah who is in charge of Ahab's palace (1 Kings 18:3) and Naaman, the Syrian general who remains loyal to Ben-Hadad, king of Aram (2 Kings 5). The Canaanite widow at Zarephath by faith is suddenly thrust on a stage larger than her own life (1 Kings 17:7–24). This kingdom transcends socioeconomic differences; it includes a captured slave girl who told Naaman about Elisha (2 Kings 5:3) and an officer in Jehoram's army who tells Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, that Elisha is present in the camp (2 Kings 3:11). The poor widow of a prophet who is about to lose her sons as slaves to her creditor (2 Kings 4:1) and the well-to-do woman at Shunem, who is without child (2 Kings 4:8), each have their unique needs met in this kingdom. Godly women play an important role in establishing the abiding kingdom of God. The widow of Zarephath feeds Elijah (1 Kings 17:7–24); the Shunammite woman gives Elisha a home (2 Kings 4:10); a female slave girl indirectly heals Naaman (2 Kings 5:3); Josheba and her nurse save Joash from Athaliah, and together the two women function as a foil against the spineless guardians of Ahab's sons in Samaria (2 Kings 11:2–3).

This spiritual kingdom also transcends the experiences of God's presence; it includes Elijah's experience of God's presence in unique power and protection (2 Kings 1:1–18) and that of others who are martyred, fleeing, or hiding in caves (1 Kings 18:4; 19:1). Naboth is not gifted and not protected in his bold stance not to sell his vineyard. His final inheritance is from *I AM*, and that inheritance is guaranteed by the sign of Ahab's and Jezebel's death according to the word of Elijah. These all, each in his or her own way, please God by their faith, know God's intimate presence even in death, and receive the new heaven and new earth in the company of all believers (Heb. 11:1–40). This spiritual kingdom that knows God's intimate presence serves as an example to the true church.

At the end of history as we know it, the remnant of Israel will become all Israel, including Jews and Gentiles.

E. Monotheistic Creed

The basis creed of Israel's covenant is that *I AM*, their God, is the only God.⁷ Through his mighty acts, the nations know that he is the only God (2 Kings 5:15; 19:4–19). He is not to be confused with the detestable idols of the other nations and with the practices associated with their gods (2 Kings 17:16–17; 19:14–19). They are powerless, futile, and corrupting (1 Kings 18:22–40). *I AM*, by contrast, is incomparable in his holiness (8:9–27) and powerfully active with his creation (8:38–53).⁸ Like Deuteronomy (esp. Deut. 7), the book of Kings contains a marked hostility and a sustained polemic against Canaanite worship. The failure of the kings to keep the nation separate from pagan religions ensured the fall of both kingdoms. Iain Provan says,

God is not prepared to take a place alongside the gods or to be displaced by them....Much of Kings therefore addresses the problem of illegitimate worship. The main interest is in the *content* of worship, which must not involve idols or images nor reflect any aspect of the fertility and other cults of “the nations” (1 Kings 11:1–40; 12:25–13:34; 14:22–24; 16:29–33; 2 Kings 16:1–4; 17:7–23; 21:1–9). There is subsidiary concern about the *place* of worship which is ideally the Jerusalem temple and not the local “high places” (1 Kings 3:2; 5:1–9:9; 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 18:4; 23:1–20). The book is also concerned to describe the moral wrongs that inevitably accompany false worship. For as the worship of something *other* than God inevitably leads to some kind of mistreatment of fellow-mortals in the eyes of [his] God (1 Kings 21; 2 Kings 16:1 —4; 21:1–6), so true worship of God is always bound up with obedience to the law of God.⁹

F. Central Sanctuary

A principal aim of Deuteronomy is to unify Israel by centralizing all sacrificial worship of *I AM* at a single sanctuary. The Deuteronomist is preoccupied with the covenant's insistence on one central sanctuary (see on immanence below). The importance he attaches to the temple can be judged by the large space he devotes to narrating in detail Solomon's building of the temple. Moreover, he evaluates every king as having done what is right or evil by his worship at this sanctuary and qualifies those who do what is right when

they cater to the spontaneous impulses of the pious to express itself at high places to *I AM*. The central sanctuary symbolizes God's immanence (see below). It is God's face in the world and his imaging of himself through it, especially the Most Holy Place, and it must not be altered. A single central sanctuary symbolizes that *I AM* alone is the only God and that he is one. The failure of retaining one central place of worship fractured Israel into two nations.

G. God's Immanence: Temple

Scripture respects a subtle equilibrium between *I AM*'s absolute and immutable transcendence and his facile immanence. God is present everywhere: "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you" (1 Kings 8:27; cf. Ps. 139:7–10), but his unique geographical presence at the temple makes him exclusively at the disposal of the privileged worshipers at his temple. *I AM* places his name at the temple (see 12:11; 13:12; 14:23; 16:2, 11; 26:2), which by an Akkadian parallel appears to be an affirmation of his ownership of the temple.¹⁰ He has a particular interest and concern for this place that he owns and gives more intense attention to the needs and cares of its worshipers (1 Kings 8:29–30). Here too worshipers experience his intimacy. When he allowed the Babylonians to destroy his house, he withdrew his unique and blessed presence from his sinful people. He is also immanent in his earthly servants the prophets (see below) and in his heavenly messengers (2 Kings 6:16), above all in the angel of *I AM* (2 Kings 1:3).

The sacrality of divine presence at a temple *topos*, in the sense that God pays closer attention to his dwelling than elsewhere, is inseparable from Mount Sinai and the Promised Land. His presence in Jerusalem is foreshadowed in his walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:1–3:24). *I AM* appeared to the patriarchs, and they commemorated his appearance according to their historical context. He revealed himself at sacred trees (Gen. 12:6–7; 13:18; 14:13; 18:1; 21:33), and they memorialize the sacred *topos* by erecting a rock and consecrating the rock by pouring oil on it (Gen. 28:18). Jacob called the site of God's revelation to him "Bethel" (i.e., "house of God"; Gen. 28:19). At Mount Sinai *I AM* appeared to Moses in a burning bush and then to all Israel in thunder and lightning, a thick cloud, and smoke. During Israel's nomadic wanderings and before their being fully established in the land (i.e., free of oppressors), *I AM*'s Glory dwelt in a portable, royal tent over the ark covered with the blood on its mercy seat (Num. 10:35–36; 2 Sam. 6:16–19). When

Solomon built the temple of stone and gold, which symbolized that the kingdom had been fully established, the sacrality of the divine presence was transferred to the temple and Mount Zion. The “temple” always became incarnate in a form appropriate to the changing dispensations.

Israel’s poets enriched the Zion ideology by borrowing the imagery of the ancient myths. The myth of the cosmic mountain and of the umbilical center of the earth are common to beliefs of classical and Near Eastern antiquities.¹¹ In this borrowed imagery, Zion became associated with the Canaanite myths about the Mountain of the North (Saphon). Unfortunately, some interpreted this imagery too literally and drew the erroneous conclusion that Zion is inviolable, a belief strengthened by Sennacherib’s lifting of the siege of Jerusalem and by the reform of Josiah (cf. Mic. 3:8–12). For example, the Arameans draw the conclusion that *I AM* is a mountain, not a valley, deity. The just God shattered that pagan theology by first abandoning his temple and then destroying it (586 BC). Nevertheless, since *I AM* had promised David an eternal throne at Jerusalem, a passionate attachment to Zion, fostered by the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, persists, and the returnees build the second temple on the site of the first temple (516 BC). Along with the Law and the expectation of the Messiah, the sacrality of Zion is a primary concern of postexilic Judaism (cf. Pss. 84:10–12 [11–13]; 132:13–14; 4 Ezra 13:35–36).

For those with eyes and ears, that temple is destroyed in AD 70 because the reality it symbolizes comes in the effulgence of Jesus Christ, the True Temple, who overwhelms Solomon’s shadow temple (John 2:21; 4:21–24). As God’s name was uniquely present at the temple, so now Jesus Christ is uniquely present with those who gather in his name (Matt. 18:20). God’s presence in the temple is now fulfilled in the Holy Spirit’s presence in the church, individually and collectively. In other words, the church is the locale of the Spirit of God: “The temple of the Spirit was filled within and protected as well as commissioned without. As in the Qumran sect, the temple was spiritualized into the community.”¹² The Holy Spirit’s presence in the individual saint and in the church of which he or she is a member produces fruit (ethical behavior informed by divine love) and gifts (empowering the church to give witness to the truth). “The Spirit covered the whole waterfront: power for life, growth, fruit, gifts, prayers, witness, and everything else.”¹³ The Holy Spirit, as much a manifestation of God’s presence as the Son’s presence in his earthly ministry, is revealed in New Testament as a person of the triune God, asserting God’s presence in his temple. His Spirit is the earnest that the church is in the last days, guaranteeing their success in the final day. In short, the church both individually

and corporately manifests the life of God. To Christians the triune God is also present in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30; Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7).

The brazen sea on the southeast corner of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 7:39) is replaced by believers from whom flow rivers of living water (John 7:37–39). Egypt supplies the wealth for building the tabernacle, Hiram of Tyre is the gifted craftsman in bronze for Solomon's temple (1 Kings 7), and foreigners come to worship *I AM* there (8:41–43). In Christ's temple, Christ is the cornerstone, the apostles are foundation stones, and Jews and Gentiles are the living stones (Eph. 2:20–22; 1 Peter 2:4–8). And the Holy Spirit's presence is the *shekinah* glory. Solomon's temple houses the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place (1 Kings 8:6–13), and at Solomon's throne hall, probably located on the right side (i.e., south) of the temple, *I AM*'s transcendent moral decree is translated into everyday life (1 Kings 7:7). Together, the Holy Place and the Hall of Judgment in their common courtyard, symbolize heaven where Christ sits as the Priest-King at God's right hand (cf. Ps. 110:1; Acts 2:33–35). Solomon's temple bore witness to God's faithfulness to David that his son would build the temple, so the church who is empowered by the ascended Christ in heavenly Zion bears witness to God's faithfulness to David to preserve Zion. In other words, the temple stands as living proof that *I AM* keeps fidelity with his verbal agreements and so shapes history.

The Zion/temple theme will be consummated in the new Jerusalem in the new heaven and earth (see [chap. 20](#)). From God's throne a stream of water flows through the southeast corner of the temple and becomes a river of life that transforms even the Dead Sea (Ezek. 47:1–12; Rev. 22:1–2). This is the heavenly city Abraham was looking for (Heb. 11:10), and he will not be made perfect without us (vv. 39–40).

Apart from the normative Jerusalem sanctuary, altars were built in connection with theophany (Judg. 6:26) or for special occasions or out of temporary necessity (Josh. 8:30; 22:10–34; 1 Sam. 7:17; 24:25; 1 Kings 3:4; 18:32; 19:14). These special altars are also part of the Torah narrative.

H. Covenant Obligations and Material Rewards

I AM's unconditional covenant commitments to Israel, unlike the vagaries of human dedication, are steadfast, constant, and far-reaching. Nevertheless, the enjoyment of those covenants depends on Israel's obedience to the Mosaic covenant (1 Kings 2:3). That obedience is above all a matter of heart, such as

found in the matchless faith of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:5) and incomparable love of Josiah (2 Kings 23:25). Those virtues in the heart vouchsafe obedience to the covenant and its material blessings (2 Kings 18:5–8). On the other hand, their spiritual lack entails disobedience and the retribution of the covenant's material curses: loss of the land (2 Kings 10:32) and even grisly cannibalism (Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:52–57; 2 Kings 6:28–31; cf. Lam. 2:20; 4:10; Ezek. 5:10). From about 840–800 BC the ruthless Arameans afflicted the land and reduced Israel's armor to ten chariots (2 Kings 13:7); from 740 to 640 the well-disciplined and ruthless Assyrians traumatized Israel and deported the northern kingdom (e.g., 2 Kings 15:9, 29; 17:3–6), and from 605 to 539 the Babylonians devastated Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and exiled the people (25:18–19). Both Assyrians and Babylonians inspired psychological terror, demanded heavy tribute, and in the case of rebellion, ruthlessly eliminated and/or deported all of the remaining middle and upper classes (25:21).

The inspired writer gives a precis of his covenant theology in 2 Kings 17:7–23: *I AM* keeps his covenant obligations, but Israel inexcusably fails to keep theirs and brings the covenant curses upon themselves. By their religious apostasy in following the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat, they spurn *I AM*'s grace to whom they owe their very existence. Throughout the land, they worship Canaanite fertility deities at their high places and engage in the practices of the Canaanites whom *I AM* has driven out before them, violating the most basic stipulation of the Mosaic law. Instead of trusting *I AM*, they reject his covenant and the prophets who warn them and adopt pagan religions. Consequently, they bring the covenant curses upon themselves (17:18–20; cf. 21:1–15; 22:16–17). A notable exception to moral retribution occurs during the reign of the evil Jeroboam II. During his extended reign of forty years, the evil nation recoups Solomon's empire, only to hasten the nation's fall (2 Kings 14:23–29). The unstable combination of evil and prosperity makes Israel like a tottering wall hastening to its collapse or like a basket of overripe summer fruit waiting to be tossed out as garbage (Amos 7:7–9; 8:1–2). At the end of Jeroboam II's reign, the first writing prophets, Amos and Hosea, appear, threatening the end of Israel. After another forty years, the northern kingdom, more than overdue for the covenant's curses, loses the land.

I. Sovereignty

As we have seen repeatedly in our Old Testament study, God's word is

sovereign. His covenants and the words of his prophets shape Israel's history and destiny (e.g., 1 Kings 11:26–40; 13:1–32). The Deuteronomist sometimes explicitly asserts *I AM*'s sovereignty. For example, God decreed Assyria's invasion of the land long before it occurred, and he led Israel's kings to rebel politically in order to inflict punishment upon them. *I AM*'s sovereign rule over Israel and the nations is entailed in the many instances of fulfilled prophecy. (See a catalogue of their predictions on the next page.)

The miracles of Elijah and Elisha entail God's sovereignty: sending fire from heaven (2 Kings 1:10) and providing food for the hungry in famine (4:42–44) and curing death in a pot (4:38–41). He even rules sickness (5:1–27) and the realm of the dead (4:27–36). The Sovereign of history exalts the humble and debases the proud, as for example in the inaugurations of Solomon versus Adonijah. In dramatic irony *I AM* uses human folly to fulfill his word (e.g., 1 Kings 2:1–46; 12:1–24; 16:3–4).

Subject	Prophecy	Fulfillment
Zadok to replace house of Eli David's son to build a house for Yahweh (Nathan)	1 Sam. 2:35 2 Sam. 7:13	1 Kings 2:26–27 1 Kings 8:20
Ten tribes to be torn from Solomon's kingdom (Ahijah the Shilonite) Note: "This turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite."	1 Kings 11:29–31	1 Kings 12:15b
Josiah to destroy the false worship at Bethel (Young prophet of Judah)	1 Kings 13	2 Kings 23:16–18
Jeroboam's dynasty to fall "as one burns up dung, until it is all gone." Israel to fall (Ahijah the Shilonite)	1 Kings 14:6–10 1 Kings 14:15	1 Kings 15:29 2 Kings 17:21–23
Baasha's house to fall (Jehu)	1 Kings 16:1–4	1 Kings 16:11–12
Rebuilding of Jericho to cost firstborn (Joshua son of Nun)	Josh. 6:26	1 Kings 16:34
Israel will be scattered and without a shepherd; let every man return to his house in peace (Micalah ben Imlah) Note: The fulfillment does not single out the prophecy. Ahab succumbs to his wound. Every man to his house!	1 Kings 22:17	1 Kings 22:35–38
Doom against Ahab and his house (Elijah)	1 Kings 21:17–24	1 Kings 21:27–29; 22:37; 2 Kings 9:25–26, 30–37
Ahaziah of Judah must die (Elijah)	2 Kings 1:6	2 Kings 1:17
No rain (Elijah)	1 Kings 17:1	1 Kings 18:41–46
Relief from famine in Samaria (Elisha)	2 Kings 7:1	2 Kings 7:16
Unbelieving officer to die (Elisha)	2 Kings 7:2	2 Kings 7:19–20
Hazael to kill Israel (Elisha)	2 Kings 8:12	2 Kings 9:14, 16; 10:32; 12:17–18; 13:3, 22
"Manasseh king of Judah has committed these detestable sins.... I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle." (Unknown)	2 Kings 21:10–15	2 Kings 24:2
Josiah not to see the evil coming upon Jerusalem (Huldah)	2 Kings 22:15–20	2 Kings 23:30

J. Providence

In the introduction to this chapter, we called attention to God's spiritual rule through the blessings and curses of the Mosaic covenant and through prophetic oracles and prayer that are in keeping with his covenants. Ultimately that spiritual power resides in Providence who upholds the words in the mouths of his prophets and saints in connection with weal (e.g., the rise of Solomon [1 Kings 2:13–46]) and woe (e.g., famine in besieged Samaria [2 Kings 6:24–33];

revolutions [1 Kings 11:14–25]; drought [1 Kings 17:1–24]; forced tribute [2 Kings 18:14–15]; and assassinations [2 Kings 9:14–10:36]). At stake in this contest between *I AM* and the king is dynastic succession and/or enjoyment of the land. The Lord of Hosts sees to it, often through the dramatic irony of the king's folly, that dynasties rise or fall and that the king retains or loses the land according to his obedience or disobedience to the Mosaic covenant. The restoration of the Shunammite's property is a classic example of providence (2 Kings 8:1–6).

K. Revelation

God makes himself known through his covenant renewals (2 Kings 22:8; 23:1–3); through his servants, the prophets (17:23; 24:2), by both their words and miracles (2:19–22); through his mighty acts (5:13–15; 19:19); through providence (8:1–6); through the Deuteronomist: the authoritative presenter and interpreter of all of the above (see [chap. 2](#)); and through the gift of wisdom. The stipulations of the covenant are insufficient to direct Israel's king to judge the nation. Solomon needs supernatural wisdom — a discerning heart — to discern what is right in those matters too small to be dealt with in the Law or spoken to by the prophets (1 Kings 3:1–14). The angel of *I AM* bears his revelations and confirms his presence with his people (1 Kings 19:1–6; cf. 2 Kings 1:3–4, 15; 4:42–44; 19:35). When his heart turns away from *I AM*, he loses the ability to discern what is right and just and becomes a fool.

L. Miracles

Leila Leah Bronner argues convincingly that the miracles of Elijah and Elisha function as a polemic against Baal worship.¹⁴ She documents from the Ugaritic Baal epics that eight motifs celebrate Baal's power: fire, rain, oil and corn, child giving, healing, resurrection, ascent, and defeating the River god.¹⁵ *I AM* demonstrates his sovereignty over these areas through the polemical words and miracles of Elijah and Elisha. With regard to fire, Elijah defeats the prophets of Baal in a contest of fire on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:17–46; see also 1 Kings 19:12; 2 Kings 1:9–16; 2:11; 6:17). With regard to rain, Elijah begins his history-shaping ministry with the words: “There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word” (1 Kings 17:1; cf. 1 Kings 18:41–46; 2

Kings 3:14–17; 7:1–2). With regard to food, *I AM* feeds Elijah by the ravens (1 Kings 17:1–6; see also 1 Kings 17:7–16; 19:1–6; cf. 2 Kings 4:1–7, 42–44). With regard to child giving, Elisha grants the Shunammite woman a son (2 Kings 4:14–17). With regard to healing, Elisha heals Naaman (2 Kings 5:1–14; see also 4:18–36). With regard to resurrection, Elijah revives the woman of Zarephath’s son (1 Kings 17:17–23; see also 2 Kings 4:18–37; 13:20–21). With regard to the ascent motif, as Baal in the Baal myths mounts the clouds, Elijah goes up in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). With regard to the River motif, the Ugaritic Baal epic said of Baal: “And a stick swooped in the hands of Baal, like an eagle between his fingers. It struck the head of Prince (Sea) twixt the eyes of Judge River: ... destroyed Judge River.” As a polemic against this myth, Elijah smites the Jordan and the river divides asunder (2 Kings 2:7–8; see also 2:14).

John the Baptist is greater than any other prophet because he is the most immediate forerunner of the one to whom all the prior prophets point.

M. Typology

Elijah foreshadows John the Baptist, who ministers in the spirit of Elijah and is in fact said by Jesus to be the Elijah to come (Mal. 4:5; Matt. 11:14; 17:12).¹⁶ Elijah designates Elisha, a greater prophet than he to succeed him, and John designates Jesus as his successor (Matt. 3:1–17; John 1:19–34). John wears clothing reminiscent of Elijah’s (2 Kings 1:8; Matt. 3:4). Both Elijah and John are sentenced to death by a woman (1 Kings 19:2; Matt. 14:3, 6–11); both subsequently question their calling (1 Kings 19; Matt. 11:2–3); both inaugurate their successors at the Jordan, and Elisha and Jesus perform similar miracles. Elisha and Messiah raise the dead, heal the leprous, preach good news, and feed the poor (2 Kings 4:1–5:14; Matt. 11:5). These types also show that an omniscient Sovereign rules history (see [chap. 7](#)).

In the Bible only Enoch and Elijah are privileged to circumvent normal death by being taken directly to heaven. According to Malachi, Elijah will reappear before the coming of Messiah to prepare the people for Messiah’s ministry (Mal. 4:5–6). According to the New Testament, that prophecy is fulfilled in John the Baptist (see [chap. 28](#) below), and the scribes fail to recognize either Elijah or Messiah when he comes (Matt. 17:10–13; Mark 1:2–8). These ascensions that circumvent normal death foreshadow the rapture of the church at the parousia (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Naaman’s rite of passage into his new life is by washing (Rom. 6:1–5; 1 Cor.

6:11; Col. 2:11–15), whereupon he becomes like a little child (Matt. 18:5; 19:13–15; Mark 9:33–37; 10:13–16; Luke 9:46–48; 18:15–17). His replacing the Israelite Gehazi, who is now afflicted with Naaman’s leprosy is a picture of the church: the natural branches are broken off and the wild branches are grafted in (see [chap. 20](#)).

N. Piety and Prayer

Solomon’s excessive wealth leads to his worldliness (1 Kings 9:10–28), and his lack of wholehearted devotion to *I AM* leads to his becoming more and more entangled with foreign women who turn his heart away from *I AM* (10:10–13; 11:1–13). To prevent material prosperity from producing spiritual poverty, the Law prescribes the following remedies: (1) remember that in the wilderness *I AM* humbled the fathers to teach them that humans do not live by bread alone but by the word of God (Deut. 8:2–3). (2) Praise *I AM* for material goods (8:10). (3) Take heed that congenital depravity not lead to forgetting *I AM* (Deut. 8:12–14). Wholehearted devotion is needed to resist the temptation to love foreign women.

Though Jehoshaphat did what was right, he did not love *I AM* with all his heart. He formed unholy military alliances with Ahab and Jehoram son of Ahab and either neglected or disobeyed the prophets. In each case he got burned badly (1 Kings 22:1–33; 2 Kings 3:1–27). The unholy marriage of Jehoshaphat’s son to Athaliah, Jezebel’s daughter, killed off all but one of his offspring (2 Kings 11:1–21). Of course, no form of syncretism can coexist when one loves *I AM* with all one’s heart, the sine qua non of the covenant obligations (cf. 2 Kings 16:15–16; 17:29–41). Pride destroyed Amaziah (14:8–22).

In this book Elisha is the shining example of the piety that *I AM* seeks. He enthusiastically embraces his calling, burns his bridges, feeds the people, perseveres to the end, ministers to the needy, refuses material rewards, and weeps for the damned. *I AM* rewards him by making him Israel’s spiritual “Father,” as even an apostate king must acknowledge. The Shunammite’s perseverance leads to her son’s resurrection from the dead. The faith of the widow of Zarephath in *I AM* saves her from famine, and Naaman’s learned humility before *I AM* heals him. Moreover, a prophet must shun a bribe in order to speak freely (1 Kings 13:11–22; 2 Kings 5:15–27).

Piety and prayer are inseparable. *I AM* is a God who answers prayer by Israelite and foreigner alike (1 Kings 3:4–14; 8:41–43, 59–60; 18:16–46; 2

Kings 4:33–35; 6:17–18; 13:4; 19:4, 14–34). Prayer changes things. Jehoahaz king of Israel sought *I AM* for relief from Aram and found salvation (2 Kings 13:1–8), and by prayer Hezekiah delivered Jerusalem (19:15–19) and his own life (20:2–3). Divine sovereignty does not nullify the need for prayer; it establishes it, for prayer is part of the sovereign design. James (5:13–18) holds up Elijah’s prayer for drought and for rain as model of prayer: a righteous person full of faith praying earnestly.

I AM forgives the repentant and those who confess his name. He even brings the repentant nation back from exile (1 Kings 8:33–34).

O. God’s Grace

The Mosaic covenant is not a mechanistic predictor of success or failure whereby an adherent’s obedience unequivocally brings blessing, and disobedience or inimical opposition necessitates failure. *I AM* showed grace to Israel and Judah in spite of their sins. He credited the relative good of individual kings and delayed his judgment on Israel for two centuries. The doom of Israel is really sealed with the first sin, the apostasy of Jeroboam I: “And he [the LORD] will give up Israel because of the sins Jeroboam has committed and has caused Israel to commit” (1 Kings 14:16). Yet *I AM* in his grace credited the relative good, even in kings whom he rejected: Ahab humbled himself, and so judgment didn’t come on his house during his lifetime (1 Kings 21:29); Jehu, for relative good, had his dynasty preserved to the fourth generation (2 Kings 10:30; 15:12). Though the sins of Manasseh cannot be erased, because Josiah humbled himself, he does not see the judgment (2 Kings 22:19–20). *I AM* showed grace even to the northern kingdom because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1 Kings 4:20–21, 24; 8:22–53; 18:36; 2 Kings 13:23). In spite of the evil of Jeroboam son of Jehoash, *I AM* saves Israel from extermination, “since *I AM* had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven” (2 Kings 14:26–27). Solomon prays that beyond exile the grace of *I AM* will prevail for a repentant Israel (1 Kings 8:33–34). Provan notes:

The world of Kings is a moral world in which wrongdoing is punished, whether the sinner be king (1 Kings 11:9–13; 14:1–18), prophet (1 Kings 13:7–25; 20:35–36), or ordinary Israelite (2 Kings 5:19–27; 7:17–20 [*sic*]). It is not a vending-machine world, however, in which every coin of sin that is inserted results in individually packaged retribution. There is no neat

correlation between sin and judgment in Kings, even though people are told that they must obey God if they are to be blessed (1 Kings 2:1–4; 11:38). This is largely because of the compassionate character of the Judge, who does not desire final judgment to fall upon beloved creatures (2 Kings 13:23; 14:27) and is ever ready to find cause why such judgment should be delayed or mitigated (1 Kings 21:25–29; 2 Kings 22:15–20). God's grace is to be found everywhere in the book of Kings, confounding the expectations that the reader has formed on the basis of law (1 Kings 11:9–13; 15:1–15; 2 Kings 8:19).¹⁷

In addition to *I AM*'s grace to national Israel, he constantly shows his grace to those who know him by faith. He indicates his great love and compassion by giving children to the barren (2 Kings 4:17), food to the hungry widow (1 Kings 17:7–16), oil to the indebted widow (2 Kings 4:1–7), and an expensive lost axhead to the borrower (2 Kings 6:1–7). In his grace he forgives the repentant.

But there is a limit to *I AM*'s patience and forbearance toward the unrepentant, and at their end judgment strikes the sinner (2 Kings 21:14). Josiah's reforms delayed but did not turn away *I AM* from his determination to exile Judah for the sins of Manasseh (2 Kings 23:26).

P. Prophets

The prophets' credentials are their predictions and/or miracles. By these people know that there is a prophet in Israel (1 Kings 17:24; 22:28; 2 Kings 3:11; 5:8; 8:7–8). They authenticate their remote predictions by immediate signs (1 Kings 13:3–5; 14:12–16; 2 Kings 20:8–9; cf. Deut. 18:21–22). The full might of the God of Hosts is on their side for those with the spiritual sight to see (2 Kings 6:16).

The prophets are *I AM*'s servants to represent his rule, especially his covenant, to the nation. These spiritual leaders are the horses and chariots of Israel. With the introduction of kingship, the prophet becomes God's plenipotentiary from the heavenly court to the earthly capitols. He designates the king God chooses (1 Kings 1; cf. 1 Sam. 9–10, 16; 2 Sam. 7). In Judah the house of David had prophetic designation through the Lord's covenant to David, mediated through the prophet Nathan. The picture in the north, however, was much more complex. In its first fifty years, three different houses sat on the royal throne. Some of these houses had temporary prophetic sanction, indicating they

were ordained of God. Others, however, usurp the throne without the Lord's consent (see [chap. 28](#)). *I AM*'s writing prophets refuse to acknowledge the reign of these usurpers by not mentioning them in the superscriptions to their written prophecies.

The prophet represents *I AM*'s rule and covenant to the king. According to their words, kings and kingdoms come and go, the sick are healed or die. They oppose apostate kings by delivering specific pronouncements and/or deeds that apply the covenant's curses. The most notable of these prophets are Elijah and Elisha, whose activities take up a substantial part of the narrative of 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13. In sum, by their powerful words and awesome deeds, the prophets inflict judgment on covenant breakers and salvation on covenant keepers.

In the view of the apostate kings, *I AM*'s prophets interfere in the affairs of state and are held accountable to the king. In their view the prophets are troublers of Israel. In the prophet's view, as representative of *I AM*'s kingdom, the kings are as much subject to the covenant as are commoners; they are the real troublers of Israel (1 Kings 18:16–18). Holding political and military power, the kings persecute the prophets. Their persecution begins with Israel's first king: Jeroboam I attempts to seize the prophet of Judah, but his hand symbolically withers. About seventy years later the house of Omri in the north kills them (1 Kings 18:13; 19:1–3) and/or incarcerates them (22:27), and about two centuries later, Manasseh in the south fills the streets of Jerusalem with innocent blood, undoubtedly including the blood of the prophets (cf. Matt. 23:29–36). According to tradition, Isaiah was sawed in two (Heb. 11:37). Unbelievers consider the prophets madmen (2 Kings 9:11). Holding *I AM*'s spiritual power, the prophets ultimately bring down apostate kings. Their influence continues even after their death (2 Kings 13:20–21).

The prophet's power consists in his gifts and calling, in fervency and prayer, and in his perseverance to the end. Even prophets are judged by *I AM* for disobedience (1 Kings 13:11–26). By contrast, the politically powerless are in touch with and open to God's prophets, for instance, Naaman's captured maidservant (2 Kings 5), Jehoshaphat's officer and the officer of the king of Aram (3:11; 6:12), and some lepers (cf. 7:5).¹⁸ Moreover, women, often more than men, have faith in the prophets (1 Kings 17:7–24; 2 Kings 4:1–7, 22–23). Elisha weeps for his people when he turns from being a prophet bringing salvation to a prophet bringing judgment (2 Kings 8:12).

In times of apostasy the prophets represent the abiding kingdom of God. Worshipers bring the firstfruit of the harvest to Elisha rather than to the apostate priests at Bethel of Dan (Lev. 2:14; 23:9–21; Deut. 18:3–5; 2 Kings 4:42), and in the famine the elders gather around Elisha rather than their impotent king in

spite of his bravado (2 Kings 6:24–7:2).

Q. Priests

For the most part, prophets represent the covenant to the nation, not the priest, though this was the responsibility of the house of Levi. The Deuteronomist firmly censors the apostate priests before monarchy (Judg. 17–21; 1 Sam. 1–2) but mostly blanks their activity during the period of the monarchy. He gives us a peek into their conduct and misconduct during the aegis of Jehoiada. On the one hand, Jehoiada boldly risked his life in his coup to overthrow Athaliah and put Joash on the throne (2 Kings 11). On the other hand, he and the other priests stole the people's contributions to rebuild the temple. The narrator contrasts their greed with the honesty of the supervisors (2 Kings 12).

R. Election of Davidic Dynasty

Joshua is the ideal prototype of kingship,^{[19](#)} and David is the ideal king apart from his sin with Bathsheba. He is the prototype of the perfectly obedient anointed and therefore the model for all succeeding kings in Jerusalem.^{[20](#)}

A special form of God's grace pertains to his commitment to keep his covenant with the house of David in spite of the disobedience of David's successors. *I AM* is faithful "to maintain a lamp for David."^{[21](#)} *I AM* spares Jerusalem during the reign of evil Jehoram "for the sake of his servant David" (2 Kings 8:19). Nevertheless, David's successors typically prosper in accordance with their obedience to the Mosaic covenant (2 Kings 16:1–4; 21:1–15; 23:31–25:26).

The presence of the Davidic covenant in Judah and its absence in the north explains why the kingship in the north was plagued with instability and violence in contrast to the south. In the northern kingdom, twenty rulers represented nine different dynasties during the approximately 210 years from the division of the northern kingdom in 930 BC until the fall of Samaria in 722–21. Eight were put to death by usurpers, one fell in battle, one died in an accident. In the south there were also twenty kings, but these were all descended from David and spanned a period of 345 years, from 930 to the fall of Jerusalem in 586. The only internally disturbed period in the south occurred at the time of Athaliah. She destroyed "all

the royal family,” with the exception of the young Joash (2 Kings 11:2–3) and threatened to extinguish the lamp of David according to 2 Chron. 21:2–4. Even that flickering flame was almost snuffed out when the servants of Joash slew him (2 Kings 12:20). Amaziah son of Joash had a conspiracy against him, for the servants slew him as well. In a still later period, Amon was also slain; the people put his assassins to death (2 Kings 21:23).

I AM’s immutable promise that David would always have a royal son has the last word in this book; the book concludes with the account of Jehoiachin’s elevation in Babylon, not with the fall of Jerusalem and the blinding of Zedekiah with his last vision of his sons being executed (2 Kings 25:27–30).²² “The last four verses of Kings announce, in a cautious, nuanced way, that a scion of David, king of Israel, is yet alive and well.”²³ The people have reason to hope. This glimmer of hope comports with Israel’s developing postexilic messianic expectations. When the house of David lost Jerusalem and the throne, the anointed king, represented ideally in the preexilic psalms, became an ideal, eschatological figure, “the Messiah.” “The Deuteronomist brings evidence in the first place for a cycle of Messianic conceptions which must have been living in his time.”²⁴

The unconditional Abrahamic covenant will finally prevail for all Israel (2 Kings 13:20–23; 14:23–29).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does the theology of the book of Kings contribute to your understanding of yourself as a citizen in the world and as a citizen of heaven?

[1.](#) For the historical credibility of this book see [chap. 25](#)ⁿ⁵. Moreover, Leila Leah Bronner has shown that these miracles fit their historical milieu: they function as a polemic against Baal worship (see “Miracles” below).

[2.](#) Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Walker and Co., 2002), 7.

[3.](#) In the famous Moabite Stone, Mesha, king of Moab, boasts of his revolt (*ANET*, 320).

[4.](#) See Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Jer. 7:32; 32:35.

[5.](#) Sennacherib boasts he shut up Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage” but does not claim to have captured Jerusalem. See Bruce K. Waltke, “Micah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary; Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 592, 622–33.

[6.](#) Dennis J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972), 131.

[7.](#) Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 11.

[8.](#) See also 1 Kings 11:14, 23; 14:1–18; 17–19; 22:1–38; 2 Kings 1:1–2:18; 4:8–37; 5:1–18; 6:1–7, 27; 10:32–33; 18:17–19:37).

[9.](#) Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 12.

[10.](#) R. De Vaux, “Le lieu que Yahvé a choisi pour y établir son nom,” in *Das Ferne und nahe Wort*, Festschrift L. Rost (BZAW 105; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967), 219–28.

[11.](#) R. J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), 131–60; cf. Samuel Terrien, “*Observations complémentaires*,” *Bib* 55 (1974): 443–46; International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, 9th Congress volume (Göttingen, 1977): Shermayahu Talmon, “The Comparative Method in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems,” *VT*Sup 29 (1978): 348–50; J. Schreiner, *Sion-Jerusalem: Jahwes Königssitz: Theologie der Heiligen Stadt im Alten Testament*

(Munich: Koîsel-Verlag, 1963), 107–12.

[12.](#) Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, 452.

[13.](#) Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), xv.

[14.](#) Leila Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

[15.](#) The discovery of ancient Ugarit was made accidentally by a peasant plowing on the northern Syrian coast. C. F. A. Schaeffer excavated there and at nearby Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) beginning in 1929. Among the many important finds were ivories, weapons, statues, and stelae, as well as two temples; one dedicated to Baal and one to Dagon, his father, dating from the fourteenth century BC. Many inscriptions were found in cuneiform, Egyptian, and Hittite hieroglyphs and also a hitherto unknown cuneiform alphabet, Ugaritic. Scholars have differed in their explanation of the purpose for which these texts were copied and preserved. Most scholars think that the primary purpose of the stories about the gods was to explain the world and how it works.

[16.](#) See also “God’s Immanence” above (pp. 741–43).

[17.](#) Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 12–13.

[18.](#) See Uriel Simon, “Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative,” *JSOT* 46 (February 1990): 11–19.

[19.](#) See G. Widengren, “King and Covenant,” *JSS* 2 (January 1957): 1–32; J. R. Porter, *Moses and Monarchy: A Study in the Biblical Tradition of Moses* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963); “The Succession of Joshua,” in *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies*, ed. J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter (Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 1983), 102–32. See Gerald E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship according to the Deuteronomistic History*, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); David M. Howard Jr., “The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” *Stulos Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 101–15.

[20.](#) 1 Kings 3:3; 5:7; 8:17; 9:4; 11:4, 6, 33, 38; 14:8; 15:3, 5, 11; 2 Kings 14:3; 16:2; 18:3; 21:7; 22:2.

[21.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 7; 1 Kings 2:4; 8:20, 25; 9:5; 11:13, 32; 36:11; 2 Kings 25:27–30.

[22.](#) J. D. Levenson, “The Last Four Verses in Kings,” *JBL* 103 (Spring 1984): 353–61.

[23.](#) *Ibid.*, 361.

[24.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 88.

Chapter 27

THE GIFT OF PROVIDENCE: CHRONICLES AND ESTHER

Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have different effects.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 1.23

PART I: CHRONICLES

I. Introduction

A. Historical Background

The Primary History (Genesis–Kings) spans salvation history from the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1) to the elevation of King Jehoiachin in the Babylonian exile (560 BC) (2 Kings 25:27–30). Jeremiah relates the events in Judah in the aftermath of the exile in 586. The Babylonian commander over Jerusalem redistributed the exiles' vineyards and fields to the poor whom he retained in the land, and he appointed Gedaliah as governor over them (Jer. 39). When Jews from Ammon, Moab, Edom, and other countries heard that Gedaliah had been appointed governor, they returned to the land of Judah.¹ But Ishmael, a man of royal blood who returned with the Jews from Ammon, assassinated Gedaliah and those loyal to him. In response, Johanan and his army fought against Ishmael, but Ishmael escaped back to Ammon. Tragically, Johanan and other apostates, in defiance of Jeremiah's prophecy, fled to Egypt and died there by the sword of the Babylonians (Jer. 40:7–42:13).

Ezra ([chaps. 1–6](#)), Haggai, and Zechariah give an insight into the situation of the Jews who returned from the exile. Instead of the ideal age the returnees might have expected from the salvation oracles of the prophets, they face opposition both without and within. In fact, the Jews are their own worst enemies by their lack of zeal for rebuilding the temple, and as a result they are providentially visited with economic reversals. Many Jews did not return to Jerusalem, and the returnees who laid the foundation of *I AM*'s temple in about 535 BC did not complete it until 515 BC what should have been a four-or five-year construction.

As known from the book of Ezra, which records events from 539 to 430 BC, governors of surrounding provinces within the Persian Empire, such as Ammon and Ashdod, coveted Jerusalem for themselves. Accordingly, they resisted both Israel's attempts to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3:7) and Nehemiah's attempt to

build a defensive wall (Neh. 2:1–10). The bigger threat, however, was the tendency of the Jews to intermarry with these people and lose their purity and identity as the heirs of God’s kingdom (see [chaps. 28](#) and [30](#)). Ezra and Nehemiah (458–430) help reform the nation, purify it of its mixed marriages, and establish it on the Law of Moses, but time and again the Jews lapse into mixed marriages, break Sabbath, and offer *I AM* token worship under a corrupt priesthood.

The reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, like that of Josiah, do not last. Israel falls into spiritual darkness under an escalating corrupt priesthood, which eventually put the Son of God to death.

The period after 425 BC is known as the Intertestament Period.

B. Author, Date, and Purpose

The two books of Chronicles were originally written as one by an anonymous author. The implied author, dubbed “the Chronicler,” interprets Israel’s history from the perspective of the Mosaic covenant and the canonical prophets. He writes his theological history with the authority of a prophet, and the people of God recognize it as God’s Word; hence its inclusion in the canon. The title “1–2 Chronicles” comes from Jerome, translator of the Vulgate in the fourth century AD. But Jerome suggested that “a chronicle of sacred history” would better describe its content.

The Chronicler records Israel’s salvation history sometime after 539/8, since he ends his book with the edict by Cyrus that the Jews return to Jerusalem.² Some date the book to the fourth century in part because of the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3:19–24, which seems to extend to a number of generations after Zerubbabel.³ However, the book’s content best suits the historical context of the early years of the return.⁴ The Chronicler’s concerns are those of Haggai and Zechariah, not those of Ezra and Nehemiah. The two prophets of 520 BC focus on the temple and the House of David, and so does the Chronicler. By contrast, Ezra and Nehemiah concern themselves with mixed marriages, but the Chronicler does not mention even Solomon’s tragic mixed marriages. Perhaps the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3:1–24 has been extended after the book’s composition; scholars detect other later expansions in the book. In any case, the Chronicler writes his history to a struggling nation, facing apathy and apostasy, economic hardships, foreign opposition and domestic conflicts.

The Chronicler aims to write real history — the Hebrew title in early rabbinic tradition is “The Events of the Days.” He relies on many sources. About half of

his book is taken from Samuel and Kings; he also draws on the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Zechariah. He also cites unknown royal annals of both the kings of Israel and Judah and some lost prophetic writings.

He retells Israel's history from David to the edict by Cyrus, but he writes Israel's salvation history from a different viewpoint than that of the Deuteronomist. As the misleading title of his book in the Greek version ("The Things Omitted") suggests, he rhetorically adapts that history to give the nation direction probably during the early postexilic period.⁵ He does so mostly by giving biographies of Israel's kings as exemplars. From his selection, arrangement, and integration of his sources, not by invention of material, it can be inferred that, unlike the Deuteronomist, he does not write his history to accuse the exiles of breaking covenant. Rather, the Chronicler aims to answer burning questions of the returnees: After the dislocations of exile and return, who inherits the covenant promises? After all their misfortune (the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of God's temple, the loss of land) and their still being in subjection to the Persian emperor and their being without a king, is God still with them? Are the old institutions of kingship and temple to be restored? If so, what is their relationship to one another? Heretofore the temple was a royal chapel, but what is its function without a king? And how can they prevent their misfortune from happening again?

C. Structure

The story line of Israel's history between the institution of kingship and its collapse was traced in the last chapter and need not be repeated. Suffice it simply to sketch the books' structure:

- I. Genealogies (1 Chron. 1:1–9:34)
 - A. Adam to Israel (1:1–2)
 - B. Tribes of Israel (2:3–9:1)
 - C. Returnees from Exile (9:1–34)
- II. United Monarchy (1 Chron. 9:35–2 Chron. 9:31)
 - A. Saul (1 Chron. 9:35–10:14)
 - B. David ([chaps. 11–29](#))
 - C. Solomon (2 Chron. 1–9)
- III. Divided Kingdom (2 Chron. 10–28)
- IV. Reunited Kingdom (2 Chron. 29–36)

D. Rhetoric

To mine the Chronicler's theology it is important to pay attention to his additions, omissions, and alterations. Note his expansion to emphasize that *I AM* chose to rule at the temple in Jerusalem, which entails the temple personnel and ritual.

1 Kings 8:16

“Since the day I brought my people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city in any tribe of Israel to have a temple built for my Name to be there, but I have chosen David to rule my people Israel.”

2 Chronicles 6:5–6

“Since the day I brought my people out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city in any tribe of Israel to have a temple built for my Name to be there, nor have I chosen anyone to be the leader over my people Israel. But now I have chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there, and I have chosen David to rule my people Israel.”

By his addition the Chronicler highlights that God elected Jerusalem as his residence and no other city for his worship, and that he chose David as his viceroy. (Later the Samaritans would erect their altar at Mount Gerizim in Samaria.) The people of God are back in God's city with the chosen House of David, which has the *bona fides* of their genealogy (1 Chron. 3). They are once again worshipping at the temple with the House of David because *I AM* chose both, not because of the vagaries of Persian imperial policy.

II. Theological Themes

Richard Pratt discerns forty-seven theological themes in the book of Chronicles.⁶ Here only the most salient are developed.

A. All Israel⁷

1. The returnees are legitimate heirs of Israel's covenants

The Chronicler guided the restored community by assuring them through his

introductory genealogies that they are legitimate descendants of God's election and covenants with Israel. The genealogies validate their claim to be descendants of the patriarchs and Israel's covenants. His concluding genealogy makes his point: "All Israel was listed in the genealogies recorded in the book of the kings of Israel. The people of Judah were taken captive.... Now the first to resettle on their property in their own towns were some Israelites, priests, Levites and temple servants. Those from Judah, from Benjamin, and from Ephraim and Manasseh who lived in Jerusalem were ..." (1 Chron. 9:1–3). Care is taken here by the Chronicler to emphasize that the remnant who returns has members from both the northern and southern tribes.

In the same way, those who today confess the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and believe in their hearts that "God raised him from dead" (Rom. 10:8) certify they are legitimate heirs of the heavenly kingdom. To those who believe in Jesus Christ God gives the right to be called the "children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12–13).

2. "All Israel" are the legitimate heirs of old Israel

The Chronicler commonly speaks of Israel as "all Israel." Several times he copied this terminology from parallel passages in the Deuteronomistic history, and several times he modified the text of Samuel and Kings to read "all Israel" (1 Chron. 11:1; 14:8; 15:3, 28; 29:21–26; 2 Chron. 1:1–3; 10:1–3). In contrast to the Deuteronomist, who represents the men of Israel making a covenant with David seven years after Judah did so (2 Sam. 2:4; 5:3a), the Chronicler omits the chronological distinction and notes simply: "all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and David made a covenant with them" (1 Chron. 11:3 NRSV). The restored community is the remnant of several tribes (1 Chron. 9:2–3).

The writer celebrates the movement of godly people from Israel to Judah for specifically religious reasons. The first are Levites in the time of Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:14), and others follow from Ephraim and Manasseh (15:9). After the Assyrians capture Samaria, many from the North resettle in Judah at good Hezekiah's invitation (2 Chron. 30). The people of Manasseh and Ephraim and the entire remnant of Israel join with "the people of Judah and Benjamin and the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (34:9). In sum, the descendants of all the tribes, not just the southern, further the kingdom of God after the dislocations of the exile and return.

The Chronicler's ideal people of God become a reality in Jesus Christ. But the

church now embraces the world of every tongue and nation who are united under one Lord, share one faith, and have experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit that places them in Christ under one God. The church should “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

3. All Israel will be restored to the kingdom

The Chronicler’s care to give the genealogies of all the tribes, while only six are listed in the returned remnant, suggests that in his view the restoration is incomplete until all the tribes are reunited with the House of David at the temple in Jerusalem. This becomes clear in Hezekiah’s prayer: “If you return to *I AM*, then your brothers and your children will be shown compassion by their captors and will come back to this land, for *I AM* your God is gracious and compassionate” (2 Chron. 30:9).

Later on, Jesus identified his twelve disciples as the replacement of the old twelve tribes when his kingdom is consummated (Matt. 19:28).⁸ Jesus promised, “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (John 6:37) and “I shall lose none of all that he has given me” (v. 39).

B. God⁹

1. Active in Israel’s history

The Chronicler gives direction to the nation by assuring them that God rules history and is active in their midst. In his book, “*I AM* put Saul to death and turned the kingdom over to David” (1 Chron. 10:13–14), and God responds to Solomon’s prayer by choosing the site of the temple (2 Chron. 7:12). Unlike the Deuteronomist who ended his sad history with the nation and its leaders in exile and only with a straw of hope in the exaltation of Jehoiachin above the other kings in exile, the Chronicler ends his narrative on a most positive note. Because *I AM* inspired Cyrus, the Persian king in dramatic irony proclaims the release of Israel from their captivity and orders them to return and to rebuild the temple! (2 Chron. 36:22–23). God is not defeated; Babylon is.

2. His character and purpose unchanging

God is unchanging in his sublime person and in his purpose to establish his

righteous kingdom universally. God's sublime attributes, election of Israel, covenants with Israel, and law endure forever and so give direction to the postexilic community. Since this is so, *I AM*'s people depend on him.

Likewise, Paul teaches the church, "For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). And the writer of Hebrews says, "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath" (Heb. 6:17).

3. I AM's Name at the temple

The Chronicler develops the Deuteronomist's theme that God put his Name in the temple (see [chap. 16](#).IX.B). The transcendent and unapproachable God in his heavenly temple (2 Chron. 6:18) condescends to put his Name in the temple as the way of access to divine power (1 Chron. 16:35), and his Name is the object of his people's praise (1 Chron. 16:8). Pratt explains the significance of God's Name: "the presence of God's Name meant that God's 'eyes' and 'heart' were in the temple (2 Chron. 7:16)."¹⁰ Access to God is available only to those who call on his Name. This belief motivated the postexilic community to reconstruct the temple and restore full worship there.

Today God puts his Name on all who confess Jesus Christ and possess his Holy Spirit. The church is baptized "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

4. God is present with his people to help

God is present "with" his people (1 Chron. 4:10; 2 Chron. 13:12) to "help" them (2 Chron. 32:8). By repeating these familiar truths the Chronicler guided the early postexilic community to depend on God and not lose hope.

In the same way, Christ promised his church, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). He fulfills his promise by giving those in the church the Spirit to empower them (John 14:18; Acts 1:8).

C. Election and Covenants¹¹

God's furtherance of his purposes through Israel can be seen in his several gracious acts of election: of the tribe of Levi to serve before the ark (1 Chron. 15:2), of David to be king over Israel (28:4), of Solomon, David's son, to be

king and to build the temple (28:5–6), of Jerusalem as his city (2 Chron. 6:6), and of the temple for his Name (7:1).

The Chronicler assures the people of their furtherance of the kingdom on account of God's covenants with them. God's covenant with the patriarchs is fulfilled in the blessings that came to David (1 Chron. 16:15–17). Frequently our historian speaks of the "ark of the covenant" (1 Chron. 15:25), which contains the Law of Moses (2 Chron. 5:10; 6:11). Abijah calls the Davidic covenant a "covenant of salt," and the Chronicler explains that God's faithfulness to that covenant preserved Jehoram (2 Chron. 21:7). In the Chronicler's faith, God will keep these covenants with respect to the restored exiles. God's election of them and his covenants with them encourage them to fidelity.

Likewise, Simon Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, assures the church that she is called by God's "own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:1–3) and that she has "the prophetic message more fully confirmed" (1:19 NRSV).

D. King¹²

1. Remnant of David shows his house still exists

If the returnees may have thought that *I AM* negated the Davidic covenant because of his son's great sin that brought the nation to ruin, the Chronicler assures them that God's commitment to David endures. The genealogies give more attention to David's lineage (1 Chron. 2:10–17; 3:1–24) than any other. That lineage is extended as far as possible to assure the exiles that the House of David lives.

The genealogy is picked up in Matthew 1 and terminates forever in Jesus, who is called Messiah (Matt. 1:1–17).

2. God rules through the House of David

I AM's rule is inseparably linked to the rule of the House of David, and the Chronicler wants the returnees not to lose faith in the House of David. For example, the Chronicler shifts the language from "your" (David's) house and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:16) to "my" (God's) house and kingdom (1 Chron. 17:14; cf. "the throne of Israel" versus "his [God's] throne in 1 Kings 10:9; 2 Chron. 9:8). In addition, King Abijah speaks of "the kingdom of *I AM*, which is in the hands of David's descendants" (2 Chron. 13:8). David's permanent dynasty is

presented as a benefit (1 Chron. 17; 2 Chron. 13:5; 21:7), not as a burden (1 Chron. 11; 14:2; 18:14; 22:18; 2 Chron. 2:11; 7:10; 9:8).

The Chronicler's hope for the restoration of David's throne is fulfilled in Christ. Born the son of David, Christ inherits the Davidic covenant (Luke 1:32; Rom. 1:3; Rev. 22:16). He satisfies the condition of obedience placed on David's line to assure his exaltation by God (Phil. 2:8–9; Heb. 5:7–10). Resurrected from the dead, he ascends into heaven and, as the exalted King, takes his throne in heaven (Acts 2:33–35; Eph. 1:20–23; Phil. 2:9; Rev. 3:21). From there he leads his church to victory (Rom. 8:37; Eph. 4:7–13), and he will reign until all his enemies are defeated (1 Cor. 15:24–26).

3. Full restoration entails messianic hope

The Chronicler emphasizes God's gracious act of electing David to be king over Israel and his pledge to David that his house would rule his kingdom forever (1 Chron. 17; 2 Chron. 13:5; 21:7; 23:3). In other words, the full restoration of the kingdom will not take place until David's son sits again upon his throne. Although the postexilic community's hope in Zerubbabel fizzles, God's promises to the House of David will not. This is the basis of Israel's hope in a future Messiah (see 2 Chron. 30 and 32) and that hope is not disappointed.

4. David and Solomon a type of Christ

As the structure above shows, the bulk of the Chronicler's history is devoted to the reigns of David and Solomon, and he idealizes them. Anything in his source material that might tarnish their image is omitted. David is represented as being anointed king over all Israel immediately after the death of Saul, making no mention of the wars between the houses of Saul and David and the questionable murder of Abner. No mention is made of David's sin with Bathsheba and his subsequent difficulties that might diminish his glory, apart from his taking the census. Mention is made of the census to guide Israel to depend on God (see below).

The Chronicler also suppresses the unflattering portraits of Solomon. No mention is made of the king's idolatry and foreign wives. Idealized depictions of Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah are also given. Presumably the Chronicler suppresses in his sources the unflattering portraits of the founders of the Davidic dynasty and their successors because these clash with the image that he is presenting of Israel's glorious heritage. For him, David and Solomon and their

glorious reigns are types of Messiah and his kingdom, which the Chronicler expects will come. His expectation is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who sits today on the throne of David (Acts 2:22–36; see [chap. 20](#)). Christ is the “Most High” (Acts 7:45–50), who will reign until all his enemies are subdued (1 Cor. 15:25; cf. 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

E. Priests and Temple¹³

1. David and Solomon found the temple

In the Chronicler’s theology the restored community is organized around two central institutions: the Davidic throne and the Jerusalem temple. His locating an extended genealogy of Levi at the heart of his genealogies suggests that he regards temple worship as the primary means by which the exiles connect with their past (1 Chron. 6:1–80). David and Solomon are represented as devoted to the temple and its worship. Pratt notes, “Out of twenty-one chapters devoted to David, seventeen concentrate on his preparations for Solomon’s temple (1 Chron. 13–29). In fact, the largest uninterrupted addition the Chronicler made to David’s reign is exclusively concerned with his efforts on behalf of temple worship (1 Chron. 22).”¹⁴ Similarly, Solomon’s principal activity in Chronicles is the construction of the temple (2 Chron. 2:8). In addition to featuring the founding king’s devotion to the temple, the Chronicler also focuses on renovations of the temple by their successors (cf. 2 Chron. 15:8–15; 17:3–6; 24:4–12). The temple was not made to serve the king, but the king was ordained to serve the King of kings in his temple.

Today the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord (Eph. 2:20; cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Cor. 3:10; 1 Peter 2:4–8). The purposes of the temple are also realized in Jesus Christ. He offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sin of his people (Heb. 9:11–18; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2). He, the Great High Priest, ascended into heaven to minister on their behalf in the true sanctuary (Heb. 6:20; 7:26; 8:1), and he will bring all of them into the presence of God (John 14:1–4; 1 Thess. 4:16–17).

2. David and his successors devoted to the temple

The Chronicler holds up as exemplars the righteous kings David, Solomon, Asa (2 Chron. 14:1–2), and Jehoshaphat (17:2–9); Jehoiada the priest, young Joash’s surrogate (23:17); the kings Joash (24:4–14), Hezekiah (29:3–31:21), the repentant Manasseh (33:1–19), and Josiah (34:3–35:18). They give the nation direction by their exemplar devotion to the temple: they devote themselves to its construction; give generous sacrifices and gifts, which *I AM* rewards (1 Chron. 29:2–5; 2 Chron. 1:6; 2:1–5:1; 7:4–5; 24:5, 14; 29:32–35; 31:21; 35:8–9); and purify temple worship and obey the Torah. The Chronicler wants to imply that the efforts of the postexilic community to rebuild and to restore its ritual put them in continuity with David and Solomon, who built the temple, and with the righteous kings who purified it. This is the stuff that furthers the kingdom of God in spite of trouble. The returnees needed the example of these righteous kings to correct them. As will be seen, the books of Haggai ([chap. 1](#)) and Malachi (3:8–12) make clear that the restored community often failed to contribute to the temple and neglected proper worship.

Jesus Christ is also devoted to temple worship (Matt. 4:10; 21:12–13 [John 2:14–15]; Luke 2:4–6; John 4:20–24).

F. Blessing and Judgment¹⁵

1. The standard of the Law of Moses

The Deuteronomist wrote Israel’s history to explain to the exiles that God’s judgment was just; the Chronicler retells the history to fortify those who returned to the Land to avoid divine wrath and to receive blessings. God punishes and rewards according to Israel’s responses to their covenant obligations: each generation faces a decision either to choose God’s way as revealed through the Law and the Prophets or to reject it; their choices are a matter of life and death. God will reward obedience to the Law with success, as David promises Solomon: “May *I AM* give you discretion and understanding when he puts you in command over Israel, so that you keep the law of *I AM* your God. Then you will have success if you are careful to observe the decrees and laws that *I AM* gave Moses for Israel” (1 Chron. 22:12–13).

Jehoshaphat sent Levites through the Land, who took with them the Book of the Law (see [chap. 17](#)). “They went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people” (2 Chron. 17:9). As a result, “Jehoshaphat became more and more powerful” (v. 12). Israel is elected for terrible responsibility: each generation faces the choice of life or death.

With regard to the standard of the Law of Moses, the Chronicler focuses on temple worship. Frequently he takes note that the Levites perform their duties “as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of *I AM*” (1 Chron. 15:15) and often under the auspices of the righteous king (1 Chron. 16:40; 2 Chron. 8:13; 23:18; 24:6). The regulations regarding temple worship came by divine revelation to David and are therefore authoritative: “He [*I AM*] gave [through the spirit of *I AM*] him [David] instruction for ... all the work of serving in the temple of *I AM*” (1 Chron. 28:13). Righteous kings acted in accordance with the Law of Moses and with the ordinances of their father David (2 Chron. 8:12–14). This is so because David’s own innovations were in accordance with the Law of Moses (2 Chron. 23:18). Abijah’s programmatic speech (13:4–12) censures the northern tribe’s abandonment of the temple and establishment of a rival priesthood as the primary form of their rebellion.

The Chronicler is interested in a heartfelt commitment to *I AM*, not in external conformity to Moses and David. Asa illustrates the point: “Although he did not remove the high places from Israel, Asa’s heart was full committed to *I AM* all his life” (2 Chron. 15:17). Conversely, Amaziah “did what was right in the eyes of *I AM*, but not wholeheartedly” (25:2). God examines the human heart and acts accordingly (1 Chron. 28:9; 29:17; 2 Chron. 6:14).

The Chronicler’s implications are clear: each generation must examine their heart. They must choose either to make a heartfelt commitment to *I AM* as known by the inspired words of Moses and prophets or abandon him and despise his word. So also Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12:30 TNIV). Christ does not want nominal Christians — he will spit them out (Rev. 3:15).

2. Standard of the prophets

The Chronicler was steeped in prophetic writings, and these undoubtedly shaped his own convictions (1 Chron. 29:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34; 26:22). The books by Samuel, Nathan, Gad, and lesser-known prophets are lost, but their messages are preserved in the Chronicler’s history. God sent prophets to turn a sinful nation back to the Mosaic standards. Some kings repented at the prophetic rebuke and found blessings (1 Chron. 17:1–15; 2 Chron. 11:1–23; 19:1–11), but those who did not repent suffered (2 Chron. 16:7–10; 18:1–34).

Implicitly, the Chronicler himself is a prophet, calling on his audience to trust the God who inspired his narrative. This God is worthy of Israel’s confidence as he seeks to guide her toward her promised glory.

In the same way, the apostles call the church to persevere in the faith despite discouragement and opposition. The regenerate are saved through persevering to the end in the Christian faith and in Christian living (Heb. 3; 6; 6:11; 10:35–39).

3. Specific blessings and judgments

Blessings and judgments took the form of victories or defeats and setbacks, as illustrated by Asa (2 Chron. 14:8–14; 16:1–6) and Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:1–30; 18:28–34)). They also took the form of increase and decline of progeny. David had many children (1 Chron. 14:3–7), but God killed both Saul and his house (10:4). Reho-bam was blessed with children when he welcomed Levites from the north (2 Chron. 11:8–23), but apostate Jehoram’s children were killed (21:14, 16–17). Divine blessing and judgment also took the shape of prosperity (1 Chron. 18:7–8; 29:23) versus poverty (2 Chron. 12:9; 36:3, 7, 10); celebration (1 Chron. 12:40; 2 Chron. 15:10–15) versus disappointment (1 Chron. 10:10–14; 2 Chron. 33:12–14); and healing and long life (2 Chron. 32:24–26) versus sickness and death (15:13; 23:7).

Today God continues to discipline his church through hardships in order to restore her, so that she will not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:30; Heb. 13:30–31).

G. Humility and Repentance¹⁶

As will be seen (see [chap. 29](#)), the Chronicler’s message is the same as that of the prophets, who delivered oracles of judgment for disobedience to the Law, oracles of salvation for obedience to the Law, and oracles of repentance for sin lest God unleash his wrath. The “blessings and judgments” cited above match the first two kinds of oracles. The Chronicler also teaches humility and repentance in conformity with the repentance oracles.

Righteous kings humble themselves. Hezekiah “repented of the pride of his heart” and was spared *I AM*’s wrath (2 Chron. 32:26). After Manasseh was taken prisoner, had a hook put in his nose, was bound in bronze shackles and taken to Babylon, he “humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors” (33:12 TNIV), and *I AM* restored him to his kingdom. All of these events “are written in the record of the seers” (33:19). Josiah responded from the heart when he heard for the first time the Book of the Law, and he humbled himself (34:14–19).

The humble heart repents when rebuked by a prophet for unfaithfulness. Repentance entails turning away from sin and turning back to God. The

Chronicler's biography of Manasseh puts beyond doubt his doctrine that God has compassion, forgives sins, and answers the prayer of those who turn to him (2 Chron. 6:24, 26; 7:14; 30:9). His portrait of Manasseh clashes with that in Second Kings, which portrays him as the most evil of Judah's kings. Manasseh's infidelity sealed his and Jerusalem's fate (2 Kings 21:13), but the Chronicler records his humbling of himself and his restoration. His portrait of Manasseh serves as an object lesson for the Judahites and the covenant community at large: God is more concerned with repentance and restoration than with retribution.

Echoing this theme, James calls upon saints to humble themselves before the Lord (James 4:10), and Peter similarly exhorts them, "Humble yourselves ... under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

H. Seeking¹⁷

Also a matter of the heart is that of seeking *I AM*. Azariah teaches the doctrine: "If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you" (2 Chron. 15:2). Seeking may focus on "all the commands" (1 Chron. 28:8) or directions from a prophet (2 Chron. 18:6–7), but most frequently the object of seeking is God himself (1 Chron. 10:14; 13:3; 15:13). In these passages, "seeking" expresses loyalty and devotion to God. It is the opposite of forsaking him, as can be learned from Azariah. The Chronicler adds in his recounting of *I AM*'s response to Solomon's dedication of the temple this famous text: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). Chronicles encourages the struggling postexilic community to seek and to serve their compassionate and forgiving God, who awaits their response and hears their prayers.

The book of Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew canon. Its optimistic conclusion is a fitting invitation: "Any of his people among you — may *I AM* their God be with them, and let them go up" (2 Chron. 36:22–23 TNIV).

In the same way, the writer of Hebrews assures the church that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb. 11:6).

PART II: ESTHER

I. Introduction

The story of Esther is set in the reign of Ahasuerus (the biblical name for Xerxes, king of Persia 485–465 BC). The Hebrew version cannot be earlier than the time of the events it narrates, but its precise date is unknown. It can be inferred from 10:1, however, that it was written after the death of Xerxes, and from 9:19 that the feast of Purim had been celebrated for some time, yet before the fall of the Persian Empire to the Greeks in 331 BC. The absence of Greek influence on the vocabulary and language of the author corroborates this conclusion.

The three references to the royal chronicles in the beginning (2:23), center (6:1), and end (10:2) of the scroll and the coda explaining the feast of Purim suggest that the Jewish author, who probably lived in Susa, intended to write real history.¹⁸

The book narrates the life of Esther,¹⁹ a Jewish orphan who is reared by her older cousin, Mordecai. She becomes queen of the Persian Empire and saves the Jews from annihilation at the hands of Haman, the Agagite. Karen Jobes helpfully analyzes the book's plot as a peripety (i.e., an unexpected reversal of circumstances):²⁰

- I. The Jews of Persia Are Threatened (1:1–5:14)
 - A. Life in Persia Is Dangerous (1:1–22)
 - 1. Xerxes Is a Powerful and Dangerous King (1:1–8)
 - 2. Queen Vashti Defies Xerxes (1:9–12)
 - 3. The King and Nobles React to Vashti's Disobedience (1:13–22)
 - B. Esther, Mordecai, and Haman (2:1–3:15)
 - 1. Esther Is Made Queen of Persia (2:1–18)
 - 2. Mordecai Foils an Assassination Attempt (2:19–23)
 - 3. Haman Issues a Decree of Death against the Jews (3:1–15)
 - C. Esther's Defining Moment (4:1–17)

1. Mordecai Mourns Over Haman's Decree (4:1–5)
2. Mordecai Begs Esther to Intercede (4:6–14)
3. Esther Calls a Three-Day Fast (4:15–17)
- D. Esther's Intervention (5:1–14)
 1. Esther Appears Uninvited before the King (5:1–5a)
 2. Esther Prepares a Banquet for the King and Haman (5:5b–7)
 3. Haman Builds a Gallows to Kill Mordecai (5:8–14)
- II. The Reversal of Destiny (6:1–19)
 - A. The Reversal Begins (6:1–14)
 1. The King Has a Sleepless Night (6:1–3)
 2. Haman Seeks the King's Permission to Kill Mordecai Immediately (6:4–9)
 3. Mordecai Is Honored Instead (6:10–14)
 - B. Haman Is Executed (7:1–10)
 1. Esther Prepares a Second Banquet for the King and Haman (7:1–2)
 2. Esther Reveals Her Jewish Identity and Accuses Haman (7:3–7)
 3. The King Orders Haman Executed (7:8–10)
 - C. The Counter-Edict Is Issued (8:1–17)
 1. Esther Introduces Mordecai to the King (8:1)
 2. Mordecai Receives the Signet Ring Previously Worn by Haman (8:2)
 3. Esther Gives Haman's Property to Mordecai (8:3–8)
 4. Mordecai Writes the Counter-Edict (8:9–17)
 - D. The Day of Conflict Arrives (9:1–19)
 1. The Jews Kill Many, Including Haman's Ten Sons (9:1–10)
 2. Esther Asks for a Second Day of Killing in Susa (9:11–19)
- III. Purim Is Established (9:20–32)
 - A. Mordecai Writes to the Jews of Persia (9:20–28)
 - B. Esther Writes to Confirm Mordecai's Letter (9:29–32)
- IV. Epilogue: Mordecai Is Esteemed as a National Hero (10:1–3)

Jobes's analysis conforms with Yehudah Radday's earlier and somewhat "cartoonish" sketch of the peripety:²¹

- A Opening and Background ([chap. 1](#))
- B The King's First Decree ([chaps. 2–3](#))
- C The Clash between Haman and Mordecai ([chaps. 4–5](#))
- X "On That Night, the King Could Not Sleep" (6:1)
- C' Mordecai's Triumph over Haman ([chaps. 6–7](#))

B' The King's Second Decree ([chaps. 8–9](#))

A' Epilogue ([chap. 10](#))

This peripety may be due to the accidents of history or may be intentionally in the mind of the author as he began his work, in order to give his work literary integrity and to drive home the book's message. Michael V. Fox argues that the book of Esther displays “an ordering principle, something which makes sense out of the events.”²²

William Lane Craig recently refined the notion of peripety to that of “carnavalesque.” There are many examples of reversal in this book (see below), and the dominant characteristic of carnivals is their use of reversals to ridicule the status quo. The Jewish orphan replaces the Persian queen, and Mordecai replaces Haman. These reversals turn Ahasuerus and Haman into fools.

II. Theology

Three theological truths must be brought together to understand the author's unstated message.

A. Nominal Covenant People

First, the dispersed Jews in this book are only nominal covenant people. On the one hand, they are the descendants of Abraham and so the heirs of the Abrahamic covenant. Presumably, they also keep the outward observances of the Mosaic law, to judge from Haman's complaints that they “keep themselves separate” and their “customs are different from those of all other people” (3:8 TNIV). When threatened with annihilation, Esther, the book's heroine, calls for a three-day fast, and Mordecai, the book's hero, hints that Providence may be ruling behind their circumstances: “who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (4:14).

On the other hand, Esther, following Mordecai's command, does not reveal “her nationality and family background” (2:10), entailing that, contrary to the Law of Moses, she does not separate herself from pagan practices, unlike Daniel and his three friends. Mordecai refuses the king's command to bow before the pagan magistrate, Haman, presumably out of pride—no other reason is given. By contrast the covenant-keepers Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah show deference to the Persian monarch. In fact, rather than bow, Mordecai risks the fate of all the Jews

and puts the whole burden to save them on Esther. Further, Esther's call for a three-day fast is a long way from calling for prayer to *I AM* to keep his covenant promises. The closest Mordecai comes to expressing any faith in God is his statement to Esther that "relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place ... and who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (4:14). Esther, out of fear, risks her life to preserve herself and her family, not to do the right thing out of faith. When the tables are turned and the Jews get the upper hand, heroine and hero seek to gain revenge on their enemies, not to bring *I AM* honor. The Jews slaughter their enemies at will in an unbridled blood bath without thought of being a light to the nations. It comes as no surprise that the people who do not pray to *I AM* also do not praise him for the unexpected overturn of their circumstances. The Jews celebrate in the feast of Purim their victory, not their God. They compassionately take no plunder from their enemies, but in so doing deprive *I AM*'s temple of much-needed funds that would bring God honor. Indeed, they show no interest in Jerusalem or God's temple, the symbol of his righteous rule. Moreover, the narrator draws his book to conclusion with the Jews holding Mordecai in high esteem, not in praising God. The people never repented of their sins.

In sum, neither Esther nor Mordecai nor the Jews show love for God or for their neighbors, the identifying marks of the true covenant people of God. The book notoriously never even mentions God. In short, these Jews are nominal covenant people: these physical descendants of Abraham keep the outward signs of the covenant, but they do not keep its true intention from the heart.²³

To correct the "secular" tone of the book, the textual tradition that is reflected in the Greek version of Esther incorporates additions at various points to the narrative. In the fourth century AD, Jerome, when making the Latin Vulgate, removed all of the additions and placed them at the end of the book of Esther; they are known as "The Additions to the Book of Esther." In this version, "Mordecai prayed to the Lord, calling to remembrance all the works of the Lord" (13:8). In his prayer (13:9–17) Mordecai justifies his reason not to bow to Haman: "I would have been willing to kiss the soles of Haman's feet, to save Israel! But I did this that I might not set the glory of man above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to any one but to you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride" (13:13–14). He draws his prayer to this conclusion: "Hear my prayer ... that we may live and sing praise to your name, Lord; do not destroy the mouth of those who praise you" (13:16).

Also in the Additions, Esther offers an extended prayer (14:1–19) in which she confesses Israel's past salvation history (v. 5) and present sin (vv. 6–7). At the same time, she presents herself to the Lord as one who keeps covenant from

the heart: “I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised.... I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head.... Your servant has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honored the king’s feast or drunk the wine of the libations” (vv. 16–18).

These religious additions unwittingly underscore, by their contrast to the original book of Esther, that the Jews of Esther’s generation are not the stuff of the spiritual kingdom of God. The additions also demonstrate that the narrator intentionally and rhetorically gaps, not blanks, any reference to God. His lack of prayer, praise, and piety silently drives home his message: these are nominal Jews, not true Israel.

B. Providence

The second theological truth implicit in the book of Esther is that Providence is at work behind the scenes on behalf of these “secular,” self-serving Jews. The timely reversals that lead to the sparing of the Jews are so many and so fortuitous that they must be due to divine design, not chance: (1) Queen Vashti’s fall brings Esther into the king’s palace to replace her (1:1–2:18). (2) Mordecai becomes aware of a plot to kill the king, and when he informs the king of it through Esther, Mordecai’s deed is recorded in the king’s chronicle, but not rewarded. (3) The king’s sleeplessness results in his discovery of Mordecai’s unrewarded service, precisely while Haman is entering the king’s outer court to seek Mordecai’s death for his affront against him. Instead, Haman is on hand to be tapped to name the award to be given to the man with extraordinary honor—an award for which Haman thinks he is the recipient. (4) Haman prepares the pole for Mordecai, but the king impales Haman on it (5:14; 7:9–10 TNIV). (5) When Esther discloses to the king Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews, the king storms out of the room and returns just in time to find Haman falling on the couch, where the queen is reclining, to plead for mercy, and the king thinks he is assaulting his queen (7:8) (6) On the very day the Jews are to be slaughtered, the edict arrives that the Jews are to slaughter their enemies (9:10–17). In sum, the king of Persia thinks he is running the show, but behind the scenes Israel’s hidden God rules.

The covenant-keeping God rules through human folly, such as the foolish pride of Mordecai and the overweening pride of Haman. One seemingly insignificant event leads to another, such as Mordecai’s overhearing of a plot to assassinate the king and a sleepless king learning of that plot at the right time. Through a mysterious and inscrutable Providence, against all odds, the fate of

God's covenant people is reversed.

C. Salvation History and Holy War

The third theological message of the book is that God not only preserves his nominal people of the Diaspora but furthers salvation history through them. The narrator identifies Haman as an Agagite (3:1), almost certainly a reference to Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:20) — not to some unknown person — for a reference to someone else would be irrelevant to his audience.

Connoisseurs of Israel's sacred history recall that the Amalekites attacked Israel after she fled Egypt and that *I AM* would be “at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (Exod. 17:16). Israel must not forget that Amalek fought to keep them from their destiny, but must “blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven” (Deut. 25:19 TNIV). As the first to attack Israel, God's son (Exod. 4:22), after the exodus from Egypt, Amalek represents all the world powers opposed to God's rule (Exod. 17:8–16). With the inauguration of monarchy, Saul was given the responsibility to blot out the memory of Amalek. But Saul failed to execute holy war against the Amalekites by sparing Agag, their king. Saul's failure brought about his downfall (1 Sam. 15). Saul claimed to have killed all the other Amalekites, but he lied (1 Chron. 4:42–43). While Agag was still living, a raiding party of the Amalekites plundered Ziklag. In a surprise counter-raid David killed many Amalekites and recovered the plunder, but four hundred escaped (1 Sam. 30). *I AM*'s holy war against Amalek is still incomplete.

The narrator identifies Mordecai as “a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin” and traces his lineage back probably to his remote ancestor, Kish (Esth. 2:5), a name that again recalls to connoisseurs of Israel's history the Benjaminite, Saul son of Kish (1 Sam. 9:1; 2 Sam. 16:5). These two references to remote ancestors, Agag and Kish, point to a reprise of history. As Saul son of Kish fought against Agag, now Mordecai son of Kish confronts in a deadly struggle Haman the Agagite. In the reprise, however, the Persian king, not apart from Mordecai's involvement, impales Haman on the very pole that Haman intended for Mordecai; later, under the direction of Esther, Mordecai's cousin, the king impales Haman's ten sons on poles (9:14 TNIV). Thus this loose end of sacred history is brought to a satisfactory ending. As Amalek represents the first of God's national adversaries, their termination represents the termination of all God's enemies.

D. Conclusion

The narrator through subtle rhetoric delivers his message to God's covenant people: I AM preserves his covenant people in inscrutable ways even through the darkest hour, and in a carnivalesque way he makes sport of his arrogant enemies until he brings them to utter ruin. Although Esther and Mordecai in dramatic irony do not praise and celebrate *I AM* for their salvation, the true people of God who read their story do. The celebration of Purim reassures the new covenant community that God will spare his ancient covenant people until the first Advent of the Messiah and until his second Advent, at which time all Israel will be joined to the whole family of God, Jew and Gentile together, in praise of the Lord Jesus Christ. God is not dead; Satan is condemned already.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How are the God-breathed books of Chronicles and Esther useful to you with regard to their teachings about All Israel, God, and Providence? How do they rebuke you with regard to blessing and judgment and holy war? How do they correct you with regard to humility and repentance? How do they train you with regard to seeking?

[1.](#) The religious and ethnic identity of the groups in Judah at this time is complex. See Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exiles* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer, Stone and Co., 1989), 179–200.

[2.](#) This chapter leans heavily on Richard L. Pratt Jr., *1 and 2 Chronicles*, Mentor Commentaries (McLean, Va.: Evangelical Press, 1996).

[3.](#) H. G. M. Williamson, in *Israel in the Book of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), suggests the book was written to encourage faithfulness amid the tense repercussions of the Persian suppression of the Tennes revolt in 351–348 BC.

[4.](#) David N. Freedman, “The Chronicler’s Purpose,” *CBQ* 23 (1961): 436–42; J. D. Newsome, “Towards a New Understanding of the Chronicle and His Purposes,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 201–17; Pratt, *1 and 2 Chronicles*.

[5.](#) Pratt, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 13.

[6.](#) Ibid., 14–62.

[7.](#) Ibid., 15–18.

[8.](#) See [chapters 12](#) and [20](#) for other reflections on the identity of the people of God.

[9.](#) Pratt, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 29–31.

[10.](#) Ibid., 30.

[11.](#) Ibid., 32–33.

[12.](#) Ibid., 24–26.

[13.](#) Ibid., 22–33.

[14.](#) Ibid., 25.

[15.](#) Ibid., 32–34.

[16.](#) Ibid., 44.

[17.](#) Ibid., 41–42.

[18.](#) The presence of a large Jewish population in Medo-Persia is confirmed by the discovery of an archive of texts in Nippur (southern Mesopotamia) from the time of Artaxerxes I (465–425 BC) and of Darius II (424–400) that contains mention of about 100 Jews who lived in the city. Some had attained positions of importance and wealth.

[19.](#) The Jewish name is Hadassah (“myrtle”). “Esther” is derived either from the Persian term *stara* (“star”) or from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, the goddess of sex and war. “Mordecai” is probably the Hebrew rendering of a common Babylonian personal name, Mardukaya, probably derived from Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. Some identify a Mardukaya, who was an accountant or minister in the court of Susa in the early reign of Xerxes, with Mordecai.

[20.](#) Karen H. Jobes, *Esther* (NIVAC; Zondervan, 1999). This is a very readable and theologically astute commentary and has a helpful annotated bibliography for further study.

[21.](#) Yehudah T. Radday, “Chiasm in Joshua, Judges and Others,” *LB* 3 (1973): 6–13. It is doubtful that [chapter 1](#) was intended as only an introduction to the story.

[22.](#) Cited by Sandra Beth Berg (*The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* [SBLDS 44; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979], 104) before Fox published his manuscript. See Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[23.](#) No fault is found with Mordecai and Esther for having pagan names (see n. 11). There are numerous examples in the Bible of Israelites having a double name — a Hebrew one and that of a pagan god (Gen. 41:45; Dan. 1:6–7). Daniel’s three friends accepted pagan names but, unlike Esther, refused the diet of pagans, because that entailed breaking the Law.

Chapter 28

THE GIFTS OF RETURN, RESTORATION, AND REFORM: EZRA-NEHEMIAH

This [the Jewish] people is not eminent solely by their antiquity, but is also singular by their duration, which has always continued from their origin till now. For whereas the nations of Greece and of Italy, of Lacedaemon, of Athens and of Rome, and others who came long after, have long since perished, these ever remain.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 9.620

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Story

The Primary History (Genesis–Kings) spans salvation history (i.e., the breaking into the world of God’s kingdom) from the creation of the world (Gen. 1) to the elevation of King Jehoiachin in the Babylonian exile in 560 BC (2 Kings 25:27–30). To continue that history, we turn to the books of Jeremiah¹ and Ezra-Nehemiah. The narrative in Jeremiah provides a helpful background to understand the political and religious situation the exiles faced when they returned to the province of Judah.² In the aftermath of the exile in 586, Nebuzaradan, commander of the Babylonian imperial guard, redistributed to the poor whom he retained in the land of Judah the vineyards and fields of the exiles, and he appointed Gedaliah as governor over them (Jer. 39). When Jews from Ammon, Moab, Edom, and other countries heard that Gedaliah had been appointed governor, they returned to the land of Judah. But Ishmael, a man of royal blood who returned with the Jews from Ammon, assassinated Gedaliah and those loyal to him. In response Johanan and all the army officers and their men “still in the open country” fought against Ishmael, but Ishmael escaped back to Ammon. Tragically, Johanan and other apostates, in defiance of Jeremiah’s prophecy, fled to Egypt and died there by the sword of the Babylonians (Jer. 40:7–42:13).

Archaeological evidence shows that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah relied on accurate traditions, sources, and memory to construct his narrative.³ This book assumes Cyrus, the Mede and Persian, defeated Babylon in 550 BC and laid the foundations of the Persian Empire, which dominated the biblical world for the next two centuries, until the time of Alexander the Great (356–323)⁴ Ezra-Nehemiah spans salvation history from the decree of Cyrus (539/38), which authorized the exiles to return to the land of Judah and rebuild their temple (539/38), to some time after the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes 1 (464–424, Ezra 1:1; Neh. 13:6).⁵

The Persian kings secured the loyalty of cities such as Jerusalem, which held

key positions vis-à-vis international conflict, by authorizing their subjects to return to their native lands and by entitling them to the support of those living in the places of their exile, probably including non-Jews.⁶ In addition, these kings covered the initial cost for the returnees to rebuild their temples and sometimes even patronized their former captives' cults (cf. 2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2–11; 6:3–12; 7:12–26; 1sa. 45).

Of the possibly twenty to one hundred thousand Jews taken into exile, fifty thousand returned under Zerubbabel. If one accepts the low figure of returnees relative to the higher figure of exiles, it can be inferred that some Jews flourished under affliction as they had in Egypt and decided to stay behind in Persia, thus beginning the Diaspora.⁷ The inference may be supported by Ezra and Nehemiah. Though Ezra's family descended from high priests (cf. Ezra 7:1–5), his family presumably did not return, and Nehemiah achieved great fame and fortune in Susa before his return (cf. Neh. 5:14–18). The book of Esther tells us more about the Jews in the Diaspora at this time.

Darius I (522–486 BC) ruled the whole of the ancient Near East from Egypt to the Indus River⁸ and strengthened the foundations of the Persian Empire. The empire consisted mostly of large provinces (satrapies) ruled by satraps (i.e., supergovernors). The satraps were directly accountable to the Persian king. The satrapies were comprised of smaller provinces under governors who reported to the satrap (cf. Ezra 5:3). The former land of Israel was divided up into the provinces of Samaria in the north, Ashdod in the west, Idumea in the south, and Judah — about thirty-five miles (ca. sixty kilometers) north to south and twenty-five miles (ca. forty kilometers) east to west — in the east with Jerusalem as its center. These and neighboring provinces such as Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Arabia formed part of the satrap of Trans-Euphrates.

The satrap was not always in full control of the provinces; the Persian king could appoint or dismiss the governors of these provinces directly. To counter the possibility of revolt by a large satrapy, Darius appointed only close friends as satraps, but since even they could not be trusted, he instituted the post of provincial secretary (cf. Ezra 4:17). This secretary was directly responsible to the king, and in case of a revolt, he sided with the king. As a further measure of control, the king could send a state secretary without warning to visit a satrapy to investigate government matters.

Aramaic was the empire's *lingua franca*, but each of the empire's peoples also retained their own language. Darius unified his empire by a very efficient postal system (cf. Ezra 4:7 et al.). He also developed a threefold system of taxation: (1) the satrap had to pay a certain amount of tax to the king that he collected from

the governors of the smaller provinces. (2) The satrap also had to collect taxes from the governors to pay for his own government. (3) The governor collected taxes from his subjects for his own subsistence and for that of his civil servants. The Judeans also had to pay a temple tax. The combined taxes overburdened the already persecuted Jews (cf. Ezra 9:7, 9; Neh. 5:4; 9:32, 36–37). Gradually the king's court became so luxurious, as in the time of Xerxes and Artaxerxes, that expenditures grew to alarming heights. According to Herodotus, the province of Trans-Euphrates had to pay the royal court 350 talents of gold, a very heavy burden.

The Greeks defeated the Persians on land at Marathon (490 BC) and on sea at Salamis (480). These victories gave the Greek states independence and a free hand to trade in the Mediterranean. The story of Esther, which seems indifferent toward Jerusalem, takes place during the reign of Xerxes (486–65), an arrogant and fickle — some say “flaky”—king, fond of extravagant parties. Occasionally troubles flared up in his harem. This was the beginning of the decay of an empire that had to suffer under unreliable kings for more than a century. The large banquet described in Esther 1 in the third year of Xerxes' reign (483) might have been held to impress the governors and to raise the taxes to support his military adventures against Greece. Esther became his queen in 479 (Est. 2:16), just after his defeat at Salamis. Haman's offer of ten thousand talents of silver to exterminate the Jews scattered throughout the provinces would have been most propitious at this time (Est. 3:9).

Ezra and Nehemiah led their separate returns to Jerusalem under Artaxerxes I (*Longimanus*) (465–424 BC). The whole effort of Artaxerxes was to keep his empire intact. In the years 460–459, the Athenians assisted the Egyptians, led by Inarus, in their revolt against Persia. The Persians diverted the Athenians by bribing the Spartans with gold to attack the Athenians. After the Athenians withdrew to defend themselves against their archenemies, the Egyptians alone were not equal to the task of defeating a new large Persian army under the Persian nobleman Megabyzus, satrap of Transjordan. It was at this time that Artaxerxes sent out Ezra for his religious reform in Judah. Judah was an important buffer state against the Egyptians, and the Persian king needed a strong, loyal city close to the border of Egypt. Shortly after a revolt by Megabyzus in 449 BC,⁹ Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah, who was loyal to him and trusted by him, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

B. The Book

Using sources such as royal letters, as well as the memoirs of Ezra (Ezra 7–10; Neh. 8–10) and Nehemiah (Neh. 1:1–7:73; 11:1–13:31),¹⁰ the implied author of Ezra-Nehemiah integrates them into a unified book.¹¹ By retelling the amazing story of how *I AM* restored Israel as the second Jewish commonwealth, he teaches them sound doctrine, reproves and corrects them by the failures of those who return, and inspires them to every good work by the examples of icons of faith (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). It is a story the church needs to hear but rarely does. He probably wrote during the reign of Darius 11 (424–405 BC) and, at the time of writing, added to the memoirs of the great reformers, Ezra 1–6, which is composed of lists, letters, and so on. In line with the “former prophets” (Judges–Kings), he too is a prophet-historian, knowing the thoughts of *I AM* (Ezra 1), as do the reformers (Ezra 7:27; Neh. 7:5). However, the reformers depend for direction entirely upon studying the Book of the Law and launch out in faith on the basis of its covenant promises. To validate their calling, they depend on prayer and providence (Ezra 7:6, 27; 8:21; Neh. 1:4 et al.), not on the visions of false prophets (Neh. 6:11–14).

II. CONTENT AND STRUCTURE WITH THEOLOGICAL REELECTION

The author divides his history into two sections. Section 1 (Ezra 1:1–Neh. 7:3) is structured around the three great returns under Sheshbazzar and his nephew Zerubbabel¹² (538–530 BC; Ezra 2); Ezra (458; Ezra 7–10) and Nehemiah (445; Neh. 1:1–7:3). Section 2 (Neh. 7:4–13:31) turns to the renewal and reformations of the restored congregation.

A. Section 1: Returns and Restorations (Ezra 1:1–Neh. 7:3)

The three parallel returns, which span nearly a century and are separated by significant chronological gaps, coincide with three salient theological moments of the restoration period. Each return culminates in a different project of reconstruction: building of the temple (Ezra 1–6), basing the community on the Mosaic law (Ezra 7–10), and building the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1–7:3). For each of these, the author employs a common pattern of progression: (1) an initial return under the *divinely* prompted authorization of the Persian crown (“to fulfill the word of *I AM* spoken by Jeremiah” [Ezra 1:1]; “hand of ... God ... on [him]” [Ezra 7:28; Neh. 2:8]); (2) the nearly constant opposition to the reconstruction, and (3) the overcoming of the opposition with the help of God. The author carefully crafts each of the returns by the mention of divine initiative, the use of genealogies, the symbolic use of the number twelve, and the use of typology (e.g., terms like “go up” [Ezra 1:3; cf. Exod. 32:1, 4, 7, 8, 23], the temple building motif, the second exodus motif, and the holy war motif from the preexilic epoch). He does so to proclaim that the postexilic community stands in strict continuity with its preexilic ancestors and is the heir of God’s election and covenants. The first two divisions, or “acts,” have an alternating structure:

A⊃⊃⊃⊃Ezra 1–2: Return under Zerubbabel depicted as a second exodus

⊃⊃⊃⊃B Ezra 3–6: Reconstruction of the temple

A' ⊃ ⊃ ⊃ Ezra 7–8: Return under Ezra depicted as a second exodus
⊃ ⊃ ⊃ B' Ezra 9–10: Reconstruction of the community

1. Return from Exile and Reconstruction of the Temple (Ezra 1–6)

This first act is structured in a chiasmic pattern:¹³

A Hebrew version of Cyrus Edict to rebuild temple (1:1–11)
The Lord moves the heart of Cyrus
B List of returnees (2:1–70)
C Worship altar/temple begun (3:1–13)
D Surrounding enemies conspire to stop building temple (4:1–5a)
X Opposition to building walls documented (4:6–23)
D' Building of temple stops (4:24)
C' Temple building resumes (5:1–2)
B' Demand for list of returnees (cf. vv. 3–4, 10) (5:3–17)
A' Aramaic version of Cyrus Edict, temple rebuilt (6:1–22)
People rejoice that the Lord moved the heart of the “Assyrian king”

a. Hebrew Version of Cyrus Edict to Rebuild Temple (Ezra 1:1–11)

The author straightaway (Ezra 1:1) shows the continuity of the first return to the past by connecting Cyrus's edict to rebuild the temple with the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy that the captivity would last seventy years (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). The seventy years probably refers to the span of time from Jehoiakim's exile (605 BC) to the edict of Cyrus (538; cf. Isa. 41:2; 44:28; 45:1, 13; Jer. 51:1) or, less likely, from the fall of Jerusalem in 587 to the rebuilding of the temple in 516 (Zech. 1:12; 7:5).¹⁴ God does not die in human experience, unlike the other ancient deities, because he fulfills his prophecies. Our author credits Cyrus's decree to *I AM*'s initiative (Ezra 1:1–2).

In the past, *I AM* used the nations to discipline Israel (1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Chron. 21:16; 36:17; Isa. 5:26–30; 7:8–19; 10:5; 45:1–9, esp. v. 7; Hos. 10:10; Amos 6:14), but now in sovereign grace he uses them to restore the nation. Cyrus's

own motivation is political, not theological (cf. Isa. 45:1–4). Nevertheless, all the might of the political world is under the rule of God, who faithfully preserves his people to serve his purposes. God had not forgotten.¹⁵ The theologian who authors Ezra-Nehemiah identifies the God whom Cyrus calls the “God of heaven” with Israel’s God, *I AM* (see chap. 13.IV.C).¹⁶ With regard to the return itself (Ezra 1:5–11), “everyone whose heart God had moved” to return is the twin of sovereign grace; God enables the people to say “amen” to the divine opportunity to return to the place where God is uniquely present. *I AM* is the ultimate motivational force enabling people to keep covenant. There is no redemption without his regeneration.

The depiction that “all their neighbors assisted them” resembles Israel’s first exodus from Egypt (cf. Exod. 3:21— 22; 11:2; 12:35–36). The typology between the two exoduses is further enhanced by the mention of livestock (Ezra 2:66; cf. Exod. 12:38) and of “freewill offerings” that are used for rebuilding the temple (Ezra 2:68; cf. Exod. 12:35; 35:21–29). Isaiah speaks of the return explicitly as a second exodus (cf. Isa. 43:14–21; 48:20–21; 51:10; 52:12), but the prophet also notes discontinuities between them. In this return there is no oppression, no flight, no haste. In other words, Isaiah infers the returnees are only a worshipping community without political autonomy. The notice that “Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem” expresses most clearly the continuity of the returnees with Israel’s past.

b. List of Returnees (Ezra 2:1–70)

The list of transplanted Israelites who return under Zerubbabel — Sheshbazzar is not mentioned — assures the reader that the nascent community does not arrive on the scene from out of the blue but is in fact solidly established by its ancestral roots. The claim of its families to the land is based on impeccable family records and on their ancestral home. They are not cut off from the promise of Canaan to Abraham and are the raw material of Abraham’s posterity from which God will continue salvation history. The list also enables us to trace the fortunes of the postexilic community (cf. Neh. 7:4–73a). The naming of twelve men in Ezra 2:2 (including Nahamani from Neh. 7:7) resonates with Israel’s composition as twelve tribes and suggests a complete restoration of the twelve tribes. The high ratio of “menservants and maidservants” (2:65) — about 17 percent of the total returnees — suggests their benevolent treatment by the Judean masters according to the terms of *I AM*’s covenant with them.

c. Altar Built, Temple Begun (Ezra 3:1–13)

The returnees put the first thing first, namely, the restoration of worship. Altar worship is restored (Ezra 3:1–6) and temple building is begun in the time of Cyrus (3:7–13). Recall that an altar symbolizes claiming the land (see p. 305). Sacrifices begin to be offered on the altar in the seventh month (3:1, 6 — an *inclusio*), the most important month of the liturgical year, and thus an opportune time for embarking on new ventures (Neh. 7:73; 8:2, 14–18; cf. 2 Chron. 5:3; 7:8–10). More specifically, the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths, which commemorates God’s gracious deliverance and protection of their forebears in their exodus from Egypt and journey to the Sworn Land (Lev. 23:42–43), is most appropriate for restored exiles. The writer emphasizes how they conform their worship to the Law of Moses to show both that they revive their past institutions of worship and that they no longer handle the Law lightly. He mentions the people assembling as one person to show their group solidarity; their being united in praise of God is their strength.

The reconstruction of the temple is also begun in the time of Cyrus (Ezra 3:7–4:5). The writer presents deliberate parallels and contrasts to show the continuity and discontinuity between the first and second temples. For example, he says they “bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa,” which is probably an allusion to Solomon’s temple (1 Chron. 22:4; 2 Chron. 2:8). Similarly the masons and carpenters are from Sidon and Tyre (1 Chron. 22:4), and their food and oil are provided in the same way (2 Chron. 2:10). Finally, the work begins in the second month, the same month work began on the first temple (1 Kings 6:1). As in the building of the altar, so in the building of the temple praise (Ezra 3:10–11) is the dominant characteristic: thanksgiving for God’s goodness and mercy (cf. Ps. 106:47; 107:2–3; see pp. 885–87). The writer connects their building of the altar with Moses and their praise with David, again demonstrating the continuity of worship between the returnees and historic Israel. He mentions, however, that the returnees wept aloud at the dedication of the temple, a reminder that the final, joyous consummation of God’s restoration still lies in the future.¹⁷

d. Opposition to Building the Temple (Ezra 4:1–24)

The opposition to reconstructing the temple occurs in three stages: (1) surrounding enemies conspire to stop the building of the temple (4:1–5a); (2)

there is opposition to building the temple; and (3) the building of the temple stops (4:24).¹⁸ Though the enemies of the Jews on the surface came with good intentions (“Let us help you build”), it is clear from the inspired reference to them as “enemies” of those whom God had moved to return and from their known syncretism of the worship of *I AM* with pagan cults (2 Kings 17) that they had an agenda to undermine the restoration of the true worship of *I AM*. The response of Zerubbabel, who, though a grandson of Jehoiachin, is the heir to David’s throne (cf. Matt. 1:12), and of Jeshua, the high priest, and of the heads of the families to their enemies — “You have no part with us” — (Ezra 4:3) shows a profound insight into the nature of the community.¹⁹ God demanded *exclusive* worship. Their wisdom is vindicated, as will be seen in the next section: the enemies oppose the restoration of a pure kingdom. The later reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah and the building of the wall aim to protect the religious and political integrity of the second Jewish commonwealth.

The narrator illuminates the opposition of the temple builders’ enemies by anachronistically appealing to a document from the time of Xerxes and Artaxerxes that stopped the building of a wall around Jerusalem (4:6–24; esp. v. 12). In fact, however, the setback may also be part of the typology between the two temples. Building of the first temple was stopped until the work had later authorization by the prophet Nathan, and building of the second temple is stopped until it is authorized by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. As noted in [chapter 13](#), God’s providential care involves political setbacks, but there is sufficient reason to trust and in that light to learn from failure (see p. 354). In truth, authorization to build the temple—a religious matter—is one thing, but building a defensive wall — a political matter—is quite another. The returnees had royal authorization for building a temple but not for building a wall. Nehemiah corrects this blunder. The tentative nature of Israel’s existence cast them constantly in fresh dependence on God. God’s people, apart from an autonomous political existence and under the sway of foreign powers and in the midst of competing religions, must learn how to be God’s people without despairing.

e. Dedication of the Temple (Ezra 5:1–6:22)

The returnees, however, fail because they become discouraged by their political defeat in rebuilding the temple, and they forget their vision. Between the founding of the altar (ca. 536?) and the building of the temple (520–516 BC), the defeated community turns instead to building their own houses and loses

their vision for building God a house. Haggai and Zechariah lash out against their spiritual apathy and indifference toward the temple in favor of pandering to their selfish interests (see p. 846). The author of Ezra-Nehemiah, however, over a century later overlooks their sin.

Eventually the temple is rebuilt after Darius learns that his predecessor Cyrus had decreed its reconstruction. The momentary setback is but a blip in the process, as shown by the literary completion of the temple after the dischronologized setback in their first attempt to build the wall. In contrast to the preceding chapter, which features the absence of God, these chapters proclaim God's active presence through the prophetic activity of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1–2; 6:14). Inspired and assisted by these prophets, the leaders "set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem." Rebuilding the temple is seen as a rallying point for the community's loyalty to God, a symbol of God's continued presence in their midst, and an institution that links them with preexilic Israel.

The reply of the elders to their enemies and to Darius to justify their rebuilding of the temple is a model of religious and political diplomacy. (1) They use terms the Persian king understands (i.e., "God of heaven," "a great king," instead of Solomon). (2) They remain deferential in tone, indicating that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were instruments of the temple's destruction while Cyrus was the instrument of its construction. (3) They claim loyalty to the king with no evidence of sedition (perhaps this is the reason the author of Ezra-Nehemiah omits a patronymic for Sheshbazzar/Shenazzar) or of the messianic hope placed on Zerubbabel and the house of David by the prophets.²⁰ They explain their defeat by saying, "Our fathers angered the God of heaven," showing that the elders now agree with the preexilic prophets. The crucible of the exile served its purpose for the remnant that returned.

The narrator subtly makes his point that the will of the God of Israel lies behind the machinations of the empire's political struggles. Precisely seventy years after the first temple's destruction in 586 BC, the second temple is ready for worship in the sixth year of Darius (516; Ezra 6:15). The returnees celebrate the dedication with joy (v. 16) because their eye of faith discerns that behind the physical structure their God is with them and for them; their continuity with the past is now assured. Although there is "joy" (Ezra 6:16; 2 Chron. 7) and the priests and Levites are at their posts (Ezra 6:18) as in Solomon's dedication of the first temple, nevertheless, where Solomon offered a thousand bulls, the returnees offer only a hundred (v. 17), showing that the community is a mere remnant of the nation. Still, they are a purified and chastened people, for they recognize the sin that forced those who had worshiped at Solomon's temple into

captivity.

For their sin offering they offer twelve goats, presumably one for each tribe. Atonement that had been neglected during the exile is now made for all Israel. The dedication of the temple is followed by celebrating the Passover (Ezra 6:19–22). Celebrating Passover at this juncture in the narrative is especially appropriate. It is a watershed between the old and new. With the purification of the religious leaders (v. 20) and the community (v. 21) and the reinstitution of the offering and eating of the paschal lamb, the exile is now behind them and a new beginning lies before them. But this is true only of those Israelites who returned from the exile together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors. The restored community is both inclusive, including both the exiles and those that remained in the land, and exclusive, being separated from the vile practices of the Gentiles. The prophet-historian begins and ends this first return with the sovereign grace that sends the exiles back to reclaim their land, worship *I AM* in his sanctuary, and thus continue God's salvation history (1:1; 6:22). The sovereign work of grace that changes the attitude of Gentile kings fills the restored community with joy.

2. Return under Ezra and Reconstruction of Community (Ezra 7–10)

The text now shifts to the return of Ezra (Ezra 7–8), which is depicted as a second exodus, and his reconstruction of the community upon the Law of Moses (Ezra 9–10).

a. Return under Ezra (Ezra 7–8)

The return of Ezra, according to his memoirs, occurred in 458 BC, more than a half century after the dedication of the temple in 516. Ezra represents his return to Jerusalem as a second exodus to worship on the holy mountain and not as an exodus for political freedom from foreign rule.²¹ Here in outline form is a sketch of the content and structure of Ezra's return.²²

A Journey to Jerusalem (7:1–10)

B Commissioning of Ezra by Artaxerxes to found community on Law (7:11–26)

C Praise for commissioning (7:27–28a)

D Leaders gathered for journey (7:28b)
 X Israel reunited: Families who join Ezra in return (8:1–14)
 D' Leaders gathered for journey (8:15–20)
 C' Prayer and fasting for safe journey (8:21–23)
 B' Commissioning of vessel bearers (8:24–30)
 A' Journey to Jerusalem (8:31–36)

The narrative moves essentially from Ezra alone (Ezra 7) to Ezra and the whole company (Ezra 8). This shift foreshadows the cooperative, delegatory, administrative style Ezra will later use with great success in his dealings with the community's problems (Ezra 9–10; Neh. 1–8). Until the pivot (X) Ezra acts alone. The pivot features the descendants of the priests, David (Ezra 8:2–3a), and twelve families (vv. 3b — 14; cf. Ezra 2) in order to proclaim God's grace, which preserved his people during the exile so that a remnant returned. The twelve tribes are now reunited in the Sworn Land. The author's key theological reflection in this account is that even under Gentile rule, Israel still enjoys her covenant relationship with *I AM*: "The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of *I AM* his God was on him.... For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of *I AM*, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." This theological reflection forms an *inclusio* around [chapter 7](#) (see vv. 6, 10, and 28 [a janus to [chap. 8](#)]). The author's narrative about Ezra's journey to Jerusalem (7:1–10) is in fact a summary of the return as recounted in Ezra's memoirs (7:12–26).

The narrator begins by identifying Ezra as a "son of Seraiah," who was the last high priest in Jerusalem before his son Jehozadak was deported to Babylon (1 Chron. 6:14) 120 years earlier. Ezra is not the high priest but descended from that lineage, which the author reconstructs in a chiasmic fashion with Azariah, the first priest in Solomon's temple, at the pivot.²³

A Ezra, reconstitution of Mosaic system
 B Seven priests to destruction of temple
 X Azariah (1 Chron. 6:10)
 B' Seven priests before construction of temple
 A' Aaron, first chief priest

As a descendent of Aaron, Ezra is genealogically qualified for the task of reconstructing the community on the basis of Mosaic law. Unquestionably the restored Israel is a continuation of the old. The return under Zerubbabel resulted in the reconstruction of the temple but not of the house of David — the

messianic hope of Zechariah and Haggai will have to wait until its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Now under Gentile rule the political leadership of Israel passes more and more to the high priest (see n. 19), under governors in the Persian period and under kings in the early Hellenistic and Roman periods.

In the depiction of the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem with temple personnel (Ezra 7:6–10), Ezra’s role as a scribe/teacher [Heb. *sōpēr* “scribe”] is highlighted (cf. Neh. 8:1).²⁴ This reformer “devoted himself” (lit., “he established his heart to seek”) to the Law of *I AM* and to teach in Israel the statutes and judgments of the Mosaic covenant. The flames of revival in all three returns begin with the exiles, not with the Judeans. Those who experienced the trauma of the exile are the seedbed from which the restored community grows. Ezra’s commission to found the community on the Law of Moses is given in the form of a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra (7:11–26), which is fashioned as a chiasm.

- A Mission: Inquire about Judah with reference to Law in your hand (v. 14)
- B Gifts for the temple from Babylon (vv. 15–18)
- C Gifts for the temple provided from royal treasury (vv. 19–20)
- B’ Gifts for the temple from the satrapy (vv. 21–24)
- A’ Mission: Appoint magistrates and justices to rule Judah according to Law (vv. 25–26)²⁵

The royal letter in A and A’ inseparably links temple personnel who teach law with administrators who rule according to the Mosaic law. Ezra is now designated as “a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven” (Ezra 7:12), which is the official Persian designation for “secretary of Jewish affairs.” As such, he is commissioned to go to Jerusalem as the king’s official representative. The rest of the letter shows that the Mosaic law and the reconstruction of Israel’s historic faith is fully authorized within Persian rule. Moreover, the funding for the temple (vv. 14–15) repeats the furnishing of the tabernacle by the Egyptians: part of an exodus motif. Ezra’s appointing of magistrates (v. 25) resonates with Moses’ delegation of authority to lay leaders (Exod. 18:13–27; Deut. 1:15–18).

After quoting the royal letter authorizing his return, Ezra begins his memoirs with praise to God for his commissioning and encourages the leaders (Ezra 8:1–14) whom he had gathered for the journey (7:27–28). Though they are much fewer than the number that originally returned, Ezra’s faith is strengthened by the faith of these family heads, who are responsible for their family’s decision-making process. The number twelve figures prominently in these returns,

probably to represent the functionaries who devote themselves to copying, preserving, publishing, and interpreting the Law of Moses for the people. 25. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 42. twelve tribes of Israel. This list names twelve family heads and the number of men with each of them (vv. 3b–14). Later Ezra sets apart twelve priests and twelve Levites (2 + 10) to transport vessels to the temple (8:24); he also devotes 12 bulls, 96 (8 × 12) rams, 72 (6 × 12) lambs,²⁶ and 12 goats for the sin offering for all Israel (v. 35). After the leaders gather for the journey (vv. 15–20), they camp for three days at a canal that flows toward a river (vv. 31–32), a reprise of the first exodus when Israel camped three days by the Jordan (Josh. 3:2). However, they are not accompanied by the ark. Instead, they pray and fast for a safe journey (Ezra 8:21–23). Ezra entrusts the silver and gold from the royal treasury to the twelve priests and twelve Levites (vv. 24–30), after which they journey to Jerusalem with the “hand of God upon them” to protect them (vv. 31–36).

b. Separation from Mixed Marriages (Ezra 9–10)

“After these things” marks the shift from return to reformation (see Ezra 7:1). Here is Throntveit’s outline sketch of Ezra’s reformation.²⁷

- A Report of the problem of intermarriage (9:1–2)
- B Ezra’s public mourning (9:3–4)
- C Ezra’s prayer (9:5–15)
- X Shecaniah’s confession and request for action (10:1–4)
- C’ Ezra’s exhortation and people’s oath (10:5)
- B’ Ezra’s private mourning (10:6)
- A’ Resolution of the problem of intermarriage (10:7–17) and list of those who had married foreign women (10:18–44)

Units A/A’ show the movement of the passage, and B/B’ show the seriousness of the problem in the reformer’s mind and his pastoral heart (i.e., he makes the community’s problem his own). In unit C Ezra’s prayer, praise, and confession implicitly exhorts the people to put away their mixed marriages, matching the explicit exhortation in unit C’. The implicit exhortation leads to the pivot, X, with the people’s resolution to renew covenant by ridding themselves of foreign wives who threaten the community’s spiritual integrity.

Chronologically this event probably follows the action in Nehemiah 7:73b–8:18 (after the reading of the Law). For at the same time as the foreign wives are

being put away, the wall is rebuilt (see Ezra 9:9). By this literary displacement, the so-called book of Ezra is drawn to a climactic conclusion — the strengthening of the people by dismissing the foreign wives in conformity with the Law protecting the purity of the commonwealth—while the so-called book of Nehemiah peaks positively with a renewing of the covenant.²⁸ Ezra’s public mourning and prayer: a judgment of grace (9:3–10:1a), can be analyzed as follows:²⁹

- A Narrative action (autobiography): Ezra’s mourning (9:3–5)
- B General confession of guilt and punishment (9:6–7)
- C Present evidence of divine mercy (9:8–9)
- X Specific confession (9:10–12)
- C’ Questioned continuance of divine mercy (9:13–14)
- B’ General confession of guilt and punishment (9:15)
- A’ Narrative action (by narrator): Ezra’s mourning: (10:1a)

Ezra’s prayer is pure confession (i.e., it lacks an explicit petition). He rejects an attitude of cheap grace in order to impress upon the community the seriousness of their sin. His statement in 9:7 “we and our kings ... have been subjected to ... humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today” (see also Neh. 9:36–37) implies that the messianic expectation based on the Davidic covenant is not dead. The meager reference to the hoped for king is probably due to the political realities of the time. These reformers carry on their work at the good pleasure of the Persian monarchs in whose administration they serve. Nehemiah refers to Israel’s hardships as coming from Assyrian kings, not Persian, probably not to offend the Persian ruler under whose good pleasure he functions (Neh. 9:32). Ezra’s lament in Ezra 9:8 that *I AM* has been gracious “for a brief moment” reverses preexilic prayers (cf.) and reflects the weak hold the remnant had in the land.³⁰

The reformer’s statement in 9:9 that “we are slaves ... bondage” implies that a greater exodus is needed and that they are living in an extended exile of seventy *weeks* of years as described in Daniel 9:24–27 (see [chap. 19](#).XI). According to N. T. Wright, the Jews in Jesus’ day regarded themselves as still being in Daniel’s seventy weeks and so still in exile.

The Jews of Jesus’ day and the next generation ... beyond all cavil [interpreted Dan. 9:24–27 to mean] that *the “exile” is extended beyond the time of Israel’s actual sojourn in Babylon*. This chimes in exactly with the portrait of the returning exiles under Ezra and Nehemiah: we are slaves,

they say, in our own land, and we are this because of our own sins. What slaves need is, of course, a new exodus, which is what Daniel 9:15–19 implies. And when it comes, it will “finish the transgression ... put an end to sin, and ... atone for iniquity.” (Dan 9:24) ... most of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries believed that the exile was still continuing and that what they needed and longed for was the real return from exile.³¹

In response to the reformer’s pure confession, the community covenants to put away their foreign wives (10:1b–44). Throntveit analyzes their response thus:³²

- A Covenant to “send away” foreign wives (vv. 1b–4)
- B People take oath to “do as had been said” (v. 5)
- C Ezra mourns faithlessness (v. 6)
- D All Israel summoned to Jerusalem in three days (vv. 7–8)
- D’ All Israel gathered to Jerusalem in three days (v. 9)
- C’ Ezra convicts of faithlessness and urges confession (vv. 10–11)
- B’ People confess sin and do as had been said (vv. 12–17)
- A’ Foreign wives are “sent away” (vv. 18–44)

The Old Testament does not condemn exogamous marriages that strengthen the religious community (e.g., Rahab, Ruth, etc.). Rather, it condemns exogamous marriages that threaten the purity of the nation (cf. Deut. 7; Samson’s women, etc.). The latter are in view here (see Ezra 9:1). The cancer of impurity within a community threatens the community’s existence from within as much as enemies and false friends without. These marriages threaten to steal Israel’s heart away from loyalty to *I AM*. According to Malachi many Jews divorced their “Jewish” wives in favor of women from the indigenous population.³³ In this reform to “send away” the foreign wives, Ezra shows his pastoral skill. He knows true reformation will result only from confession arising out of the community itself. Although nothing is said of what happened to these pagan divorcées, who could have embraced *I AM* like Rahab and Ruth, we should assume that they returned to their fathers’ houses and remarried (cf. Gen. 38:11; Ruth 1:8).

3. Return under Nehemiah and Reconstruction of Walls (Neh. 1:1–7:3)

The third return of the first section of Ezra-Nehemiah is taken from

Nehemiah's memoirs. Its key word is the Hebrew *herpâ*, which is glossed in NIV by "disgrace" (Neh. 1:3; 2:17); "insults" (4:4); "reproach" (5:9). Nehemiah's return is developed in three reproaches: (1) reproach of Jerusalem (Neh. 1–2); (2) reproach of the builders and their wall (Neh. 3–4); and (3) reproach of Nehemiah (Neh. 5–6).

a. Reproach of Jerusalem (Neh. 1–2)

The "Reproach of Jerusalem" unit is developed according to the alternating pattern:

- A Report of Jerusalem's reproach by Hanani and Nehemiah's response (1:1b — 2:8)
- B Opposition by Sanballat and Tobiah (2:9–10)
- A' Report of Jerusalem's reproach by Nehemiah to Jerusalem leaders (2:11–18)
- B' Opposition by Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem (2:19–20)

Nehemiah frames the unit with "God of heaven" (Neh. 1:5 and 2:20); "your/his servants" (1:6, 10 and 2:20) and "give success" (1:11 and 2:20). These crucial theological terms are used first in his address to God and then in his address to his opposition. In his view the reproach of Jerusalem is a reproach against God. "Gates burned with fire" (1:3; 2:3, 13, 17) is a key word that connects its episodes. The unit progresses geographically from Susa (2:2–8) through the province of Trans-Euphrates (2:9–10) to Jerusalem (2:11–20).

Hanani's report of Jerusalem's reproach (Neh. 1:1b–2:8) leads Nehemiah to an *encounter with God in faith*. The report about Jerusalem's derelict state (1:1–4) comes to him in the twentieth year, which the scholarly consensus holds to be the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (465–424 BC); if the first is his regnal year, then it may be his nineteenth actual year. The content of the report that "those back in the province are in great trouble" must refer to the situation after Ezra's return in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. Probably, when the Jews attempted to rebuild the wall without royal authorization and their enemies slandered them as seditious, Artaxerxes withdrew his favor from the Judean province (cf. Ezra 4:6–16).

Hanani's report took Nehemiah by surprise, probably because he was unaware that the imperial policy had been reversed. This man of covenant-faith responds to the report in a prayer.³⁴ Within the political framework of living under Gentile

dominion, the people of God depend on God's covenant fidelity and look to him in prayer for success. The pivot isolates both the true source of the problem and the source of hope: Israel fails to keep *I AM's* covenant, but God is faithful to forgive and restore. In his confessions Nehemiah confesses his own involvement in the sin of the people, identifying himself with their condition and situation (cf. Exod. 34:9; Isa. 6:5; Ezra 9; Dan. 9:3–19), even as Jesus later identified himself with the repentant messianic community at his baptism. Nehemiah's sense of God's awesome holiness reveals to him the depth of his own sinfulness.

After Nehemiah's encounter in faith with God, he reports his *encounter with the king in courage* (Neh. 1:11b–2:8). To enable the reader to understand the encounter, he identifies himself as the king's "cupbearer." This is not a menial role as the English gloss suggests. Rather, the royal cupbearer tastes the king's wine (to prevent poisoning), guards the royal chambers, and comforts the king. As such he becomes the most trusted official and enjoys influence with his master. The king's trust in Nehemiah as a person predisposes him to trust Nehemiah to build Jerusalem's walls in the king's interest and not in rebellion against him (see p. 774).

Nevertheless, though a trusted cupbearer, Nehemiah is "very much afraid," for he is about to ask the king to change the imperial policy and allow him to rebuild a city that had earlier been scandalized as rebellious. Again, he prays before making his bold request. From the secular viewpoint Nehemiah's personal integrity and loyalty to the king as his cupbearer reverses the king's suspicions, but from the viewpoint of faith Nehemiah attributes his success to God: "The gracious hand of my God was upon me." Therefore the king granted Nehemiah not only permission to return to Jerusalem, but the necessary provisions for rebuilding its walls. Moreover, the hand of God also inclined the king to send army officers and cavalry with Nehemiah (Neh. 2:9). Nehemiah, unlike Ezra, accepted a military escort (Ezra 8:22). The life of faith expresses itself differently in each life and in differing circumstances. The escort will impress the opposition that indeed the imperial policy had changed.

Upon Nehemiah's return to Judea, he encounters opposition from the governors in Trans-Euphrates (Neh. 2:9–10; see p. 773). This is the first of seven oppositions, introduced by the formula, "When [proper name] heard." Every new initiative by Nehemiah is met by an escalating opposition. (1) Sanballat and Tobiah are greatly displeased by Nehemiah's mission (2:10). (2) Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem mock the decision to rebuild the walls (2:19–20). (3) Sanballat and Tobiah, in the presence of Sanballat's "associates" and the army of Samaria, mock Nehemiah's successful organization of the rebuilding (4:1–3). (4) Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites threaten to

fight when the wall is joined to half its height (4:6–7). (5) Even though their enemies hear that their plot has been frustrated by God, Judah returns to work on the wall armed with swords and trowels (4:15). (6) Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and the rest of the enemies, foiled by Nehemiah’s defense measures (4:9–23), turn to personal attack upon Nehemiah (6:1–9). (7) Finally, all the enemies realize that the wall is completed with divine assistance (6:16).

In a night ride around the broken-down walls—Nehemiah does not yet know friend from foe—Nehemiah *encounters reality* (Neh. 2:11–16). Before involving others he must be fully aware of the complexities of the situation by personal investigation. He thereupon *encounters the people* and with human diplomacy and divine guidance persuades them to rebuild (2:17–18). In response to the opposition’s charge that he is “rebellious against the king” (v. 19) he retorts, “The God of heaven will give us success” and “You have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it” (v. 20). He invests the work of rebuilding with theological significance. This is God’s work. Moreover, his answer also gives insight into why the neighbors oppose the wall. They claim a right to a share in the city, but by building the wall, Nehemiah decisively excludes them. The basic error of the opposition is that they reckon only with political reality, leaving God out of the picture.

b. Reproach of the Wall (Neh. 3–4)

The “Reproach of the Wall” unit follows a concentric pattern.³⁵

- A Wall building: “repaired” (Heb. *h̄zq*) (3:1–32)
- B Opposition: “When [proper name] heard ...” (4:1 [3:33])
- C Reproach: “Jews” (Heb. *y^ehûdîm*), “rubble” (Heb. *he‘āpār*) (4:2–3 [3:34–35])
- D Prayer: “our God” (4:4–5 [3:36–37])
- E Wall half completed (lit., “joined together” [Heb. *qšr* (4:6 [3:38])
- E’ Opposition: “plotted together” (Heb. *qšr* (4:7–8 [4:1–2])
- D’ Prayer: “our God” (4:9 [4:3])
- C’ Effect of reproach upon Jews: “rubble” (Heb. *he‘āpār*), “Jews” (Heb. *y^ehûdîm*) (4:10–14 [4:4–8])
- B’ Opposition: “When our enemies heard” (4:15 [9])
- A’ Wall building and defense: “held” (Heb. *h̄zq*) weapon (4:16–23 [4:10–17])

The key word *ḥzq* (“repaired”) occurs thirty-four times in this reproach scene. A pun on *ḥzq* (“repaired” and “were equipped”/“held”) (4:16, 17, 21) forms an inclusio around the scene. The wordplay effectively ties together the scene’s two descriptions of the wall building: repair and defense.

Eliashib the high priest sets the example for the wall builders listed in Nehemiah 3 (v. 1).³⁶ The list reveals that some builders are priests and others are laypeople; some are identified by family, others by profession; some are from Jerusalem, others from neighboring towns. In other words, the whole fledgling community is involved. In addition to rebuilding the wall, Nehemiah is restoring the community. The wall itself will give them a defense against the temptation to intermarry. The notice that the “nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors” functions as the negative foil.

Nehemiah 4, which narrates the opposition to the builders and their defense of the city, is infused with imagery from ancient Israel’s holy war traditions.³⁷ (1) The enemies band together intending “to fight” against Israel (vv. 7–8). (2) The people call upon God for help before arming themselves (v. 9). (3) The capability of the people to defend themselves is limited (vv. 10, 13). (4) Jewish forces are a drafted militia arranged by family (v. 13). (5) The leader declares holy war (“Our God will fight for us!” [v. 20b]) and summons the people to courage and faithfulness (“Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome” [v. 14]). (6) The Lord frustrates the intentions of the enemies, whose courage fails them (v. 15). (7) Trumpets are employed in the summons to battle (vv. 18–19).

Nehemiah’s prayer for God to avenge the builders (Neh. 4:4–5) has much in common with the so-called “imprecatory psalms” (see p. 878–80). Nehemiah’s narrative about his defense of the wall/city against the opposition of the other governors follows a chiasmic pattern (4:7–23):³⁸

- A Jerusalem threatened with war (vv. 7–9)
- B People fear they will not be able to work (vv. 10–12)
- C Encouragement to nobles, officials, and people (vv. 13–14)
- X God frustrates enemies: sword and trowel defense (vv. 15–18)
- C’ Encouragement to nobles, officials, and people (vv. 19–20)
- B’ People labor at the work (v. 21)
- A’ Jerusalem defended (vv. 22–23)

The outer frame (A/A’) is linked by “Jerusalem,” “guard,” “day,” and “night.” In the pivot (X), God frustrates the enemy’s plot and Nehemiah installs a

practical defense. The builders only stop work when “the stars [come] out,” the usual time to stop work (Deut. 24:15; Matt. 20:8).

C. Reproach of Nehemiah (Neh. 5:1–7:3)

Because Nehemiah is about to narrate how the enemies attack his character (Neh. 6:1–7:13), he provides, as a foil to their calumnies, a dischronologized incident that illustrates his righteous character (5:1–19). In this exemplary incident, the officials had been charging interest from the poor and reducing them to slavery (5:1–5).³⁹ Nehemiah assembles the nobles and officials to rebuke them for their greed and to motivate them to return to the poor their fields. He challenges the nobles to “walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies” (5:9) and sets himself as an example: since he had become governor, he neither exacted interest from the poor nor demanded the food rightfully allotted to the governor.

On the vertical axis, Nehemiah is motivated “out of reverence for God”—that is, he does not forget that those in authority are themselves servants of a superior “Master in heaven.” Such recognition keeps those in power from abusing their positions. On the horizontal axis, he correlatively deals with his subjects charitably “because the demands were heavy on these people” (Neh. 5:18). His rhetoric, backed by his righteous example, carries a moral imperative and persuades the wealthy to cease taking advantage of the poor (5:12–14). His stylized remembrance formula “Remember [me] ... O my God,” used as a conclusion to the episode (v. 19; cf. 13:14, 22, 29, 30), probably functions as a foil against the personal accusations now leveled against him by his enemies (6:1–7:3).

His narrative of the enemies’ reproach against his person follows a chiasmic pattern:⁴⁰

- A Building report, Sanballat and Geshem intrigue (6:1–9)
- B Tobiah’s intrigue (6:10–14)
- X Building report and opposition fears (6:15–16)
- B’ Tobiah’s intrigue (6:17–19)
- A’ Building report, securing the city (7:1–3)

The key word of the unit is *yir’* glossed in NIV by “fear,” “frighten” (Neh. 6:9), “intimidate” (6:13, 14, 19), “were afraid” (6:16), “feared God” (7:2). This word helps identify the three schemes of intimidation vis-à-vis Nehemiah’s three

main supports: the king, God, and community loyalty. His enemies rightly appraised Nehemiah's three sources of strength and so subtly, but forcefully, sought to dismantle them. If they could, the wall would have come crashing down.

Nehemiah's enemies' first scheme is to intimidate and discourage him by charging him with sedition against Artaxerxes (Neh. 6:6–9). They make it appear as though the charge will get back to the king by sending it to Nehemiah in an unsealed letter. This charge is explosive because Nehemiah's success depends on the king's trust in his loyalty. The scheme worked for Rehum and Shimshai with the same king (Ezra 4:8–16). Nehemiah, however, successfully rebuffs them by charging them with making false accusations. He prevails in this psychological war because he remains confident of his position with God and the king.

Their second scheme aims to discredit his loyalty to God (Neh. 6:10–14) through false prophets. For example, Nehemiah's rivals hire Shemaiah to intimidate Nehemiah by a false prophecy urging him to seek asylum in the temple from assassins. If Nehemiah listens, the governor will appear to be seeking asylum because of some sin, calling into question his moral integrity before God (see p. 708).

The enemies replace their bullying approaches against the people in [chapter 4](#) by deceit and innuendo against their leader in [chapter 6](#). Nehemiah, through his acumen to detect intrigues, which comes from his pure spiritual vision, again meets the challenge in a frank and forthright way, but not in kind (e.g., no insincerity, no counterplots; cf. Prov. 26:4–5).

At the pivot of the report about the three attempts to intimidate Nehemiah into taking a false step that will discredit him, Nehemiah inserts a building report (Neh. 6:15–16). Remarkably, the builders complete the wall in only fifty-two days. The opposition to the builders has escalated from Nehemiah's personal enemies to "all the nations." Nevertheless, the completion of the wall makes all the enemies afraid and they end up losing their self-confidence. In this way the builders reverse the tide in the spiritual war. They win because now even their enemies "realized that this work had been done with the help of ... God." In other words, what Nehemiah envisions all along by faith (see 2:8) — and his vision inspires the workers (2:18) — becomes a substantive reality before the enemy's eyes that completely destroys them spiritually.

The third scheme, which transpires at the same time as the other two and so before the completion of the wall, involves his officials. For political and personal reasons, they conspire with the enemy to act as moles to deceive Nehemiah into thinking well of his enemy and giving his enemy ammunition to

intimidate Nehemiah. In spite of these moles, however, he wins the spiritual war, builds the wall, and sets up the doors (Neh. 7:1). The narrative of building the wall concludes with provisioning guards to protect the city at night. Hanani features prominently in the frame of Nehemiah's memoirs (cf. 1:2). This faithful and God-fearing man is chosen because he has the same qualities as Nehemiah: both are men whom the king and God can trust.

B. Section 2: Renewal and Reform (Neh. 7:4–12:44)

Matching the first section of Ezra-Nehemiah, the second also has three salient theological movements (Neh. 7:4–12:44): (1) community renewal (7:4–73a); (2) covenant renewal (7:73b–10:39); and (3) the joyous dedication of the wall (11:1–12:43).

1. Community Renewal (Neh. 7:4–73a)

The long list of returnees (Neh. 7:4–73a), which is already familiar to us from Ezra 2, is now interpreted in the context of community renewal. Whereas in Ezra 2 the list functioned to emphasize the restoration community's continuity with the past and to legitimate their claim to the land, here it serves as a census list that provides the demographic data needed for the relocation of the population to live in rebuilt Jerusalem and for proper tithing (see Neh. 11). It is appropriate that the descendants of the original restored exiles who had experienced God's grace in the second exodus of Ezra 1–6 should now inhabit the holy city.^{[41](#)}

2. Covenant Renewal (Neh. 7:73b–10:39)

Chronologically, the covenant renewal ceremony follows Ezra's reforms (Ezra 9, 10), and not, as here, immediately upon the building of the wall. Ezra's reform of putting away foreign wives and this covenant renewal not to intermarry with foreigners are separated by Nehemiah's return and the building of the wall in order to bring Ezra's return to a thoroughgoing climax in reformation and to bring the covenant renewal into connection with the rebuilt holy city, making the renewal part of the climactic moment in the city's dedication.

The narrative of covenant renewal is presented in three scenes that display the

same alternating pattern:⁴²

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3
A. time reference	7:73b	A' 8:13a	A'' 9:1a
B. assembly	8:1 – 2	B' 8:13b	B'' 9:1b – 2
C. encounter with Law	8:3 – 6	C' 8:13c	C'' 9:3
D. application	8:7 – 8	D' 8:14 – 15	D'' 9:4 – 37
E. response	8:9 – 12	E' 8:16 – 18	E'' 9:38 – 10:39

These chapters can also be analyzed according to the familiar pattern of covenant renewal, resembling the reforms of Asa (2 Chron. 15:1–18), Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29–31), and Josiah (34:29–35:19): proclamation of the law (Neh. 8), confession (Neh. 9), and renewal of commitment to the covenant with general and specific stipulations (Neh. 10).

Through the covenant renewal ceremony, the people obey the law introduced by Ezra. They do so from their hearts within; Ezra does not impose it from a scroll without. Serious attention is paid to the process by which the written word functions authoritatively within the community. Reading is followed by interpretation, by application to the new situation, and by appropriate spiritual responses so that all understand. As to the peoples' response, they are renewed in three ways: first in the joy of the Lord, then with a sense of dependence, and finally with a commitment in connection with repentance. "It is only after the gracious activity of God upon the unregenerate heart that we come to realize our fallen nature and turn back to God in repentance and confession."⁴³

a. Joyous Renewal: Understanding the Law Brings Great Joy (Neh. 7:73b–8:12)

The report begins with providing the setting for reading and understanding. The renewal ceremony (Neh. 7:73b–8:12) begins on the first day of the "seventh month," New Year's Day (Lev. 23:24), the time of new beginnings (see Ezra 3:4). On that day the returnees began their venture back in the land by laying the foundations of the altar. Now that the people and the city are restored, they bring the restoration period to closure by renewing covenant. Remarkably, "all the people" tell Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law. Ezra neither summoned the people to this inaugural presentation nor imposed the Law on them. Rather, it is the people who initiated the renewal. In their encounter with the Law, the people

are united (Neh. 8:3–6; cf. vv. 3, 5 [3x], 6, 9 [2x], 11, 12), eager (from daybreak to noon!), attentive (vv. 3, 7b), enthusiastic (v. 6a), and worshipful (vv. 5b, 6b). Revival is in the air! The Levites and other significant groups take an active role in interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic, the people’s language (8:7–8). Upon understanding the Law, the people begin to weep over their laxity to it (cf. 2 Kings 22:11, 19; 2 Chron. 34:19), but Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites replace their weeping with joy because the New Year’s Day was holy to *I AM*, and they understood the words that were declared to them. This “joy of *I AM*” strengthens them for the soul-searching that lies ahead.

b. Festive Renewal: Doing the Law Brings Great Joy (Neh. 8:13–18)

On the second day, the heads of the families along with priests and Levites gather around Ezra and encounter the Law’s instruction to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. They respond by building booths and living in them — “their joy was very great.”

c. Covenant Renewed (Neh. 9:1–10:39)

On the twenty-fourth day of the month, the people mourn, and having dirt on their head, they become like their dead ancestors who failed (Neh. 9:1). Afterward they rejoice that they understand the Law and obey in celebrating God’s gracious provision in their wilderness pilgrimage. In sobriety they now recite their past failures. The sequence of joy followed by mourning partially follows the liturgy of the seventh month. Throntveit notes that “there the joyous festival inaugurating the New Year was followed by the somber festival of Yom Kippur with its emphasis on repentance and concluded with the festive celebration of Booths.” The Christian liturgy progresses similarly: first the Advent-Epiphany complex, then Lenten season, and finally the joys of Easter.⁴⁴ Today, however, mourning is almost entirely omitted from our worship. Once again they encounter the Law for “a quarter of the day” (i.e., a six hour service!), followed by another six-hour service of confession and worship! The Levites apply the earlier reading to the situation by a sermon prayer of confession having a chiasmic structure:⁴⁵

A Praise (v. 5b)

- B Confession in the form of historical retrospect: God's grace constantly met with Israel's rebellion (vv. 6–31)
- X Petition: "Take away our hardships" (v. 32)
- B' Confession of present sin (vv. 33–35)
- A' Lament: "We are in great distress as slaves to foreign kings" (vv. 36–37)

The reversal from praise to lament has the pastoral effect of preparing the people to make their covenant pledges. The Levites, not Ezra, lead the confession, and in the confession of past sins they identify their assembly as part of the community that includes kings. Though the relationship of the people to God has been restored, God has not yet acted in the definitive way he had promised in his covenants and through his prophets. The messianic hope is not yet realized, but neither has it died. Their petition for deliverance is reduced to one verse! Their confession is real; they are not looking for cheap grace. The Jews now make a binding agreement with self-imposed sanctions to be faithful to the covenant (Neh. 9:38–10:39). But they will fail when Nehemiah returns to Susa (Neh. 13). Their response is narrated following a chiastic pattern in 9:38–10:39:⁴⁶

- A Declaration to make agreement (9:38a)
- B Leaders set their seal on the agreement (9:38b — 10:27)
- Princes (9:38b)
- Levites (9:38b)
- Priests (9:38b)
- X Nehemiah the governor (10:1a)
- Priests listed (10:1b — 8)
- Levites listed (10:9–13)
- Chiefs of people listed (10:14–27)
- B' Rest of people join leaders in agreement (10:28–29a)
- A' Stipulations of the agreement: Law applied to new situation (10:29b — 39)
- Intermarriage (10:30)
- Sabbath keeping (10:31)
- Tithes (10:32–39)

Their specific pledges adopt and expand the original Law of Moses to implement it in their new situation (see pp. 125–28). "Obeying Moses' teaching does not simply mean adhering to its specific content, but perceiving what

Moses would say if he were here now—perceiving what is the appropriate new equivalent to Moses’ injunction.”⁴⁷

3. Joyous Dedication of Holy City (Neh. 11:1–12:43)

This section begins where the Nehemiah memoir regarding the building of the wall had left off (Neh. 7:4). The intercalation of the covenant renewal festival underscores that the inhabitants of the city are holy.

a. Repopulating Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1–12:26)

Jerusalem is now called “the holy city.” The city is settled with a tithed people (Neh. 11:1–24) and the rebuilt temple with appropriate personnel (12:1–26), after which the city is dedicated (12:27–43). The holy city is inhabited by the leaders and by people who either offer themselves as freewill offerings to live there or are chosen to live there by the sacred lot (Prov. 16:33), paralleling the time Joshua divided the land by lot (Josh. 14:2; cf. 1 Sam. 14:41–42; Jonah 1:7). One out of every ten is chosen by the sacred lot to live in the city, making the inhabitants a sacred tithe to *I AM*. Others “volunteered to live” (*nāḏāb*, Hithpael) in Jerusalem. *Nāḏāb* (“offer freewill offerings”) resonates with sacrificial and cultic terminology (cf. 1 Chron. 29:5, 6, 9 [2x], 14, 17 [2x]; Ezra 1:6; 2:68; 3:5): The term also means to volunteer for war (Judg. 5:2, 9) and for other kinds of service (2 Chron. 17:16; Neh. 11:2). Besides those who live in the holy city as symbols of the tithe, these volunteers live as symbols of freewill offerings. The rest of the people of Judah, along with the people of Benjamin, live in the villages with their fields and are sanctified by divisions of the Levites in Judah (Neh. 11:31–36). The lineage of the cultic personnel for the temple service is established through annals (12:1–26).

b. Dedicating Jerusalem (Neh. 12:27–43)

The key word with reference to the dedication (Heb. *h^anukkā*; cf. Ezra 6:17) of the holy city is “joy,” which forms an inclusio around the literary unit (Neh. 12:27, 43 [5x]). The narrative follows a chiastic pattern.⁴⁸

- I Preparations for joyous dedication (vv. 27 - 30)
- II Two companies appointed (v. 31a)

- III One goes to the right upon the wall (vv. 31b - 37)
- A Hoshaiah and half the princes of Judah (v. 32)
- B Seven priests with trumpets (vv. 33 - 35a)
- C Zechariah and eight Levitical instrumentalists (vv. 35b - 36a)
- X Ezra the scribe (v. 36b)
- A' Nehemiah and half the people/officials (vv. 38, 40)
- B' Seven priests with trumpets (v. 41)
- C' Jezrahiah and eight Levitical singers (v. 42)
- III' One goes to the left upon the wall (vv. 38–39)
- II' Two companies meet and stand at the house of God (v. 40)
- I' Performance of joyous dedication (v. 43)

The work of the Levites at the dedication makes the dedication a cultic event (Neh. 12:27). The purification of the Levites, people, gates, and walls makes Jerusalem a holy city (v. 30). Ironically, the assembly gathers on top of the wall that the enemies had derided, saying it would break down if a fox went on it (v. 31; cf. Neh. 4:2b–3). We instinctually feel Nehemiah's joy as he reflects on his night ride around the broken down walls at the beginning. The procession in opposite directions, with vocal music at the front and instrumental music at the rear, is heard as a stereophonic presentation. The reference to Jerusalem as "the city of David" links the city to its glorious past. Sovereign grace begins and ends the restructuring of the second commonwealth: "because God had given them great joy" (Ezra 3:12; 6:16; Neh. 12:43).

C. Section 3: Renewed Reforms upon Nehemiah's Return (Neh. 12:44–13:51)

Section 3 is a coda to Nehemiah's memoirs. Its four scenes of purification are marked off by the refrain "Remember me, O my God" (Neh. 13:14, 22, 29, 30): (1) purification of the temple (12:44–13:3); (2) purification of the Sabbath (13:15–22); (3) purification from mixed marriages with the Ashdodites (13:23–28); and (4) purification of priests and Levites from everything foreign (13:30–31).

The original reforms involved appointment of storeroom stewards to support the temple personnel (Neh. 12:44–47). Moreover, the reading of the Mosaic law at that time showed that the Ammonites must be excluded from the assembly of God's people (13:1–3). Nehemiah's renewed purification of the temple

storerooms and reforms regarding temple personnel are necessary because Eliashib the priest provided Tobiah, an Ammonite and an enemy of Nehemiah (see Neh. 2:10), a large storeroom in the temple courts. The misuse of the storeroom for an impure residence instead of for the storing of grain and other provisions for the Levites is part of an overall failure to provide for the Levites. Nehemiah remedies the problem by purifying the storerooms and restoring the Levites to their posts.

Great attention is paid in Scripture to keeping the Sabbath because it is the sign of Israel's covenant relationship with their holy God (cf. Exod. 31:12–17). To retain their identity, Israel must keep that sign unsullied and exclude all that is foreign.

III. THEOLOGY

The theology of the narrator is the same as that of Ezra and Nehemiah, whose memoirs he incorporates without reservation.

A. God: Sovereign in His Providence

God demonstrates his sovereignty and faithfulness to Israel through prophecy (see below) and through providence (Ezra 1:1). Jeremiah predicted the captivity would last seventy years to provide the land its much needed sabbaths (cf. 2 Chron. 36:21) and to fully punish Israel for their infidelity (cf. Isa. 40:2). God's eye and hand are now providentially on the second Jewish commonwealth to restore his chosen people back in the land as he had prophesied (Ezra 5:5; 7:6; 8:31).

The Persian kings, though they do not know *I AM* personally, refer to Israel's God as "the God of heaven," so that both the Persian kings and the narrator/reformers can refer to *I AM* as "the God of heaven" (Ezra 1:2; Neh. 1:5). The title "God of heaven" is appropriate for *I AM* because he makes the Persian Empire work for the benefit of nominal Israel in the Diaspora and for the elect whom he returns to the land. In dramatic irony the Persian kings unwittingly preserve Israel and the worship of *I AM*. Though *I AM*'s nominal people are scattered abroad, yet, as the book of Esther demonstrates, through amazing providence he preserves those Jews who do not name him. Thus it is to this day and will be until all Israel is saved.

The inspired narrator represents *I AM* as sovereign over the successive Persian kings by an inclusio. *I AM*'s sovereign grace begins the restoration by giving his elect people favor with the Persian king — he moves the heart of Cyrus to issue his edict that reverses the imperial policy (Ezra 1:1). His sovereign grace brings the restoration to closure by empowering the Jews to rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem, the place he chose for his unique presence on earth: "On that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy" (Neh. 12:43). In other words, Israel and their God, *I AM*, outlast Babylon and their god, Marduk.

In delicious dramatic irony, *I AM* moves the uncircumcised Persian king Cyrus to “shepherd” his people in their second exodus to worship him at his temple in Jerusalem, which *I AM* in a very real sense rebuilds (Ezra 1:1–2). Cyrus’s proclamation, “I AM, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem” (1:2), is probably political propaganda, for Isaiah says Cyrus does not know *I AM* (Isa. 45:4), and the Cyrus Cylinder shows he says much the same about Marduk, the god of Babylon. Nevertheless, the pagan king unwittingly fulfills Isaiah’s visions and Jeremiah’s prophecies. He is the Mede, the individual from the north and east (Isa. 13:17; 41:2, 25; 45:13), and is clearly named beforehand as *I AM*’s shepherd (Isa. 44:28–45:13). Jeremiah predicted Israel’s captivity would last seventy years (Ezra 1:1; Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10) and that the accoutrements of the temple would be returned to the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 1:7; Jer. 27:22). Though he does not know *I AM* (Isa. 45:4), Cyrus unwittingly plays a decisive role in preserving God’s eternal and universal kingdom.

Darius ironically commands the enemies of the Jews not to interfere with the rebuilding of *I AM*’s temple, to pay the governor and the elders of the Jews out of the royal treasury, and to provide daily whatever is needed for *I AM*’s temple worship. If anyone changes his edict “a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it” (Ezra 6:11).

Artaxerxes, the Persian king who saw the preservation of the Persian Empire as his mission, ironically sends Ezra, a descendant of Aaron, to restore *I AM*’s congregation to live according to his Law and to punish, even up to death, those who disobey. He too provides for the funding to worship God. But even more ironically he sends his most trusted person, Nehemiah, to build the wall to separate his people from pagan influences within and to protect them from attacks without. Artaxerxes even supplies his cupbearer with the raw materials to build it.

Those who return do so because *I AM* moves their hearts (Ezra 1:5); Ezra succeeds because “the gracious hand of his God [is] on him” (7:9); and Artaxerxes supports the rebuilding enterprise because “I AM put it into the king’s heart to bring honor to the house of *I AM* in Jerusalem” (7:27). No wonder Ezra exclaims, “Praise be to *I AM*, the God of our fathers” (7:27). *I AM* raises up prophets to reprove and encourage the people (5:1–3) and uniquely gifted men to meet the sacred congregation’s needs (8:18). The reformers and the inspired author are well aware that the gracious hand of God is on the fledgling community (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; Neh. 2:8 et al.).

I AM is a great and awesome God who retains fidelity with his chosen people. After chastening his people, as he had promised, he restores them (Ezra 3:11;

7:28; Neh.1:5; 4:14 [8]; 9:32). *I AM* is *ʾaddîq* (“righteous” [Ezra 9:15]) — always doing what is right by his people, in punishing them and finally in saving them. This God is worthy of Israel’s worship: trust in prayer and exaltation in praise. Yet the remnant that returns is no more secure than a tent peg in the ground, is no more prosperous than a serf, and is the recipient of God’s grace for no more than a brief moment (Ezra 9:8). This is so because the returnees again prove unfaithful (Ezra 9; Neh. 9:32–37; 13). Israel must wait for a much greater revival and restoration beyond even these returns, and God has promised it will happen.

B. Identity of Israel

The Israel that returns from the Babylonian exile is an *elected remnant* out of the elect nation in the Diaspora.⁴⁹ Although Cyrus authorizes “anyone of [God’s] people among you” and “of any place” to return, only those “whose heart God had moved” return to build the temple for their worship of *I AM* at Jerusalem (Ezra 1:3–5). The returnees are *true Israel*, the “heirs” of *I AM*’s covenant with Israel. The examples of Ezra and Nehemiah and those who return with them show that though God does not move all of true Israel to return, those who stay behind nevertheless identify themselves with the remnant that returns and with the Sworn Land and not with the lands of foreigners (1:4). In place of the old songs of Zion they now sing:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy. (Ps. 137:4–6)

In several ways the author validates that the restored exiles, not those left in the land of Judah or in the surrounding provinces,⁵⁰ are the “heirs” of Israel’s historic covenants. He documents their lineage from the Jews taken into exile (Ezra 2:3–70; Neh. 7:6–73). Also the returnees bring back, with royal authorization, the sacred temple articles, showing they have political authorization to build the temple. Included in their number are Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, descendants of David, and Levites and priests who can establish

their lineage back to Aaron. Prayer, providence, and *I AM*'s Spirit, who inspires prophets like Haggai and Zechariah and moves the elect to build the kingdom of God, all verify that they are the people of God through whom God continues to establish his kingdom rules in the world. Providence reinforces the continuation of true Israel in their returnees by several types between preexilic and postexilic Israel (cf. Ezra 1:5–11).

Correlatively, the author aims to legitimate the restored community's political form at Jerusalem and its religious expression at the temple. They have the authorization of the Persian kings, and that authorization stands up even when challenged by rival claims (Ezra 4–5). The documented decree of Cyrus refutes adversarial challenges to the political legitimacy of the Jewish state within the Persian Empire (cf. Ezra 4). Similarly, Jesus Christ did not threaten Rome yet made a good confession before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13), and Paul established Christianity as a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire by appealing to his rights as a Roman citizen, including the right to appeal to Caesar (Acts 16:37–38; 22:25–29; 23:27). In other words, while God's people are without an independent political state of their own, they seek to establish their political right to exist as a legitimate religion within whatever political system they find themselves. Moreover, during the times of the Gentiles, they do not seek to reestablish the political autonomy of Israel as a state under a political king. Rather, God's people establish a worshipping community under a Ruler whose kingdom is not of this world.

Israel includes “all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God” (Neh. 10:28; cf. v. 29 [30]) and excludes those who are descendants of the ancestors but refuse to identify with the congregation of returnees (Ezra 10:7–8). To be sure, blood ties usually bind together old Israel, but above all the spiritual commitment to *I AM* unites true Israel.

C. Character of True Israel under Gentile Rule

True Israel, then, has *a heart to worship I AM* on his holy mountain. The Jerusalem temple symbolizes *I AM*'s presence with people and his rule over them. The returning remnant risks their very lives in the dangerous journey from Persia to Jerusalem to rebuild it. Their journey is made more dangerous by the temple's treasures and the silver and gold from the royal treasuries and freewill offerings they carry with them.⁵¹ Upon their arrival they put first things first. Despite their fear of enemies who surround them, they build the altar of worship

and reclaim the land, and they provide extremely generous gifts beyond the tithe to rebuild the temple (Ezra 2:68–69; cf. 2 Cor. 8:11). The account emphasizes the presence of priests, Levites, and other temple ministers (Ezra 1:5; 2:36–58; 3:2, 8; 4:3; 5:2; 8:15–20).

True Israel lives *ex animo* according to the Law of Moses. Ezra founds the second Jewish commonwealth on *I AM*'s legislation. The priests and scribes at the temple now become the authoritative teachers of the Law that stand behind the magistrates and judges (see Ezra 7–8). The people rejoice when they understand it and embrace this rule from their hearts (see Neh. 7:73b–10:39). In addition they respond to the word preached by prophets and prosper (Ezra 6:14). On the one hand, they are a worshiping community because they listen to the Law of Moses (Ezra 3:2, 4; 5:1; 6:14, 18; Neh. 8–10) and to the word of the prophets (Ezra 5:1–2). The biblical exposition of the Law takes place in the context of worship (Neh. 8:2–8). This is an occasion for joy, not sadness.

The reconstructed Israel is both inclusive for all of purified Israel and exclusive from all impure worshipers. Though a remnant, they represent all twelve tribes. The census list (Ezra 1) recalls the census in Moses' day and hints that the people as a whole are entering into possession of the land. The number twelve, resonating with the twelve tribes of Israel, figures prominently. Twelve leaders return with Sheshbazzar (Ezra 2:2), and at the dedication of the temple the remnant offers "twelve male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel" (6:17). Twelve leaders of men join Ezra (8:3–14). Twelve priests and twelve Levites are appointed, and sacrifices are offered in multiples of twelve (8:24, 35). Finally, Ezra models his own return after the exodus of all Israel from Egypt. The opposition to Ezra and Nehemiah both from within and without underscores the author's desire for the purity of the community. Their spirit of discernment enables them to distinguish accurately between pretenders to their congregation and the genuine members (Ezra 4:3–5). They joyfully celebrate Passover with those who have separated themselves from the unclean practices of the Gentiles (6:19–22). To maintain their identity, they must circumspectly keep the Sabbath, the sign of their holy identification with the God of heaven. Tithes must also be paid to those who teach and apply the Law to them, and separation from all foreign (i.e., pagan) influences, such as mixed marriages with unconverted women, must be strictly observed (Neh. 9:2). "People who really wish to belong to Yhwh's community have to choose to associate themselves with the exiles rather than with such other Judahites or the Samaritans or the other ethnic groups."⁵²

In the midst of hostile powers, true Israel by faith continues to worship and to claim their land by building an altar (Ezra 3:3). They engage in holy war to build

the wall that they are authorized to build (Neh. 4). However, they fight only a defensive war when necessary, not a war of aggression for the ethnic cleansing of the land of Judah. On the one hand, they live in the land with unbelieving neighbors, as a purified, holy people (Ezra 6:20; Neh. 9:2). On the other hand, they govern Jerusalem, the city they rebuilt and dedicated to *I AM*, as a holy city, forcefully removing everything foreign (Neh. 12:27–43; 13). John Goldingay notes that Nehemiah does not oppose the foreigners who work on the Sabbath but the leaders who desecrate the city by tolerating Sabbath-day trade in the holy city.⁵³

With regard to the first return, the large proportion of slaves suggests a positive relationship between masters and slaves (Ezra 2) and they assemble as “one man in Jerusalem” (3:1). With regard to the third return, the whole community, from the highest to the lowest, shoulders the work of building the kingdom of God (Neh. 3). The mention of wives and children reveals the family orientation of true Israel (Ezra 10; Neh. 4:14; 5:1; 10:28 [29]; 12:43). After the reforms they pledge to put away their foreign wives (Ezra 10:19). To be sure, on one occasion the “haves” egregiously take advantage of the “have-nots,” but when the well-to-do are reproved by Nehemiah for not fearing God and bringing the reproach of the Gentile enemies, they repent and follow Nehemiah’s example of brotherly love (Neh. 5).

When the temple foundation is laid, without inhibitions the Jews express their true emotions in loud shouting and weeping (Ezra 3:13). They so love the Law of the Lord that they are willing to stand for six hours to hear it, and for another six hours they confess in genuine grief their sins. And they so love Jerusalem that they are willing to give up their fields and offer themselves as a tithe to live there (Neh. 11–12). When they prove themselves faithful in doing God’s work, they are full of praise and joy (Ezra 3:10).

However, the people fail time and again. Although God elects a remnant to return, not all remain zealous for *I AM*. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah must revive the original returnees. By Ezra’s time, many of his generation prove unfaithful, as seen in their intermarriage with the nations around them. The reformers are always reforming (see Neh. 13). Flames of revival, however, periodically ignite them. When they revive, they confess their failures in corporate solidarity (Ezra 9), accept reproof, offer atoning sacrifices (Ezra 6:17), and move on with diligence (Ezra 6:13–15; Neh. 13:1–31). When reproved by Ezra, they repent and humble themselves; when reproved by Nehemiah for abusing their brothers, the leaders repent (Neh. 5). When convicted by the prophets for lethargy, they repent and change their ways. When they lose their vision, they respond to the impassioned preaching and exemplary conduct of the

prophets (Neh. 5:1–2).

The Jews' eyes of faith see the hand of God behind their successes, and their hope for a better future is well founded (Ezra 9). God began the restoration of Israel in 538 BC and brought it to closure in 430 within the walls of what becomes the holy Jerusalem (see Neh. 9:32–37; 11:1). Here they are a worshiping community full of joy (Neh. 12:43). However, the best is yet to come for the people of God.

The author also instructs the community how to survive while under Gentile political control. First, Israel must retain integrity with the Gentile king by being diplomatic and politically astute (Ezra 5:11–16) rather than rebellious (Neh. 6:6–7). They pray for the well-being of the Persian king (Ezra 6:10; cf. 1 Tim. 2:1–2), for God's forgiveness and relief from foreign oppression, and for the restoration of the consummate kingdom (see Ezra 9; Neh. 9).

Second, they retain covenant loyalty to God and pray for his good hand of providence to be upon them in their relationship to the king (Neh. 2:4–5). Third, they gladly accept the funding of the Persian king to rebuild their political and theological community without compromising their religious exclusiveness (Ezra 7:13–24). Fourth, they aim to bring honor to their God before the pagans (Ezra 8:22–23; Neh. 5:6–13). As true Israel they retain their identity by separating themselves from mixed marriages, keeping the covenant sign of Sabbath rest, and paying tithes to their spiritual leaders. “A commitment to identity requires a commitment to the internal maintenance of identity.”⁵⁴ An alien language threatens that identity (Neh. 13:26). In sum, they obey the law of God and the law of the king (Ezra 7:26).

Finally, though reformers suppress Israel's hope for a king lest they appear seditious (cf. Neh. 6:6–7), they subtly hint at true Israel's hopes for a coming king. Sheshbazzar (i.e., Shenazzar) son of Jehoiachin is the first to return, and Zerubbabel, grandson of Jehoiachin (1 Chron. 3:17–19), is the first to be named among the returnees (Ezra 2:2; cf. Hag. 1:1; 2:20–23; Zech. 6:9–13). Ezra in his confession identifies himself with the humiliation of Israel's king (Ezra 9:7; Neh. 9:32, 34).

D. Leaders of Israel

The memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, slaves of *I AM* who hold him in awe (Neh. 1:6, 11), are inspiring icons of the kind of people God uses to revive and reform his people. They embody the best of true Israel. The gifted reformers,

each in his own way, are providentially chosen by God (Ezra 7:6), and their lives are built on the firm foundation of their God-given-faith in *I AM*, who makes his thoughts and ways known through his covenants with Israel, especially the Law of Moses, and who rewards the faithful (Neh. 13:31b).

The covenants of *I AM* to Abraham, Moses, and David direct them, prompt them to leave their comfort zones, and inflame them with a calling to further the irruption of God's will on earth through his chosen people. Ezra studies the Law to be a good interpreter of it (Ezra 7:6, 10, 28). Both reformers obey the Law from their hearts and have faith for restoring the kingdom of God on earth through an imagination that is informed by the Law of Moses.

Nehemiah regards reproach against God's symbolic representations of his temple and his chosen city as reproach against God himself. And such reproaches must be righted (see Neh. 1–7). His passion for God's kingdom, God's glory, and the city God loves motivate him to risk the displeasure of the Persian crown. He leaves his prestigious position in Susa, gives up his right to the governor's remuneration, and entertains royalty out of his own deep pockets to relieve the people of his tax (Neh. 5). Confronted with bullying and/or cunning enemies, Nehemiah answers them forthrightly but not foolishly (Neh. 6).

Ezra and Nehemiah are men of prayer and fasting (Neh. 1:4; Ezra 8:21–23). Both reformers overcome their fears by trust in *I AM*'s providence in connection with earnest prayer for personal protection (Ezra 8:31; Neh. 4:16–20). They find courage both through their eye of faith to see God's providence (Ezra 8:31; 9:13; Neh. 7:5), and in prayer (Ezra 8:21; Neh. 1:11b–2:8). Nehemiah cannot be intimidated by escalating opposition (Neh. 2–6). By faith the people build a sacred temple and a sacred wall in the midst of their enemies.

The reformers are utterly appalled by sin: they abase themselves, confess the people's sins as their own, and humble themselves in fasting and prayer (Ezra 9:6; Neh. 1:8–11). Ezra even tears his cloak and pulls hair from his head and beard (9:3). Ezra and Nehemiah know how to pastor the people gently into a revival that springs from the people themselves, not from their imposition of the Law upon the people; they know how to rejoice and then to weep (Neh. 8–9). They also know how to rap knuckles when covenants are broken (13:25) and take decisive action to rid the community of mixed marriages and of Sabbath breakers (10; 13:6–22).

Ezra and Nehemiah are wise administrators who know how to exploit the political system to further God's kingdom and how to delegate authority to responsible leaders. In sum, the book proclaims that the second Jewish commonwealth is the heir of God's election and covenants, and as such its

purpose is to establish God's rule on earth. It also instructs that community on how to live a life of faith and establish the kingdom of God even when subjected to foreign rule.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does the book of Ezra-Nehemiah instruct you on how to live a life of faith and establish God's kingdom in a hostile, pluralistic society?

1. For the situation in Palestine immediately after the exile, see also 2 Kings 25:22–26.

2. The religious and ethnic identity of the groups in Judah at this time is complex (see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exiles* [Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer, Stone and Co.], 179–200).

3. The famous Cyrus Cylinder and other records certify that what is reported in Ezra 1:2–4 (and 6:3–5) is at least analogous to what Cyrus did in the region of Babylon (cf. Amélie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy,” *JSOT* 25 [1983]: 83–97). E. J. Bickerman (“The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1,” *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, Part 1 [Leiden: Brill, 1976], 72–108) shows that the document in Ezra 1 is a “royal proclamation addressed to the Jews and published by heralds everywhere and in many languages, including Hebrew” (p. 76) and that the text quoted in Ezra 6 is a “memorandum to the royal treasurer, in Aramaic, which was not made public at the time” (p. 76). The Elephantine papyri refer to a Sanballat as “governor of Samaria” in 407 BC (cf. Neh. 2:10). The names of his sons, Delaiah and Shelemiah, may be evidence that Sanballat was at the least a nominal Yahwist (cf. 2 Kings 17). The marriage of his daughter to a member of the high priestly family (Neh. 13:28) further substantiates this impression. In addition, our author's sequence and dates of sixth- and fifth-century imperial rulers closely correspond to extrabiblical sources. Kenneth A. Kitchen (*On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 79) notes, “Among lesser lights, Nehemiah's three foes find good background: Sanballat and family in papyri; Tobiah through his descendants' works; Geshem in contemporary records. With regard to places, Susa has been excavated and Palestine attests a period of developing resettlements (cf. Neh. 11:20–36). Biblical Aramaic and cultural traits such as ‘passports’ (cf. Neh. 2:7) correspond closely with external data.” Cf. Edwin M. Yamauchi, “The Archaeological Background of Ezra” and “The Archaeological

Background of Nehemiah,” *BSac* 137 (1980): 195–211, 291–309; idem, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

4. Herodotus (*Herodotus*, trans. A. D. Godley, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981], bk. 1, 191; 239–40) corroborates the prophesied fate of Babylon in the writing prophets (e.g., Isa. 46–47; Jer. 50–51). The Euphrates River ran through the city, but in times of siege its river gates were shut in order to channel the river through the moat around the city. The Persian king Cyrus, however, diverted the Euphrates upstream for several hours into a swamp. Unaware of his action, the drunken ruler of Babylon left the river gates open, and Cyrus entered the city through them without significant resistance (see Isa. 44:26b – 45:13, esp. 45:1; Dan. 5).

5. The kings of Persia at this time are Cyrus (550–530), Cambyses (530–522) and brief usurpers (522), Darius I (522–486), Xerxes (“Ahasuerus,” 486–465), Artaxerxes I (465–424), and Darius II (424–405). Eric Meyers (“The Persian Period and the Judean Restoration,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr. et al. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 509–21) helpfully interfaces the postexilic biblical literature with Persian history.

6. Bickerman, “Edict of Cyrus,” 72–108 (esp. 86–91).

7. Cf. Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless*, 32: 49,697 return with Zerubbabel, 1,758 with Ezra, and an unknown number with Nehemiah.

8. Xerxes inherited this kingdom (cf. Est. 1:1).

9. Megabyzus later became loyal again and was pardoned by Artaxerxes.

10. Since the opening of Ezra-Nehemiah, Ezra 1:1–3a is virtually identical with the last two verses of 2 Chronicles to dovetail the narratives of these two books, some argue the same person — Ezra according to Jewish tradition — authored both Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Yet differences between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah suggest that different people wrote them. Some interpreters even propose that the Chronicler wrote as early as when Zerubbabel reconstructed the temple (ca. 520–515 BC). The book of Chronicles traces Israel’s history from the creation of the world to Cyrus’s decree to restore Jews to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple (538 BC). The Deuteronomist, who composed his work about 560 BC, uses Israel’s history to defend the Chronicler’s evaluative viewpoint to the bitter exiles that *I AM* did not fail to keep covenant; Israel failed. The Chronicler develops that history to encourage the discouraged returnees with the vision of their glorious past, which gives hope that *I AM* will continue to keep his covenant promises to them and guide them to the full restoration of that promise.

11. I lean most heavily in this chapter on M. A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*

(Louisville: John Knox, 1992).

[12.](#) Sheshbazzar was “prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8) and “governor” (5:14). If he is associated with Shenazzar in 1 Chron. 3:18, he is the last son of Jehoiachin, and Zerubbabel is his nephew, a member of the same royal blood. James C. VanderKam (*From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004], 6–10) argues with erudition that Sheshbazzar laid the lowest foundation of the temple and that Zerubbabel laid its upper foundation and completed the temple. He also holds that the list in Ezra pertains to a later, undated return under Zerubbabel. Sheshbazzar is consistently reproduced as *sanabassaros* in the early Greek sources (1 Esd. 3:8, 11; 6:17, 19).

[13.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 21.

[14.](#) Cyrus captured Babylon in October 539 and issued the edict to return in March 538. The trip would take about four months (cf. Ezra 7:8–9).

[15.](#) Ezra 1:2–4 gives the Hebrew expression of proclamation for people; 6:3–5 gives the Aramaic form in the archives to authenticate the proclamation.

[16.](#) Of 22 occurrences of this title for God, 17 occur in Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel.

[17.](#) Cf. Neh. 12:43, where great rejoicing occurs at the dedication of the wall.

[18.](#) Note the repetitive resumption of 4:4–5. The function of a summary notation of this sort is to “recapitulate the contents, and thus also delineate the extent of a preceding textual unit” (Shermaryahu Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” *IDBSup* [New York: Abingdon, 1976]: 317–28, esp. 322). H. G. Williamson (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, WBC [Waco: Word, 1985], 44) notes: “4:4–5 will be the narrator’s way of explaining that 3:1–6 refers to an altar dedication in the reign of Cyrus, that for fear of the peoples of the land no building was undertaken at that time, and that 3:7–4:3 describes the start of the work in the time of Darius.” It also establishes 3:1–4:5 as a textual unit.

[19.](#) The reference to the high priest and the elders taking quasi-political leadership begins the escalating role of the high priest and elders in the political leadership during the Persian and especially during the Hellenistic periods. Victor Tcherikover (*Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* [New York: Atheneum, 1970], 58–59) maintains that “the historic process of the transfer of the traditional authority from the king to the High Priest, which began in the time of Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel of royal descent, and of Joshua ben Jehozadak the High Priest, ... ended with the decisive victory of the High Priest.” In truth, however, the king plays no role in political affairs after Zerubbabel, and though the chief priest is generally presented as the prince of the Jews, he never appears in public acts before the Maccabean period. A decree of Antiochus III (223–187 BC) speaks of his meeting with the senate (*gerousias*) of the Jews (Josephus,

Antiquities, 12.3.4). Coins minted during the Hasmonean era refer to the high priest and the “congregation” (*ḥbr*) of the Jews. According to E. Shürer (*The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 175 B.C. – A.D. 135*, rev. and ed. G. Vermes and F. Millar with M. Black [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973], 1:211), *ḥbr* “is the *gerousia* of the Jewish nation known from later documents as the Sanhedrin.” But VanderKam (*From Joshua to Caiaphas*, 308) is not so sure about this meaning of *ḥbr*.

[20.](#) Sara Japhet, “Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Nehemiah,” *ZAW* 94 (1982): 94–96.

[21.](#) Klaus Koch, “Ezra and the Origins of Judaism,” *JSS* 19 (1974): 184–89.

[22.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 38.

[23.](#) *Ibid.*, 41. For a refutation of the view that Ezra was a high priest, see VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas*, 45–49.

[24.](#) In preexilic Israel scribes are official secretaries and key figures in both religious and civil administration. They also function as diplomats. In postexilic Israel they are temple functionaries who devote themselves to copying, preserving, publishing, and interpreting the Law of Moses for the people.

[25.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 42.

[26.](#) 1 Esd. 8:26, not 77 of MT.

[27.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 49. The scene’s parts are marked off by verbs of movement — “sat” (v. 3), “rose/fall” (v. 5), *etc.*

[28.](#) “Unfaithfulness” (Heb. *macal*), a key word of this unit (9:2, 4; 10:2, 6, 10), is “normally reserved for serious sin against God, often associated with idolatry, and carrying with it extreme penalties” (e.g., Ezek. 14:13; 15:7). See J. Gordon McConville, *I and II Chronicles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 17.

[29.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 52.

[30.](#) NIV glosses Heb. *yāṭēd* (lit., “tent peg”) by “firm place,” but the figure may in fact connote that the returnees’ hold on the land is no greater than that of a tent peg.

[31.](#) N. T. Wright, “In Grateful Dialogue: A Response,” in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. C. C. Newman (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 257–58; *ibid.*, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 269.

[32.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 52.

[33.](#) Paul gives a different solution for the church in 1 Cor. 7.

[34.](#) From Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 64: A Invocation, “O I AM” (Neh. 1:5–

6a) B Confession: Israel's sin (Neh. 1:6b – 7) C An appeal to God's covenant promise to restore from exile a repentant Israel (Neh. 1:8–9; see Deut. 30:15; Isa. 11:12; Jer 23:3; 31:8–10; Ezek. 20:34, 41; 36:24; Mic. 2:12) B' Confession: God redeemed Israel (Neh. 1:10) A' *I AM*" (Neh. 1:11a)

[35.](#) Ibid., 75.

[36.](#) The list of builders and building activity derives from a different source. (1) "I" style is replaced by "they"; (2) "set its doors" (vv. 3, 6 et al.) is at odds with "Up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates" (6:1); (3) vocabulary (e.g., "nobles" [Heb. *'addîrîm*]) differs from memoirs (Heb. *hōrîm*, 2:16; 5:7; 6:17; 7:5; 13:17); and (4) Nehemiah refers to leaders of builders as "their lords" (3:5, NIV note).

[37.](#) U. Kellermann, *Nehemia: Quellen, Ueberlieferung und Geschichte* (Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 102; Berlin: Topelmann, 1967), 18.

[38.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 80.

[39.](#) The exemplary incident comes from a distinct document. (1) The extended length of time (Neh. 5:14) does not match the fifty-two days of building the wall (6:15); (2) the crisis does not involve the work on the wall, but a famine (v. 3). Originally it may have followed [chap. 13](#), for it has the same pattern as his reform of space (13:9) and of holy time (vv. 15–22) and his reform of the breakdown of the holy congregation through intermarriage (vv. 23–29).

[40.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 83.

[41.](#) A. H. J. Gunneweg ("Zur Interpretation der Bücher Ezra-Nehemiah," Congress Vol., Vienna, 1980: VTSup 18 [1968], 156) thinks these are the names written in the Book of Life (Mal. 3:16–18).

[42.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 95.

[43.](#) Ibid., 110.

[44.](#) Ibid., 101.

[45.](#) Ibid., 102.

[46.](#) Ibid., 109.

[47.](#) John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 739.

[48.](#) Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 114–15.

[49.](#) Ezra-Nehemiah refers to the Second Temple community as "Israel," a historical-theological term (Ezra 7:7, 10, 11, 28; Neh. 9:1–2) and as *yehûdîm* ("Judahites" = "Jews"), a political and religious term.

[50.](#) Cf. Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:1–3 [3:33–35], 7–8 [1–2]; 6:1–19.

[51.](#) In spite of the danger of carrying gold with him, Ezra, a priest, refuses to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect them from enemies on the road

(Ezra 8:22). Nehemiah, by contrast, takes soldiers and horses to establish his authority as governor.

[52.](#) Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, 742.

[53.](#) Ibid., 747.

[54.](#) Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 198.

Part Three

OTHER WRITINGS

Chapter 29

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY, PART 1: THE PROPHETS

The prophecies, the very miracles and proofs of our religion, are not of such a nature that they can be said to be absolutely convincing. But they are also of such a kind that it cannot be said that it is unreasonable to believe them. Thus there is both evidence and obscurity to enlighten some and confuse others.

We understand nothing of the works of God, if we do not take as a principle that he has willed to blind some, and enlighten others.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 8.564, 566

I. INTRODUCTION

Through the prophets the invisible God becomes audible. Without their voice a biblical theology is impossible (see [chap. 2](#)). Their luminous words bring the kingdom of God to earth by penetrating the human heart. The prophets interpret Israel's history, explaining its failures as due to her covenant infidelity and her sure destiny as due to God's covenant fidelity (see [chap. 19](#)). Israel's destiny to save the nations is not just the end of the journey; it is the point of the journey.

A. Terms

The English term *prophecy* derives from the Greek verb *prophēmi* ("to say before or beforehand"). Prior to Samuel a person who delivered oracles from God is called a *rōʾeh* ("seer"), or he is said to *hāzā* both terms designating him or her as clairvoyant and an observer of the divine realm (1 Sam. 9:9).¹ Balaam, a pagan seer, describes his experience: "Who hears what God says, and knows the thought of the Most High, who sees [*hāzā*] the visions of Shadday, who faints but has his eyes uncovered" (Num. 24:16–17, translation mine). The English term "prophet" glosses the Hebrew term *nābîʾ*, which is rendered *prophētēs* ("one who speaks for a god and interprets his will to man") in LXX. A *nābîʾ* designates a person called and designated by God to be his spokesperson (2 Kings 9:1; 2 Chron. 12:5; Jer. 1:5). In other words, a prophet is God's human mouth.

God uses the term *nābîʾ* to designate the relationship between Moses, who is the source of revelation, and Aaron, who is Moses' mouth. *I AM* said to Moses that Aaron "shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him" (Exod. 4:16 NRSV). Later *I AM* re-expresses the idea, using "your prophet" instead of "your mouth": "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet [*nābîʾ*]" (Exod. 7:1). Amos expresses the same thought: "Surely the Sovereign *I AM* does nothing without revealing his plan to his slaves, the prophets.... The Sovereign *I AM* has spoken—who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8 translation mine). In sum, according to Herbert Huffmon: "A prophet of the Lord is a person who through nontechnical means (e.g., with

extispicy, heptoscopy, divination by child sacrifice, omens and signs, sorcery, spiritism) receives through dreams, visions and/or auditions a message from God for transmission to a third party (cf. Deut. 18:9–14).”²

The prophet wears several titles. “Man of God” denotes the prophet as pious, devoted, godly (Deut. 33:1; 1 Sam. 9:6; 2 Kings 8:11); “watchman,” as one who announces impending doom or blessing (Isa. 21:11; Hos. 9:8); “slave/servant of *I AM*,” as one with a mission from God, not of his or her own making (2 Kings 21:10; 24:2; Jer. 25:4; 26:5; Amos 3:7). “Messenger” (Heb. *mal'ak* = Gk. *angelos*) represents the prophet as a plenipotentiary from *I AM* in heaven to a person on earth (Isa. 42:19; Mal. 3:1). The prophet functions like an “angel” (also Heb. *mal'ak*); both angels and prophets are emissaries to take God’s message to mortals, but prophets, unlike angels, are themselves mortals. Isaiah, however, in a vision finds himself in the heavenly court in the midst of seraphim and offers to be God’s emissary to Jerusalem in their place (Isa. 6:1–8; see below).

B. Social Status

Some prophets are professional prophets; others, like Amos, are not: “I am no *nābî* nor the son of a *nābî* I am a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores” (Amos 7:14 translation mine). Professional prophets are counted among the ruling social class, along with kings, princes, priests, and wise men (Isa. 3:2–3; 28:7; Mic. 3:11; Jer. 2:26; 4:9; 6:13; 8:1; Ezek. 13:9). Correlatively, some are attached to the royal court (2 Sam. 7:1–17; 12:1–15; 1 Kings 1:8, 10–11, 22, 32; 2 Sam. 24:11, 18), just as diviners and “wise men” are present at oriental courts (Gen. 41:8; Isa. 19:3, 11–12; Dan. 1:20; 2:2). Sometimes they are consulted about the future and the outcome of a public or private enterprise (1 Sam. 28:6; 2 Sam. 7:1–7; 1 Kings 14:1–16; 22:5–28; 2 Kings 6:21–22; 8:7–15; 22:14–20; Isa. 38:1–4; Ezek. 14:3–10). Other times they intervene, without having been asked, at God’s order (2 Sam. 12:1–15; 24:11–14, 18–19; 1 Kings 11:29–39; 13:1–3; 16:1–4). Many of their prophecies are not known because their books are lost (2 Chron. 9:29). Attached as they are to the affluent royal court, they can be tempted to tell the king what he wants to hear—for a fee, of course.

As Israel falls into moral abyss, God’s four divinely appointed institutions to establish his kingdom — the king with military and political power, the priest with God’s catechism, the prophet with his word, and the sage with his counsel — fall prey to greed and lead the people astray. In fact, they array themselves against the true prophets who champion Israel’s covenant ideals (Jer. 18:18).

Some are “false prophets,” or better, “lying prophets.” *I AM* inspires them with deceptive visions as part of his judgment upon the nation, in order to seduce the unrepentant nation into a false security (see below). After they have seduced the nation, *I AM* takes away their prescience:

Night will come over you, without visions,
and darkness, without divination.

The sun will set for the prophets,
and the day will go dark for them.

They will all cover their faces
because there is no answer from God. (Mic. 3:6–7)

C. Historical Background

All peoples of the ancient Near East have known diviners, seers, or sorcerers who claim to penetrate the divine realm and to forecast the future (see Deut. 18:9–13; 1 Kings 18:19, 25, 40). But none rival *I AM*’s prophets for their direct auditions, specific prophecies, comprehensive plan, and moral imperative. In his excellent treatise on prophecy, Paul van Imschoot, a Roman Catholic theologian, writes,

Their prophecies are so comprehensive and yet specific that they put pagan prophets to shame (Isa. 41:21–29). Their remarkable specificity and fulfillment, and when taken as a series, their magnificent, comprehensive grasp of history, is gloriously incomparable to any other literature. In clear and precise terms they predict, on the one hand, the fall of Samaria to Nineveh and of Jerusalem to Babylon, and, on the other hand, the fall of Nineveh and Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Often their prophecies of doom are given at the very moment a nation is at the apogee of its power, and their prophecies of salvation when the situation looks most hopeless. For example, against all odds Micah and Isaiah predicted the miraculous defeat of Sennacherib’s army at Jerusalem’s gates at the very time his army had inundated the Near East like a flood (see Mic. 2:12, 13; Isa. 37:21–38). Beyond the more immediate future these two contemporary prophets predicted Christ’s birth at Bethlehem, his atoning death, resurrection, ascension and glorification (Mic. 5:2; Isa. 7:14; 52:13–53:12).

Years later Jeremiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem, though it nearly cost

him his life. When challenged by the false prophet Hananiah, Jeremiah accurately foretold his death within the year (Jer. 28:16, 17). Beyond the exile, however, Jeremiah anticipated a time when the Lord would make a new covenant with Israel (Jer. 31:31–34), even as it is today (2 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 8). Sometime later Ezekiel, while in exile, again and again gave amazing prophecies that Israel might know that the Lord spoke through His messenger (Ezek. 2:5; 5:13) and that He is the LORD (Ezek. 6:7, 10, 13, 14).³

Historic critics deny the possibility of prescience. In a consensus that matches any other fundamentalist, they affirm that a prophecy, though it gives the impression of foreknowledge, is in fact a *vaticinium ex eventu* — a “prophecy” after the event. Process theologians rule out real prophecy because for them the divine is part of the universe and does not know the future but is in process of being shaped by it. If either is right, prophets like Isaiah are at best deluded or at the worst phony, but in either case not holy and trustworthy. The amazing fulfillment of their prophecies (as noted above), the continual growth of the kingdom of God in a hostile world in connection with their prophecies, and the moral imperative of their words carry conviction and debunk their gainsayers.

Because true prophets represent the incomparable God, their messages and awesome deeds are incomparable. His sublime character informs their oracles. A true prophet of *I AM* must be an Israelite who represents God’s holy covenant mediated at Sinai (Deut. 13:1–5) and accurately foretells the immediate future (Deut. 18:14–22). If he satisfies these three criteria, the people of God can trust him to lead them in the way that leads to heaven (Isa. 41:21–29).

II. IDENTIFICATION OF ISRAEL'S PROPHETS AND THEIR MESSAGES

A. Premonarchical

The Scriptures mention relatively few prophets up to the time of Samuel who experience divine revelations and auditions: Enoch (Gen. 5:22; Jude 14); Abraham (Gen. 15; 20:7); Moses (Deut. 34:10; Hos. 12:13); Miriam (Exod. 15:20; Mic. 6:4); Eldad, Medad, and the Seventy Elders (Exod. 24:9–11; Num. 11:24–29); and Deborah (Judg. 4:4–5). Moses is the prototype of those to come (Deut. 18:14–22) and supreme among them (Num. 12:1–8; Deut. 34:10–12).

B. Early Monarchy: Non-writing Prophets (1000–750 BC)

The *nābî* replaces the *rō'eh* with the institution of monarchy. In premonarchic Israel, the divine spirit reveals itself exclusively in the person of a leader, like Moses, or an inspired savior, like Deborah. With the establishment of the monarchy, a “bifurcation” of the divine presence in the nation sets in. God reveals his spirit in two types of leaders: the charismatic king (2 Sam. 7, esp. vv. 12–17) and the charismatic prophet. In establishing the monarchy, God retains his rule by subordinating the king to obey his prophet (see [chaps. 22](#), 24). *I AM*'s inspired slaves elect, reject, and direct the king. By them he sends his messages to the king and holds the king accountable to obey. In other words, the prophet has precedence over the king in giving direction to the *res publica* in accordance with the divine will.⁴

In the contest between the prophet Samuel, who represents Israel's covenants and true (i.e., moral) strength, and gifted king Saul, who exercises military power (1 Sam. 14:47), God gives priority to the word of Samuel, not to the sword of Saul. Because the anointed king successively disobeys the anointed

prophet, *I AM* first denies Saul dynastic succession — a sine quo non of kingship — and then impeaches him, while instructing Samuel to anoint an obedient king. Whereupon *I AM* removes his victorious spirit from Saul and gives it to David and sends an evil spirit on Saul to hasten that king's demise (see [chap. 22](#)).

Charismatic messengers mentioned in the historical books are Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1); Gad (1 Sam. 22:5); Nathan (2 Sam. 7:2); Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29); Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun (1 Chron. 25:1); Iddo (2 Chron. 9:29); Shemaiah (1 Kings 12:22); a prophet from Judah and an “old prophet” (1 Kings 13:11); Hanani (2 Chron. 16:7); Jehu, son of Hanani (1 Kings 16:1); Elijah (1 Kings 17:1–2 Kings 2:12); Elisha (1 Kings 19:16; 2 Kings 13:21); Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kings 22:8); Jehaziel and Eliezer (2 Chron. 20:14, 37); Obed (2 Chron. 28:9); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and unnamed prophets (1 Kings 20:13–14, 22, 28; 2 Kings 9:4) and “sons of prophets” (1 Kings 19:10 [“prophets,” TNIV]).

In the early monarchy, prophets are occasionally identified as such by ecstasy —i.e., an abnormal state of consciousness in which one is so intensely absorbed in a situation that the normal psychical life is temporarily arrested.⁵ Their ecstasy functions as manifestation to the community of their prophetic gift.

Prophets may appear individually, like Gad, or in bands (“sons of prophets”; 1 Sam 10:5, 10; 19:20; 1 Kings 22:6, 10) and live together under the authority of a leader, called “father” or “lord” (1 Sam. 19:20; 2 Kings 4:38; 6:1; 8:9; 13:14). Some prophets have greater gifts and power than others and so become the heads of prophetic guilds. Elisha has a double-portion of Elijah's spirit, making him the leader of the prophetic guild.⁶ He demonstrates his greater gift and leadership by performing miracles *for prophets*. The poverty-stricken widow whose jar of oil never ran out is the wife of one in the prophetic guild — apparently the guild could not help her (2 Kings 4:1); Elisha removes death in the pot for prophets (4:38–41); and he makes a prophet's borrowed axe head float (6:1–7).

Prophets experience different fates in God's rule: many are martyrs; Obadiah, Ahab's major domo, hid one hundred in caves (1 Kings 18:12–14); Elijah dominates the king (18:46) and is carried off to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11); and Elisha dies a sick old man (13:14, 20). All they have in common is their common faith, which pleases God (Heb. 11:32–38).

C. Late Monarchy: Writing Prophets (750–586 BC)

The writing prophets are discussed in the next chapter.

III. WHAT MANNER OF MEN WERE THE PROPHETS?⁷

Here we have in mind mostly the peerless writing prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve, who are so-called because their corpus of oracles is small enough to be written on one scroll.

A. Encountering God

To understand these prophets we begin with their calling. In Walther Eichrodt's words, "they experienced the divine reality." He says that in their personal lives the prophets experience this power terrifyingly with the radical overthrow of everything that had held good for them hitherto, an experience to which the accounts of their calling bear eloquent testimony:

There is not one of them who did not receive this new certainty of God in such a way that the whole previous pattern of his life, the thoughts and plans by which he had till now regulated his relationship to the world, was now smashed, and replaced by a mighty divine imperative obliging him to undertake something which hitherto he had not even considered as a possibility.... Their threatening predictions of the end of the nation and people ... all stem from the same dominating conviction that the present order is menaced at its very roots by the breaking in a power hostile to it.⁸

The call of Isaiah is typical (Isa. 6:1–8):⁹

In the year that King Uzziah died,¹⁰ I saw the Lord¹¹ seated on a throne, high and exalted,¹² and the train of his robe filled the temple.¹³ Above him were seraphs,¹⁴ each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces,¹⁵ with two they covered their feet,¹⁶ and with two they were flying.¹⁷ And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is *I AM* Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the

doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, *I AM* Almighty.”¹⁸

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:1–8).

Implicitly, *I AM* in heaven is inseparably linked to human history on earth. The prophet is incapable of isolating the two worlds. Abraham Heschel says,

Where an idea is the father of faith, faith must conform to the ideas of the given system. In the Bible the realness of God came first, and the task was how to live in a way compatible with His presence.... The prophet disdains those for whom God’s presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency. The prophet’s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep the, prophet feels the blast from heaven.¹⁹

B. Sensitivity to Evil

Amos accuses Israel of moral indifference:

[They] drink wine in bowls
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Amos 6:6 RSV).

As odors are discerned only by those unaccustomed to them, so also the prophets, having experienced God’s holiness, discern sin. The uniqueness of Jesus’ humanity was the purity of his devotion to God, enabling him to discern all that was false. Heschel comments,

The sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the

prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice — cheating in business, exploitation of the poor — is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world... We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited.²⁰

The Importance of Trivialities

Life consists of small social details. What appears as trivia to others in fact are determinative in social relationships. Cicero (106–43 BC) thought, “The gods are concerned only with great matters; they have no interest in trifles.”²¹ To *I AM*’s prophets, however, no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of the orphan, the widow, and the sojourner. They challenge false justice (Mic. 2:1–12), false speech (Mic. 6:12), false values (Isa. 3:1–22), false sexuality (Amos 2:6–8), and false religion (Mic. 2:11; 3:11).

For three transgressions of Israel, and for four,
I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals —
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned. (Amos 2:6–7 NRSV)

D. Luminous and Explosive Language

Some of the poetry that the heavenly messengers create is virtually unmatched in world literature. The anonymous slave’s mouth is “a sharp sword”; he is “a polished arrow” in God’s quiver (Isa. 49:2). The messengers’ style is charged with agitation, anguish, and a spirit of non-acceptance. Their language is

imaginative, concrete, and direct. Above their works soar thunder and lightning, and only occasionally the clouds are parted to show the eternity of love hovering over moments of anguish. In short, their rhetoric is inspired. Heschel makes a point,

The language is luminous and explosive, firm and contingent, harsh and compassionate, a fusion of contradictions. He does more than translate reality into a poetic key; he is a preacher whose purpose is not self-expression or “the purgation of emotions,” but communication. His images must not shine, they must burn.^{[22](#)}

E. Abhorring Hubris

Three things ancient society cherished above all else: wisdom, wealth, and might. To the prophets, who experienced the divine reality, such infatuation was ludicrous and idolatrous:

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice and pervert all equity,
who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;...
Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Mic. 3:9–12)

Thus says the LoRD: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I the LoRD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LoRD.” (Jer. 9:23–24 RSV)

F. Iconoclasm

Having experienced the Sovereign God, the prophets challenge and condemn what apostates consider holy, sacred, and awesome. The beliefs of apostates, though cherished as certainties, and their institutions, though endowed with supreme sanctity, are exposed as scandalous pretensions.

To what purpose does frankincense come to me from Sheba,
or sweet cane from a distant land?

Your burnt offerings are not acceptable,
Nor your sacrifices pleasing to me. (Jer. 6:20 RSV)

G. Austerity and Compassion

In contrast to false prophets, who like most mortals are filled with self-regard and self-ambition, the true prophet is filled with zeal for the oppressed. For Micah this is the telltale sign that he is filled with *I AM*'s spirit (Mic. 3:8). The prophet is not merely *I AM*'s megaphone, but a person. Micah delivers his messages of judgment with earnest pleading (6:1–8). Amos preaches with passion against injustice, and Hosea with the heart of love. Even their prophecies of judgment, delivered with the lightning and thunder of heaven, must be valued as *I AM*'s gift to his people. Silence is a worse form of judgment (Amos 8:11–14; Ezek. 7:26; Ps. 74:9). Moreover, these human angels also see the divine glory, the glory of God's grace shown to Moses on Mount Sinai, enabling God to sojourn with sinful people (see [chap. 16](#)). Heschel says,

The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind. Ezekiel sets forth what all other prophets imply: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked," says the Lord God, "and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23). Indeed, every prediction of disaster is in itself an exhortation to repentance. The prophet is sent not only to upbraid, but also to "strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees" (Isa. 35:3). Almost every prophet brings consolation, promise, and the hope of reconciliation along with censure and castigation. He begins with a *message of doom*; he concludes with a *message of hope*.²³

H. Loneliness and Misery

The world hates those who expose their sin and unbelief. When Micah is rebuffed by his audience (Mic. 6:6–11), this flashing preacher lifts his almost solitary voice from the highest peaks of ethical standards above the clamorous masses. As for Jeremiah and other prophets, Heschel comments,

None of the prophets seems enamored with being a prophet nor proud of his attainment. “Cursed be the day on which I was born! ... Because He did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave” (Jer. 20:14, 17). Over the life of a prophet words are invisibly inscribed: All flattery abandon, ye who enter here. To be a prophet is both a distinction and an affliction. The mission he performs is distasteful to him and repugnant to others; no reward is promised him and no reward could temper its bitterness. The prophet bears scorn and reproach (Jer. 15:15). He is stigmatized as a madman by his contemporaries, and, by some modern scholars, as abnormal. The prophet’s duty is to speak to the people, whether they hear or refuse to hear. A grave responsibility rests upon the prophet:

“If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that people are not warned, and the sword comes, and takes any one of them; that man is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand” (Ezek 33:6–7).²⁴

And yet, as *I AM*’s plenipotentiary (see “angel of *I AM*” [chap. 8.V](#); “God’s Immanence,” [chap. 13.III.B.1.a](#)), they are holy; they are God’s property, and touching them incurs his anger.

I. Prayerful

At the same time, we bear in mind that these patriots intercede for people, even as Moses had (Exod. 32:31–32). Isaiah pleads for Israel (cf. Isa. 6:11), moans for Moab (15:5), and weeps bitterly over Jerusalem (22:4). *I AM* repeatedly tells Jeremiah to stop praying for the people (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11):

“Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence!” (Jer. 15:1). Jonah is faulted because he neither has compassion for Assyria nor seeks its conversion. In keeping with the godly prophets, the Lord Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (Matt. 22:37–39), and the church joins Paul in prayer for the conversion of ethnic Israel (Rom. 9:1—3), the remnant that will exist until all Israel is saved (Rom. 11).

J. Spiritual

The prophets reject Israel’s carnal marks of identity unless accompanied by the love of God. Without love for him, God disregards the fatherhood of Abraham, circumcision, sacrifices, ceremonies, the temple, Jerusalem, and even the Law as his mode of administering his kingdom.

With regard to Abraham’s posterity, Israel is to be punished like strangers if they transgress (Deut. 8:19–20). Foreigners, if they love God, are received by him as Israel (Isa. 56:3; 63:16). God accepts neither persons nor sacrifices on their own (Deut. 10:17). Israel, for lack of that love, will be rejected and the heathen chosen in their stead (Deut. 32:21; Hos. 9:23; Isa. 65:1–12; cf. Rom. 9:25–29; 10:16–21). The name of Israel will be rejected and a new name given (Isa. 65:15).

As for circumcision, in the flesh it is a sign (Gen. 17:11), but circumcision of the heart is commanded (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4) and in Israel’s future will be performed by God (Deut. 30:6). The uncircumcised in heart will be judged (Jer. 9:26).

The external liturgy is of no avail apart from the internal. The temple will be destroyed (Jer. 7:12–14; 26:18; Mic. 3:12). Israel’s feast and sacrifices displease God (Isa. 1:11; 66:1–3; Amos 5:21), but the sacrifices of the Gentiles will be accepted (Mal. 1:11). The ark will no longer be remembered (Jer. 3:15). Aaron’s priesthood will be replaced through Messiah by the eternal priesthood of Melchizedek (Ps. 110).

God will make a new covenant, and the old will be annulled (Jer. 31:31).

IV. PROPHETS AND HOLY WAR

Before the writing prophets, nations come to know that *I AM* is the true God through his military victories (Exod. 6:7; 7:5; 14:4, etc.). In other words, *I AM* is king of the mountain. Amos, however, predicts “the day of *I AM*,” by which he refers to the day when *I AM* obtains glory by first destroying Israel and then giving her rest beyond the destruction (Amos 5:18–20; see also Joel 2:1–11; Zeph. 1:7–8, 14–18). How does *I AM* prove himself as the true God in that day when he fights against his own people and intentionally loses his mountain to a false god?

During the illegitimate Omri dynasty and the apostasy of Jehu’s house, God makes himself known as the true God through the prescience and amazing signs and wonders of prophets such as Micaiah ben Imlah, Elijah, and Elisha (ca. 850 BC). Later, when *I AM* causes darkness to fall on the Land where once his light shone brightly (cf. Isa. 9:1–2), he makes himself known through the inspired rhetoric and amazing predictions of the writing prophets. “You will know that I am *I AM*” through amazing prophecies (e.g., Ezek. 6:7, 10, 13–14; 26:6; 28:22–24).

Whole books (Nahum, Obadiah) and sections of books (Isa. 13–24; Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 26–32) are anthologies of oracles against the nations to demonstrate that *I AM* rules the nations. To Jeremiah he says, “See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:10). Jonah and Nahum respectively bring salvation and damnation to Nineveh. In other words, the soldier’s sword is replaced by the prophet’s cutting word (see [chap. 14](#) regarding the holy war). Messiah smites the earth with his word (Isa. 11:1–6), and the world is brought into Christ’s transpolitical kingdom by his disciples, who teach the nations Christ’s catechism and baptize them in the name of the Triune God.

The gods of ancient Israel’s world eventually die when they lose their temples. To my knowledge, none today worship Asshur of the Assyrians or Marduk of the Babylonians. By contrast, *I AM* lives in the worship of his people because he fulfills the words of his prophets and therefore is worthy of trust and praise.

V. INTERPRETATION OF PROPHETIC LITERATURE

A skilled interpreter of the prophetic books masters figures of speech, knows ancient symbols, perceives their synchronic perspective, understands their generic quality, and is aware they are qualified by what Richard Pratt calls “intervening historical contingency.” Let us look at each of these qualities.

A. Figurative Language

Unlike prose narrative, it should not be assumed that prophetic speeches and their writings are to be taken at face value. Prophecy is commonly expressed in poetry, which is terse and rich in figures of speech and evocative symbols. The writing prophets are identified as prophets by their patently *inspired* poetry, not just by their amazing predictions in conformity with Israel’s covenants.²⁵

Poetry is terse, expressed in grammatical and semantic parallels and in a heightened style of speech. As one scholar put it: “the prophets’ lofty ethical oracles are elegant and sublime, forcible and ornamented, imaginative and arresting, attractive and alluring; they combine punch with clarity; energy with copiousness, and dignity with variety. In sentiments one feels uncommon elevation and majesty; in imagery uncommon taste and diversity; in language uncommon beauty and energy.” Consider the parallelism between the versets A and B in Isaiah 52:13–15:

13A See, my servant²⁶ will act wisely;
13B he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
14A Just as there were many who were appalled at him —
14Ba ⊕ ⊕ ⊕ ⊕ his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
14Bb ⊕ ⊕ ⊕ ⊕ and his form marred beyond human likeness —
15A so will he sprinkle many nations,
15B and kings will shut their mouths because of him.

As for terseness and parallelism, note that in verset 13A the slave acts wisely

and its parallel in 13B tersely defines and proves he acts wisely by dramatically describing his escalating elevation from resurrection, to ascension to glorification. Note too how the poet jumps from escalating the slave's elevation to the highest exaltation to his escalating his degradation (v. 14): many appalled at his disfigurement. Note also the jump to the explanation for this humiliation: "he will sprinkle" — a literary allusion to the cleansing ritual by blood — the nations, and kings will be silenced because of his work. The rest of the oracle fills in the missing gaps of this introduction. The slave is raised from the dead and glorified because he humbly accepts the rejection of his own people to make an atonement for them, and he will see his spiritual offspring after he pours out his life as guilt offering for them in the light of life (53:1–12). What an amazing prophecy of the death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ!

Observe also (1) the vivid imagery: "See, my slave"; (2) hyperbole: "form marred beyond human likeness"; (3) metaphor: "sprinkle many nations"; and (4) symbolic action: "shut their mouths because of him." The alliteration of *mīšhat mē'īš mar'ēhū* (lit., "disfigured from a man his appearance") guilds the oracle.

B. Symbolic Dreams and Visions

As noted in [chapter 1](#), relating to Numbers 12:6–8, *I AM* differentiates his speech to Moses from his speech to prophets in two ways. First, to Moses he speaks directly in a face-to-face encounter, but to prophets he speaks less directly in visions or auditions. Second, his revelation to Moses is explicit and clear, while to prophets it is symbolic, like a dream. In Micah's opening oracle he sees, in a vision, *I AM*'s punitive epiphany (Mic. 1:1–6). God descends from his celestial heaven to the mountains that surround both Samaria and Jerusalem (v. 3). Under *I AM*'s hot wrath the mountains melt like wax, and under his heavy tread they crumble; the arable plains are so broken up that rocks cascade down the slopes like water (v. 4). The divine sentence shows that the crumbling mountains represent the fall of Samaria and the destruction of its fortifications. Micah sees as in a dream what the unbelieving eye cannot see: behind the Assyrian juggernaut stomps the hot and heavy tread of God.²⁷

Similarly, in 4:1–5 (cf. Isa. 2:2–5) Micah sees Mount Zion elevated as the highest mountain on earth with nations "flowing" to it as on a river, and he overhears the nations exhorting one another to ascend the mountain as pilgrims to learn the law of *I AM* and to hear his prophets. They symbolically "flow"

there because Micah intends a polemic against rival Babylon, to which nations journeyed by river. I have commented elsewhere on the symbolism of this vision:

In the ancient Near East, a temple mountain represented the deity worshiped there and symbolized the deity's presence with his people, the deity's abiding victory over chaos, a gateway in to the deity's heavenly presence, and the deity's rule over the territory it dominated. Micah's superlatives for Zion as "the highest mountain" and his comparison "above the hills" helps to validate that he aims to contrast Mount Zion—and so the Lord who is worshiped there—with pagan temple-mountains and their false deities. Formerly when pagan soldiers paraded over Mount Zion, they profaned the Lord worshiped there, but in the future, when it regains its religious ascendancy, the Lord will once again be seen as the true God, present with his people, achieving victory over chaos, giving access to himself uniquely through that mountain, and showing his dominion over all the earth.^{[28](#)}

C. Language Contingent on Historical Setting

1. Contextualization and "Incarnation Theology"

Prophecy takes the hue and color of its culture. Language is restricted to and signifies the culture of which the speaker is mostly unaware.^{[29](#)} Sociologists refer to this phenomenon as "the sociology of knowledge." Israel's prophets presume the categories of thought endemic to the Hebrew language. The English language has no adequate counterpart to either Hebrew *hesed* ("love," "loyalty," "kindness," "mercy") or to the Hebrew aspectual verbal system; in turn, biblical Hebrew has no counterpart to "nuclear fission," "microwave," and a thousand other English words or to the English temporal verbal system. Prophets cannot speak in the terms of present-day culture because prophecy is God's word incarnate, adapted to the intellectual capacity of the people being addressed.^{[30](#)} As such, God's word takes its language and representations of the future from its historical contexts. (I am not saying that they see later cultures and represent them in their language, but that they see the future in terms of their culture).

Because the word of God becomes incarnate in its historical context, Samuel cannot distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of Eli (1 Sam. 3:4–10). The protoevangelium takes its hue and aspect of the Serpent’s seed from the occasion and circumstances in the Garden of Eden that give rise to it and so becomes symbolic of what is to come (Gen. 3:15).³¹ Walking one day through the Ishtar Gate at Babylon that Daniel used, I saw depictions of a Babylonian deity. The creature is shown with the torso of a lion covered with fish scales, with the tail of a serpent and the head of a dragon, and with feet that are a hoof, a claw, and more. I thought, “No wonder Daniel envisions such bizarre animals in Daniel 7; his mind is conditioned for such visions.” Micah represents the coming of all nations to heavenly Jerusalem to learn God’s word by the pilgrimages to the temple as he experienced it in his culture. So also, messianic salvation is presented as victory over kingdoms that are attacking Israel (Isa. 25:9–12; 63:1–6 ; Mic. 5:1–6 ; Amos 9:12) and may describe events or persons of the future by using traits of Israel’s past. In the same way that they refer to the nation by “Jacob,” they describe their future king as “David” (Hos. 3:5; Jer. 30:9).

Prophecies about events prior to Pentecost find a material fulfillment in the New Testament: for example, Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem, his ministry in Galilee, his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Christ prepares his disciples for the new era of worshipping God in spirit and truth by reinterpreting and “christifying” Old Testament images such as temple, birth, water, and manna (see [chap. 20](#)); but his wooden disciples do not understand him until after they see his resurrected body, witness his ascension into heaven, and receive the enlightening Holy Spirit. As we saw, the Land is reinterpreted by Christ and his apostles as referring to the world, and Jerusalem and its temple are spiritualized, transcendentalized, eschatologized, and typified. The earthly material symbols are transformed into the spiritual realities they always represented. The tabernacle becomes only a literary pattern of the heavenly (Exod. 25:9; Heb. 8:5). Leslie C. Allen notes with regard to Micah 4:1, “In light of such NT passages as John 4:21–24, the Christian will set little value on the geography of the piece and regard it as a cultural adornment to a deeper and universal truth.”³² When Christ lowers heaven to earth in his advent and Pentecost, the otiose symbols of the old dispensation are *forever* done away, leaving the reality unveiled (Heb. 8:13; 9:26; 10:9).

2. *Hyperbole*

To show the exceeding greatness of the future, the prophets supercharge the

old symbols by hyperbole. Edmund Clowney says,

The outward symbols of the old covenant are so intensified with the fullness of the glory of the new covenant that they are transfigured and transformed.... So holy will the city of God become that the inscription of the high priest's diadem will be found on the bells of horses, and the very wash pots of the town will be as the holy vessels of the temple (Zech. 14:20; cf. Jer. 31:38ff.), where the boundaries of the New Jerusalem include all the unclean areas as holy places.³³

Historical Mount Zion is represented as the highest mountain on earth to depict its heavenly reality (Mic. 4:1; Isa. 2:2; cf. Heb. 12:22–24).

Diverse hyperboles give rise to apparent discrepancies. Some prophets describe the peace of the messianic times by the destruction of arms by fire (Hos. 2:18 [20]; Isa. 9:5 [4]); some, by swords being beaten into plow tips (Mic. 4:3); others, by the domestication of wild beasts (Isa. 11:6–8; 65:25) and still others, by their riddance (Ezek 34:25). By these diverse figures they all communicate the same message: the messianic age is a period of peace and rest. These “contradictory” statements, like all hyperbole, borrow their imagery from their culture.

D. Synchronic, Not Diachronic, Perspective

The prophets represent their heralded events as occurring on the same historical horizon, but their occurrences may in fact prove to be separated by ages. For example, the following sequence of oracles in Micah 4:9–5:6 pertains to events extending from the Assyrian king besieging Jerusalem to the exile to and return from Babylon, to the birth of Messiah and beyond, but they are collapsed together with no indication of the huge chronological gaps separating the heralded events. The oracles are collected by key terms and by a logical and/or chronological development. The collection below begins with the return from the Babylonian exile, predicts Jerusalem's victory over her adversaries, the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem, Israel's abandonment until then, and finally the everlasting peace Messiah will bring.

Referring to Zion's return from the Babylonian exile (586 BC; Mic. 4:9–10)

Why do you now cry aloud —

⊗⊗⊗⊗have you no King?
Has your Counselor perished,
⊗⊗⊗⊗that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?
Writhe in agony, Daughter of Zion,
⊗⊗⊗⊗like a woman in labor,
for now you must leave the city
⊗⊗⊗⊗to camp in the open field.
You will go to Babylon;
⊗⊗⊗⊗there you will be rescued.
There *I AM* will redeem you
⊗⊗⊗⊗out of the hand of your enemies [translation mine].

**Referring to Zion's victory after Sennacherib's siege (701 BC; Mic.
4:11–13)**

But now many nations
⊗⊗⊗⊗are gathered against you.
They say, "Let her be defiled,
⊗⊗⊗⊗let our eyes gloat over Zion!"
But they do not know
⊗⊗⊗⊗the thoughts of *I AM*;
They do not understand his plan,
⊗⊗⊗⊗he who gathers them like sheaves to the threshing floor.
"Rise and thresh, Daughter of Zion,
⊗⊗⊗⊗for I will give you horns of iron;
I will give you hooves of bronze
⊗⊗⊗⊗and you will break to pieces many nations."
You will devote their ill-gotten gain to *I AM*,
⊗⊗⊗⊗their wealth to the Lord of all the earth [translation mine].

**Referring to the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem after Sennacherib's
siege (Mic. 5:1–2)**

Now marshal your troops, city of troops,
⊗⊗⊗⊗for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
⊗⊗⊗⊗on the cheek with a rod.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
⊗⊗⊗⊗though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me

⊃⊃⊃⊃one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins from of old,
⊃⊃⊃⊃from ancient times” [translation mine].

**Referring to Zion’s abandonment until the birth of Christ
(Mic. 5:3; Daniel’s 62 weeks)**

Therefore Israel will be abandoned
⊃⊃⊃⊃until the time when she who is in labor gives birth
⊃⊃⊃⊃[i.e., the labor pains of the Babylonian captivity—see 4:9–10],
and the rest of his brothers return
⊃⊃⊃⊃to join the Israelites.

**Referring to the Messiah’s final peace and abandonment
(Mic. 5:4–5)**

He [Messiah] will stand and shepherd his flock
⊃⊃⊃⊃in the strength of *I AM*,
⊃⊃⊃⊃in the majesty of the name of *I AM* his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
⊃⊃⊃⊃will reach to the ends of the earth.
⊃⊃⊃⊃And he will be their peace.
When the Assyrian invades our land
⊃⊃⊃⊃and marches through our fortresses,
we will raise against him seven shepherds,
⊃⊃⊃⊃even eight leaders of men.

Van Imschoot notes that the tableau by which the prophets announce the future lacks perspective, so that it is difficult at times to distinguish whether the heralded events, delineated on the same plane, refer to the same epoch or must be separated by centuries. The birth of Messiah is brought into relation with the threat of an Assyrian invasion in the days of Ahaz (Isa. 7:1–14; [737 BC] and of Sennacherib in the days of Hezekiah (Mic. 5:1–2). In Isaiah 49:5–8 the return of the exiles to their home inaugurates the messianic salvation (cf. Zech. 9; 12; 14 et al.). Prophets envisage salvation as near at hand, since salvation forms their horizon, and the future is an insignificant track between their days and the day of salvation and does not allow them to measure the duration.³⁴

E. Generic Prophecy

1. Old Testament

Prophecy is often generic—that is, the prophecy predicts an event that unfolds in many specific instances (i.e., species). For example, the “seed” that defeats the Serpent in Genesis 3:16 refers to the antediluvian and postdiluvian patriarchs, Israel, Judah, the house of David, and consummately Jesus Christ and his church. Likewise, the seed of the Serpent extends from Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, to the Pharisees, of whom Jesus said, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire” (John 8:44). The Serpent’s seed still expresses itself in antichrists who continue to plague the church, such as those who control Hollywood and Muslims who kill Christians.

Greek *plēroō* (“to fulfill”) does not designate an all-at-once full-glass fulfillment but a glass being filled intermittently. With regard to Herod’s slaughter of the innocent, Matthew says, “Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, ... Rachel weeping for her children ... because they are no more’ “ (Matt. 2:17–18). The *Reformation Study Bible* explains,

Matthew cites Jeremiah 31:15, a verse taken from the middle of a prophecy about the return of Israel from exile. Rachel, the matriarch, represents Israel in her weeping, and the departure of the Lord’s Christ to Egypt is like the departure of Rachel’s sons Joseph and Benjamin to Egypt in Genesis. The citation in Matthew thus connects the sorrow preceding the exodus from Egypt with the sorrow in Babylon prior to the return and with Israel’s sorrow at this time in Christ’s life.³⁵

This thickness is also true of the expression *bēʿa ḥrît hayyāmîm*, “in the latter days” (NRSV, “in days to come”; TNIV, “in the last days”), which refers to a future that paradoxically reverses a present situation and at the same time begins to bring to a fitting outcome that toward which it is striving. The LXX translates it by *ep’ eschatōn tōn hēmerōn*. George W. Buchanan cautions, however, that *eschatos* here does not mean the “eschaton”: “Modern Bible students should not be misled by the word *eschatos* in this expression and should not read eschatological meanings into context which do not anticipate any kind of an end, but only future time.”³⁶ For example, *bēʿa ḥrît hayyāmîm*, in Daniel 10:14 includes the activity of three kings of Persia (11:2), Alexander and his successors, their various struggles, and the “contemptible person” of 11:21.

The prediction of the exaltation of Zion in Micah 4:1–6, as explicated in the

oracles that follow in [chapters 4–5](#), embraces the remnant’s restoration from Babylon (4:9–10), the birth of the Messiah (5:1 [2]), and his universal rule and everlasting peace (4:1–4; 5:3 [4]). Peter linked the expression to Pentecost.³⁷ We noted above that the “abomination that causes desolation” (Dan. 9:27) may refer to the desecration of the temple by the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in 167 BC and by the Roman general, Titus, in AD 70. In the New Testament, “last days” or “later days” designates the time between Christ’s first and second advents. In the apostolic literature, the “last days” began with Pentecost, continue in the present, and will be consummated at the second advent (Acts 2:17–21; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 9:26; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:3).

2. New Testament: “Realized Eschatology”

A specific type of generic prophecy is what New Testament theologians commonly denominate by the oxymoron “realized eschatology” — an already-not-yet fulfillment.³⁸ Robert Peterson explains, “The ‘already’ refers to the fact that the great eschatological event predicted in the Old Testament has been fulfilled Christ has come. The ‘not yet’ refers to the fact that the New Testament itself indicates that there are still prophecies to be consummated, such as the Second Coming.”³⁹ For example, the American army fulfilled its mission to invade Iraq, but as I write, it has not yet consummated its mission in stabilizing Iraq.

The schema of realized eschatology explains why the soteriological kingdom of God has both a present aspect (Matt. 19:16–30; Luke 17:20–21; John 3:3, 5; Col. 1:13) and a future aspect for which his church prays (Matt. 6:10). God’s people have been saved (from the penalty of sin—Eph. 2:1–8), are being saved (from the power of sin — 1 Cor. 1:18), and will be saved (from the presence of sin—Rom. 5:9). Redemption is already (Eph 1:7) and not yet (Eph. 4:30); so also are our adoption (Rom. 8:15, 23) and our justification (Rom. 5:1) and the righteousness for which we hope (Gal. 5:5). Believers are already raised with Christ in his resurrection (Rom. 6:4, 5; 8:10–11) and will be raised from the dead at his appearing (1 Cor. 15:20–28).

Jesus and his apostles label the present aspect of the kingdom as “this age” and its future aspect as “the age to come” (see Matt. 12:32; Eph. 1:20–23; Heb. 6:4–6). In this age the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God grow together as tares and wheat (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), but after the Second Coming the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our God (Rev. 11:15).

As noted above, prophets see future events on a flat tableau, like a sequence

of ascending peaks that from the viewpoint of a remote observer blend together in a generic way into the final and highest mountain without discerning the valleys between the peaks. Prophets speak of the messianic age as coming “in the last days,” unaware of its thickness. Christ’s promise of his second coming forced the apostles to distinguish between the already fulfillment in his first advent from the not-yet fulfillment in his second advent. More specifically, they distinguish between the *inauguration* of Christ’s reign at his first coming, the *continuation* of it by the Holy Spirit from Pentecost to his Parousia, and its *consummation* in the eschaton. The inauguration and continuation of his reign gives assurance that the delayed eschatological hope will not be put to shame.

In sum, in light of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the apostles recognize a temporal thickness to Old Testament prophecy. As it turns out, the prophets’ predictions embrace a beginning of fulfillment in Israel’s restoration from the exile, a victorious fulfillment in the church age stretching from Christ’s first advent to his Parousia, and a consummation in the eschatological new heaven and earth when Christ’s kingdom becomes coextensive with the creation.^{[40](#)}

F. Intervening Historical Contingency

1. *Prophecy and Providence*

An acorn has the genetic code of an oak tree within it, but the actual shape of the tree that springs from it depends on historical contingencies. So also prophecy has “a genetic code,” especially Israel’s covenants, but intervening historical circumstances determine its time and manner of fulfillment.^{[41](#)} This is so because Providence normally fulfills prophecies according to the nature of secondary causes. The Westminster Confession of Faith says of these secondary causes that they work together “necessarily (*necessario*), freely (*libere*), or contingently (*contingenter*).”^{[42](#)} Although the stability of the earth is assured, there are unpredictable, local instabilities that may (*libere*) — as in the case of the sun standing still at Gibeon — or may not (*necessario*) — as in the case of the damming up of the Jordan River (see [chap. 18](#) above) — defy science. Oracles of doom and hope are contingent upon human response, but not mechanistically (see below). God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and our ways are not his ways (Isa. 55:8). His wisdom and power are infinite; his mercy and

patience exceed human rationality.

The Abrahamic covenant guarantees seed and the land to Abraham, but precisely who those individuals will be and when and how they will appear and occupy their land is open to historical contingency. David's family will reign forever, but individuals of his house will be judged if unfaithful (1 Kings 11:34–36; 15:4). A virgin will conceive (Isa. 7:14), but her name, manner of conception, and time of delivery are unknown until Mary through the Holy Spirit fulfills the prophecy. The Davidic throne will endure, but which sons? When? How? The eternal king on his eternal throne is unknown until Christ ascends to heaven and sits at the right hand of God. The Mosaic covenant guarantees blessings for repentant and regenerate Israel and curses for unregenerate covenant breakers, but the precise time and manner in which the blessings and curses will occur are not known until they are fulfilled. Deutero-Isaiah predicts the anonymous slave will be cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of God's elect people. His prophecy was at least partially understood, but its timing and manner was unknown until its fulfillment in the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth (Isa. 53:7–8; Acts 8:32–35). The same is true of the restoration of David's fallen "tent" and its renewed rule over Edom (Amos 9:11–12; Acts 15:16–17).⁴³ Paul likens the people of God to an olive tree, but though the genetic code (i.e., the covenants and unqualified prophecies) remains constant, the shape of "the olive tree" (i.e., the church) is determined by its historical conditioning (see [chap. 20](#)).

These prophecies are partially understood by the original audience, but only later audiences understand the manner of their fulfillment. Still other prophecies are not fully understood, and until their full meaning is realized in their fulfillment, as seems to be true of Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2: 15 and Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:18 (see above).

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

2. Three Kinds of Prophecy Qualified by Human Response

Providence that involves human responses merits a separate discussion. Pratt distinguishes three basic types of prophecy in this regard. First, some predictions are explicitly qualified by conditions — that is, they explicitly make their fulfillment dependent on hearer response; for example, “If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword” (Isa. 1:19–20; cf. 7:9; Jer 7:5–7; 22:4–5; Mic 6:1–8 et al.).

Second, others are qualified by assurances that the prophecy, whether good or bad, is not reversible but will certainly come to pass; for example, “for three sins of [name of country], even for four, I will not turn back” (Isa. 14:24; 45:23; Jer. 4:28; 7:15–16; 11:11, 14; 14:10; 23:20; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; cf. 4:2; 6:8; 8:7 et al.).

Finally, other predictions are given without qualifications. In these cases there is an implied contingency (see “repentance” oracles below). Jeremiah plainly states this aspect of prophecy:

“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.” (Jer. 18:7–10)

Calvin notes, “Even though [the prophets] make a simple affirmation, it is to be understood from the outcome that these nonetheless contain a tacit condition”⁴⁴ (cf. Jonah 3:4; 2 Kings 22:11; 2 Chron. 12:6; Acts 21:11).⁴⁵

3. Prophecy Conditioned by Repentance

Pratt analyzes the nonqualified prophecies that implicitly call for repentance into several subtypes. First, intervening repentance may lead to the annulment of an oracle of doom. Nineveh repented and did not fall in forty days (an indefinite period of time, Jonah 3:4–10), and *I AM* spared repentant Israel the dreadful Day of *I AM* (Joel 2:1–18). But the penitent understand that God’s response is not

mechanical or fully predictable. Joel asked Israel to rend their hearts to escape the threatened judgment because of *I AM*'s gracious character, but added, "Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing" (Joel 2:13–14). Likewise, David pleads on the basis of God's *hesed*, mercy, and grace to be forgiven for his sin against Uriah, but he conditions, not presumes, his anticipated praise for forgiveness, saying, "Save me from bloodguilt, O God, ... and my tongue will sing of your righteousness" (Ps. 51:14).

Second, repentance may mollify a judgment oracle. Elijah predicts that *I AM* will cut off from Ahab every last male — "ruler and governor,"⁴⁶ but because Ahab is humbled by the sentence, the judgment is delayed (1 Kings 21:28–29). Josiah was spared seeing the horrific death of his sons through his premature death because he also humbled himself (2 Kings 22:18–20; cf. 2 Chron. 12:1–12).

Third, in spite of prayer, a judgment oracle may nevertheless be carried through. Nathan predicts that David's son by Bathsheba will die, and though David prays that *I AM* spare him, God does not spare the baby (2 Sam. 12:22–23).

Fourth, saints can hasten the fulfillment of prophecy (2 Peter 3:11–12).⁴⁷ This important category corrects the thinking of most Christians that restricts Christ's return to a fixed eternal decree, not reckoning that that decree works together with human response. Peter teaches that there is a lassitude to the time of his return: his coming is contingent on the actions of the church in fulfilling its mission.

Regarding the test of a prophet by the accuracy of the fulfillment (Deut. 18:22), we may plausibly assume that this qualification of prophecy by the implied contingency of human response to the prophecy should be granted. Quite different from the fortune of the repentant, however, is the fate of those who do not repent in spite of predicted judgment.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do the lives and words of the prophets instruct you in your walk with God?

[1.](#) *Hôzeh* is used in poetic literature.

[2.](#) Cf. Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Origins of Prophecy,” in *Magnalia Dei, The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 172. The words *extispicy* and *heptoscopy* refer to divination by examining animal organs, especially the liver.

[3.](#) Paul van Imschoot, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Kathryn Sullivan and Fidelis Buck (New York: Desclee, 1965), 169.

[4.](#) Shermayahu Talmon, “The Biblical Idea of Statehood,” in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. Gary Rendsburg *et al.* (New York: Ktav Publishing/Institute of Hebrew Culture and Education of New York University, 1980), 240–48.

[5.](#) Ecstasy, a faltering adaptation of our somatic mechanisms to the central supertension of high intellectual contemplation can otherwise be caused by hysteria, the use of psychic or psychophysical techniques, narcotics, or other means. See Joseph Maréchal, *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics*, trans. from the French (1927; repr., New York: Dover, 2004), 208.

[6.](#) “Double portion” does not mean twice as much but a double portion of the whole. If a man had three sons, the elder son got a double portion of the inheritance and the remaining two sons shared the one remaining portion. If he had nine sons, the eldest got two portions of the inheritance, and the other eight sons divided the remaining seven portions.

[7.](#) I lean heavily in this section on Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

[8.](#) Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament. Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 345.

[9.](#) The narrative of Isaiah’s call has six parts: historical setting (6:1A), vision (6:1B – 4), insight into self (6:5), call (vv. 6–7), cleansing (also vv. 6–7), and commission (vv. 8–10).

- [10.](#) Transition from good king Uzziah to evil king Ahaz.
- [11.](#) Title: Lord.
- [12.](#) God's aseity, sovereignty, immutability, eternity.
- [13.](#) To suffocate all human hubris.
- [14.](#) Lit., "burning": God's holiness.
- [15.](#) Cannot look on glory.
- [16.](#) Conscious of being creatures and having no glory of their own.
- [17.](#) To do his bidding.
- [18.](#) Cannot know self without knowing God (see p. 503).
- [19.](#) Heschel, *The Prophets*, 16.
- [20.](#) Ibid., 4.
- [21.](#) Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods (De natura deorum)*, II.167, trans. Horace C. P. McGregor (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1972), 190.
- [22.](#) Heschel, *The Prophets*, 6–7.
- [23.](#) Ibid., 15.
- [24.](#) Ibid., 17–19.
- [25.](#) For a fuller discussion of Hebrew poetry see Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: [chapters 1 – 15](#)* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 38–44.
- [26.](#) Better translated "slave" (Heb. 'abdî). See ibid., 525n52.
- [27.](#) Perhaps his vision inspired Julia Ward Howe's famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic": "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Behind the "dim and flaring lamps" of the campfires of the federal troops camped outside Washington, D.C., she saw the Lord's "righteous sentence" during the U.S. Civil War.
- [28.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *Micah*, in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, Vol. 2, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 678.
- [29.](#) John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 104–39.
- [30.](#) Also, Jesus says God adapted his law according to the moral capacity of the Old Testament saint (Matt. 19:8; Mark 10:5).
- [31.](#) Patrick Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 92.
- [32.](#) Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 2nd ed. (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 327.
- [33.](#) Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, *Contours of Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 216–17.
- [34.](#) Van Imschoot, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 166.
- [35.](#) *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, ed. Richard L. Pratt Jr. (Grand

Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1546, note at 2:18.

[36.](#) George W. Buchanan, “Eschatology and the ‘End of Days,’ “ *JNES* 20, no. 3 (July 1961): 188–93.

[37.](#) Waltke, *Micah*, 677.

[38.](#) C. H. Dodd coined the term. He originally meant by it that the kingdom of God, which is the transcendent order beyond space and time, has broken into history in the mission of Jesus and fulfilled all that the prophets had hoped for. After being criticized for minimizing the futuristic aspects of the kingdom, Dodd admitted that the kingdom yet awaits consummation “beyond history” (*The Founder of Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1970], 115).

[39.](#) Robert A. Peterson, “Systematic Theology: Three Vantage Points of Hell,” in *Hell under Fire*, Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 165.

[40.](#) For Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, see also Frank Thielman, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 84–89.

[41.](#) I lean heavily in this section on the concepts of my colleague, Richard L. Pratt Jr., “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180–203.

[42.](#) Westminster Confession of Faith, 5.2.

[43.](#) In this case, not only was the timing not understood, but neither was its generic nature, for his rule embraces not just ^ʿ*dōm* (“Edom”) but ^ʾ*ādām*. The LXX prepared the way for this reinterpretation. Perhaps impacted by his Panhellenic world, he read ^ʾ*ādām* (“mankind”), not ^ʿ*dōm*.

[44.](#) J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John. T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 1.17.14.

[45.](#) Instead of being resigned to the prophecy by Agabus, Paul’s disciples urged him not to go to Jerusalem.

[46.](#) The common translation in v. 21 of ^ʿ*šwr wʿzwb* by “slave and free,” instead of “ruler and governor,” is mistaken. See Shemaryahu Talmon and Weston W. Fields, “The Collocation of ^{mš}*tyn bqr* ^ʿ*šwr wʿzwb* and Its Meaning,” *ZAW* 101 (1989), 85–112.

[47.](#) Pratt, “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” 190.

Chapter 30

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY, PART 2: THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

All err the more dangerously because each follows a truth. Their mistake lies not in following a falsehood by in not following another truth.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 14.863

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

Superscripts to the prophetic books usually identify the book's genre, the prophet who delivered the book's oracle(s), and his dates. The book's immediate audience is sometimes specified, but as it sits in the canon its implied audience is the people of God (see below)^{[1](#)}. The prophets of these books span Israel's history from about 760 to 425 BC. The prose superscripts assume a grammaticohistorical method of interpretation.

II. THEOLOGY AND FORMS OF PROPHECY

A. Introduction

The messages within the books are presented as poetry (see [chap. 29.V.A](#)). More specifically, the dominant form is the oracle: a direct message from God to earthlings. In addition to oracles, the books also contain prose narratives (cf. Jonah) and utterances to God in petition and praise, both of which teach theology indirectly.² In addition, form critics note three kinds of oracles: oracles of judgment, repentance, and salvation. They further analyze these three forms into subtypes.³ For example, the first cycle of judgment oracles in the book of Micah takes the form of: *I AM*'s punitive epiphany (1:2–7), a lament song (1:8–16), a funeral lament (2:1–5), and a controversial saying (2:6–11). The concluding salvation oracle is more precisely a victory song, a composite hymn of confidence and praise (7:8–20). But for our purpose, the three broad forms of oracles are sufficient to analyze the essential theology of these books.

All three forms are based on Israel's covenants, especially the Mosaic covenant's curses and blessings: blessings or salvation if its laws are obeyed, curses or doom if violated. *I AM* guides the course of history by his system of covenant fidelity, not by amoral chance, as pagans think. In the view of the prophets, what Israel is at the time of the prophecy determines her destiny. *I AM*'s glory—his compassion, grace, longsuffering, faithfulness and reliability—moderates the covenant's curses (Exod. 34:6). The merciful King relents from punishing the truly repentant. In short, *I AM* intervenes in history to uphold his covenants and thereby establish his kingdom.

These three forms are interconnected by the logic of covenant theology in the historical pattern of judgment (i.e., punishment and exile), repentance and forgiveness, and salvation. Moses delineates the pattern:

When all these blessings and *curses* I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children *return* to the

LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will *restore* your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. (Deut. 30:1–3)

To this essential threefold pattern the prophets add the doctrine of the remnant. The “return” and “restoration” find fulfillment through the remnant who by faith either persevere in keeping Torah or repent of their failure to obey. Although nominal Israel is unfaithful to her covenant commitments and is punished, God remains faithful to his commitment to universal salvation by preserving a remnant, who by faith will vanquish all his enemies and establish his kingdom universally. God cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). “His anger lasts only a moment, but his favor [mercy] lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5). This is the message of the prophets.

B. Oracles and Israel’s Covenants

Preaching that conforms to Israel’s covenants is the mark of a true prophet (Deut. 13). Obviously an oracle from Israel’s covenant keeping God will not violate his character, his covenants, or his counsel. God’s covenants are immutable, and his purpose in salvation history, informed as it is by his sublime character, does not fail. In earlier chapters (e.g., [chap. 11](#).B.3–4) I dealt with *I AM*’s four unconditional covenants: the Noahic, guaranteeing the stability of the cosmic earth ([chap. 11](#)); the Abrahamic, guaranteeing him an eternal seed, land and universal mission of blessing ([chap. 12](#)); the Mosaic, God’s unchanging standard that Israel love him and humankind ([chap. 16](#)); and the Davidic, guaranteeing David’s house will reign forever, but individuals within his house will be punished and even lose their throne if found unfaithful to the Mosaic covenant ([chap. 23](#)). The Mosaic covenant informs the judgment oracles, and the Abrahamic and Davidic inform the salvation oracles. The inviolable parameters of these covenants restrict an unpredictable latitude in their realization (see [chap. 29](#).V.F — “Intervening Historical Contingency”).

C. Judgment Oracles

Judgment oracles typically consist of an address, an accusation, and a judicial sentence. Their content derives from the Mosaic covenant: if the nation reneges on its covenant promises to obey Torah, God's integrity guarantees his punishment, but not before due warnings. By the same token, his faithfulness to his covenant also guarantees a blessing on the righteous who live by faith.

The prophets accuse Israel of fracturing the covenant they accepted at Sinai by worshipping other gods. Their idol worship entails an exploitive and oppressive social system, as illustrated in the Naboth vineyard story (1 Kings 21:1–26). The prophets condemn Israel's leaders for becoming "Ahabs": they behave like the depraved Canaanites, whom the Land vomited out for their despicable practices.⁴

The rich land owners in order to add field to field (cf. Isa. 5:8) bribe the magistrates to rule in their favor on land grabs, the magistrates bribe the religious establishment—priests and prophets — to turn a blind eye to their malfeasance, making all of them conspirators against the poor in a system based on wickedness. They give bribes to advantage themselves and disadvantage others.⁵ Their victims are Israel's small landholders like Naboth who can be killed through the king's corrupt officials. The Naboth vineyard story also illustrates how the elders could be co-opted into supporting the rich and powerful against the common landholder. Perhaps, after the fall of Samaria, the social injustices of elite classes are exacerbated by a flood of refugees into Jerusalem from the North. The swollen numbers of refugees into Jerusalem increase the demand for food and lower the price of labor. Moreover, in times of drought or other misfortunes, the rich, contrary to the Law, loan money to the poor at exorbitant interests, leading to foreclosures on the property, thereby forcing the free landholder into indentured slavery (cf. 2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:1–5; Amos 2:6).⁶ In other words, by adding field to field the rich cannibalized the poor (Mic. 3:1–5; cf. Ezek. 34:2–3; Pss. 14:4; 53:5; Hab. 3:14).

These shrewd practices dissolve the Mosaic ideal of freedom for all and social and economic equality, which was sanctioned through the distribution of the Land by the sacred lot. According to the Mosaic covenant, each family has the right to hold its allotment from the divine lot in perpetuity (Lev. 25:23). Due to social inequities that inevitably arise within a society, the Law further guaranteed every Israelite freedom and social equality by legislating that each family return to its family property every fifty years, the year of Jubilee (25:10), and that all debts be canceled. The year of Jubilee was also a sabbatical year for the Land — that is, it was to lie fallow (25:1–7). Israel spent seventy years in exile, as Jeremiah predicted, to allow the Land to catch up on its Sabbath rests

(Lev. 26:40–45; 2 Chron. 36:20–21; Jer. 25:11–12). God punished Israel by sending the people into exile but he restricted this to seventy years — the number of perfection and fullness. In other words, his last word is freedom.

The prophets interpret the invasions by Assyria (ca. 750–626 BC) and Babylon (605–586) as the fulfillment of the covenant curses to purge the Land: Israel is losing the Land because she is abusing her usufruct (see [chap. 19.2.C](#)) just as the covenant curses had warned (Lev. 26: 34; Deut. 28:64–68). Since the nation has destroyed her relationship with God, she also destroys her privilege to the Land. The protracted subjugation of the Land due to a succession of kings — each of whom has to establish himself and his kingdom — and their imperial policy of first taxing their victims and then smashing them if they revolt afford Israel the opportunity to repent under the mighty hand of God. Instead of accepting his grace, however, they become ever more hard-hearted and stiff-necked, and *I AM*'s blows by the hand of Mesopotamian empires — his rod of anger and club of wrath (Isa. 10:5) — become ever more severe until the capitals fall and the people are taken into exile (Isa. 1:5–9). The prophets' call to the nation to foster justice as in the days of David shows she is capable of reform with David's faith (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 2:2).

John the Baptist and Jesus carry on this prophetic tradition. John the Baptist predicts “coming wrath” (Matt. 3:7–10; Luke 3:7–9). In Jesus' preaching, Jerusalem, the temple, and its hierarchy are Israel's true enemy, keeping the people in spiritual exile even though they are physically back in the Land. Moreover, Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple, “the den of robbers,” by symbolically overthrowing the temple and by purging it of their corruption (Matt. 21:12–13 et al.).⁷ Later he explicitly prophesies of the temple that not one of its stones will be left upon another (Matt. 24:2).

Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaim that membership in physical Israel is no guarantee to a share in the age to come. Like the prophets of old, Jesus predicts the coming judgment in terms of cosmic disaster: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (Mark 13:24).⁸ When Babylon is to be destroyed, there is only one proper response: get out and run.⁹ The same is true of Jerusalem.¹⁰

D. Repentance Oracles

Some oracles explicitly call for repentance: “ ‘Come now, let us reason

together,’” says *I AM*. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.... If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword’ “ (Isa. 1:18–20). Hosea’s call to repentance is based on the promise that “after two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence,” a prophecy fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Hos. 6:2). Micah’s lawsuit against Israel contains an appeal to repent: “My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of *I AM*” (Mic. 6:5).

Moreover, judgment oracles are also repentance oracles. The prophesied judgments are conditioned on Israel’s response: death if she rejects his grace; life if she repents (see [chap. 28](#)).

John the Baptist and Jesus also call for repentance. Israel will be saved if she repents of her vain traditions and allegiance to the priestly hierarchy that keep the nation bound in sin and if she commits herself to *I AM*’s savior, Jesus Christ (see [chap. 6](#)).

E. Salvation Oracles

Beyond the impending exile, the prophets foresee returning to the Land a surviving meek and humble remnant of Israel, who trust in *I AM* and “do no wrong” and “speak no lies” (Zeph. 3:13).¹¹ The formula “in that day,” or “behold the days are coming,” characteristically introduces the salvation oracles, which prophesy. The formula signifies that Israel’s ideal age will come in God’s good time beyond the immediate purging of the Land.

These consoling prophecies of salvation promise the humble remnant—who survive the washing away of the filth and its bloodstains by “searing” (lit., “spirit”) judgment (Isa. 4:3–4)—that they play the heroic role of sustaining God’s rule that will issue in the restoration and regeneration of all Israel (Mic. 4:6–8). God’s fidelity and not Israel’s infidelity will have the last word. This blessed hope (cf. Isa. 30:18–26) is rooted in the unconditional character of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. The former assures Abraham that the sworn Land is his forever (Mic. 7:20). The latter promises that David’s son will sit forever upon the throne of David.

In the preaching of Jesus, the promises to Zion are interpreted as references to Jesus and his followers (see [chap. 20](#), esp. III.D.2.c and IV.B.1.c).

III. DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

Martin Luther complained about the prophetic books: “They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.”¹² This jerkiness of style is due to the manner in which the prophetic books come into existence. Stage one is when the prophet delivers various kinds of oracles at diverse times to Israel and/or Judah (Hos. 5:1–15; Amos 7:10–17; Mic. 1:2–7 et al.). These oracles can usually be isolated by their form, which includes common subject matter, common motifs, a common mood, and known rhetoric techniques.

In stage two these oracles are recorded, arranged, and sometimes framed with accounts, titles, *etc.* Usually, however, they lack editorial introductions so that reading their anthology of oracles within a book is somewhat like reading a preacher’s file of sermons delivered on different occasions and not separated within file folders. Without recognizing these embedded oracles, reading a prophetic book is as confusing as trying to read the Psalms. Each hymn in the book of Psalms has a superscription, separating one hymn from another, but each of the prophetic books has only an initial superscript that pertains to its collected anthology of oracles. Reading the prophets is like looking at snapshots, not a movie.

In the last stage the books themselves are collected into the canon for the edification of the people of God.

With the prophetic books, as in the narrative books, a distinction is helpfully made between the immediate audience of the oracles, which is named in the superscripts, and the implied audience of the book—namely, the covenant community. Peter says, “It was revealed to [the prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you” (1 Peter 1:12) and “we have the prophetic message as something completely reliable” (2 Peter 1:19, translation mine). The fulfillment of prophecies in both the Old Testament and the New Testament portends their consummation in the eschaton. Until then, their messages sober the rich, console the afflicted; warn the high, and comfort the low.

IV. THE MESSAGES OF THE WRITING PROPHETS

A. PreExilic Prophets of the Neo-Assyrian Period (750–614 BC)

Prophets in the Neo-Assyrian context (750–612 BC) include Jonah (against Assyria: ca. 800–750), Amos (760–750), Hosea (753–722), Micah (735–700), First Isaiah ([chaps. 1–39](#), in 740–681),¹³ Nahum (against Assyria: 645–620) and Zephaniah (640–09). Amos and Hosea prophesy before the fall of Samaria (722), and Micah and Isaiah prophesy both before and after its fall. The latter two also deliver prophecies in connection with Sennacherib's threat to capture Jerusalem in 701 BC and the city's miraculous survival. Nahum and Zephaniah prophesy after these events and during the height of the Neo-Assyrian Empire under Sennacherib's youngest son, Esarhaddon (681–669), and grandson, Assurbanipal (ca. 668–627), who is famous for his library. Assurbanipal is both the greatest and last of the great Assyrian kings.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire seems invincible because, in contrast to the freestanding armies of the western states, the Assyrian king maintains a well-equipped and disciplined imperial army of professional mercenaries paid for by the tribute the kings exact from their conquered subjects. Isaiah gives an eyewitness account:

He lifts up a banner for the distant nations,
he whistles for those at the ends of the earth.
Here they come, swiftly and speedily!
Not one of them grows tired or stumbles,
not one slumbers or sleeps;
not a belt is loosened at the waist,
not a sandal thong is broken.
Their arrows are sharp,
All their bows are strung;

their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
their chariot wheels like a whirlwind. (Isa. 5:26–28)

Yet, even prior to the great Asshurbanipal's death, the Babylonians begin to reassert themselves.

1. Jonah

The book of Jonah is a biography in two parts:

- I. Jonah Flees His Mission (1–2)
- II. Jonah Reluctantly Fulfills His Mission (3–4)

Jonah rejects *I AM*'s commission to preach against hated Nineveh, capital of the dreaded Assyrians. His refusal leads to his personal deliverance from the belly of a great fish, after which he preaches judgment against Nineveh, followed by their repentance and deliverance. God relents from destroying Nineveh because, as Jonah confesses to him, “You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (4:2; cf. Exod. 34:6).

This book—perhaps the earliest prophetic book in the canon of Scripture — condemns Israel. If the wicked Ninevites find salvation by repenting in response to Jonah's judgment oracle because *I AM* is compassionate and forgiving, how much more would he have forgiven Israel if she had repented under prophets more noble than Jonah. And how much more should Israel repent at the preaching of Jesus, the Son of Man, who was delivered from the tomb (Matt. 12:38–41; Luke 11:29–32). The book of Jonah and Jesus magnify the Gentiles' willingness to repent and God's mercy on the Gentiles, both to condemn Israel for their hard hearts and to save Israel by rousing them to envy (cf. Rom. 11:11–14).

2. Amos

After the superscript and introduction (1:1–2) the book of Amos consists of four parts:

- I. Judgment Oracles against the Nations (1:3–2:16)
- II. Judgment Oracles against Israel ([chaps. 3–6](#))

III. Visions of Divine Retribution (7:1–9:10)

IV. Salvation Oracles (9:11–15)

By combining judgment oracles against the nations with judgment oracles against Israel, the book teaches that in judgment God shows no favoritism (Rom. 2:1–11). Israel is no more privileged than other nations, either in being elected or in punishment (Amos 9:7).

During the reign of the covenant breaker, Jeroboam II (793–753), under whose kingship Amos begins his prophetic ministry, there is peace and prosperity as Jonah the son of Ammitai had prophesied (Amos 1:1–2; 2 Kings 14:25). The combination of prosperity with social inequity, however, emboldens the elite in their corruption.

Amos, like all true prophets, is not buffaloed by Israel's repulsive ritual formalities (4:4–5; cf. 1 Sam. 12:22, 23; Isa. 1:11; Mic. 6:6–8; Matt. 23:23). He, along with other prophets, is not repudiating the sacrificial system as such but recognizes that liturgy is worthless without covenant fidelity. The prophet attacks two major areas of sin commonly indicted by the prophets: idolatry (5:26) and social injustice (2:6–8; 4:1). As double punishment, *I AM* will exile Israel from its land and then redistribute it among foreigners: “Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country” (7:17). As the aristocrats defraud the poor of their lands, so *I AM* will defraud them of theirs (Amos 2:6–7; 3:10; 4:1; 5:7, 10–12; 6:4–7; 8:4–6; cf. Mic. 2:1–3, 8–9; 3:1–3, 9–11; 7:5–6; Hos. 5:10; 12:7–8; Isa. 1:15, 17, 23; 3:13–15; 5:8–10; 10:1–2; 33:15).

In a series of five visions Amos represents the delay of God's wrath and inevitable infliction. At first, due to Amos's intervention, God relents from punishing Israel, as in the visions of the locusts and fire (7:1–3, 4–6.) But God will not always relent. In Amos's next vision, that of the “wall” (i.e., Israel) and the “plumb line” (i.e., Torah), Israel's collapse is represented as imminent and inevitable. In the third vision ([chap. 8](#)) Israel has become like a basket of overripe summer fruit that is to be thrown out like so much garbage. Next, Amos's vision of *I AM* standing beside the altar (9:1) and the collapse of the temple shows that none of the guilty escape God's judgment.

But thrown-out garbage and collapsed walls and temples are not God's last words. “In that day” (see above) *I AM* will rebuild the “tent” of David that is fallen, will extend his salvation to Edom — representing the converted nations, who are now called by the name of the God of Israel — and will bring universal prosperity in the Land God had promised Abraham (9:11–15). This salvation oracle finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his church (Acts 15:16–17) and finds

its consummation in the heavenly Jerusalem and in the new heavens and the new earth (Heb. 11:13–16; 12:22–24; Rev. 21:1–22:6).

3. Hosea

Hosea's preaching reflects the relative calm of Israel under Jeroboam II (2:5, 8, 13) and the later turmoil in domestic (7:3–7; 13:10–11) and foreign affairs (7:8–12 ; 12:1). The Syro-Ephraimite war (2 Kings 15:27–30; 16:5–9; Isa 7:1–9) stands behind Hosea's messages in 5:8–10. Israel's political vacillation between Egypt and Assyria is reflected in 5:13; 7:11; 8:9–10; 9:3; 11:5; 12:1. This vacillation finally brings an end to the Northern Kingdom, but not before the end of Hosea's prophetic ministry (13:16).

The book of Hosea, after the superscript, has two major sections:

- I. The Lesson from Hosea's Family (1–3)
- II. Hosea's Prophetic Messages (4–14)

As *I AM*'s earthly counterpart, Hosea enacts *I AM*'s salvation of the prostitute nation by commanding Hosea to marry a prostitute. The stages of that relationship include (1) betrothal to Gomer, a whore (representing Israel), with a view to having children destined for destruction (Hos. 1:2; cf. Jer. 2:2); (2) his marriage to her and their children;¹⁴ (3) his wife's adultery (3:1; cf. Jer. 5:7; Ezek. 16:15–34); (4) estrangement (3:3–4; cf. Jer. 3:8–10; Ezek. 16:35–52); and (5) restoration (3:5; cf. Ezek. 16:53–63).

Gomer's promiscuous infidelity movingly symbolizes Israel's unfaithfulness to *I AM*'s covenantal relationship. Hosea calls his wayward wife to return to him (2:7, 14, 19, 20). For Hosea, Israel's hope and restoration to the Land lie not in *I AM*'s oath but in *I AM*'s ability to love freely. Hosea announces that *I AM* will bring Israel again into the wilderness so that Israel can return her thoughts to *I AM*, renew the covenant, and receive the Land (2:14–23). In the face of Israel's insolence, *I AM* graciously responds from his love (11:8–9).¹⁵

In his messages Hosea declares that the imminent judgment and exile of the Northern Kingdom will be a return to captivity as in the captivity in Egypt (7:16; 8:13; 9:3, 6, 17; 11:5). The symbolism of marriage shows that to “know *I AM*” (2:20; 4:1; 5:4; 6:3, 6; 13:4 NRSV) denotes covenant intimacy, loyalty, and obedience, not merely correct information about him.

In his oracles of reproach, in the form of a lawsuit, Hosea accuses the nation of “lying, murder, stealing and adultery” (4:2). *I AM*'s real contention is against

the religious establishment for its failure to teach sound theology (4:4–9; 5:1–15). As a result of their failure, all Israel will reap the whirlwind (8:7; see [chaps. 8–9](#)). Hosea’s call for repentance went unheeded (6:1–3); the people offered liturgy, not covenant fidelity (6:6).

Nevertheless, whoredom, guilt, and relentless punishment are not God’s last word. The oracles in the last chapter confidently appeal to stricken Israel to return to her true Lover and reject her idols with a promise of *I AM*’s healing love ([chap. 14](#)).

Micah

Micah distributes his oracles in a threefold, alternating pattern of judgment oracles followed by salvation. John T. Willis divides the book of Micah into [chapters 1–2](#), 3–5, 6–7, each beginning with the command “Hear”/“Listen.”¹⁶ The salvation oracles pertain in part to the remnant that survives either the Assyrian invasion or the Babylonian—it matters not which. The preservation of a remnant of Israel resolves the tension between Israel’s immediate doom and ultimate hope.

In the first cycle, Israel is threatened with exile on account of their sin (Mic. 1:2–2:11). *I AM*, however, will gather his elect remnant into Jerusalem to survive the Assyrian siege and after that become their King (2:12–13). In the second cycle, after threatening to dismantle Jerusalem for the conspiracy of the elite against the poor (3:1–12), *I AM* will exalt Jerusalem high above the nations (4:1–5) and there reassemble the afflicted remnant, who will restore God’s dominion over the earth (4:6–8; see [chap. 28](#)). In other words, the greater kingdom of the new David will be on a restored Land and be geographically centered in Mount Zion. “In days to come” the psalmist’s idealization of Zion will be elevated above all the mountains as a magnet to attract all nations to worship there (cf. Amos 9:14–15; Hos. 1:10; Isa 2:1–5, 9:1–9; 9:10–16; 26:15–20; Mic. 4:1–5:15; 7:8–19).

In the third cycle, a remnant of the chosen people from the spiritually depraved (6:1–16) and disintegrating nation (7:1–7) will be forgiven and saved by God and triumph victoriously over sin (7:8–10). No matter how stained and tattered the world becomes, God purposes to triumph over Satan and his minions will prevail through a forgiven remnant that gathers around the Messiah (cf. Rom 16:20).

5. First Isaiah

The first book of Isaiah has five parts:

- I. *I AM* is the Holy One of Israel (1–12)
- II. The Day of *I AM* in All the Earth (13–23)
- III. The Little Apocalypse (24–27)
- IV. Judgment and Salvation (28–35)
- V. Narrative on Isaiah and Hezekiah (36–39)

The book of Isaiah begins with an oracle calling the nation to repentance, after already having being disciplined repeatedly under the mighty hand of God (1:2–20; see above). But the nation rejects God’s offer that, though her sins be crimson, he will make them white as snow. They offer liturgy instead of social justice (1:10–17), so *I AM* will turn his hand against them (1:24). Isaiah draws his Song of the Vineyard (5:1–7) to this conclusion: “*I AM* looked for justice *mišpāt* but saw bloodshed *mišpāh* for righteousness *šēdāqā* but heard cries of distress *šēāqā*” This reproach explains why *I AM* sentenced Jerusalem and Judah to disaster (3:1–4) and why he called Isaiah to harden his unrepentant people (6:1–8; see p. 836). Nevertheless, salvation oracles counterpoint the judgment oracles: Zion will be exalted above the nations (2:1–5; cf. Mic. 4:1–14).

[Chapters 7–11](#) contain judgment and salvation oracles delivered during Judah’s war with Israel and Syria (see [chap. 26](#)). Isaiah challenges Ahaz to ask for a sign to prove he should trust *I AM* and not to form an alliance with Assyria. Although the unfaithful king declines the challenge, Isaiah gives him a sign nonetheless. With his son, “A Remnant Will Return,” in hand, Isaiah predicts “The virgin¹⁷ will be with child and will give birth to a son” (7:14). The son of the virgin will eat the diet of the poor, curds and honey — in contrast to the elite who stay inflamed with wine and have no regard for sound theology (5:11–12) — in order to know *l’dā’tô* not “before he knows” [contra TNIV] or “by the time he knows” [contra NRSV]) to choose the right and reject the wrong (7:15). Isaiah fathers another son, “Quick to the Plunder and Swift to the Spoil.”

Isaiah’s disciples are to write down and seal his prophecy like a law so that it can be shown that his words are fulfilled by events (see 8:16; cf. 2, 20; Deut. 18:21, 22; Jer. 28:9; 32:12–14, 44). In addition to fulfilled prophecies, Isaiah and his children are signs and symbols from *I AM* to reinforce that his words should be trusted and obeyed. Only by that trust and obedience will the light dawn for Israel.

In the midst of ensuing darkness to fall upon Galilee — a metaphor for Assyria’s hegemony over the land — Isaiah prophesies,

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; ...
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from
that time on and forever. (9:1, 6–7)

These glorious promises are being fulfilled in Jesus Christ and will be consummated at his eschaton, when he rules universally.

The first section of Isaiah ends with a Hymn of the Redeemed ([chap. 12](#)).
(For Section 11, see [chapter 28](#).)

In Section 111, Isaiah's unique term for Jerusalem is Ariel (e.g., 29:1, 2, 7), which means "burning hearth."¹⁸ If this is his meaning, the metaphor implies the city will be the place where the people and their leaders will be sacrificed.

Section IV ([chaps. 28–35](#)) also contains a mixture of judgment and salvation. Like the first and third sections, it too ends with a celebration of Zion's future glory (cf. [chaps. 12](#), 27).

Section V (chaps. 36–39) essentially has two parts: (1) Through Isaiah's word and Hezekiah's faith the angel of *I AM* vanquishes Sennacherib; (2) Hezekiah's sickness and foolish self-confidence prompt Isaiah to predict the nation's exile in Babylon, thus preparing the way for the Second Book of Isaiah.

6. Zephaniah

Zephaniah is the only prophet whose genealogy is traced through several generations back to "Hezekiah" (1:1). Why would he go back to Hezekiah unless this was King Hezekiah? Therefore Zephaniah was probably in the royal family and lived in Jerusalem. Zephaniah's denunciation of mixing idolatry with the worship of *I AM* points to a date before Josiah's reform. If so, it can be argued that that God used this prophet's ministry to turn the nation around in 622 BC. Zephaniah mentions the coming destruction of Nineveh, so we know he prophesied before 612 BC at the very least.

Apart from the superscript, his book has two parts:

I. Judgment in the Day of *I AM*¹⁹ (1:2–3:8)

II. Purification and Restoration of Judah's Remnant (9:9–20)

I AM's judgment will fall on earth, as in the days of Noah, once again undoing the creation from fish to birds to beasts to humans (1:2–3), and on Judah in particular (vv. 4–13) on account of its idolatry (vv. 4–6), alliances with foreign powers out of unbelief in *I AM* (v. 8), violence and injustice (v. 9), and deism, in its belief that God is not involved in human affairs (v. 12). As a result, God will curse the apostates with the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28:38–40 (1:13). Verses 10–11 describe the actual route the Babylonians will take as they come through Jerusalem in the invasion.

Zephaniah then describes the Day of *I AM* (1:14–17). Human strength (v. 14), human structures (v. 16), and human resources (v. 18) are all worthless for protecting one from God's judgment. The people have placed their faith in the wrong things and cannot hide from *I AM*, because he will personally search for them. When he finds them, nobody will be able to stand before him.

In 2:1–3 Zephaniah calls the shameless nation to repent before it is too late. Perhaps Josiah's reform due to the discovering of the Book of the Law in the temple is abetted by the preaching of Zephaniah (see [chap. 26](#).I.E.4). Nevertheless, Josiah's reform did not go deep enough into the soul of the nation to remove the stain of Manasseh's profound evil. Josiah can only postpone judgment. Therefore the prophet continues with his description of certain judgment. Zephaniah uses the word *perhaps* in 2:3. This does not imply uncertainty as to whether God will save anyone or whether anyone will repent. Rather, the word preserves the absolute sovereignty of God. It is entirely up to God.

In 2:4–15 judgment oracles are pronounced against Philistia (vv. 4–7) in the west, Moab and Ammon in the east (vv. 8–11), Ethiopia in the south (v. 12), and Assyria in the north (vv. 13–15), perhaps representing the four corners of the earth. In any case, *I AM* will judge the whole earth for defying his rule and for messing around with his chosen people.

In his judgment against Jerusalem (3:1–7) Zephaniah mentions four groups: princes, judges, prophets, and priests. All of these have forsaken their intended function of preserving the society. Instead, they are destroying the society (3:3). They are no longer just, but God is just and will punish them.

Again, however, the last word is restoration for the remnant (3:8–20). Zephaniah begins this section with a command to the remnant to “wait.” This is a request to trust God to carry out his promises. “The day” (v. 8) must refer to the tribulation when God will judge “all the earth.” The book concludes with a song celebrating God's faithfulness for restoring Israel (3:14–20).

Nahum

After the Jerusalem has been purged of its dross (Isa. 3:1–4:1), *I AM*, through his faithful remnant, will transform Israel to become once again the socially and economically just society he intended (Isa. 1:27–28). In that day Zion will be glorious. By contrast, wicked Nineveh’s just destruction by *I AM* is irreversible: “Your injury is fatal” (Nah. 3:19). This is the implied message of Nahum in the canon.

B. PreExilic Prophets of the Neo-Babylonian Period (612–597 BC)

Prophets who prophesied during or after the collapse of the Assyrian Empire (612–605 BC) include Jeremiah (626–586) and Habbukuk, who prophesied after Assyria fell to the Babylonians in 612, but before Nebuchadnezzar, the founder of Neo-Babylonian Empire, deported Josiah’s young son, Jehoiachin, to Babylon in 597 (2 Kings 24:8–17). Nebuchadnezzar’s first deportations occurred as early as 605, when Daniel and his friends were taken captive (Dan. 1:1). The books of Kings (see [chap. 26](#)) and Lamentations (see [chap. 6](#)) also are written at this time.

1. Jeremiah

Jeremiah’s ministry spans the period from Josiah’s reform at the end of the Assyrian dominance to Nebuchadnezzar’s two invasions of Judah in 597 and 586, the fall of Jerusalem, and a short time thereafter. Lamentations is also composed in the rubble of fallen Jerusalem.

The book of Jeremiah can be structured this way:

- I. The Call of the Prophet (1)
- II. A Book of Judgment and Salvation Oracles (2–35)
 - ⊃⊃⊃A. Oracles chiefly of judgment against Judah and the House of David (2–29)
 - ⊃⊃⊃B. Book of consolation, promising Jerusalem’s restoration (30–33)
 - ⊃⊃⊃C. Appendix (34–35)
- III. Sufferings and Persecutions of the Prophet (36–38)

IV. Fall of Jerusalem and Its Aftermath (39–45)

V. Judgment on the Nations (46–51)

VI. Historical Appendix (52)

This outline shows that judgment, especially the final curse of exile, is the dominant note in the book (Lev. 26:31–33; Deut. 28:49–68). Jeremiah also condemns kings, prophets, and people ([chaps. 21–24](#)).

The nation's continuing economic and social injustices persuade Jeremiah that Israel's response to the reform of Josiah is superficial (6:14; 8:4–7). He inveighs against the nation's idol worship (11:13; 19:13), pride (13:9), and failure to keep the Sabbath (17:19–27), but above all — like Amos, Micah, and Isaiah before him — his principal complaint is against Jerusalem's unjust social, political, and economic system. Jerusalem has become worse than Sodom — there is not an honest person to provide *I AM* a reason to spare the city (5:1–9).

Jeremiah pictures *I AM* fighting against the city in a great battle in which the enemy invades from the north, the weakest point in Jerusalem's defenses (4:5–7). To graphically depict Jerusalem's imminent subjugation to the Babylonians, Jeremiah binds himself in the wooden yoke bars of an ox ([chap. 28](#)). The prophet Hananiah, however, convinced of the inviolability of Israel's covenants, takes the yoke bars from Jeremiah's neck, breaks them into pieces, and declares that *I AM* will break the yoke of Babylon within two years. Jeremiah leaves, but later confronts Hananiah and denounces him, not for being a faker but for being a lying prophet that *I AM* has sent to seduce the rebellious people into a false confidence, even as *I AM* used a lying spirit to entice Ahab to his death at Ramoth Gilead (Jer. 4:10; 1 Kings 22:19–22). Jeremiah later responds that the Babylonian yoke will not be of wood but of iron ([chap. 28](#))!

Nevertheless, Jeremiah's book is not devoid of oracles of salvation ([chaps. 30–33](#)). After years of preaching doom and gloom, he offers a message of hope literally “out of the blue” even while Jerusalem is under the Babylonian siege in 586. “Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land” (Jer. 32:15). These promises are certain because God will make a new covenant, enabling his people to keep Torah (31:31–34; see pp. 439–41). To symbolize Israel's restoration and future occupation of the Land and to symbolize his own faith in the oracles of hope God had given him, Jeremiah redeems a piece of family land while the Babylonians build their siege ramps to take the city (32:8–25). Sword, famine, and pestilence are not God's last word; salvation is (32:36–44). God's covenant with Israel and David is as certain as day and night coming at their appointed times ([chap. 33](#)). God's covenant promises are so irrevocable that he himself will cleanse the people and restore their fortunes.

Jeremiah also introduces significantly new notions regarding the Land. He predicts the exile will last seventy years (25:11–12; cf. 2 Chron. 26:20; Dan. 9:2; Zech. 7:5). Moreover, he proclaims that Israel’s theological existence is not dependent on being in the Land. Now that Israel finds herself in exile, she has to learn that being in the Land is no longer seen as a necessary source of existence. She was constituted as a nation through historical events before her settlement in the Land. For its theological significance, Israel can also exist in the wilderness and in the exile. Until the seventy years of exile are ended, the nation should settle down and live life normally ([chap. 29](#)). Nevertheless, Israel continues to see being out of the Land in the Diaspora as an abnormal existence.

The lonely prophet, rejected by his people for his unpopular message of judgment, lives long enough to see his prophecies fulfilled. He lives in politically turbulent times as Egypt and Babylon contest the region. He repeatedly prophesies Babylon’s victory to become *I AM*’s scourge. His prophecies that the city and temple are doomed to fall to the Babylonians sound like treason (Jer. 7:2–15; 26:2–6). When Jerusalem falls to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king commissions his commander to care for the prophet, whose fame has spread to the heart of the empire (39:11–14).

2. *Habakkuk*

Until the day God avenges the Babylonians and restores Jerusalem, the just live by faith (Hab. 2:1–4), waiting with confidence for the fulfillment of *I AM*’s unfailing promise that the wicked will be destroyed (2:5–19) and his legitimate claim to the whole world will be universally acknowledged (3:1–16). This is the message of Habakkuk—and in that perspective on history saints rejoice in *I AM* (3:17–19).

C. Exilic Prophets (597–539 BC)

Prophets who serve after Jehoiachin is deported to Jerusalem include, besides Jeremiah, Ezekiel (592–572), Obadiah (585), and “Second Isaiah”^{[20](#)} (chaps. 40–55; 540 BC).^{[21](#)} Their oracles are also in the form of judgment (e.g., Ezek. 24), repentance (e.g., Jer. 18), and restoration (e.g., Ezek. 37).

1. *Ezekiel*

The book of Ezekiel has three parts:

- I. Oracles of Judgment against Israel (1–24)
- II. Oracles of Judgment against the Nations (25–32)
- III. Oracles of Consolation for Israel (33–48)

To strike at the heart of Israel's false confidence in her election, Ezekiel portrays Jerusalem — to him, a synecdoche for the nation — as a foundling whom God saved from certain death (chap 16). Later, *I AM* married her, adorned his bride, and made her his queen. But his wife used her fame to prostitute herself in the lewd promiscuity of pagan fertility cults. This image portrays the introduction of a pagan hierarchical system that replaced Israel's originally just society with social injustices that favor the rich and powerful ([chaps. 16](#), 23). These injustices, which even include the killing of children, seal Jerusalem's doom.

On January 19, 586 BC, however, Ezekiel's prophecy undergoes a profound transformation. On that day, according to Ezekiel 33:21, a fugitive who escaped from Jerusalem informs him, "The city has fallen." With the announcement that his oracles of reproach and judgment have been fulfilled, Ezekiel is filled with glorious visions of Israel's salvation. He likens the Return to a return to Eden (34:25–30). For him, Israel's restoration is assured, because *I AM*'s name must be upheld among the nations. A failure to restore Israel would bring dishonor upon himself (39:25–29). The reassembled nation will be purified in heart and spirit and united in one flock under *I AM* as their Shepherd (36:16–38; 37:24).

In the book of Ezekiel, *I AM*, city, and temple are restored in the Land (43:1–5; 44:4; 48:35). The promise of restoration is combined with the covenant formula, "I will be their God." The book is drawn to conclusion on a glorious note: a vision of *I AM* returning to his city and temple and reestablishing his residence in the midst of his people (40:1–48:35). This is the last of Ezekiel's "visions of God," probably a proto-apocalyptic idiom (40:2).^{[22](#)}

Ezekiel's visions represent spiritual realities, not physical geography (1:1), as seen in his initial vision of God enthroned on a palladium that is supported by four cherubim and moves about by intersecting wheels (cf. Ezek. 1). The temple Ezekiel envisions has no more tangible reality than that palladium or the skeletons in his famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (37:1–14). Aspects of his temple vision are fantastic and stylized elements, suggesting the figurative, symbolic character and ideational function. Daniel I. Block comments,

The high mountain on which he observes the new city is reminiscent of

the high and holy mountain of Yahweh encountered earlier in 17:22 and 20:40, but also has affinities with mythical Mount Zaphon on which dwelt Baal, the storm deity of the Canaanites, and with Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek gods. The river, whose source lies within the temple complex itself, flows through the Judean desert increasing dramatically in size, and turning the wasteland into an Edenic paradise, even healing ... the Dead Sea (47:1–12). The plan of the city is idealized as a perfect square with three gates punctuating each side to prove admittance for the twelve tribes.... The apportionment of the land of Israel among the tribes to a large extent disregards topographic and historical realities. The dimensions of the temple and city are dominated by multiples of five, with twenty-five being a particularly common number. All in all Ezekiel's scheme appears highly contrived, casting doubt on any interpretation that expects a literal fulfillment of the plan.²³

In its canonical context, this idealized, visionary temple symbolizes the spiritual temple that begins with Christ's body and is now being built up as a spiritual temple in his church (see below).

2. Second Isaiah

Isaiah opens his second book (see pp. 66–67) with lines made famous by Handel's oratorio *The Messiah*: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people" (Isa. 40:1 KJV). The "ye" is plural — that is to say, the setting of his call is once again the heavenly court where the prophet finds himself in the company of *I AM*'s messengers. But whereas in his first book ([chaps. 1–39](#)) he is called to announce judgment on Judah (6:1–13), in the second book (chaps. 40–55) Isaiah is called to be a minister of consolation to the exiles, whose punishment is sufficient (40:1–9). He responds to the call to cry out, "What shall I cry?" (v. 6).²⁴

Isaiah's "old" prophecies about Jerusalem's severe affliction under the Assyrian hammer blows and yet being spared from being captured have been fulfilled, and his predictions of exile in Babylon are fulfilled. Now as one of the exiles he prophesies new things. Against all expectations Isaiah predicts—no prophet of the pagan gods makes such an outlandish prediction (41:21–29)—that Cyrus, who does not know *I AM* (45:4), will rebuild Jerusalem and—get this!—he will rebuild *I AM*'s temple (44:27). Isaiah even predicts that Cyrus will capture Babylon: *I AM* "says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,' " and "says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of

... to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut” (45:1). Herodotus records that Cyrus diverted the waters of the Euphrates into a swamp and found open the water gates under Babylon’s wall, which are closed in war to divert the river into a defensive moat around the city. *I AM* summons Cyrus by name and gives him the honorific titles of *I AM*’s shepherd-king and “anointed” king (44:28–45:4). Isaiah’s amazing prophecies leave the exiles without excuse for not trusting *I AM* and obeying his command through Isaiah to flee Babylon (48:14–22).

Like Jeremiah ([chaps. 30–33](#)) and Ezekiel ([chaps. 33–48](#)), Second Isaiah is a book of consolation. These books all associate restored Israel’s ideal future with a new covenant, a covenant of peace (see [chap. 15](#); also Isa. 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer. 24:4–6; 31:31–33; 32:40; 33:21; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26). In the interim, the hope that Israel will return to the land revives the people and sustains them (Isa. 40:29–31; Ezek. 37:1–14). In other words, the homeless nation must begin anew by trusting *I AM*’s fidelity to keep his oath to Abraham and his words to them through true prophets. Israel’s future hope is rooted in God, not in herself.

As for the disconsolate exiles, Isaiah exhorts them to return to Jerusalem with predictions and logical arguments with unparalleled rhetoric. *I AM* stirs up “one from the north” and “one from the rising sun” (41:25) — Cyrus came from Persia in the east and conquered Media in 549 BC—to launch Israel on an exodus from Babylon that will eclipse her exodus from Egypt (Isa. 43:16–19; 48:20–21; 51:9–11; 52:11–12).

Isaiah’s unique contribution to Old Testament theology is his anonymous suffering servant songs. As Cyrus is Israel’s political savior, so the Suffering Servant is their spiritual savior. In the first song the rejected servant brings justice to the nations and inaugurates a covenant for the people (42:1–9).²⁵ In the second song, a soliloquy, the servant announces that he will become a light to the nations through the deaf and blind Israel’s rejection of him (44:18–25; 49:1–7).²⁶ In the third song (50:4–11) the submissive servant learns by his daily sufferings “to know the word that sustains the weary” and to set his face like a flint, because *I AM* God “helps me.” His example instructs those who fear *I AM* to “trust in the name of *I AM* and rely on their God” (v. 10 TNIV).

The climactic fourth song (52:13–53:12) celebrates the gospel of Jesus Christ. Israel “made his grave with the wicked.... Though *I AM* makes his life an offering for sin, he [the servant] will see his offspring and prolong his days” (53:9–10 NRSV, NIV). In other words, the song proclaims the servant’s death for sin and his resurrection from the tomb (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3). According to the

index in *The Greek New Testament* (2nd ed., United Bible Society), this song is quoted or referred to thirty-nine times in the New Testament (cf. Acts 8:32–33). Through it Jesus conflates his unexpected roles as Suffering Servant and Messiah. He is the Suffering Servant who gives his life in the place of his sheep so that they, with him, may have eternal life.²⁷

3. Obadiah

What Nahum is to Assyria in the preexilic context, Obadiah is to Edom in the exilic context (v. 1). *I AM*'s program of salvation seems to go down the drain when Edom prospers and gloats over Jerusalem's defeat. But Obadiah assures *I AM*'s people's troubled faith that the tables will be turned. Edom will be cut off forever for mistreating his brother (v. 10), but "deliverers [i.e., God's transformed people] will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be *I AM*'s" (v. 21).

C. PostExilic Prophetic Oracles

Postexilic prophets include Haggai (520 BC), Zechariah (520), so-called "Third Isaiah" (Isaiah 56–66; 525 BC),²⁸ Malachi (458–433), and possibly Joel. Their oracles take the form of oracles of reproach (Mal. 1:6–14), repentance (Hag. 1), and restoration (Hag. 2). The books of Esther and Chronicles (see [chap. 27](#)) and Ezra-Nehemiah ([chap. 28](#)) are also written in this historical context.

Haggai and First Zechariah

Haggai's book consists of four clearly dated prophecies:

- I. A Call to Rebuild the Temple (1:1–15)
- II. God's Greater Temple and Blessings (2:1–9)
- III. God's Blessing for a Defiled People (2:10–19)
- IV. God's Victory for His People (2:20–23)

Zechariah consists of two books:

- I. Encouragement for the Present (1–8)

II. The Future of God's Kingdom (9–14)

Although Cyrus allows and even encourages the exiles to return to Jerusalem, the returnees encounter difficulties and feel despair (see [chap. 28](#)). Instead of the kingdom of God breaking forth in power and glory as might have been expected from Second Isaiah, the returnees meet opposition both within and without. Instead of prevailing in prayer as Jacob had at the beginning of their history, the returnees fall into spiritual despondency and stop building the second temple.

Haggai and Zechariah prophesy to motivate the Judahites to rebuild *I AM*'s temple. The need to rebuild is urgent, because temples in their world are the center for administering the political, economic, judicial, social, and religious life of the nation. In other words, rebuilding *I AM*'s temple would symbolize his rule over the life of his people and his prophesied rule of the world (cf. Zech. 1:14–17). Judah's prosperity and meaning in salvation history depend on the elevation of this symbol. To provoke the Judahites out of their apathy, God in severe mercy afflicts them with economic oppression and then sends Haggai and Zechariah to explain and heal their malady (Hag. 1:6).

These prophets begin their preaching in 520 BC — about three years before the end of Jeremiah's predicted seventy years, according to one reckoning (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). Haggai blames the Judahites' economic frustration — they planted much and reaped little (1:5–6) — on their failure to give priority to rebuilding *I AM*'s ruined temple over building their paneled houses (1:4; cf. 1 Kings 7). Zechariah motivates them to rebuild by piling up eight visions that put Jerusalem and temple into the comprehensive scheme of salvation history (1:7–6:8). Israel's rebuilding fulfills Jeremiah's vision that the exile will last seventy years (Jer. 29:10; Zech. 1:12). Both Haggai and Zechariah prophesy that the temple, which is an institution and not a building, is predestined, in spite of its present lack of splendor, for greater glory than Solomon's temple (Hag. 2:9). First Zechariah ends with seven oracles, each containing a vivid image of Jerusalem's future splendor (8:1–17).

2. *Malachi*

Apart from the title (1:1), the book of Malachi has three parts:

- I. Introduction: God's Faithful Covenant Love for Israel Affirmed (1:2–5)
- II. Israel's Unfaithfulness Rebuked (1:6–2:16)

III. *I AM*'s Coming Announced (2:17–4:16)

It is clear in Malachi that the prophesied glorious age of the exilic prophets, Haggai, and early Zechariah, including the establishing of a new covenant, failed to materialize. Jerusalem and its temple continue to be nothing more than the backwater Persian sub-province. Instead of the nations bringing their wealth to Jerusalem, Jerusalem continues to pay heavy taxes to the Persians. The reason for this, as Malachi's preaching exposes, is that the priests at the rebuilt temple are guilty of malfeasance (1:13) and false teaching (2:8), and the people, though having one God and Father, are guilty of violating the covenant's fundamental precepts of morality (2:10). Their liturgy is a sham. For Malachi, the revitalization of the nation's morality is a prerequisite for the revitalization of its liturgy.

In place of Isaiah's messenger to announce the good news to the exiles of their restoration, Malachi looks forward to a messenger who must come first to prepare the way before *I AM*, whose coming will be as a purifying fire (3:1–5; 4:1–3). The remnant that returns to the Land must await for the full return to the Land of the tribes in a united Israel under a Messiah who will bring the earlier golden vision to fruition (Zech. 10:9–12; cf. Mic. 5:1–6).

3. *Second Zechariah*

Second Zechariah (9–14) begins with *I AM*'s victory march through Damascus, Tyre, and the cities of Philistia, cutting off instruments of war (9:1–12), followed by the command, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9 translation mine; cf. Matt. 21:1–11; John 12:12–16). In another snapshot, however, Zechariah pictures the death of *I AM*'s shepherd king, fulfilled in Jesus Christ: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my companion— Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (13:17 translation mine; cf. Matt. 26:32–35; Mark 14:27–31; Luke 22:31–34).

In yet another prophecy, *I AM*'s spirit produces humility over Israel's piercing of God himself, also fulfilled in Christ: "I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child" (12:10; cf. John 1:14; 19:37). And still another: "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of

Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity” (13:1; cf. John 7:31–39).

This book concludes with a snapshot of the surviving nations coming to worship *I AM* at the Feast of Tabernacles. In that day Jerusalem will be so holy that even the bells of its unclean horses and also the cooking pots will display what was written on the plate of the high priest’s turban: “HOLY TO *I AM*” (14:16–21; see [chap. 28](#).II.B.3).

4. Third Isaiah

Isaiah’s third book (56–66) is also addressed to the returnees. He delivers messages of reproach (56:9–57:13), required repentance (59:1–13), and restoration of the covenant blessings in the Land (60:1–22). His ministry in this book is a foreshadow of Christ, who fulfills the prophecy, “The Spirit of the Lord *I AM* is on me, because *I AM* has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of *I AM*’s favor” (Isa. 61:1–2; cf. Luke 3:22; 4:18–19).

Haggai and Zechariah had shown the importance of rebuilding the temple in the scheme of salvation history, but more important is obedience to God’s word. Third Isaiah prophesies, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things ...? These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word” (Isa. 66:1–2 TNIV).

For those who repent, the Redeemer will come to Zion (59:20). When he comes in his glory, as he certainly will, he commands faithful Jerusalem,

“Arise, shine, for your light come,
and the glory of *I AM* rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but *I AM* rises upon you and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (60:1–2)

“Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies,
and never again will foreigners drink the new wine
for which you have toiled;

but those who harvest it will eat it and praise *I AM*,
and those who gather the grapes will drink it
in the courts of my sanctuary.” (62:8–9)

Moreover, the exilic and postexilic prophets begin to envision a new heaven and a new earth. In proto-apocalyptic literature, Second Isaiah pictures the present heaven vanishing away like smoke and the present earth wearing out like a garment (51:6). Third Isaiah proclaims visions of a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:12). In that day the new Jerusalem has no sun or moon, but only the dazzling light of God (60:19–20).

D. From the Cessation of Prophecy to John the Baptist

Prophecy ceased in Israel with Malachi until Israel heard the voice of John the Baptist. Malachi draws prophecy in the Old Testament to its conclusion with the promise that God will send his messenger, “Elijah,” to prepare the way for the future coming of God to his people (Mal. 3:1; 4:5).

No declaration is given that prophecy is ending, but after a time it dawns upon some that it has ended. Three times the author of 1 Maccabees (4:46; 9:27; 14:41) — who on the whole is a sober historian of events from the accession of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV (175 BC) to the reign of the high priest John Hyrcanus (134–104) — says prophecy ceased in Israel and implies that this has been true for a considerable length of time. Josephus, the Jewish historian (ca. AD 90), said that at about the time of Artaxerxes of Persia (ca. 450 BC) “the exact succession of the prophets” ceases.²⁹ Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah is a prophet, and no prophet rouses them to embark upon their mission or encourages and directs them. The reformers, who probably succeed the prophets, rebuke the returnees for their sins, and they make no mention of a prophet as their contemporary. Whereas formerly when Israel went to inquire *dārâš* lit. “to seek”) of God, they went to a prophet (1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kings 14:5; 22:5), Ezra devotes himself to the study *dārâš* of the Law of *I AM* and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

Benjamin Sommer says that by the time of the Hasmoneans, true prophecy is largely acknowledged to have ceased, and he notes that Jews resorted to other practices for direct access to *I AM*’s word: the reuse and interpretation of older texts, pseudepigraphy; and various secondary forms of contact with God, such as

the rabbinic *bat qôl*.³⁰ Sommer adds that while Jews in the Second Temple period cease to believe in the continued existence of prophecy, they look forward to a renewal of prophecy with the arrival of the final redeemer:

As a result, at the time of messianic ferment and within messianic groups claims to prophesy were greeted as feasible. The claims to prophesy within such groups were not intended to challenge the notion that prophecy had gone into eclipse earlier on.... One may legitimately speak of a decline of prophecy or a transformation from prophecy to exegesis during the Second Temple period.³¹

In this context John the Baptist suddenly appears in the desert as a brightly burning lamp in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy that "Elijah" would prepare the way for the coming of *I AM* (Mal. 4:5 [3:23]). People throughout all Israel rejoice in his light and hear his testimony that Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah (Matt. 3; 11:1–14; Mark 1:1–11; Luke 3:15–18; John 1:15–34; 5:33–35).

THOUGHT QUESTION

Prepare for your own situation an oracle of reproach, an oracle of repentance, and an oracle of restoration based on the content of the prophetic books.

[1.](#) See also [chapter 19](#) (esp. sections VIII, IX, and XI), where these books are introduced because their content largely pertains to Israel's destiny with reference to the Land.

[2.](#) As in the previous chapter, I lean heavily in this section on the concepts of my colleague, Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180–203.

[3.](#) See *ibid.*

[4.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs: A Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, 94–101.

[6.](#) Exacting usury from the poor was allowed everywhere in the ancient Near East except in Israel (see Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:207n75).

[7.](#) N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 413–28.

[8.](#) Cf. Isa. 13:6, 9–11, 19; 14:4, 12–15; Isa. 34:3–4; Ezek. 32:5–8; Joel 2:10–11, 30–32; 3:4–15.

[9.](#) See Zech. 2:6–8.

[10.](#) See Zech. 14:2a, 3–5, 9; Mark 13:14–19.

[11.](#) See also Amos 9:14–15; Isa. 2:1–5; 9:1–9, 10–16; 26:15–20; 29:16–21; 32:15–20.

[12.](#) Cited by Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), 257 n. 56.

[13.](#) In using the critical terms "First Isaiah," "Second (Deutero-) Isaiah," and "Third (Trito-) Isaiah," I intend to designate different historical horizons, not to indicate any prophets other than the one identified in Isaiah 1:1.

[14.](#) The children's names are "Jezreel" (a reminder of the destruction of the House of Jehu), "No Mercy" (to signify that the time of grace has ended for the Northern Kingdom, but not the Southern), and "Not My People" (to indicate that

Gentiles, not Israel, will become God's people) (Hos. 1:3–11; cf. Ezek. 16:8–14).

[15.](#) Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, trans. Gary Stansell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), xxviii – xxix.

[16.](#) John T. Willis, doctoral dissertation, the basis later for “A Reapplied Prophetic Hope Oracle” in *Studies in Prophecy*, ed. G. W. Anderson (VTSup 26; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 403–17.

[17.](#) See Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2.492.

[18.](#) The Hebrew for “burning hearth” or “altar hearth,” as in Ezek. 43:15–16, sounds similar to “Ariel.”

[19.](#) The prophets, especially Amos and Zephaniah, use the ancient belief in the “Day of *I AM*” to speak of the approaching judgment — of Israel, not of the nations as Israel expected. The expression refers to any specific period of time when the Divine Warrior is glorious in victory: against Babylon (Isa. 13:1–14:32), against Egypt through Babylon (Ezek. 30:2–4), against Israel's oppressors in the future (Zeph. 3:8–20; Joel 3:14–16). But in the present time, prior to the time of God's decisive judgment on the wicked, “the Day of *I AM*” (“that day”) speaks of *I AM*'s glorious victory over wicked Israel (Amos 5:18–20; Zeph. 1:7; “day of *I AM*'s wrath,” 2:2).

[20.](#) See note 13.

[21.](#) Daniel is called a prophet (even by Jesus, Matt. 24:15), but his book is not strictly included among the prophetic books because he is not called to be a prophet, but a ruler within the Babylonian administration. Moreover, his visions are apocalyptic, not prophetic (see [chap. 19](#)).

[22.](#) TDOT, XIII:239, s.v. *רָאָה*.

[23.](#) Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: chapters 25 – 48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 501–2.

[24.](#) Reading *wāʾōmar* with Qumran and LXX, not *wəʾāmar* with MT.

[25.](#) *Ṣāʾaq* (42:2), glossed “cry out,” means to “cry out in distress,” not to “cry out to call attention to oneself” (see R. Albertz, *TLOT*, 2.1089, s.v. *ṣāʾaq*). In these songs the servant's sufferings become more and more pronounced.

[26.](#) In v. 5 the *Kethiv* (“Israel would not be gathered to him”), not the *Qere* (“Israel will be gathered”) is the preferred reading because *lōʾ* cannot be explained away, whereas *lōʾ* is a facilitating reading for the parallel, “to bring Jacob back to him.”

[27.](#) Jesus identified his death with himself as the Son of Man, but the early church identified it with him as Messiah (Acts 3:13–14, 27; cf. Acts 8:34–35).

[28.](#) See note 13.

[29.](#) Josephus reports two incidents of divine revelations to John Hyrcanus, and

there are reports of special revelation being given to the high priests Jaddua (Neh. 12:11) and Onias III (early second century). See James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 296f., 304.

[30.](#) *Bat qôl* means heavenly voice and is often taken as referring to an angel.

[31.](#) Benjamin D. Sommer, “Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating A Reevaluation,” *JBL* 115 (Spring 1996): 46.

Chapter 31

THE GIFT OF LOVE (*HESED*): RUTH

What pleased God was Saint Theresa's deep humility in the midst of her revelations; what pleased men was her light.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.499

I. INTRODUCTION

I AM's sublime attribute of abundant *ḥesed* ("help to the helpless") sustains his program of bringing salvation to earth through Abraham's seed. When his covenant people are utterly helpless to save themselves, he redeems them by demonstrating love and kindness, as we saw in the book of Judges. That attribute inspires true Israel to do the same; in honoring their covenant commitment to *I AM*, they serve him and redeem their covenant partners. This is especially demonstrated in the book of Ruth, which functions in the canon to display *I AM*'s attribute of unfailing love and how it brings about Israel's greatest leader, David, and his greater Son, Jesus Christ.

Great persons, such as Moses and Samuel, for example, often have a birth narrative. The book of Ruth provides the birth narrative of David's ancestors during Israel's darkest hour. The book takes its name, perhaps meaning "Refreshment,"¹ from the book's heroine. In the Hebrew Bible, it is one of the five *Megilloth* (*megillôt*, "rolls") and read during the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). In many Hebrew texts, it comes immediately after Proverbs, probably to flesh out that book's closing idealization of an *ʿēšet ḥayil* ("a noble and competent woman," Ruth 3:11; Prov. 31:10). In the Septuagint, Vulgate, and most modern versions, however, it comes immediately after Judges, setting this burst of heavenly sunshine in the dark, bloody period of the warlords. Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.8) apparently reckoned it to be an appendix to Judges and did not count it separately in his enumerating the total number of books in the canon. As a counterpoint to the grim ending of Judges, the story of Ruth redeems Bethlehem from its associations with the idolatrous priest and the callous priest as recounted in the epilogue of the book of Judges.² Who today would associate Bethlehem with those two heartbreaking events?

The author is anonymous (see above), and although he writes of a time when warlords ruled, he certainly did not write at that time (see Ruth 4:7). Probably he wrote between 1000 BC and 600 BC. He concludes his book with the genealogy of David (ca. 1000 BC; 4:22). The book's language is best dated to the seventh century BC.³ As a masterful, artistic writer who speaks for God, the author begins his book by authoritatively interpreting the end of a famine as due to *I AM*'s intervention. Then he concludes it by authoritatively connecting *I AM*'s

gift — of a baby to Naomi — as the forerunner to King David, Israel’s greatest king (Ruth 1:6; 4:13). A mere human cannot interpret providence so absolutely. By the inclusio of God’s gifts of grain seed and human seed, our artist frames his short story as taking place under the good hand of Providence. His canonical audience is the universal covenant people of God (see [chap. 4](#) above).

Recall that all biblical narrators aim to write history and theology through aesthetic literature. Thus, our author aims to write history, not a novella (“a fictional prose narrative that is longer and more complex than a short novel”), as commonly alleged. He locates his story in time (“when warlords ruled”) and in place (Moab and Bethlehem) and provides a genealogy of David (Ruth 4:18–22), giving the book the texture of real history.⁴ Our consummate narrator teaches his theology almost solely through plot and characterizations — and rarely by inserting interpretative glosses such as frame his book. Before turning to his theology, however, we must first ponder the text’s artistic structure and content.

II. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Leif Hongisto analyzes the first chapter as a chiasm:⁵

- A Famine (1:1)
- B Emigration from Bethlehem (1:1)
- C “Naomi” = “Pleasant” (1:2–5)
- D Leaving Moab for Bethlehem (1:6–7)
- E Naomi says: (1:8–9a)
 - Go*
 - Go back!*
 - May Yahweh show to you kindness hesed*
 - May Yahweh grant to you rest [menuha]*
- F Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth good-bye (1:9–10)
- X “I am too old to conceive” (1:11–13)
- F’ Orpah kisses Naomi good-bye (1:14–15)
- E’ Ruth says: (1:16–17)
 - Where you go I will go*
 - Where you stay I will stay*
 - People of you, people of me*
 - God of you, God of me*
 - Where you die I will die*
 - And there I will be buried*
- D’ Entering Bethlehem from Moab (1:19)
- C’ *Marah* = “bitter” (1:20, 22)
- B’ Immigration to Bethlehem (1:22)
- A’ Barley harvest (1:22)

Hongisto then analyzes the book as a whole as a chiasm:

- A Naomi—Too old to conceive (1:1–22)
- B Possible redeemer introduced (2:1)
- C Ruth and Naomi make a plan (2:2)
- D Ruth and Boaz’s field (2:3)
- E Boaz comes from Bethlehem (2:4)

F Boaz asks, “Whose young woman is that?” (2:5–7)
 G Ruth becomes part of the Boaz clan (2:8–18)
 (Ruth brings ephah of barley and food to Naomi [2:18])
 H Naomi blesses Boaz (2:19)
 I Boaz a potential redeemer (2:20)
 J Ruth joins Boaz’s workers (2:21–23)
 X The plan laid by Naomi and Ruth (3:1–8)
 J’ Ruth identifies herself as Boaz’s handmaid (3:9)
 I’ Ruth challenges Boaz to act as Redeemer (3:9)
 H’ Boaz blesses Ruth (3:10)
 G’ Boaz promises to marry Ruth (3:11–15)
 (Ruth brings 6 measures of barley to Naomi [3:17])
 F’ Naomi asks, “Who are you?” (Heb.) (3:17–18)
 E’ Boaz goes to Bethlehem (4:1)
 D’ Ruth and field (4:2–12)
 C’ Ruth and Naomi’s plan fulfilled: marriage (4:13)
 B’ Redeemer not denied (4:14–16)
 A’ A son was born to Naomi! (4:17)
 Epilogue: What a son! Grandfather of King David (4:19–22)

As in a Bach fugue, its chiastic structure harmonizes with its narrative structure. Its plot develops through five acts:

1. Ruth Emigrates from Moab to Bethlehem (1:1–22)
2. Ruth Gleans in Boaz’s Field (2:1–23)
3. Ruth Proposes Marriage to Boaz (3:1–18)
4. Boaz Redeems Ruth (4:1–12)
5. Ruth Gives Birth to Obed/David (4:13–17)

A. Ruth Emigrates from Moab to Bethlehem (1:1–22)

The first act has two scenes: Elimelech’s household migrating from Bethlehem to Moab, and its bereaved widows returning to Bethlehem.⁶

1. Elimelech’s Household Migrates to Moab (1:1–5)

Scene one (Ruth 1:1–5) provides the historical situation for the drama that follows, and its first episode introduces Ruth’s Israelite in-laws (vv. 1–2). During the bloody and dark days when warlords ruled (see [chap. 21](#) above), the Lord of Hosts (see [chap. 14](#) above) punishes his people by oppressors who plunder their grain (see Judg. 2:14; 6:1) and by a famine that withers their grain (Ruth 1:6, 21; Deut. 28:23). If *I AM* “visits” (*pāqad* v. 6) his people with food, we should assume he also causes the drought.

The names of Ruth’s in-laws, Elimelech (“My God is King”) and Naomi (“Pleasantness”), contrast sharply with the names of their sons, Mahlon and Kilion, a farrago possibly meaning “Sterile and Spent.” The name change from good fortune to misfortune probably reflects Israel’s departing glory of the warlord epoch. The family is identified as Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah (cf. 1 Sam. 17:12). To a connoisseur of the Davidic tradition, the address points to King David. A dynamic equivalent would be, “They were of the House of Tudor, from London, England.” This identification forms an *inclusio* with the genealogy that brings the book to its cymbal-clashing climax, “father of David.”

The first episode features no grain seed; the second, no human seed (Ruth 1:3–5). Naomi’s bereavement is double. First her husband dies, and after her two sons marry Moabite wives — Mahlon, Ruth, and Kilion, Orpah (4:10)⁷ — a questionable theological practice at best, her sons die childless. The repeated “she was left” underscores Naomi’s bereavement. The three surviving widows — especially Naomi — are left in desperate need of *hesed* (unfailing kindness to the helpless). The young widows can remarry and have sons, but Naomi represents herself as too old to have a son to care for her in old age. Moreover, without an heir, Elimelech’s household will lose its inheritance and social immortality in Israel. Naomi is portrayed as an unlikely candidate to play a leading role in salvation history.

2. Return to Bethlehem (1:6–22)

Scene two, whose key word is “return,”⁸ consists of three partial scenes: starting out from Moab (Ruth 1:6–7), along the way to Bethlehem (vv. 8–18), and arrival in Bethlehem (vv. 19–22). The report that “*I AM* had come to the aid of his people” (v. 6) came to Naomi as a herald of hope, calling her to return home (vv. 6–7). The journey along the way features three exchanges between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. In the first, Naomi proves herself a loving covenant partner by petitioning *I AM*, God of Israel, not Chemosh, the vile god of Moab (2 Kings 23:13), to show her daughters-in-law *hesed* and “rest” (i.e., “a

place of settled security”). Perhaps she hopes they will marry Israelite men, for she recommends they return to their mother’s house — and not, as would be normal, to their father’s house (Gen. 38:11; cf. Lev. 22:13 [12]; Num. 30:16 [17]; Deut. 22:21; Judg. 19:2–3). The young widows’ insistence on returning to Bethlehem with their mother-in-law rather than returning to their own mothers in Moab testifies to Naomi’s “pleasantness” and her evaluation of them as showing *hesed* to their deceased husbands.

In the pivotal second exchange (Ruth 1:11–13), Naomi, apparently having second thoughts about all three returning, forces her daughters-in-law to own up to hard reality: they have no future with her. According to the Israelite law of levirate (from Lat. *levir*, “brother”) marriage (Deut. 25:5–9), other sons or close relatives of hers should marry the childless widows and use their seed to preserve the deceased relative’s name and land inheritance. But Naomi considers herself too old to bear and raise sons to marry them, and during Israel’s dark age, she has little hope that a relative will jeopardize his fame and fortune by siring sons neither bearing his name nor adding to his own property. The only sensible thing, she insists, is that they return to Moab. Either consciously or unconsciously, she is testing their covenant fidelity, as *I AM* tests Israel to teach them to live by faith (see p. 596). In any case, she places their interest above her own and resolves to face her dark future alone, without a family provider or a legal protector. With warm affection she kisses them good-bye. They weep.

After their third exchange (Ruth 1:14–18), Orpah opts to go back. Tested to the limit, she chooses to live by sight, not by faith. She proves in the acid test of choice that her *hesed* to Kilion is ultimately based on self-interest and/or social pressure, not on a total dedication to *I AM* and to Kilion’s family. Naomi has committed her daughters-in-law to *I AM*’s *hesed*, but Naomi—without reproaching Orpah—interprets Orpah’s return as a return to her pagan gods, including vile Chemosh (Num. 21:29; Jer. 48:46), whose worship involves child sacrifice (2 Kings 3:27; cf. 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:13). Orpah functions as a foil to Ruth.

Facing the same realities as Orpah, Ruth by faith throws herself through the veil of sight and clings (*dābaq* ; see Gen. 2:24) by faith to Naomi and the living God. Her spirit feels Naomi’s persistent urging to go back as sharp barbs: “Stop afflicting *pāga*^c me,” she says. Her confession, “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16), gives classic expression to true faith, loyalty, and love to God and his people, who are inseparable. According to the calculus of faith, not of sight, she found her security in God and the people of God, not in Moab and her own pagan family. She backs up her confession with an oath: “May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death itself

separates you and me.”⁹ Like Abraham, Ruth leaves her country and family to follow *I AM* to an unseen land. Ruth’s depth of character testifies to her ability to establish God’s kingdom on earth.

Upon their arrival at Bethlehem, Naomi has so aged from her years of bitter distress that the people ask, “Is this Naomi?” Here she interprets her afflictions as *I AM*’s public testimony against her. She renames herself Mara (“Bitterness”) to reflect that she had fallen upon hard times, not that she felt bitter. In her depression she discounts Ruth and thinks of herself as “empty.”

B. Ruth Gleans in Boaz’s Field (2:1–23)

The second act transpires from the beginning of barley harvest in early April (Ruth 1:22), which is associated with Passover, to the end of wheat harvest in late May (2:23), which is associated with Pentecost. The act consists of two scenes: Ruth meets Boaz in his field (vv. 1–17), and Ruth reports to Naomi that night (vv. 18–23).

1. Ruth Meets Boaz in the Field (2:1–17)

The scene shifts from the city to the field of Boaz. The narrator introduces Boaz (= “In Him [i.e., *I AM*] Is Strength”) as “a man of standing” (Heb. *gibbôr hayil*, “a capable and powerful man with wealth” [vv. 2–7], highly respected [4:1–12]), and a relative of Naomi and Ruth. From here on, the unfolding events will prove Boaz worthy of possessing wealth.

The Creator, according to his codified law, gives ownership to the gleanings left by the harvesters to the poor and needy (Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19).¹⁰ Ruth shows her nobility by requesting Naomi to let her go and glean what the harvesters miss. Naomi, who now calls Ruth “my daughter” (i.e., an Israelite, Ruth 2:2, 22; 3:1, 16, 18), grants her permission to claim that right. By sheer chance (at least from the human perspective), Ruth chances — the Hebrew is emphatic — upon a field owned by her unknown relative. This kin of Ruth’s “just then” — a sign of Providence — arrives from Bethlehem (vv. 2–3). The encounter between them contrasts the great social disparity between Boaz, a respected Judahite and wealthy landowner, as compared with Ruth, a foreigner from a nation founded on a scandalous, incestuous relationship (Gen. 19:29–38) and at best a menial slave girl (Ruth 2:13).

Boaz then mediates *I AM*'s blessing of prosperity and protection upon Ruth, testifying to his faith in Israel's God and his respect for the widow. Unlike the men in Judges, he does not treat her as a piece of property. More than that, he materializes this blessing by extraordinary grace. He immediately addresses her as "my daughter," signaling that he too accepts her as a true Israelite (2:8; cf. 3:1, 16, 18). The epithet labels Ruth as a chaste, humble, loving, and lovable young woman. Aware that Ruth is not likely to find favor elsewhere in Israel at this time, Boaz instructs her to glean only with his female slaves, not in anyone else's field. He commands his workers not to lay a hand on the foreigner to chase her off. He even instructs her to drink from their common water jars.

Confounded by Boaz's unexpected outpouring of favors, Ruth asks him why she, a foreigner, has found favor in his eyes. He explains in effect it is due to her *hesed* to Naomi and Elimelech's household, and then he petitions *I AM* to repay her for her kindness. Humbly accepting his grace, Ruth hesitantly claims her new identity as his maidservant *šiphâ* a most lowly slave not eligible for marriage,¹¹ but nevertheless, her new owner's property and responsibility. He, however, elevates her and invites her to share in the savory meal with him and his workers. The meal is so generous that she has some left over. Before they return to glean, he instructs the workers to deliberately pull out sheaves from the shocks for her.¹²

2. Ruth Arrives Home

Upon her arrival home, the loving daughter presents Naomi with the special gift of what she has left over from the savory noonday meal (Ruth 2:18). In addition she bears the three-fifths of a bushel of barley that she has threshed by hand. Overwhelmed by the largess, Naomi asks where she had reaped. Upon learning that Ruth has been working in Boaz's fields, Naomi exclaims, "Blessed be he by *I AM*." Her qualifying clause "who has not stopped showing his kindness [Heb. *hesed*]" may qualify either *I AM*, Boaz, or perhaps an intentional pun to refer to both. If she attributes *hesed* to *I AM*, this practical woman of faith sees behind what appears to be chance encounter and attributes the events to the good hand of God. More than supplying their immediate needs, the offstage Director, as Naomi explains, led Ruth to the field of "one of our close relatives" " (lit. a *gō'ēl*

Although *gō'ēl* is traditionally glossed only as a hyponym, "redeemer," the term more strictly speaking is a superordinate meaning "family protector." As such, Boaz is the closest relative.¹³ He bears several responsibilities: to avenge

the death of a family member (Num. 35:19–21); to buy back family property that had been sold to pay debts (Lev. 25:25; Ruth 4:3–4); and/or to redeem a relative who had sold himself into slavery (Lev. 25:47–49). Moreover, as the nearest relative, Boaz may bear the responsibility of levirate marriage — by his seed, he preserves the name of the deceased (Deut. 25:5–10; Ruth 4:5).

C. Ruth Proposes Marriage to Boaz (3:1–18)

The third act slows down the narrative from the harvesting season to the climactic evening of threshing the grain. Naomi's risky plan — that Ruth steal into bed beside the sleeping Boaz on the threshing floor—forms the story's turning point, as indicated in the chiasmic structure shown above.

This peripeteia contains three scenes: the early evening and preparation at home for marriage (Ruth 3:1–5), the dark of night and Ruth's marriage proposal on the threshing floor (vv. 6–15), and the early morning at home (vv. 16–17).

1. Ruth Prepares Herself for Marriage (3:1–5)

Naomi begins this section by asking two rhetorical questions: “Should I not try to find a home for you?” (Ruth 3:1; “home,” Heb. *mnḥh*, is glossed “rest” in 1:9) and “Is not Boaz ... a kinsman of ours?” (v. 2; “kinsman,” Heb. *mōdāʿat*, is glossed “relative” in TNIV). In the Hebrew idiom, these questions emphatically express Naomi's responsibility to be Ruth's matchmaker and Boaz's responsibility to marry Ruth. Naomi's interest is to provide for Ruth; Ruth's interest is to show *hesed* to her deceased husband.

The matchmaker now initiates a most daring plan that risks Ruth's reputation. First, Naomi instructs Ruth to “wash, perfume, and dress,” that is, prepare herself for the sexual act (cf. Ezek. 16:9–12). Next, Naomi tells Ruth to go down secretly to the threshing floor—a totally countercultural act, for women are traditionally not present at the evening revelries of the threshers (see Ruth 3:14). Ruth is then instructed to lie down (a sexually charged word in Hebrew) and to uncover Boaz's feet (which may be a euphemism for the genitalia).¹⁴ These instructions make up a series of bold actions that lead toward a marriage proposal to Boaz, initiated by Ruth. In spite of Naomi's good intentions, we are faced with the question of whether Naomi is being manipulative. After all, she allows Ruth to think that Boaz is the close relative responsible to marry. But how could Naomi not know — as well as Boaz did — that there was a nearer kinsman who

had that responsibility (see 3:12–13)? Unlike Boaz, Naomi seems willing to slacken *I AM*'s law in contrast to Boaz's rectitude. In any case, she depends on the noble character of both Ruth and Boaz to do the right thing. Ruth's response, "I will do for you all you ask," is a major emphasis of both Ruth and Boaz in this act (3:11). Her response is similar to Mary's to the angel of the Lord: "I am the Lord's servant.... May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

2. *Ruth Proposes Marriage (3:6–15)*

Ruth, who is innocent, risks her reputation to remain loyal to her deceased husband (see Ruth 3:14) by entrusting herself to Naomi, Boaz, and ultimately God. When Boaz turns over in his sleep, to his amazement he finds a woman lying beside him. He asks who she is. Ruth identifies herself as "his servant," using a different Hebrew word than in 2:13. Ruth now slightly elevates herself from a menial slave woman to an *ʾāməâ*, "your marriageable female slave" (3:9). Though submissive, she is creative, not passive clay. Her instruction, "Spread the corner of your garment over me," symbolizes that he marry her (cf. Ezek. 16:18). "Corner" (Heb. *knp*) renders the same Hebrew word glossed "wings" in 2:12. Taking the initiative, she probably triggers Boaz's imagination, flooding him with the memory of his words and prompting him to transform them into action. She explains her bold request: "since you are a *gōʾēl*."

His benediction "I AM bless you" sensitively relieves the anticipated embarrassment that Ruth feels when he turns her down for the moment. His blessing is a heartfelt benediction for her bolder *ḥesed* than her first *ḥesed* of returning with Naomi (see Ruth 2:11). To be loyal to her family, she not only journeys to a foreign land, but once there seeks marriage not for love or money. Boaz, who is accustomed to telling others what to do, humbly says to his slave girl, "I will do for you all you ask" (Ruth 3:11). His exceptional submission is based on the public recognition of Ruth's character. "My fellow townsmen" (Heb. *šaʿar ʿammî*, lit. "gate of my people") refers to the esteemed citizens of Bethlehem who know she is a noble and competent woman (*ʾēšet ḥayil*), a woman rarer than a ruby (Prov. 31:10). The narrator puts this summarizing characterization in Boaz's mouth to underscore Boaz's recognition of their harmonious characters and social standing, for he is a *gibbôr ḥayil* (see Ruth 2:1).

But there is a problem that Naomi may have conveniently overlooked: there is a nearer "kinsman-redeemer" (Heb. *gōʾēl*, the same word rendered "close relative" in 2:20) than Boaz, and it is his duty under God to redeem the family property (Lev. 25:25). Here Boaz exercises *ḥesed* without bending the Law.

Adele Berlin comments, “It is not that by fulfilling his obligation as redeemer that Boaz appears so loyal to the interests of the family; rather his loyalty is in his willingness to relinquish that privilege if law or custom demanded it.”¹⁵

As a token that there will be a redeemer, either the nearer relative or himself, he gives her six seahs of barley. In the predawn hours, Ruth walks home with a bulging bag of barley, weighing anywhere from fifty-eight to ninety-five pounds, slung over her shoulders as her strong legs carry her from the lowlying fields up a steep hill toward Bethlehem.

3. Arrival Home

When Ruth arrives home, Naomi asks, “Who are you?” (Heb. *mî-ʾat* rendered in the TNIV as “How did it go?”). Naomi is not seeking information about Ruth’s physical identity (contra Ruth 3:9), for she calls her “my daughter,” but about her inner identity. With this question, Naomi wants to know how Ruth sees herself. Does she identify herself as a scorned woman, a slave girl, or a wife? At Naomi’s prompting, Ruth relates everything Boaz did and promised. Ruth’s response reveals that she is emerging into the fullness of the new identity she has chosen (see 1:16–17).

The matchmaker knows her man: Boaz will not rest. No obstacle will keep him from immediately keeping his word (see Ruth 3:11). He will not procrastinate, waiting for the nearer kinsman to act. Naomi has gotten the right man to do the right thing.

D. Boaz Redeems Ruth (4:1–12)

The fourth act at the city gate consists of three scenes: Boaz convenes a legal assembly, two exchanges with the nearer kinsman and one exchange with the elders, wherein Boaz acquires Ruth.

1. Boaz Convenes a Legal Assembly (4:1–2)

As Naomi anticipates, Boaz immediately goes up and sits in the town gate (see Ruth 3:11, glossed “town” in TNIV) — the site of legal and commercial transactions and the ancient equivalent of a city hall (see 3:11). The nearer *gōʾēl* passes by, and Boaz addresses him as *Pʿlōnî-ʾAlmōnî*. This attribution is probably

coined by the narrator as derogatory farrago (like *helter-skelter* and *hanky-panky*); English equivalents are “Mr. So and So” or “Joe Blow.” While Boaz probably used the man’s true name, the narrator seems unwilling to memorialize the name of the selfish kinsman—who himself had refused to memorialize the name of his deceased relative in order to protect his immediate family. Like Orpah, the one with self-regard disappears from the stage of salvation history. In any case, Boaz gathers ten elders, the minimal number needed for a legal quorum.¹⁶

2. Two Dialogues between Boaz and *P^ēlōnî-ʾAlmōnî*

The dialogue with the nearer kinsman unfolds in two stages in order to present *P^ēlōnî-ʾAlmōnî* as a foil to Boaz. In the first exchange, Boaz reveals to him that Naomi is selling her inheritance. Without an heir, upon her death her field will pass over to the nearest kinsman. The two widows are unable to work the fields by themselves. Since the fields are of little use to the widows, Naomi resolves to sell them beforehand. According to the Law, when family property goes up for sale, the nearest kinsman has the responsibility to redeem it and buy it back for the clan. It cannot be sold outside of the clan (Lev. 25:23–28). “Redeem” is the key word of this scene.¹⁷ The nearer kinsman agrees to redeem Naomi’s land to enlarge his own inheritance.

In the second exchange, Boaz explains to the nearer kinsman that he also has the responsibility to raise up seed for the deceased. Since the Hebrew text and grammar of verse 5 are difficult, it is best to follow the ancient versions: “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabitess.” Although the Law distinguishes between kinsman redemption of land and levirate marriage (see Ruth 3:11–12), Boaz and the legal assembly agree that the Law intends that one could not exercise the option of redeeming land without being willing to exercise levirate marriage “to maintain the name of the deceased.” In ancient Israel the disappearance of one’s name is considered a great misfortune — equivalent to losing social immortality (see 1 Sam. 24:21; 2 Sam. 14:7). Ruth has remained loyal to Naomi and her family precisely to preserve this social immortality. Upon learning that the land will bear the name of Elimelech’s household and not be reckoned as his property, the nearer kinsman backs out. “I cannot redeem the land,” he now claims. In other words, Mr. So and So is willing to buy Naomi’s field when it enhances his fame and enriches his fortune, but he exposes his self-centered motives by being unwilling to sacrifice financially (though he has the money) to save the name of Elimelech

and Mahlon and to protect their defenseless widows. As Orpah is to Ruth, Mr. So and So functions as a foil to Boaz. The nearer kinsman is willing to participate in the covenant community as long as it involves no risk and no sacrifice. Such action does not reflect the ethics of God's kingdom community.

3. Boaz Acquires Elimelech's Property and Ruth (4:7–12)

In stark contrast to the foil, Boaz, who probably is already married and has children, willingly sacrifices his wealth to redeem the property of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion and to take Ruth as his wife. He repeats his reason for doing so: "to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records" (Ruth 4:10). Boaz sacrifices himself, not merely shares himself, for a deceased relative who cannot pay him back, and he does so even though he is not the one responsible. Contrary to popular opinion, the book of Ruth is not a romantic love story, but a story of unselfish and sacrificial love within a family that can survive in no other way. The elders and all those at the gate celebrate the marriage with a prayer to mediate God's benediction upon Ruth, Boaz, and the baby.

E. Ruth Gives Birth to Obed (4:13–17)

The story reaches its climax with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the gift of their offspring to Naomi.¹⁸ The narrator attributes this gift to *I AM* to complete the frame of God's providence (see above). Upon the child's birth, the women in the neighborhood pray a benediction upon Naomi. First, the women praise God that through this child, God has not left Naomi without "a kinsman-redeemer" (Heb. *gō'ēl*, "a family protector") who will retain her family's property and name. Second, they petition God to make the child "famous in Bethlehem" (cf. Ruth 4:11). Third, they predict that the child will rejuvenate and sustain her in her old age because his mother will exemplify to him "love," not just duty, and care that "is better than seven sons." As Naomi's "daughter," Ruth is worthy of the women's highest accolades, for her *hesed* has transformed Naomi's emptiness into fullness (see 1:21).

Naomi now takes Ruth's precious gift and lays him in her lap (lit., "set him in her bosom") to symbolize that Naomi is his legal mother. The Hebrew term

glossed “cared for him” means “she became his foster mother” (i.e., the mother who is not natural but cares for dependent children). The women respond to her action by declaring that “Naomi has a son,” which more literally means, “a son was made born to Naomi.”¹⁹ They then name him Obed (i.e., “Worker” or “Server”), for he will work to restore sweetness to Naomi’s life and care for her as she ages. Finally, in anticipation of the concluding genealogy, the narrator adds the phrase, “Obed [was] the father of Jesse, the father of David,” for genealogies are normally preceded by an earlier reference (cf. Gen. 4:25–26 and 5:1; 9:24–29 with Gen. 10).²⁰

F. Epilogue (4:18–22)

Like the genealogies of Genesis 5:3–32; 11:10–26, this genealogy also has ten names, making it likely that it too includes gaps. Paul Biggar observes, “The ten generations in the genealogy balance the ten years in Moab, [and] Ruth who is worth more than seven sons to Naomi marries the seventh generation Boaz.”²¹ In this genealogy Boaz fills the favored seventh slot, and David, the tenth slot of completion, just as in Genesis 5 Enoch and Noah respectively fill these slots. Although Boaz aims to give social immortality to Elimelech and Mahlon as the legal parents in Bethlehem’s registry of citizens, *I AM* rewards him as the biological parent of an even greater social immortality by including him in the lineage of David and of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1–16; Luke 3:23–38). The reference to David, an implicit inclusio with Bethlehem, Ephrathah, Judah (see 1:1), adds “a new a wider dimension to the book which up to this stage has dealt only with the afflictions and the lot of a limited family circle.”²²

III. THEOLOGY

The narrator teaches theology through narrative—that is to say, through plot and character. The main character is *I AM*, who, though unseen, stands over each scene directing the play in accord with his sublime character. There are three full-fledged, developing characters with whom the author wants his audience to empathize because of how they display covenant virtues: Naomi, a despairing, bereft, and barren widow, transforms into a joyful mother; Ruth, a noble but dependent slave widow rises to her full stature as a mother of high regard in the Israelite community; and Boaz quietly grows from a godly but hesitant kinsman-redeemer into an assertive, humble, sacrificing redeemer.

In contrast, Orpah functions as a foil to Ruth, while “So and So” acts as a foil to Boaz. The foils display false *hesed*. They do not embody people who sacrifice and establish God’s community; they do not last long on the stage of sacred history.

A. I AM: Divine Covenant Partner

The full-fledged characters stand in the forefront of the story and *I AM* in the background. Nevertheless, the narrative is really about the unseen Lord, “the major actor” in the drama.

1. Sovereign in Providence

The narrator steps onto the stage only twice, at the beginning of his story and at the end. These crucial references show that *I AM* alone grants life, be it the seed from the earth (Ruth 1:6) or seed from the womb (4:13). Through the former he initiates Naomi’s redemption, and through the latter he completes it. Within the story Naomi interprets her own narrative as under his Providence (1:20–22; 2:20), and so do the women of Bethlehem (4:14). More subtly, the narrator teaches God’s providence through at least eighteen other references to *I AM* or the equivalent of the name in prayers, greetings, and oaths. Almost imperceptibly, like providence itself, he answers every prayer and benediction.

In that light, as William LaSor notes, *I AM* moves “through the everyday events and motivations of ordinary people.”²³ He rewards human initiative (2:2; 3:1–8). Naomi’s risky plan played out on the threshing floor of Boaz functions as the decisive turning point at the center of the story. Moreover, it includes apparent chance (2:3), by which is meant that quality of God’s providence that seems to be accidental or random in human experience. Above all, he exhibits his providence by rewarding each of the full-fledged characters (see below).

2. *Giver of Life*

Barbara Green argues that the “institutions of marriage and redemption are kept distinct in the story for purposes of artistry.”²⁴ According to her, the field stands symbolically for the fertility of the woman. If land is used through the book of Ruth in this symbolic way, God’s restoration of fertility to the land in 1:6, after ten years in Moab (1:4), prefigures his gift of fertility to Ruth in 4:13, after ten years of sterility.

3. *Redeemer*

The lexeme *g^l* occurs twenty times, making “redemption” a leading message of this artistic work.²⁵ Both the narrator’s plot and story teach that *I AM* is a redeemer.²⁶ The narrator makes the point indirectly by embedding three significant movements within the plot: from famine — of grain seed and human seed — to a plentiful harvest and a royal genealogy; from unnatural emptiness to restoration of order; and ultimately from death to life.

The narrator also allows the message of redemption to be expressed through the life of each character. In Ruth 1:11–13, Naomi complains that *I AM* has testified against her, and she symbolizes her feelings by changing her name from Naomi, “My Pleasant One,” to Mara, “Bitterness” (1:20). At the end of the story, Naomi is made to bear a son because *I AM* did not leave her without a kinsman-redeemer son (4:14–17). Boaz foreshadows the joyful end by giving Naomi grain seed. “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed” (3:17), he tells Ruth as he pours out the grain into Ruth’s shawl. Not least, the faithful women of Bethlehem also teach the doctrine in praise. “Praise be to *I AM*, who ... has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer” (4:14), they exclaim to Naomi.

God works out his redemption through his faithful people. The unconstrained *hesed* of Boaz and Ruth maintains the names of the deceased (social immortality)

and their property (space for the continuation of their lives) and transforms Naomi from her bitter situation back to her former pleasantness.

4. *Compassionate*

In his Law, *I AM* gives the defenseless — the alien, poor, widow, and fatherless — ownership of grain overlooked and/or left behind by the harvesters (Lev. 19:9–10); he provides levirate marriage for the childless widow (Deut. 25:5–10) and a family protector for the needy relative (Lev. 25:25–28).

5. *Hesed*

I AM providentially unfolds salvation history according to his unfailing kindness. He extends his *hesed* to the people of Israel in caring for them and by relieving the famine (Ruth 1:6; cf. Judg. 2:18). His abounding, unfailing love guarantees the restoration of sinful Israel from famine and death to grain and life. He plans for their welfare and not for their harm; he gives them a future with hope when all seems lost. He also extends *hesed* to individuals, rewarding those who themselves show *hesed* (Ruth 1:8; 2:11–12; cf. Matt. 6:14–15; Phil. 4:19). He blesses them with life and prosperity and memorializes them with enduring fame. *I AM*'s *hesed* to national Israel is unconditional, but it is conditional to the individual as signified by Boaz's explanation, "May *I AM* repay you for what you have done" (Ruth 2:12). True human covenant partners, like Ruth, and unlike Orpah, persevere in their faith.

B. Naomi: A Flawed Israelite Covenant Partner

Naomi progresses from famine, isolation, barrenness, and creeping age to find fullness within her community — becoming a mother in Israel with a son to care for her in her old age. She enters the stage as Naomi (Pleasant) with a husband and two sons, becomes Mara (from her bitter experience in Moab) with only another widow on her hands to care for, and finally transforms into a fuller Naomi, with a "daughter" who is better than seven sons.

She is a flawed covenant partner. She herself says that *I AM* has testified against her in providential action. The narrative does not specify her sins, but the story suggests she was part of the community that deserved famine. Her opening

speech betrays her as a woman without hope (Ruth 1:11–13). Her spiritual division leads to irrational behavior. Reasoning apart from God’s care, she pragmatically risks — in spite of advising them to return to their mother’s, not father’s, house (see above) — sending her daughters-in-law back to uncircumcised husbands who cannot share in the congregation of *I AM* and to gods whom *I AM* abhors (see 1:8–9), but paradoxically she prays that *I AM* show them his *hesed*. Boaz’s strict adherence to the Law contrasts unfavorably with Naomi’s ignorance of it or willingness to bend it.

Nevertheless, she is a true covenant partner in Israel. She returns to the land under God’s blessing (1:6); prays for the Lord’s blessings on her daughters-in-law (1:8); interprets her own narrative, both its bad and good parts, as under God’s providence (1:21; 2:20); and plans according to the Mosaic law (2:20; 3:2). The love and loyalty of her daughters-in-law for her, their parting from one another in tears, testify to the loveliness of this practical woman. Her community also loves her, embraces her, and rejoices with praise for God’s good hand upon her. *I AM* rewards her faith by giving her a famous family protector, Obed (i.e., “Worker”) to renew her life and to care for her (4:14–17).

C. Ruth: Gentile Covenant Partner

In the exchanges between Naomi and Ruth on the journey to Bethlehem, Ruth gives us a self-portrait of her soul. Her classic confession of faith in *I AM* (1:16) and her commitment to Israel exhibit her as a helpless widow who makes decisions by a deliberate commitment to his person although she sees no natural way of salvation (1:20–21). Upon the widows’ arrival in Bethlehem, as R. T. Hyman notes, “Naomi is rejecting and bitter; Ruth is accepting and hopeful.”²⁷ Ruth takes no slight at their rudeness. Boaz, in their meeting in the field, commends her for this commitment. Her faith expresses itself in her *hesed* to an otherwise hopeless family.

At the beginning of the story, Naomi testifies to Ruth’s *hesed* to her deceased husband (Ruth 1:8) and his family. Ruth, in turn, testifies to and demonstrates the reliability of her *hesed* by refusing—unlike Orpah — to turn back to Moab and to her family in spite of any obstacle she may face (1:16–17). “Ruth’s steadfast action stands out because Orpah does the conventional thing—she obeys the head of her family and returns to her mother’s home.”²⁸ Boaz testifies to her extraordinary *hesed* by not remarrying for love or money (3:10), and the Bethlehem women indirectly testify to it by the accolade that she is to Naomi

“better ... than seven sons” (4:15). She backs up her *ḥesed* by her strength of character and physique. In a unique summary, Boaz gives her the epithet, *ʿēšet ḥayil* (3:11; Prov. 31:10–31), a woman of loyalty, courage, determination, loving-kindness, and strength (Ruth 2:2, 7; 3:15).

Both Naomi and Boaz call Ruth “my daughter,” identifying the natural-born Moabitess as a true daughter in Israel (Ruth 2:8; 3:1). The community recognizes her as better than seven sons (4:15). Her speeches show she is obedient to the older generation of the family into which she married (2:8–9; 2:22–23; 3:1–6, 12–15). But her first allegiance is to God (*I AM*) and to Israel, not to family (1:16). She acts out of love, not just duty, for “duty is the cast put around broken love” (C. S. Lewis). But she is not passive clay in their hands to be shaped by Naomi and given over to Boaz.²⁹ She is a woman of virtue in her own right. This loyalty between the generations constitutes the enduring kingdom of God.

Ruth’s escalating titles trace the trajectory of her gaining social esteem in true Israel for her faith and *ḥesed*. When she arrives from Bethlehem, she is a foreigner of no significance to the unnoticing townswomen. Even Naomi discounts her (Ruth 1:20–21).³⁰ Ruth uses three terms to refer to herself when speaking to Boaz: *nokriyâ* (“foreigner,” 2:10), *šiphâ* (a female slave without prospect of marriage, 2:13), and *ʾāṁâ* (a female slave with the prospect of marriage, 3:9). These reflect her ascending status.

Boaz’s terms for Ruth also progress, but instead of being on the plane of female slave and master, they are on the plane of familial relationships. When Boaz first notices Ruth, he uses the neutral word *naʿarâ* (“girl,” 2:5). Later he addresses her as *bittî*, “my daughter” (2:8), a term showing his superior status but as a family member, not a master. Finally, in the nighttime scene, he calls her an *ʿēšet ḥayil* (“a noble and competent woman,” 3:11). By using this term, he raises Ruth’s status to that of his own.

At the end of the story, the elders liken the former Moabitess to Rachel and Leah, the honored matriarchs that birthed the twelve tribes of God’s covenant people. Ruth is playing a leading role on a stage that is bigger than life! Under *I AM*’s good hand, she will become a heroine in sacred history, memorialized along with Israel’s original matriarchs, and a mother of David and Jesus Christ (4:17). She has the right stuff to be a mother in God’s kingdom.

D. Boaz: True Kinsman-Redeemer

From the beginning of the story to its end, Boaz is portrayed as a “man of standing” (*gibbôr ḥayil* ; see above). The narrator names him as such (Ruth 2:1), his speeches to the foreman and Ruth confirm him as such (2:5–12), Naomi counts him to be such (3:18), and his actions and speech at the gate confirm her evaluation (4:1–10). His speeches also manifest him as a man of faith. The first words out of his mouth are a prayer to *I AM* (2:4); he affirms Ruth’s faith (2:11–12); and he works out his faith in conformity with the Law (3:12–13). He too shows *ḥesed*. Naomi’s praise to God for “one who shows *ḥesed*” could refer to Boaz as well as to *I AM*. His own testimony — that he redeems Naomi’s property and marries Ruth to preserve the name of the deceased — testifies more to his *ḥesed* than any human praise. His foil, “So and So,” by his unwillingness to sacrifice a portion of his inheritance for the needy widows to whom it is due, unwittingly testifies that Boaz *sacrifices* himself to show *ḥesed* to the helpless widow. The discipleship involved in belonging to the people of God requires sacrificing oneself to *I AM* (see Luke 14:25–33), believing he will give life to the dead.

Boaz is a true kinsman-redeemer/family protector. At stake in this story is the property and social immortality of Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon, and the well-being of their widows, Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 4:1–10). The elder’s second benediction, for Boaz, is that he “be famous.” Like all the other prayers in this book, it is answered, but in later Scriptures. He too is worthy to be a father of Israel and is worthy to establish God’s kingdom.

IV. INTERTEXTUALITY: RUTH CORPUS

The references to “Moab” and to Tamar in the book of Ruth are significant, for they open the possibility that the narrator intends to compare and contrast Boaz and Ruth with Lot and his daughters and with Judah and Tamar. Furthermore, Elimelech’s life shares striking intertextual links with Lot and Judah. Fisch calls this the “Ruth corpus,”³¹ for Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Elimelech, as a Moabitess and so a remote daughter of Lot, and as wife of Boaz and so a remote daughter-in-law of Judah, has links with both Lot and Judah. In the sketch below, I have adopted and adapted Fish’s structural analysis, which compares Elimelech, Lot, and Judah. This structure focuses on the similarities, then the antithetical pairs, and finally the differences that distance Elimelech from Lot and Judah.

A. Similarities

First, Lot, Judah, and Elimelech separate themselves from the elect: Lot departs from Abraham for Sodom (Gen. 13:11); Judah goes down from his brother for Canaan (Gen. 38:1); Elimelech leaves his home for Moab (Ruth 1:1).

Second, all three suffer tragic results of separation from the elect: Sodom is overthrown and Lot is saved by the skin of his teeth; Judah loses his wife and both sons; and Elimelech and both sons die.

Third, the three men’s female offspring face a life of barrenness: Lot’s two daughters are left without prospect of acquiring men; Tamar is bidden to remain a widow in her father’s house; and Naomi’s two daughters-in-law are widowed.

Fourth, a near kinsman accepts responsibility for continuation of Lot, Judah, and Elimelech: Lot himself is made to redeem; Judah is made to redeem; and Boaz chooses to redeem.

Fifth, in all three cases a woman takes the initiative in marriage in a “bed trick”: Lot is deceived into cohabiting with his daughters; Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute; and Ruth comes secretly to the threshing floor.

Sixth, the union occurs in conjunction with the celebration and a temporary loss of order: Lot is made drunk with wine; Judah is on his way to sheepshearing

festivities; and Boaz is merry in connection with the barley harvest.

Seventh, in each case the marriage occurs within the family: Lot's two daughters commit incest; Tamar commits incest because Judah denies a levirate union; and Boaz formally becomes the kinsman-redeemer, redeeming both the property and the widow.

Finally, the unions issue into male children: Moab and Ammon — the former is the ancestor of Ruth; Perez and Zerah—the former is the ancestor of Boaz; and Obed — the grandfather of King David.

B. Antithetical Pairs

The eight similarities occur in four pairs. The descent in hope of material gain (1) ends in tragic failure (2). Widowhood (3) ends with a redeemer (4). The secrecy and guile of the women (5) occur in connection with the joviality and openness of the men (6). The legal difficulty of a levirate union (7) is followed by the blessing of life (8).

C. Differences

The eight similarities are comparable in their tragic descent (1–3) but strikingly different in the steps of salvation (4–8). Fisch says, “The real value of the synchrony, i.e., the exhibition of the structural pattern which unites the stories, is in lighting up the social and moral differences between them in the diachronic scale.”³²

The redeemer (4) shows an increasing sense of responsibility: Lot is made to continue the family; Judah is made to continue the family, but Boaz sacrifices himself to redeem Elimelech who cannot continue the family. The bed trick (5) shows an increasing sophistication: Lot's daughters are crude and animalish; Tamar, though playing a harlot and committing incest, is more civilized and declared “right”; but Ruth acts innocently, delicately, and she thinks with propriety, leaving before she and Boaz can be seen, followed by public approval. The celebration (6) shows an increasing propriety: Lot has lost control; Judah has not lost control but is lascivious; and Boaz lives with freedom within control and marries within the Law. The union (7) escalates in its morality: Lot's daughters are without moral justification; Tamar seduces unrighteous Judah and is declared “right” (Gen. 38:26); but Boaz and Ruth publicly marry. Finally, the

issue (8) escalates in the characters' significance in salvation history: Moab and Ammon are rejected; Perez becomes the father of Boaz; and Boaz and Ruth become the parents of the k/King. In sum, Lot is a foil; Judah is a lesser type of the greater antitype Boaz, just as Boaz is a type of the greater antitype.

V. TYPOLOGY

The intertextuality of Ruth with the New Testament suggests that Boaz foreshadows Christ, while Naomi and Ruth foreshadow the union of ethnic Israel and of Gentiles in the church. Naomi of Judah and Ruth of Moab typify the union of ethnic Israel and Gentiles respectively in the church, and Boaz typifies Christ. In the discussion that follows, when we wish to signify them as both historical figures and types, we put their names in quotes. For example, “Naomi” signifies both Naomi in the book of Ruth and a type of ethnic Israel in the canon.

A. Boaz: Type of Christ

Boaz did more than share: he sacrificed himself financially to give Naomi and Ruth land and an inheritance in perpetuity. Jesus Christ, the greater antitype, sacrifices his blood to give his church a regenerated earth and eternal life. “Boaz,” like Judah, willingly sacrifices himself for his brothers (see Gen. 44:33–34) and is ultimately crowned with kingship (see Gen. 49:8–12). Looking back, the elders relate Boaz and Ruth to Rachel and Leah, the founders of Israel, and to Tamar and Judah, the founders of their royal tribe. Looking ahead, they “pregnantly” relate them to the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

“Boaz” gave the dead immortality: by his sacrifice he bought back those who had verged into death and debt and secured a “Ruth,” his Gentile bride. “Boaz” brought his “bride” into final rest. As Boaz brought Naomi and her family rest (see Ruth 1:9; 3:1) so David brought Israel rest, and Christ gives the church rest.

B. Naomi and Ruth: Types of the Church

1. Ruth: A Type of Redeemed Gentiles

The four women mentioned by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus Christ are all aliens: Tamar and Rahab are Canaanites, Ruth is a Moabitess, and Bathsheba is married to a Hittite. Matthew uniquely includes them to emphasize the

universal lineage of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. God exalts these four women from their natural status (as “not a people” and without hope) to their new identity by their faith commitment to *I AM*, God of Israel, and through that faith they become mothers of the holy seed.

“Ruth” becomes the people of God by commitment to her “Boaz,” her Bridegroom. By public proclamation in baptism of her identity with him, she comes to have blood links with Abraham (Gal. 3:16, 29). Through her, “Boaz” begets seed that will destroy the Serpent (Gen. 3:15; Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Chron. 2:5–15; Matt. 1:3–6; Luke 3:31–33; 1 Tim. 2:9–15).

2. Naomi: A Type of Ethnic Israel

“Naomi’s” fate and “Ruth’s” fate are inextricably linked to one another. “Naomi” precedes “Ruth” in being the people of God, and “Naomi” mediates “Ruth’s” entrance into the covenants God originally made with “Naomi.” “Ruth” is her daughter. They are equal heirs of the covenant relationship because “Boaz” redeems them from a land of death. The new and young “widow,” full of hope and promise, rejuvenates “Naomi,” the old and failed “widow,” who on her own was without hope. By her faith and covenant loyalty, “Ruth” transforms bitter and hopeless “Naomi” to the joy of salvation. “Naomi” in the end will again be called Pleasantness.

THOUGHT QUESTION

What is the significance of God's *ḥesed* and of human *ḥesed*, both by God and his covenant partners, including yourself, in your life? Observe how *ḥesed* in Ruth 1:8; 2:20; and 3:10 is demonstrated by God and the human characters in the book of Ruth. In what ways are we called to demonstrate *ḥesed* in our generation? In the book of Ruth, what are some costs and rewards of practicing *ḥesed*? In the same way, what sacrifices and promises can we claim today as we humbly ask God to transform us through his loving-kindness?

1. Traditionally “female companion,” but its root is probably *rwȳ*, “drink one’s fill; be refreshed” (*HALOT*, s.v. “*rût*,” 3.1209).

2. Eugene H. Merrill, “The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes,” *BSac* 142 (1985): 130–41.

3. *IBHS*, 14, §1.4.2bc, c.

4. The story may explain why David exiled his family with the king of Moab when Saul sought to exterminate the house of Jesse (1 Sam. 22:3–4). Ruth, David’s great-grandmother, was a Moabitess.

5. Leif Hongisto, “Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth,” *AUSS* 23 (1985), 19–28, esp. 22–23.

6. The book is silent about the underlying hostility and suspicion the Judahites and Moabites felt for each other (cf. Num. 22:1–25:18; 1 Sam. 14:47; 2 Sam. 8:2; 2 Kings 3:4–27; Isa. 15; Jer. 48; Ezek. 25:8–11; Amos 2:1; and the extrabiblical Mesha Stele).

7. The Mosaic law forbade a Moabite male and his sons *even* to the tenth generation (i.e., forever) to “enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deut. 23:3–4). Ruth’s offspring are not descended from a Moabite male. The Law did not forbid all exogamous marriages. Scripture commends foreign wives who were loyal to their Israelite husbands (e.g., Tamar [Gen. 38:13–19]; Rahab [Josh. 2:1; cf. Matt. 1:5]; Ruth [Ruth 3:1–9; 4:12]; Bathsheba [2 Sam. 11:2–5]; the royal bride[s] [Ps. 45:11–15]) by locating them in the lineage of the Messiah (see Matt. 1). By contrast, it censures those who are unfaithful to Israelite husbands (cf. Samson’s women [Judg. 14–16]; Gomer [Hos. 1:2–11]; any apostate wife [Prov. 2:15–18]).

8. *SûH b* (“return”) occurs 11 times (vv. 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 21, 22). So

Bernard Bell, “Ruth: A *Hesed* Story” (unpublished paper for Biblical Theology 680, Regent College [April 1996]).

9. See Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 119–20.

10. “Glean” is the act’s key word, being used 12 times (Bell, “Ruth: A *Hesed* Story”).

11. Hubbard, *Ruth*, 196.

12. Perhaps his lack of racial discrimination is influenced by Rahab, the converted Canaanite prostitute, who is in his lineage (see Matt. 1:5).

13. Hebrew *āḥ*, though traditionally glossed by its hyponym “brother,” is also a superordinate meaning “relative.”

14. Hubbard, *Ruth*, 204.

15. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 86.

16. See Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 271.

17. “Redeem” occurs 13 times; 9 times as a verb (5 times in v. 4; 4 times in v. 6), 9 times as *gōʾēl*, “redeemer” (vv. 3, 6, 8); and once as *gʿullā*, “right of redemption” (4:6).

18. W. W. Prinsloo, in “Theology of the Book of Ruth,” *VT* 30 (1980), 339, regards 4:17 as the most important verse in the book.

19. The pual stem in the Hebrew verb represents here the unreal mood of an indirect situation (*IBHS*, 407, §24.3.2).

20. Cf. David Howard, *Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 127–28.

21. Paul Biggar, “The Contribution of Rhetorical Criticism to the Study of Theology in the Book of Ruth” (M.Th. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 47.

22. Prinsloo, “Theology of the Book of Ruth,” 340.

23. William Sanford LaSor, *The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 165.

24. Barbara Green, “The Plot of the Biblical Story of Ruth,” *JSOT* 22 (1982): 55–68.

25. Harold Fisch, “Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History,” *VT* 32 (1982): 434.

26. Hebrew has two words glossed “redeem.” *pādā* is a technical term for freeing in the context of the institution of debt slavery. *Gāʾal*, the term used in Ruth, has the broader meaning of the restoration of a previous status. It is primarily oriented toward legal relations in the clan (see Klaus Baltzer,

“Liberation from Debt Slavery,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr. *et al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 481.

[27.](#) R. T. Hyman, “Questions and Changing Identity in the Book of Ruth,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39 (1984): 189–210, esp. 193.

[28.](#) Ibid., 192.

[29.](#) Ibid., 199.

[30.](#) Ibid., 193.

[31.](#) Fisch, “Ruth,” 427.

[32.](#) Ibid.

Chapter 32

THE GIFTS Of HYMNS AND THE MESSIAH: THE PSALMS

If we would say that man is too insignificant to deserve communion with God, we must indeed be very great to judge of it.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.511

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALTER

Israel's concept of kingship during the exilic and intertestamental periods developed into the expectation of a "David" redivivus who would reign in Israel's golden age at the end of time — that is, a Messiah. The trajectory to that expectation progresses not only through the concept of "kingship" developed in the preceding chapters but also through the heart of the book of Psalms. The path takes us through the royal interpretation of most psalms in their historical context, through their editing in connection with their prophetic reinterpretation after the exile, and into the New Testament with their interpretation in reference to Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah (cf. Luke 24:44). In sum, the Psalter advances significantly the Bible's message that God's kingdom is irrupting into the world for his glory and our good.

In addition to its significant contribution to the doctrine of the Messiah, Israel's anthology of psalms is a lodestone of theological reflections. King David and other pious poets learned and lived their theology in the harsh reality of living as those completely surrendered to God's will. Later editors handed over their hard won theological heritage to enrich the hymnody of the church. It is appropriate therefore to consider the contribution of the Psalms to biblical theology broadly and to the doctrine of the Messiah more narrowly.

The English titles Book of Psalms and Psalter derive from the Septuagint *Psalmoi* (Codex B) and *Psalterium* (Codex A) via the Vulgate, *Liber Psalmorum*. Greek *psalmos* renders Hebrew *mizmôr* in superscriptions, which denotes a song accompanied with the pizzicato of stringed instruments.¹ Under the influence of the Greek Bible and of the advance of Christianity, this meaning fell into the background, and "psalm" came to mean "song of praise." This development brought these titles in line with the Hebrew title *šhillim*, "praises." Some superscriptions, however, have *špillâ*, "prayer," as their genre identification. An older title may have been "the prayers of David" (cf. Ps. 72:20). However, with the exception of Psalm 88, "the black sheep of the Psalter," every petition leads to praise.

II. INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALTER

A consideration of the historical context, forms, liturgical use, editing, and New Testament use of Israel's canonical anthology of petitions and praises will lead to a better understanding of their interpretation and their contribution to biblical theology.

A. Historical Approach

The historical context of a psalm's composition must be gleaned from its superscription, which often looks back to the book of Samuel, and/or from its content. Unfortunately, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, under the impact of historical criticism, many academics discarded the superscriptions and reconstructed the historical context by their limited knowledge of philology and a mistaken notion of the evolution of Israel's religion. Scholars such as Bernhard Duhm, T. K. Cheyne, Paul Haupt, and the later Charles A. Briggs² came to the mistaken conclusion that the Psalter was principally the hymnbook of the second temple, and they interpreted many psalms with reference to the Maccabees.³ For example, they attributed Psalm 3 "to a leader caught in the partisan battles and struggles of that time."⁴ No one accepts that interpretation today.

Nevertheless, Brevard Childs says, "A wide consensus has been reached among critical scholars for over a hundred years that the titles are secondary additions, which can afford no reliable information toward establishing the genuine historical setting of the Psalms."⁵ As a result, psalm studies for more than a century have been adrift in conflicting opinions about their dates and meaning, such as the identification of the "enemy."⁶ Fortunately, the tide of academic opinion concerning the antiquity and reliability of the superscriptions is slowly changing under the gravity of evidence.

Whether or not the superscriptions are reliable affects the interpretation and theology of the Psalter. If they are historical notices, the "I" of the Psalms becomes a real character, and his enemies come into focus. The Psalms represent theology at work in real life and enable later readers to use them more appropriately in corresponding specific situations.⁷ Furthermore, the

superscriptions give a theological depth in the interpretation of the Psalms. Although Psalm 3 ascribes all praise to God for the afflicted's deliverance, its superscription probably refers to an event recorded in 2 Samuel 15:17 and shows that God used the gifted tongue of Hushai to effect David's deliverance (see pp. 669–71). The superscription of Psalm 63 says David composed the psalm in the desert of Judah while he was fleeing from Absalom. If so, David's choice to reflect upon God in the sanctuary (v. 2) and to remember him (v. 6), instead of opting to petition God to return the king to the sanctuary (cf. Pss. 42:4; 43:3–4), gives a sharp point to the role of reflection and remembering in the spiritual life of the pious.

1. Antiquity and Reliability of Superscriptions in General

Sumerian and Akkadian ritual texts dating from the third millennium contain rubrics corresponding to elements in the superscription,⁸ and so do Egyptian hymns from the Eighteenth Dynasty and later.⁹ Some psalms ascribed to David contain words, images, and parallelism now attested in the Ugaritic texts (ca. 1400 BC).¹⁰ Though many technical terms in the superscriptions were obscure to the Greek and Aramaic translators (which suggests a loss of a living tradition and an extended gap of time between their composition and the Tannaitic period, 70–200 AD), they neither alter nor omit them. No ancient version or Hebrew manuscript omits them. With regard to the antiquity of some psalms, there can scarcely be a question. Many believe that Psalm 29 depends on a Canaanite background. Linguistic, stylistic, structural, thematic, and theological differences are so great between the Psalter and its imitative thanksgiving psalm at Qumran as to leave no doubt of the far greater antiquity of the Psalter.

2. “Of David”

Authorship of the Psalms and of their historical backgrounds depends in part on the meaning of the Hebrew preposition *ל* with a proper name, usually David.¹¹ Though *ל* can mean “belonging to a series,”¹² it commonly denotes authorship in the Semitic languages.¹³ Within other literary genres *ל* in superscriptions signifies “by” (cf. Isa. 38:9; Hab. 3:1). In the Old Testament as in other ancient Near Eastern literature, poets, unlike narrators, are not anonymous (cf. Exod. 15:1; Judg. 5:1). The meaning “by” is certain in the

synoptic superscriptions of 2 Samuel 22:1 and Psalm 18:[1].

Other Scriptures abundantly testify that David was a musician and writer of sacred poetry. Saul discovered him in a talent hunt for a harpist (1 Sam. 16:14–23). Amos (6:5) associates his name with temple music. The Chronicler says that David and his officers assigned the inspired musical service to various guilds and that musicians were led under his hands (i.e., he led them by cheironomy—hand gestures indicating the rise and fall of the melody—as pictured in Egyptian iconography already in the Old Kingdom; 1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 29:26; Neh. 12:36).¹⁴ The Chronicler also represents King Hezekiah as renewing the Davidic appointments of psalmody. Hezekiah directed the sacrifices and accompanying praises in which the compositions of David and his assistant Asaph were prominent (2 Chron. 29:25–30). J. F. A. Sawyer says, “In the Chronicler’s day ... it can scarcely be doubted that the meaning was ‘by David.’”¹⁵ This was the interpretation of Ben Sirach (47:8–10), the Qumran scrolls (11QPs^a), Josephus,¹⁶ and the rabbis.¹⁷ The interpretation is foundational for the New Testament’s interpretation of the Psalter as testimony to Jesus as the Messiah (Matt. 22:43–45; Mark 12:36–37; Luke 20:42–44; Acts 1:16; 2:25, 34–35; 4:25–26; Rom. 4:6; 11:9–10; Heb. 4:7).

If it should be objected that Solomon’s temple on Mount Zion is presupposed in Psalm 24:7, 9, note that the assumed “house of God” refers to an institution, not a building (cf. 1 Sam. 1:7). If it is objected that the Aramaisms in Psalm 139 point to a late date, note that it is now clear “that evidence of Aramaic influence alone cannot serve as decisive proof for arguing for a late date of a given text.”¹⁸ As Israel’s poet laureate, there is good reason to suppose David composed the dedicatory prayer for the temple (Ps. 30) just as he designed and prepared beforehand for its building (1 Chron. 28).

3 An Extensive Royal Interpretation

Although the “I” in postmonarchic psalms refers to an anonymous leader or personifies Israel, the “I” of many preexilic psalms is the king; and if so, why not David? John H. Eaton offers cogent arguments for an extensive royal interpretation: (1) Even psalms by the sons of Korah (cf. Pss. 44, 84) and by Ethan (cf. 89) pertain to the king. (2) Temple music as a whole took its rise from the king (see 1 Chron. 15–16; 2 Chron. 29; Isa. 38:20). (3) Throughout the ancient Near East the king took responsibility for worship. In Mesopotamia the lament psalms were royal. (4) The enemies are frequently nations (e.g., Pss. 18:43[44]; 20; 21; 28; 61; 63; 89; 144). (5) The royal interpretation gives

integrity to psalms that otherwise lack unity (e.g., Ps. 4). (6) “The only ‘situation’ that is certainly attested is that of the king; ... he is the subject in a number of psalms, and the dispute is only about how many. This cannot be said of the other suggested usages.”¹⁹ (7) The representative character of the king explains the special problem presented by the Psalms where “I” (i.e., the king) and “we” (i.e., the people/army) alternate (cf. Pss. 44, 60, 66, 75, 102). (8) Throughout the “psalms of the individual” there occur about twenty-four motifs or expressions that are specifically appropriate for a king. Hermann Gunkel²⁰ identified the following: all nations attend to his thanksgiving (18:49 [50] ; 57:9 [10] ; 119:46). His deliverance has vast repercussions (22:27–31[28–32]); he invokes a world judgment to rectify his cause (7:7–8); he depicts himself as victorious over the nations through God’s intervention (118:10); he is like a bull raising horns in triumph (92:10).²¹

This royal interpretation of the Psalter affects biblical theology in several ways. (1) It allows the reader to hear the most intimate thoughts of Israel’s greatest king. (2) It validates the New Testament attribution of select psalms to David as their author. And (3) it provides the firm basis of the grammaticohistorical method of interpretation for the New Testament’s messianic interpretation of the Psalter.

4. Historical Notices

According to their superscriptions, Psalms 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 142 date from the time of David’s exile (1 Sam. 16–31); 18 and 60, from the time he is under blessing (2 Sam. 1–10); and 3, 51, 63, from when he is under wrath (2 Sam. 11–20). Psalms 7 and 30 are unclassified as to their precise dates (cf. 2 Sam. 21–24; for this threefold division of David’s career, see [chaps. 22–23](#)). In addition to the arguments given above for the credibility of the superscriptions, we ask, Why, if they are secondary additions, are the remaining fifty-nine Davidic psalms left without historical notices, especially when many of them easily could have been ascribed to some event in David’s life?²² Also, why would later editors introduce materials in the superscriptions of Psalms 7, 30, and 60 that are not found in historical books and not readily inferred from the Psalms themselves? Finally, why should it be allowed that psalms in the historical books contain superscriptions with historical notices (see Exod. 15:1; Deut. 31:30[cf. 32:44]; Judg. 5:1; 2 Sam. 22:1; Jonah 2; Isa. 38:9) but those in the Psalter do not, even though the syntax is sometimes similar?

5. *Historical Indications from Content*

Moses (Ps. 90) composed the oldest psalm, and the latest ones were composed in the exile (Ps. 137) or shortly thereafter (Ps. 126). It is unwise, however, to reconstruct the historical background where none is given or to overemphasize it when it is given — regrettable practices of earlier commentators (e.g., Franz Delitzsch, J. J. Stewart Perowne, J. A. Alexander). Most of the psalms, including those in which an author is identified, are written in abstract terms, not with reference to specific historical incidences, so that others can use them in their worship.

B. Form-Critical Approach

Also important for the interpretation and theology of the Psalms is an understanding of their literary forms. Regrettably, however, many form critics unnecessarily pit their approach against the superscriptions. Traditionally, it was recognized that the Psalms were meant for various spiritual circumstances. Luther, in his preface to the German Psalter (1528), comments, “[Each saint], whatever his circumstances may be, finds in it psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as if they were composed exclusively for his sake.”²³

At the turn of the twentieth century, Gunkel, in his magisterial *Form-Critical Introduction*, advanced the study of the Psalter by noting in his comparison of the petitions and praises of Israel’s psalms with other ancient Near Eastern hymns striking similarities of their content, mood, expressions, motifs, and structure. By comparing these criteria, he was led to distinguish five basic types of psalms: (1) lament of individual (also called petitions), (2) lament of community, (3) thanksgiving, (4) praise, (5) and royal (Pss. 21 and 72 for royal anniversary; 132 for anniversary of royal sanctuary and palace; 45 for a royal wedding; 20 before war and 18 after it; 2, 101, and 110 for king’s enthronement; 144:1–11 and remotely 89 as petitions for the king). His category “royal,” in distinction from other forms, is questionable, for it depends on the use of the word “king” or “David,” not on form. Moreover, his distinction between lament of individual and of the community is questionable because the “I” and “we” are sometimes used together. Eaton’s evidence for an extensive royal interpretation of the Psalms also calls into question a unique category of royal psalms in contradistinction to the other four types. In sum, a critical appraisal of Gunkel’s

criteria leaves three basic types: petition, thanksgiving, and praise.

Although Gunkel is rightly criticized for overgeneralization and for his use of form criticism to establish a composition's origin and tradition, his analysis has enhanced our understanding of hymnic literature. Indeed, the Chronicler validates Gunkel's analysis. In his account of David's activity in the ark liturgy (1 Chron. 15–16), he notes: “ [David] appointed some of the Levites ... to make petition/invoke [Heb. *ʾhazkîr*], to give thanks [Heb. *ʾhōdôt*], and to praise the LORD [Heb. *ʾhallel* YHWH]” (1 Chron. 16:4 [N1V; NRSV]). This remarkable agreement between the internal and external evidences for three forms of hymns puts beyond reasonable doubt that Israel's poets were conscious of them. The Chronicler's sequence is intentional: petition leads to “thanksgiving” (i.e., declarative praise; see below) and that to (descriptive) praise.

1. Petition Psalms

The common motifs of prayers are address to God (cf. Ps 54:1–2[3–4]), lament and/or complaint to ventilate the emotions and move God to act (v. 3 [4]), confidence (v. 4 [5]), petition (v. 5 [6]), and praise broadly defined (vv. 6–7 [7–8]).

Petitions always begin with a *direct address* to God, for example, “o YHWH” (Pss. 3:1; 5:1; 6:1). By turning to God in distress and addressing him, the petitioner shows his complete dependence on God. To look elsewhere for deliverance would be tantamount to idolatry. David incurred God's wrath when he counted his fighting men because, as he confesses, “When I felt secure, I said, ‘I will never be shaken’” (Ps. 30:6 [7]; 2 Sam. 24). Directing one's petition to God conforms with other psalms that emphasize one can never rely on human resources (cf. Pss. 118:6–7; 146:3). God alone can help (Ps. 62:7–9); everything and everyone else is a delusion (Ps. 33:16–18). The fool says there is no God (Pss. 10:4, 11; 14:1). To not turn to God in crisis is, according to Helmer Ringgren, “what the Babylonians calls ‘living *ina ramanishu*,’ i.e., living by oneself, on one's own resources, without dependence on God. But this is the essence of sin.”²⁴

In the *lament and complaint*, the psalmists speak of sickness, though this is sometimes metaphorical (Pss. 6, 31, 38, 39, 88, 102; cf. Isa. 38:9–20), false accusation (Pss. 7, 17, 26, 27), persecution (Pss. 3, 9, 10, 13?, 35, 52, 55, 56, 57, 62, 69, 70, 86, 109, 120, 139, 140, 141, 143), military crises (Pss. 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 89, 137), and drought (cf. Ps. 4). These crises resemble those anticipated by Solomon when he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:27–53). In this

section the psalmist focuses on his alienation from God (Pss. 13:1; 22:1), the too-powerful foes (in forty-seven of the fifty lament psalms), who either cause or exploit his affliction (cf. Pss. 38, 39, 41), and his own extremity—he cannot go on (Pss. 6:6–7[7–8]; 88:3–7). He is afraid of death because God’s fidelity to the Davidic covenant is at stake, not out of personal apprehension for himself (cf. Pss. 6, 25, 38, 41).

A distinctive form of petition pertains to sin. In Psalm 51 the representative of the nation, after an introductory petition (vv. 1–2 [3–4]), first laments (i.e., confesses) his overt acts of sin (vv. 3–4 [5–6]), noting that all sin is against the Lawgiver, so that his forgiveness depends on God’s grace, not on unforgiving humanity. In David’s murder of Uriah, after his adultery with Bathsheba (cf. superscription [vv. 1–2]), David committed an “intentional” sin, a premeditated murder that transpired over about two weeks. He could not make restitution by giving back purity to Bathsheba or life to Uriah. Nevertheless, through the cleansing blood of the hyssop (vv. 7–9 [9–11], a type of Christ’s cleansing blood; note he does not reject sacrifices as often alleged) he found forgiveness.²⁵

David also confesses his moral impotence (vv. 5–6 [7–8]). Edward Dalglish comments: “In the depths of the womb [= ‘inward parts’ in English versions] the essential being of the psalmist was wrought in a context of sin (v. 7 [v. 5 in English versions]). But there is another factor: the psalmist knows full well the divine desire for truth to be a moral imperative even in the formulative stages of his being within his mother’s womb ... and is conscious that even there wisdom was taught him” (v. 8 [Eng. 6]).²⁶ Unlike Freud, David does not excuse his moral impotence, but pleads for God’s spirit to re-create him (vv. 10–12 [Eng. 12–14]). He praises God’s benevolent attributes of grace, mercy, and love so that all saints may experience God’s forgiveness by using his psalm (vv. 13–15 [Eng. 15–17]). His praise, however, in contrast to conventional declarative praise with an animal sacrifice, will be accompanied with a broken spirit on which all can feed (vv. 16–17 [Eng. 18–19]). Other penitential psalms are 6, 38, 102, 130, and 143.

The *confidence* section of petitions, often formally introduced by “But you” (cf. Ps. 3:3 [4]), turns the mood from dark despair into bright hope in preparation for the petition that follows. The psalmist commonly finds his confidence in God’s sublime attributes and past faithfulness, in his own election, and in his innocence. This section is a lodestone for theology. Here and elsewhere in the Psalter the psalmists focus on, among other attributes (such as God’s power), his benevolent attributes made known to Moses in Exodus 34:6 (cf. Pss. 86:15; 103:8): the compassionate *rahūm* and gracious *ḥannūn* God, patient *ʔerek ʔappayim*²⁷

abounding (i.e., “beyond human loyalty”) in love *rab-ḥesed* and faithfulness *ʾemet* (cf. 26:3; 40:11[12]).

The first stanza of the song of confidence in Psalm 22:1–10 [2–11] consists of two strophes mixing lament with confidence. In the first strophe (vv. 1–5 [2–6]), David matches his rejection by God with God’s past faithfulness to his fathers: “they trusted and you delivered them” (v. 4 [5]). In the second strophe (vv. 6–10 [7–11]), he matches his rejection by men with God’s past faithfulness to him: “yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast” (v. 9 [10]). In Psalm 77, a declarative praise psalm, the psalmist confesses that he almost lost faith when he compared God’s past faithfulness to Israel’s present plight: “I was too troubled to speak. I thought about the former days, the years of long ago” (vv. 4–5 [5–6]). Then, however, upon deeper reflection, he found God’s past faithfulness his source of confidence: “Then I thought, ... ‘I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago ...’” (vv. 10–12 [11–13]).

In Psalm 3 the king finds confidence both in God’s power, “You are a shield around me, *I AM*” and in his own election, “you bestow glory on me and lift up my head” (v. 3 [4]). In Psalm 4 he addresses his feckless leader (Heb. *ḥayil* = “highborn men,” [cf. 49:2; 62:9]) and laments they are humiliating him in the crisis, probably a drought, by turning to false gods (v. 2 [3]). To restore their confidence in their king, who should be drawn into divine blessings and be potent in prayer,²⁸ he asserts, “Know that *I AM* has set apart [Heb. *hiplâ* = “to distinguish one in a remarkable way from others in order that others might recognize the elect’s dignity”] the godly for himself; *I AM* will hear when I call to him” (v. 3 [4]).

Many are troubled by the protests of innocence that accompany some confidence sections. C. S. Lewis, citing Psalm 26 where the “good man” claims to “have led a blameless life” (v. 1) and even “refuse[s] to sit with the wicked” (v.5), accuses the psalmist of leading “straight to ‘Pharisaism.’”²⁹ However, Lewis misunderstands the function of these protests. The psalmist must be convinced of his innocence to petition God confidently to deliver him and/or to punish his tormenters. Otherwise, he may feel his sufferings are deserved and he has no right to deliverance and/or vindication. Confidence is possible only in those who feel no condemnation. If there is sin, they expect God to make it known to them, as in the case of Achan. The king protests: “If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?” Since no prophetic voice of condemnation comes forward, the king and his army conclude: “Yet for

your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (Ps. 44:20–22 [21–24]; cf. Rom 8:36). Therefore, he can pray: “Awake, I AM! ... Rise up and help us” (Ps. 44:23–26).

Some psalms are entirely *songs of confidence* or *trust* (e.g., Pss. 16; 62; 91; 121). The most famous is Psalm 23. In its first vignette (vv. 1–4), using the metaphor of a shepherd tending his sheep, David celebrates serially God’s provision (“I shall not be in want,” v. 1), his renewal (“he restores my soul,” v. 3), and his protection (“I will fear no evil,” vv. 3–4). In the second vignette (v. 5), David escalates God’s provision, renewal, and protection by the metaphor of a host with a guest: “my cup runs over” (provision); “you anoint my head with oil” (refreshment); “in the presence of my enemies” (protection). In the third vignette (v. 6), he leaves the realm of imagery to return to the reality of the temple, where he summarizes God’s benevolent attributes that are in view: his eternal “goodness and love” (v. 6). In Psalm 139, though a lament psalm, the psalmist’s confidence is so extended that the psalm almost becomes a song of trust. The psalmist does not shrink before his enemies (vv. 19–24) because God knows all about him (vv. 1–6). God is always present with him, be it in heaven or hell (vv. 7–12). And this is so because God created him (vv. 13–18).

The *petition section* typically consists of an appeal for God to be favorable toward the psalmist and to deliver (Heb. *יִשְׁׁע*) him. “Deliver” pertains to both the military and juridical spheres; it denotes a military or physical intervention because it is one’s due or right.³⁰ Elsewhere the psalmists speak of God’s “righteousness” (i.e., he does what is right by his covenant partner, cf. 4:1[2]; 23:3). It would be inconsistent with God’s character to abandon and hand over his covenant partner forever to his enemies.

Thirty-five of the petition psalms ask God to punish the enemy. These psalms also trouble many. Lewis speaks of them as “terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible Psalms.”³¹ Here he joins hands with those who deny that all Scripture is inspired. Dispensationalists traditionally averred that they are part of the ethical inferiority of the Old Testament.³² In fact, however, upon reflection they teach sound doctrine (2 Tim. 3:16) and are most holy.

a. These petitions are by saints (especially the innocently suffering king) who have suffered gross injustices. Few commentators have experienced the agony of utterly unprovoked, naked aggression and gross exploitation.

b. The petitioners are righteous and just: they ask for strict retribution (cf. Lev. 24:17–22). Here Lewis is helpful, for he notes such expressions are lacking in pagan literature because Israel had a firmer grasp on right and wrong:³³

Thus, the absence of anger, especially that sort of anger which we call *indignation*, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom.... If the Jews [*sic*] cursed more bitterly than the Pagans, this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because they are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim. The thought of the “righteous Lord” — who surely must hate such doings as much as they do, who surely therefore must (but how terribly He delays!) “judge” or avenge, is always there, if only in the background.³⁴

We should further add that the New Testament upholds the justice of God (Luke 18:6–8; cf. Matt. 7:23 with Ps. 6:8; Matt. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:6–9).

c. The petitioners are faithful. The pious recognize that vengeance is God’s, not theirs (Deut. 32:35). They trust God, not themselves, to avenge the gross injustices against them.

d. The psalmist is not vindictive (Ps. 109:5). “There have been few men,” says Derek Kidner, “more capable of generosity under personal attack than David, as he proved by his attitudes toward Saul and Absalom, to say nothing of Shemei.”³⁵ The wicked, by contrast, avenge themselves (cf. Rom. 12:17–21).³⁶

e. These prayers are ethical — that is, the petitioners ask God to distinguish between right and wrong (cf. Ps. 7:8–9; 2 Tim. 4:14–18).

f. They are also theocratic, looking for establishment of a kingdom of righteousness by the moral administrator of the universe (cf. Pss. 72, 82). The earthly king asks no more of the heavenly King than the latter asked of him (cf. Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:13, 19; 21:9, 22; 22:22, 24).

g. The prayers are theocentric, aiming to see God praised for manifesting his righteousness and justice in the eyes of all (cf. Pss. 35:27–28; 58:10–11). Calvin wrote, “It was a holy zeal for the divine glory which impelled [the psalmist] to summon the wicked to God’s judgment seat.”³⁷

h. These prayers are evangelistic, aiming for conversion of earth by letting all people see that the Lord is Most High over all the earth (Ps. 83:17–18).

i. They are “covenantal”; a wrong against a saint is seen as a wrong against God (Pss. 69:7–9, 22–28; 139:19–22).³⁸ (Paul considered himself the worst sinner because in persecuting the church it was as if he were physically assaulting Jesus Christ himself— 1 Tim. 1:15; cf. 1:13; Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2, 13.)

j. The prayers are oriental and full of figures, especially hyperbole³⁹ (cf. Jer. 20:14–18).

k. The prayers are political.⁴⁰ If we may presume the enemy heard the prayer, he would be publicly exposed as one who opposed the kingdom of God. Moreover, the righteous identify with the psalmist and rally around him (Ps. 142:7; cf. the complaint of Ps. 38:11). Indeed, the enemy and potential evildoer may be instructed and converted through prayer (cf. Pss. 51:13; 94:8–11).

1. These prayers are consistent with the central message of the Bible: “Thy kingdom come” (see [chap. 6](#)). The Lord’s Prayer entails that saints pray for the overthrow of Satan’s kingdom.

Though theologically sound, these petitions for retribution are nevertheless inappropriate for the church in the present dispensation for the following reasons. (1) Ultimate justice occurs in the eschaton (Rev. 20:11–15; cf. Isa. 61:1–2 with Matt. 13:30; 25:46; Luke 4:18–20; John 15:15; 2 Cor. 6:2; 2 Thess. 1:5–9). (2) Sin and sinner are now more distinctly differentiated (cf. Eph. 6:11–18), allowing the saint both to hate sin and love the sinner. (3) The saint’s struggle is against spiritual powers of darkness. He conquers by turning the other cheek and by praying for the forgiveness of enemies (Matt. 5:39–48; 6:14; Luke 6:28, 35; Acts 7:60).

Petition psalms usually end in *praise* (e.g., Ps. 13:6). Psalm 88 lacks any praise, but the psalmist has spiritual energy to cry and not despair.

2. Praise Psalms

It is useful to treat the other two types of psalms mentioned in 1 Chroni cles 16:4, “thanksgiving” (i.e., declarative praise) and praise (i.e., descriptive praise), together.

a. Declarative Praise

Hebrew *ydh* is traditionally glossed “to thank.” But, in fact, there is no equivalent in Hebrew to English “to thank.” A more faithful rendering is “to confess in praise.” In the so-called “thanksgiving psalms” the psalmist publicly acknowledges (i.e., confesses) and praises specifically what God has done for him. Claus Westermann, who calls these psalms “declarative praise,” helpfully distinguishes English “thanks” from Hebrew *ydh* praise:

1. In praise the one being praised is elevated...; in thanks the one thanked remains in his place. 2. In praise I am directed entirely toward the

one whom I praise.... In thanks I am expressing my thanks. 3. Freedom and spontaneity belong to the essence of praise; giving thanks can become a duty. 4. Praise has a forum and always occurs in a group; giving thanks is private, for it need concern no one except the one thanking and the one being thanked. 5.... Praise can never, but thanks must often, be commanded. 6. The most important verbal mark of difference is that thanksgiving occurs in the speaking of the words, “thank you”...; genuine, spontaneous praise occurs in a sentence in which the one being praised is the subject: “thou hast done,” or “thou art.”⁴¹

Declarative praise (e.g., Pss. 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 92, 103, 107, 116, 118, 124, 138) typically follows the structure:

- A. An introduction wherein the worshiper states his intention to praise the Lord (cf. Ps. 116:1–2).
- B. A main section wherein he narrates his experience of deliverance (vv. 3–9).
- C. A conclusion wherein he again testifies to the Lord’s gracious act or gives a homily to the congregation (vv. 10–19).

b. Descriptive Praise

Descriptive praise, in contrast to declarative praise, celebrates God’s person and his works in general, not a specific act of deliverance in answer to a petition. Above all, descriptive praise exalts God for his *hesed* (“kindness,” “unfailing love,” and the like; see [chap. 31](#).I), which occurs 127 times in the Psalter.⁴² Bernhard Anderson draws the conclusion, “Unlike the capricious gods of the ancient world, the God whom Israel worships is true to promises made, constant in faithfulness, consistent in behavior.”⁴³

In its simplest forms, descriptive praise consists of a call to praise (Ps. 117:1), a cause for praise (v. 2a), and a renewed call to praise (v. 2b). These hymns praise God as creator (redeemer) of Israel (100, 111, 114), as creator of the world, which is his temple (8, 104, 148), and as creator and ruler of history (33, 103, 113, 117, 145, 146, 147, 150).

3. Other Forms

There are other kinds of psalms as well. Psalms 50 and 81 are liturgies, aiming to renew Israel's covenant. Wisdom psalms aim to instruct Israel in piety and ethics (37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128). Narrative or storytelling psalms aim to instruct Israel from its sacred history (78, 105, 106, 135, 136). Songs of Zion celebrate God's election of Zion (46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 121, 122). Many psalms contain a mixture of some of these elements. Psalm 34, a declarative praise psalm (vv. 1–10), concludes with an extended homily in the form of wisdom (vv. 11–22).

C. Liturgical Approach⁴⁴

For Gunkel the life setting where the various forms of psalms were sung is unimportant. He recognizes that they were rooted in royalty and in the preexilic temple, but he regards them as late “spiritual songs” from the religious life of the individual. His student Sigmund Mowinckel, however, recovered the original setting of many psalms as part of the liturgical performances in the first temple.⁴⁵ The internal evidence of the psalms themselves and the external evidence put his emphasis beyond reasonable doubt. Moreover, as noted, it is just as certain that *I AM*'s anointed, Israel's “very life breath” (Lam. 4:20), played a prominent role in this liturgy. Mowinckel is not convincing, however, in his theory that many were sung at an annual festival at fall equinox, when the summer drought and the early rain began, and by which *I AM* “became king.” He derives this festival from the Babylonian Akitu festival, not from the Old Testament. A. Weiser associates the majority of the songs also with a specific fall festival, but according to him this festival functioned to renew Israel's covenant, similar to the one in Joshua 24.⁴⁶ H.-J. Kraus pictures a more complex festival, but he has won no more agreement for his theory than the other two.⁴⁷

I recovered James William Thirtle's theory that the phrase “For the director of music,” which introduces fifty-five psalms, was originally a postscript to the preceding psalm, not an original part of the superscription. Among other things, I argued for this theory on the bases of comparative ancient Near Eastern literature; the paradigmatic example in Habakkuk 3; the theory's ability to explain several conundrums, including the well-known *crux interpretum* in the superscription to Psalm 88, whose superscription illogically specifies two genres and two authors; and parallels from the LXX and in 11QPs^a.⁴⁸ If I am right, then the superscription pertains to the psalm's composition and the postscripts to its liturgical performance.

The internal evidence from the Psalms for a liturgical interpretation is convincing in spite of the objections of A. Szorenyi.⁴⁹ One finds frequent reference to the liturgical site: “Zion,” “house of the LoRD,” “holy hill,” and the like (e.g., Pss. 2:6; 3:4[5]; 63:2[3]; 74:3; 76:2; 92:13; 100:4; 114:2; 116:19; 118:19, 20). One also finds a mixture of references to offerings (22:25–26; 50:8; 96:8; 107:22; 116:14, 17–19), feasts (69:22), visitations with friends (22:22–24), and public processions (Pss. 15; 24; 26:6–8 [cf. 43:4]; 47:1; 68:24–27; 84). In addition, there is a whole collection labeled “songs of ascents [= pilgrimage?]” (Pss. 120–34). Reference is also made to sacred objects: altar (84:3; 118:27), cup (116:13), banners (20:5), and musical instruments (47:5; 150). Sacred personnel include angels (103:20–21), priests (132:8–9), Levites (135:19–21), warriors, and worshipers (Pss. 20–21) and, above all, the anointed king.

To be sure, some psalms were composed away from Zion (Pss. 42–43) or after the temple’s destruction (Pss. 74, 79). However, even these are “inwardly so closely related to the sanctuary and its cultic traditions that not many hymns are left over in the Psalter of which it can be said that they are really ‘dissociated from the cult’ and not many exclusively composed for private edification.”⁵⁰ Mowinckel in 1924 recognized only two or three psalms as nonliturgical (Pss. 1, 11, 127). Then he added to learned psalmography Psalms 1, 34, 37, 49, 78, 105, 106, 111, 112, and 127, which he attributed to the wise. But the priests instructed the people in Torah, and King Solomon composed proverbs. Holm Nielsen redefines cult to include postexilic synagogue, where instruction in the law and in divine worship cannot be strictly separated. Roland E. Murphy also disallows sharp division between wisdom circles and cult, though he is uncertain about the precise life setting of Psalms 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, and 128.⁵¹ Otto J. Babb nicely summarizes the importance of the liturgical interpretation for the theology of the Psalter:

In the use of this literature the individual became one with his group and shared the spirit which moved it, whether the mood of the moment was contrition, trust, or glad thanksgiving. He found himself, and he also found the God of his soul’s desire through his unreserved participation in the acts of communal worship, whereby the rich resources and inspiring traditions of his people’s history were made available to him.⁵²

III. EDITING THE PSALTER

A. Earlier Collections of the Psalms

The Psalter began with songs by individuals composed under unique historical circumstances. These poems were then used in the liturgical life of worshiping Israel and were later gathered into earlier collections. Psalm 72:20, “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse,” is “the eggshell” of an earlier collection. The notice in 2 Chronicles 29:30 suggests that two collections, “the words of David” (cf. Pss. 3–41 except 33) and “the words of Asaph” (Pss. 50, 73–83), existed in Hezekiah’s time. Psalms by the sons of Korah (Pss. 42–49, 84–88 but not 86) probably constituted another collection.

The so-called Elohistic Psalter (Pss. 42–83), probably an earlier edition, is now divided between books 2 and 3, whose seam is found between Psalms 72 and 73. This collection is marked by a striking statistical contrast between use of the divine names *YHWH* and *ʾēlōhîm*. Whereas in Psalms 1–41 and 84–150 *YHWH* occurs 584 times and *ʾēlōhîm*, 94 times, in 42–83 *YHWH* occurs 45 times and *ʾēlōhîm*, 210 times. Moreover, in the rest of the Psalter, *YHWH* occurs mostly in verset “a” and *ʾēlōhîm* in verset “b” [i.e., the parallel to “a”], but in 42–83 the situation is reversed. Finally, in synoptic psalms the names are reversed (cf. 14:2, 4, 7 with 53:3, 5, 7; 40:13[14], 17 with 70:1[2], 5). No consensus has been reached to explain the existence of the Elohistic Psalter.

B. Five Books

The 150 psalms we have in hand — though the pairs Psalms 9–10 and 42–43 were originally unified psalms and later divided for liturgical reasons — are now collected into five books. Each of these books ends with a doxology consisting of a priestly benediction, “Praise be to *I AM*,” and the congregation’s response, “Amen” (see Pss. 41, 72, 89, 106). The books are also marked off by a change of authors at the seams. The variation in these doxologies is better explained by

viewing them as integral parts of the Psalms to which they are attached rather than as additions by a single redactor.⁵³ Since Psalm 106 concludes with a prayer for Israel's regathering from the exile and Psalm 107:3 begins by viewing the regathering as an accomplished fact, it is plausible to conclude that the division at this seam occurred after Israel's return from the exile (ca. 536 BC). The Dead Sea Scrolls also display this five-book arrangement and so mark the *terminus ad quem* for its editing.⁵⁴

Jewish tradition explains this second "Pentateuch" as a conscious echo of the first. A midrash on Psalm 1 from the Talmudic period says, "As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel."⁵⁵ This is certainly appropriate. Moses instituted Israel's liturgical elements: its sacred objects, festivals, personnel, and activities. David, Israel's Mozart, transformed the Mosaic liturgy into opera by putting it on the stage of the temple and by accompanying it with the music and libretto of his psalms.

C. Exegetical and Theological Significance of Five Books

During the postexilic period, probably about 520 BC, the Psalms were edited in such a way as to focus on the king. This final editing significantly affected both the Psalter's interpretation and theology.

1. Introduction (Ps. 1)

Most agree that Psalms 1–2 are the Psalter's introduction and Psalms 146–50, its climactic finale of praise. The first two psalms lack a superscription, unlike the rest of Book I (except Pss. 10, 33); share similar vocabulary;⁵⁶ and expound a uniform message: the pious and righteous are fully rewarded, and in the time of judgment they triumph over the wicked. The didactic generalization that the righteous prevail over the wicked (Ps. 1), is fleshed out in salvation history as happening through *I AM*'s anointed king (Ps. 2).

Some suggest that the *torah* (catechistic teaching, traditionally "law") in Psalm 1:1 refers to the book of Psalms, transforming the book from liturgical hymns of praise and petition into a book to be read, studied, and meditated upon.⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the Psalter, however, *torah* in similar contexts refers to the covenant God gave Israel at Sinai (Pss. 19:6; 119:1). Nevertheless, the book of

Psalms was transformed from liturgy in the temple to reflective meditation in the postexilic synagogue. According to Ernst Jenni, “the people’s ‘Amen’ no longer responds to the deeds of God but to the mighty words of God.”⁵⁸

Psalm 1 functions as a garden gate, protecting Israel’s sacred hymns against abuse. A problem inherent in liturgy is that it tempts humanity to rigidity and manipulation. Given to magical rituals, some worshipers throughout history have turned religion into a way to get what they want from God. Others have assumed that God is interested only in the proper execution of religious procedures without a corresponding life that is attentive to him. Psalm 1 anticipates these problems. Before entering the Psalter, one must say a hearty “Amen” to Psalm 1. Only the covenant keeper can enter and dwell in God’s presence (Pss. 15 and 24), and only those that delight in the Torah can enter the congregation of the righteous who sing the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of the Psalter.

Psalm 2 escalates the wicked of Psalm 1 to whole nations and narrows the righteous individual to the Davidic king. The way of the wicked is at war against *I AM*’s rule (Psalm 1) and against his ruler (Psalm 2). The wicked in Psalm 2 form a cabal of nations at war against *I AM* and against his anointed king, who rules *I AM*’s righteous kingdom. Psalm 1 profiles the cause and consequence of the righteous individual against the wicked; Psalm 2 profiles the cause and consequence of the rebels.

The editor’s two introductory psalms prepare those who meditate on his anthology of petitions and praises to interpret the psalms with respect to both the king and to themselves as individuals within his kingdom. The church by its baptism into Christ Jesus is “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” who prays with their king (1 Peter 2:9).

2. Books 1 and 2 (Pss. 1–72)

Psalm 2 introduces the principal subject, the king in prayer. At the king’s coronation, he recites a poetic variation of a decree in the Davidic covenant (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14): “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps. 2:8). In the rest of the Psalter, the reader hears the petitions and praises of David and his heirs. “The anointed one” plays a prominent role not only in this introduction but also at the Psalter’s seams, Psalms 72 and 89. Books 1 through 3 are clearly royal. Gerald Wilson says, “The presence in 72:20 of the postscript announcing the conclusion of ‘the prayers of David, son of Jesse’ suggests Books One and Two may have combined to form an earlier collection introduced and concluded by ‘Royal’

psalms, a collection which because of its high Davidic content (60 of 70 psalms) might well justify the description ‘prayers of David.’”⁵⁹

Within these books Wilson notes a progression of thought. Psalm 2 introduces the idea of the Davidic covenant, Psalms 3 and 41 speak of the king’s assurance of *I AM*’s protection and security in the face of his enemies, and Psalm 72 contains multiple petitions for the king’s son: may he rule justly; may his domain be secure from his enemies; may he live long and be blessed. “So the covenant which YHWH made with David (Ps. 2) and in whose promises David rested secure (Ps. 41) is now passed on to his descendants in this series of petitions in behalf of the king’s son’ (Ps. 72).”⁶⁰

3. Book 3 (Pss. 73–89)

With book 3 and its concluding hymn, Psalm 89, a new perspective is achieved. This is the dark book of the Psalter. The Davidic covenant is viewed as established in the dim past, and more important, it is considered as fractured: “At the conclusion of the third book, immediately preceding the break observed separating the earlier and later books, the impression left is one of a covenant remembered, but a covenant *failed*. The Davidic covenant introduced in Psalm 2 has come to nothing and the combination of three books concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.”⁶¹ But there is hope!

4. Book 4 (Pss. 90–106)

With book 4 yet another perspective is achieved. Without a king, Israel falls back upon its heritage. They look back to Moses, who is now mentioned seven times (Pss. 90 [superscription]; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32), whereas heretofore he was mentioned only once (77:20[21]), and whose only song in the Psalter introduces book 4. Moreover, Israel now looks back to their eternal King, *I AM*: “O God our help in ages past, our hope in years to come” (cf. 90:1–2). In Psalms 93–99 one finds the so-called enthronement psalms: *I AM* is king! He has been Israel’s refuge in the past, long before monarchy existed; he will continue to be Israel’s refuge now that monarchy is gone; and blessed are they that trust in him. His kingdom comes.

5. Book 5 (Pss. 107–50)

Book 5 is clearly linked with book 4. Psalm 106:47 concludes book 4 with the prayer, “Save us, *I AM* our God, and gather us from the nations.” Book 5 begins by viewing this act of gathering as an established fact: “those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south” (107:3). The troubles of the exile have been overcome. Two groups of Davidic collections are found in this book, 108–110; 138–145. The redactor intends to set up David as a model in response to the concerns of the psalms that precede them.

Thus, in Psalms 108–110, David emerges as the “wise man” (107:43) who “gives heed” to the cautions of 107:39–42 and relies wholly on the steadfast love of YHWH. His willingness to sing the praise of YHWH “among the nations” (108:3) becomes a paradigm of action to be followed, whether by those yet in exile or among those vulnerable returnees surrounded by their foes. David knows that only reliance on YHWH is effective ... (108:12).... In like fashion to the first group of Davidic psalms, David serves as an example in Psalms 138–144 following the plaintive cry of the exiles expressed in the words of Psalm 137 which immediately precedes.⁶²

Moreover, there is a prominent messianic hope in some of these Davidic psalms. In Psalm 110:1a David, using distinctively prophetic language, “*I AM* says” (*nē’um*, in divine spirit speech), foresees a King greater than himself: “*I AM* says to my Lord.” Jesus pressed home the argument that Messiah is greater than David’s son, for David “in the spirit” calls him “my lord” (Matt. 22:41–46). This King will be a warrior king—priest after the order of Melchizedek. With himself at God’s right hand (v. 1b) and God at his right hand (v. 5a), he and his army will crush rebellious kings and rule the earth (vv. 5b–7). In Psalm 118 Israel shouts to the King whom the builders rejected, but whom *I AM* made the capstone (vv. 22–23), “Blessed is he who comes in the name of *I AM*” (v. 26).

IV. MESSIANISM

A. Term Anoint/Anointed

The term *Messiah* (Heb. *mēšīah*) derives from the root *māšah*, “to paint, smear, sprinkle, daub,” “anoint” (Pss. 45:7; 89:20). The one “anointed” (*mēšīah*, a passive participle of *māšah*) is designated and appointed publicly for divine status with divine authority (1 Sam. 10:1; 15:1, 17; 16:1–13; 2 Sam. 2:4, 7; 5:3, 17) and consecrated as God’s property (Exod. 29:7; 40:9–11; Lev. 8:10–11; Num. 7:10–11). This entails his invincibility and divine protection (1 Sam. 24:6–11; 26:9–24; Pss. 2:10–12; 105:15; Lev. 10:1–2) and his being qualified and equipped for tasks by *I AM*’s spirit (1 Sam. 10:6; 16:13; Isa. 61:1–3).

Those considered to be *mēšīah* *YHWH* (“anointed by *I AM*”) in the Old Testament included the patriarchs (Ps. 105:15 [1 Chron. 16:22]), priests (Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; Num. 3:3; Dan. 9:26), and especially the king (e.g., Saul [1 Sam. 24:6, 10; 26:16; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16], David [2 Sam. 22:51; 23:1], and Zedekiah [Lam. 4:20]). Sometimes the king is called with regard to *I AM* “my anointed” (1 Sam. 2:35; Ps. 132:17), “your anointed” (Hab. 3:13; Pss. 84:9; 132:10; 2 Chron. 6:42 [2x]), and “his anointed” (1 Sam. 2:10; 12:3, 5; 16:6; 2 Sam. 22:51 [= Ps 18:50[51]; Pss. 2:2; 20:6[7]; 28:8; Isa. 45:1), or “anointed by the God of Jacob” (2 Sam. 23:1).

Other terms for *I AM*’s ideal king or Messiah at the end of the ages are: *hōter*, “shoot” (Isa. 11:1); *hōtām*, “signet ring” (Hag. 2:23); *mōšēl*, “ruler” (Mic. 5:1); *ʾelōhīm* “righteous shoot” (Jer. 23:5; NIV: “righteous Branch”) or “true shoot” (Zech. 3:8; 6:12; NIV: “the Branch”); and *melek*, “king” (Ezek. 37:22, 24).

B. Development of the Concept of “Messiah” in the Old Testament

1. In the Davidic Covenant

The concept of an ideal king who will rule Israel in the eschaton is rooted in the Davidic covenant that promised David an eternal house, kingdom, and throne (2 Sam. 7:16; see [chap. 23](#) above). Israel's king is superhuman, a son of God who represents *I AM* before the people. By divine anointing and the gift of God's spirit, the king becomes a superhuman divine being filled with superhuman power and wisdom, but in the Old Testament not equated as one with God. Endowed with righteousness (i.e., with ability to rule), he defends the people and relieves the oppressed (Ps. 21:9–12); he is the people's source of strength and life (Lam. 4:20; 2 Sam. 12:7; Hos. 3:4; Ps. 72:6, 16). As a priest he is in corporate solidarity with the people and represents them before *I AM*. The concerns of the king are his people's concern; his sin infects the whole nation; he should bear Israel's religious and moral ideals; and convey *I AM*'s blessing on the people according to his obedience.

2. In the Prophets

Although the prophets did not use the term “the Messiah,” they contributed significantly to the doctrine of a future king that would rule Israel and the world in the last days. For example, First Isaiah saw a glorious future son of David ruling over Israel in contrast to corrupt Ahaz (ca. 735 BC). This coming king, born of a virgin, would be called “Immanuel” (“God with us,” Isa. 7:14). His name would also be “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6[7]). Micah 5:2–6 announces both the birth of the humble Messiah at inauspicious Bethlehem and his glorious reign. According to Micah 5:4 [3], the reigning Messiah *will stand* (i.e., endure forever; cf. Ps. 33:11) *and shepherd his flock*, providing for their every need, including spiritual food, and protecting them (John 10; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4). Through faith he will rule “*in the strength of the LORD*,” not through human engineering and manipulation (cf. 5:10–15). His subjects *will live securely* for, conquering Satan (Matt. 12:22–29; Rom. 16:20), he will extend his kingdom to the ends of the earth (Mic. 4:3–4; Matt. 28:18–20; John 17:2).

Some have been troubled by God's judgment on Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim. Regarding that king, *I AM* swears, “Even if you ... were a signet ring [i.e., a representation of the owner] on my right hand, I would still pull you off [i.e., revoke the Davidic covenant in your case]” (Jer. 22:24). As for Jehoiachin's children, *I AM* prophesies, not swears, “Record this man as if childless, ... for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah,” yet Jeconiah (i.e., Jehoiachin) is in the lineage of Jesus

Christ (Jer. 22:30). *I AM*, in keeping with his character to change his prophecies according to the righteousness or unrighteousness of a person (see [chap. 28](#) above), graciously reversed this judgment. He offered to make his servant Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Jeconiah (i.e., Jehoiachin), his signet ring (Hag. 2:23), but this did not take place until Jesus (Matt. 1:12).

Second Isaiah foresaw an anonymous Suffering Servant, who is True Israel (see 49:3) and unlike nominal Israel, who is as deaf and blind as the idols it worships (Isa. 43:18–25). The true, insightful Servant gives his life as an atonement for sin and after his resurrection assumes his glorious throne (42:1–7; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). God says of him in 52:13, “See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and [then] lifted up and [then] highly exalted.” Since the rest of the oracle features his atoning death—*I AM* makes his life a guilt offering (53:10) — “he will be raised” must refer to his resurrection from the dead. His resurrection is then followed by his ascension (“lifted up”) and glorification (“highly exalted”). This is explicitly stated in the rest of vv. 10b–11: “he will see his offspring and prolong his days— After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life.” In other words, Messiah must first die a vicarious death bearing the iniquities of Israel and then be raised from the dead to his glory.

3. In the Royal Psalms

The concept of Messiah was also augmented in the royal ideology of the Psalter. The Psalter’s royal ideal was not due to the *Hofstil* (“court style”) of the ancient Near East, as Gunkel claimed, but Israel’s genuine hope applied to reigning kings. The Psalms represented the king visually and *ideally* to the people and were always pregnant with messianic expectations. Some royal psalms contain ideals that surpass historical reality and give birth to the messianic expectation: the “anointed” rules to the ends of the earth (Ps. 2:7–8) and as long as the sun and moon endure (72:5). Israel salutes this king who is his sovereign and who sits at God’s right hand (110:1). On the other hand, some royal psalms—such as the penitential psalms — contain elements that are less than ideal. This is so because discontinuity is a necessary dimension of typology for history to progress. Sacred history progressively rises from the less than ideal to the ideal. The outward, carnal forms of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants had to fail to make way for the fulfillment of their inward, spiritual perfections (see pp. 136–39).

4. In the Editing of the Psalter

The concept of Messiah was also developed in the editing of the Psalter. Israel draped the magnificent royal psalms as robes on each successive king, but generation after generation the shoulders of the reigning monarch proved too narrow and the robe slipped off to be draped on his successor. Finally, in the exile, Israel was left without a king and with a wardrobe of royal robes in their hymnody. On the basis of *I AM*'s unconditional covenants to Abraham and David, the faithful know that Israel's history ends in triumph, not in tragedy. The prophets, as noted, envisioned a coming king who would fulfill the promise of these covenants. Haggai and Zechariah, who prophesied about 520 BC when the returnees had no king, fueled the prophetic expectation of the hoped-for king by applying it to Zerubbabel, son of David, and to Joshua, the high priest. When this hope fell through, Israel pinned their hope on a future Messiah. It was in that context, when Israel had no king, that the Psalter was edited with reference to the king. Accordingly, the editors of the Psalter must have resignified the Psalms from the historical king and draped them on the shoulders of Messiah. Samuel Terrien, commenting on Psalm 21, agrees: "The theology of kingship and divine power had to be re-examined in the light of the historical events. Psalm 21 needed to be interpreted eschatologically. The Anointed One began to be viewed as the Messiah at the end of time."⁶³ In short, in light of the exile and the loss of kingship, the editors colored the entire Psalter with a messianic hue.

More specifically, in the petition psalms the Messiah must first suffer before he triumphs. In that light the faithful at the advent of Jesus Christ should have anticipated from the "lament" motif of these psalms, as well as from the Suffering Servant songs in Second Isaiah, that Christ would first suffer before entering his glory depicted in both the praise motifs of these psalms and in the praise psalms. Satan understood Psalm 91, a psalm of confidence, as referring to Messiah, and Jesus did not correct him. Moreover, the so-called enthronement psalms in book 4 must refer in the context of the Psalter's editing to Messiah. *I AM* reigns at the end of the ages in the Messiah, not apart from a human agent. In book 5 exemplary David finds his fulfillment in the Messiah.

C. Messiah in Later Judaism

The terms *hammāšīah* (Heb. "the anointed") and *hammāšīah* in Aramaic (Gr.

Christos) for the eschatological king originate in later Jewish literature. The concept of the Messiah intensifies in apocalyptic literature (see [chap. 6.V](#) and 19.XI).⁶⁴ In this literature the righteous future kingdom of heaven under the Messiah is seen as imminently breaking into the evil kingdoms of earth. Here the Messiah becomes strikingly profiled as Israel's coming King who ushers in the righteous kingdom of God at the end of the ages.

The central figure of 1 Enoch is "the Son of man" (cf. Dan. 7:9–14) referred to in 1 Enoch 46:1–3, the Chosen One (cf. Isa 42:1) or the Righteous One (1 Enoch 38:2), and the "Anointed One" (1 Enoch 52:6). This heavenly figure, who is regarded as having been with God from the beginning (1 Enoch 48:3, 6) and remains in God's presence, reveals all things to the elect. He is the judge of the world and the champion of righteousness who destroys the enemies of the righteous.

The Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch refers "my Anointed" (39:7; 40:1; 72:2), "my servant, the Anointed One" (70:9), and "the Anointed One" (29:3; 30:1) to a royal figure introducing a limited period of time of complete bliss and incorruptibility. "That time marks the end of what is corruptible and beginning of what is incorruptible" (74:2). The Messiah will reign over the remnant of God's people in the place God has chosen (40:2): "His kingdom will stand forever, until this work of corruption comes to an end and the times appointed are fulfilled" (40:3). When the Messiah's presence on earth has come to an end, he will return in glory, and general resurrection will follow.

In 4 Ezra (= 2 Esdras) the divine agent who finally ushers in after his death the new eon of incorruptibility, bringing with it resurrection and judgment (7:30–44), is called "my/the Anointed One." In another vision he is likened to a lion, "The Anointed One whom the Most High has kept back to the end of days, who will spring from the seed of David" (12:32).

Other intertestamental Jewish literature (200 BC–AD 100), although preoccupied with the priesthood, also makes its contribution to a royal Messiah.⁶⁵ BenSirach is clearly interested in God's promises concerning the (high) priesthood in the line of Aaron. He does not neglect God's promises to David, but they do not seem to be relevant. The book of 1 Maccabees was written to legitimize the Hasmoneans' leadership in cultic and political matters as high priests and princes. The Jews and their priests make Simon their leader (*hēgoumenos*) and high priest forever (14:35, 41–42) as well as "commander" (*stratēgos*) and "ethnarch" (v. 47). This arrangement will last "until a trustworthy prophet should arise" (v. 41). Second Maccabees features the intrigues to replace Onias, son of Simon, and his murder. He is clearly thought to

be with God in heaven.

The Book of Jubilees features Jacob's blessing of Levi and Judah in 31:13–17 and 18–20 respectively. This passage emphasizes the functions to be exercised by the two patriarchs and their descendants on behalf of Israel. Of Judah it is said, "A prince shall you be, you and one of your sons." Not only the patriarch and tribe are in view but also David and/or a future ideal Davidic king.

The extant Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs achieved its final shape in the hands of Christians, and isolating the earlier traditions on which it is based remains a hazardous undertaking. The Testaments in their present form are interested in the juxtaposition of Levi and Judah and of the priesthood and kingship, but the former is superior to the latter. Levi's descendants are, however, singled out as sinners against Jesus Christ (T. Levi 4:4; [chaps. 10](#), 14–15, 16). In 5:2 Levi's priesthood will be limited to the period before God's decisive intervention in the history of Israel. Whenever the Testaments mention an agent of the divine deliverance in connection with these two tribes or with one of them, they mean Jesus.

The Qumran community represented in the writings discovered in the caves at Qumran was a priestly sect led by Zadokite priests. Under the leadership of their "Teacher of Righteousness," they separated from the Jerusalem temple and the Hasmonean priesthood officiating there. The people at Qumran looked forward to the time when the meaning of the Law would be fully clear and when God's will would be obeyed completely. Then a duly appointed high priest and a Davidic prince would discharge their respective functions properly. As may be expected from a priestly community, of these two the future high priest is the most important figure. When God brings about this decisive turn of events, the final battle against the demonic forces and human enemies will be won.

The authors of the Psalms of Solomon, which were written about 50–40 BC clearly oppose the Hasmoneans, who have not discharged their priestly duties properly and have usurped the high priesthood (8:11) as well as royal authority (17:5–6). These authors anticipate God's deliverance from a Davidic king (e.g. Pss. Sol. 17:21): "Behold, Lord, rule over Israel your servant." This king will rule as God's representative forever and ever and will free Israel from their enemies, the people in the dispersion will return, and the nations will serve God. The king will serve the Lord as the ideal pious, obedient, and wise man. In 17:32 and 18:5, 7 he is called "The Anointed" and in 18:7, "the anointed of the LORD." The "anointed of the LORD" has become a fixed expression denoting the Davidic king appointed by God to bring about a turn in the fate of Israel.

V. THE MESSIAH AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus of Nazareth and his apostles identified the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, combining in his one person the future Prophet, Priest, and King. With his death, resurrection, and ascension, the temple and its priesthood cease. Jesus is a priest-king after the order of Melchizedek and the prophet to come like Moses. In fact, he is greater than Moses, because Jesus is identified with *I AM* himself.

The New Testament regards David and Israel, including the priesthood, the representatives of the kingdom of God under the old covenant, as types of Christ and his church, the quintessential representatives of the kingdom under the new covenant arrangements. Of the 283 direct quotes from the Old Testament in the New Testament, 116 (41 percent) are from the Psalter. Jesus Christ alludes to the Psalms more than fifty times (see Luke 24:44). The New Testament introduces a realized eschatology, an “already” and a “not yet” (i.e., an already present fulfillment and a not-yet future consummation). The messianic expectation is *fulfilled* in Jesus Christ and his church (cf. Matt. 28:18–20; John 17:2) and *will be consummated* after his Parousia (second coming) and the resurrection of his saints in the new heaven and the new earth (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23–28). The sufferings of the Christ at his first advent are clearly distinguished from his glory to follow his resurrection and ascension at his second advent.

The specific predictions of some Psalms that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ combined with the use of the Psalter in the New Testament suggest that the entire Psalter pertains to Jesus Christ and his church.

Christ and his apostles, however, radically transform the notion of Messiah from a superhuman figure to one who is united with God from eternity past to eternity future. He is the one-of-a-kind Son of God. He fulfilled Israel’s expectations and exceeded them as much as the heavens are higher than the earth.⁶⁶ He did not come to satisfy Israel’s cravings for a national, political, and even military Jewish restoration. Rather, he came to radically transform the nation’s spiritual climate by calling for repentance from confidence in their corrupt religious practices, useless traditions, and self-righteousness to trust in him. The difference between the people’s understanding of messiahship and Jesus’ reality was so radical that the title Messiah is the one Jesus used least for himself, preferring instead Son of Man. Christopher J. H. Wright explains: “The

term ‘Messiah’ had become so loaded with the hopes of a national, political, and even military Jewish restoration that it could not carry the understanding of messiahship which Jesus had derived from a deeper reading of his Scriptures. A public proclamation of his own messiahship would have been ‘heard’ by his contemporaries with a load of associations that were not part of Jesus’ concept of his mission.”⁶⁷

A. References to Psalms in the Gospels

The New Testament cites explicitly Psalms, which rewritten in small letters with reference to David’s passions, are written in large letters with reference to Christ’s (cf. Ps. 2:1 with Acts 4:25–26; Ps. 6:3[4] with John 12:27; Ps. 22:1 with Matt. 27:46; Ps. 22:18 with John 19:24; Ps. 31:5[6] with Luke 23:46; Ps. 34:20 with John 19:36; Ps. 35:19 with John 15:25; Ps. 40:6–8 with Heb. 10:5–10; Ps. 41:9[10] with John 13:18; Ps. 42:6 with Matt. 26:38; Ps. 69:22 with Matt. 27:34, 48; Ps. 109:25 with Matt. 27:39; Ps. 109:8 with Acts 1:20.⁶⁸ The anointed’s fervor (Ps. 69:9) typifies the Anointed’s (John 2:17). The authoritative teaching of the psalmist presages the authoritative teaching of Jesus Christ (cf. Ps. 37:11 with Matt. 5:5; Ps. 48:2 with Matt. 5:34; Ps. 78:2 with Matt. 13:35; Ps. 78:24 with John 6:31; Ps. 82:6 with John 10:34). The glory of the anointed king in the Old Testament becomes the glory of the Anointed King in the New Testament (cf. Ps. 2:1–2, 6[7] with Acts 4:25–28; Ps. 8 with Heb. 2:5–10 and 1 Cor. 15:27; Ps. 16:8–11 with Acts 2:25–31; Ps. 18:49[50] with Rom. 15:9; Ps. 22:22[23] with Heb. 2:10–12; Ps. 45:6[7] with Heb. 1:8–9; Ps. 110:1 with Matt. 22:44; Ps. 110:1 with Heb. 1:13; 5:5; Ps. 118:22–23 with Matt. 21:42).

B. Kinds of Messianic Psalms: How the New Testament Uses the Psalter

1. Indirect and Typical

Some of the psalms cited above are so indirectly typical that the New Testament use of them strongly suggests that all the psalms are a type of Christ. For example, select psalms that indirectly speak of Christ are: “My soul is in anguish” (Ps. 6:3[4]), “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (31:5 [6]), “Those

who hate me without reason” (35:19), and “My soul is downcast” (42:6). Kidner says, “But a closer look at the way these psalms are handled will suggest that they are regarded as samples of a much larger corpus. It would scarcely seem too much to infer from this treatment that wherever David or the Davidic king appears in the Psalter ... he foreshadows to some degree the Messiah.”⁶⁹ Of course, the antitype must be greater than the type in order for history to advance (see “Typology,” [chap. 5](#).II.C.6). Whereas the psalmist, the type, confesses his sins, the Antitype is without sin. Moreover, whereas the type is the Son of God as the heir of the Davidic covenant (cf. John 1:49), Christ is additionally the Son of God by virgin birth (Luke 1:34–35) and by his preincarnate glory with the Father (John 17). In Psalm 2:7 on the historical horizon “son” is a type in lower case, but on the prophetic horizon “Son” is in upper case.

2. Typico-Prophetic

David’s sufferings and glory typify Jesus Christ, but sometimes his language transcends his own experience and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (e.g., Pss. 2, 22). Select psalms that are clearly predictive are “They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing” (22:18) and “He protects all of his bones, not one of them will be broken” (34:20).

Unfortunately, under the impact of historical criticism, academics restrict the prophetic gift and often undermine the New Testament. For example, Peter, following the Septuagint, interprets Psalm 16:10b to mean, “You will not let your Holy One see decay” (Acts 2:27). On this basis he argues that since David’s body decayed, David was a prophet and predicted the resurrection of the Christ, who “was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see corruption” (Acts 2:24–32). The NRSV, however, undermines Peter by rendering Psalm 16:10b “or let your faithful one see the Pit [Heb. *šāḥat*].” BDB allows “pit” as the only meaning of *šāḥat*, and HALOT invests it with this meaning in Psalm 16:10b. The evidence, however, does not sustain their interpretation.

The noun *šāḥat* occurs twenty-five times in the Old Testament, always in poetry. It can be derived from the verbs *šwh* (“to sink down”) or *šāḥat* (“to go to ruin”). Nouns of the pattern *šāḥat* derived from roots like *šwh* are feminine (i.e., final *t* is the feminine suffix); nouns derived from roots like *šht* are masculine (i.e., the *t* is part of the root). As a result, homonyms, a masculine and a feminine form, are possible. *Nāḥat* (fem.),⁷⁰ a derivative from *nûah*, means “quietness/rest,” but *naḥat* (masc.)⁷¹ from *nāḥat* means “descent/descending.” All

the ancient versions understood *šahat* as a homonym. None denies it sometimes means “pit,” but the Septuagint and Vulgate understood it to mean “corruption” in Psalms 9:15; 29[30]:9; 34[35]:7; 48[49]:9; 54[55]:23; 102[103]:4. Symmachus so understood it in Psalm 35:7; 55:23; Aquila in Psalms 7:15; 30:9; Theodotian in Job 33:22, 30. In addition to the Septuagint, Jerome and Syriac understood it this way in Psalm 16:10. Marvin H. Pope, seemingly unaware of *šahat* (masc.), recognizes that it must mean “filth” in Job 9:31 and tries to explain it as due to the netherworld’s putrescent nature.⁷² A clear example, however, of masculine *šahat* is found in Job 17:14: “If I say to *šahat*, ‘You are my father,’ and to the worm [*rimmâ*, feminine collective for ‘worms’], ‘My mother’ or ‘My sister.’” Karl Brugmann showed at the end of the nineteenth century that grammatical gender guided the poetic imagination in personification.⁷³ “Worm” (*rimmâ*) is feminine, hence its personification by “mother” and “sister.” We may confidently infer, therefore, that *šahat* personified as “father” is the masculine form, “decay/corruption.”

Moreover, it can be established that the masculine form, “corruption,” not the feminine form, “pit,” is in view in Psalm 16:10 by the verb “to see” *lir’ôt* which may express figuratively the ideas of “experiencing,” “enduring,” “proving,” and the like, and takes for its object a noun indicative of the *state* of the soul or body: for example, “to see death” (Ps. 89:48[49]), “to see trouble/evil” (Ps. 90:15), “to see trouble and sorrow” (Jer. 20:18), “to see famine” (Jer. 5:12), “to see affliction” (Lam. 3:1). On the contrary, when indicating the idea of *place* (e.g., pit, grave, sheol, gates of death, etc.), the Hebrew authors use a verb of motion; for example, “to come” (Job 5:26), “to go” (Eccl. 9:10; Isa. 38:10), “to draw near” (Pss. 88:3[4]; 107:18), “to descend” (Job 21:13), “to fall” (Pss. 7:15[16]; 57:6[7]). The expression “to go down to the pit” occurs four times in the Psalter and nine times in Ezekiel (cf. Isa. 38:18; Prov. 1:12). In this case, the ancient versions, not modern lexicographers, have the better of the argument, and so does the New Testament.

3. Prophetic

David predicts the reign of his greater son. Psalm 110 (see Matt. 22:41–46) envisions him as seated at God’s right hand. A. B. Ehrlich argues, “From the OT point of view it was wholly unthinkable, even in metaphor, to describe a mortal as seated on Yahweh’s right hand.”⁷⁴

4. Enthronement (Pss. 93–99) and Other Psalms

The so-called enthronement psalms (Pss. 93–99) celebrate *I AM*'s coming universal, righteous kingdom. Some other psalms find their fulfillment in the church and their consummation in the coming reign of Jesus Christ in the new heaven and the new earth. The specific predictions of some psalms that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, combined with the use of the Psalter in the New Testament, suggest that the entire Psalter pertains to Jesus Christ and his church. The New Testament identifies the everlasting Creator with Jesus Christ (cf. Ps. 102:25–27[26–28] with Heb. 1:10–12). The apostles did not hesitate to use the Psalter with reference to their day (cf. Ps. 34:12–16 with 1 Peter 3:10–12; Ps. 55:22 [23] with 1 Peter 5:7; Ps. 90:4 with 2 Peter 3:8; Ps. 4:4[5] with Eph. 4:26; Ps. 112:9 with 2 Cor. 9:9; Ps. 116:10 with 2 Cor. 4:13; Ps. 24:1 with 1 Cor. 10:26; Ps. 146:6 with Acts 4:24).

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do the historical, form critical, rhetorical critical, and messianic approaches to the Psalter enrich the usefulness of Psalm 3 to your spiritual life?

[1.](#) This introduction is taken from Bruce K. Waltke, “Psalms: Theology of,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:1100–1115.

[2.](#) Briggs was conservative early in his career and later became more critical.

[3.](#) See O. Sellers, “The Status and Prospects,” in *The Study of the Bible Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Harold Willoughby, Chicago Society of Biblical Research (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947).

[4.](#) J. L. Mays, *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 151.

[5.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 520.

[6.](#) Walter Wiens, “The Identification of the Enemy in the ‘Lament’ Psalms” (Th.M. thesis, Regent College, 1979).

[7.](#) Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973–75), 17.

[8.](#) Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 13–24.

[9.](#) *ANET*, 365–81.

[10.](#) Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I:1–50*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1995), xxix – xxx.

[11.](#) Moses (Ps. 90), David (73 times), Solomon (Pss. 72, 127), Korah, 42–49, 84–87), Asaph (50, 73–83), Heman (88), and Ethan (89).

[12.](#) BDB, 513, entry 5b.

[13.](#) GKC, 129c.

[14.](#) J. Wheeler, “Music of the Temple,” *Archaeology and Biblical Research* 2 (1989).

[15.](#) J. F. A. Sawyer, “An Analysis of the Context and Meaning of the Psalm,” *Transactions* 22 (1970): 6.

[16.](#) Josephus, *Antiquities*, 9.13.3.

[17.](#) Charles A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (New York: Scribner, 1906–7), liv.

[18.](#) A. Hurvitz, “The Chronological Significance of ‘Aramaisms’ in Biblical Hebrew,” *IEJ* 18 (1968): 234.

[19.](#) John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1976), 22.

[20.](#) Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1933), 147–48.

[21.](#) Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 20–26.

[22.](#) Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 28.

[23.](#) Cited in A. Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 20.

[24.](#) Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 35.

[25.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “Atonement in Psalm 51: ‘My Sacrifice, O God, Is a Broken Spirit,’ “ in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. C. E. Hill and Frank James III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 51–60.

[26.](#) Edward Dalglish, *Psalm Fifty-one in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 124.

[27.](#) See M. L. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1980), 485–87.

[28.](#) See Eaton, *Kingship*, 142–46, 185–87.

[29.](#) C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Fontana, 1967), 58.

[30.](#) J. F. A. Sawyer, “What Was a Mosaic?” *VT* (1965): 479.

[31.](#) Lewis, *Reflections*, 23.

[32.](#) By contrast, the Westminster Confession of Faith (19:5) states that the New Testament in no way dissolves the substance of the law. Charles H. Spurgeon (*Treasury of David* [Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1981], 3:266) contended they are prophecies, not petitions, but in my opinion Hebrew grammar rules out this option.

[33.](#) Lewis, *Reflections*, 28.

[34.](#) *Ibid.*, 31.

[35.](#) Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 26.

[36.](#) The biblical concept of “vengeance” (*nqm*) entails faith. Bernhard W. Anderson (*Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak to Us Today* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983], 90–91) oversimplifies the meaning of the word “to save.” Better, it means that the Lord secures his sovereignty and keeps his community whole by delivering his wronged subjects and punishing their guilty slayers. Viewed from the perspective of the sovereign acting on behalf of his besieged community, a translation such as “deliver” or “rescue” is called for, but where

the perspective is between the ruler and the enemy, as in Mic. 5:14, a translation such as “defeat” or “punishment” is appropriate. Only the sovereign himself has the legitimate right to use force to protect his imperium; the exercise of force by an individual is actually a hostile act. Mendenhall notes: “With reference to the early usages of NQM, one must conclude that the normative value system of the early biblical society would never tolerate an individual’s resorting to force in order to obtain redress for a wrong suffered.... Yahweh was the sovereign to whom alone belonged the monopoly of force. Self-help of individuals or even of society without authorization of Yahweh was an attack upon God himself” (George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974], 95).

[37.](#) John Calvin, *Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981): *Commentary on Psalm 69:22*.

[38.](#) C. Martin, “The Imprecations in the Psalms,” *Princeton Theological Review* 1, no. 4 (1903): 537–53.

[39.](#) Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 220. See hyperbole in Luke 17:2. See also A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, CBSC (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1902), xcii – xciii.

[40.](#) G. T. Sheppard, “‘Enemies’ and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis*, ed. D. Jobling, P. L. Day, and G. T. Sheppard (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1991).

[41.](#) Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 27–28.

[42.](#) *THAT*, 1:601.

[43.](#) Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 59.

[44.](#) See [chap. 16](#).

[45.](#) Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

[46.](#) Weiser, *Psalms*, 35.

[47.](#) H.-J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).

[48.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both,” *JBL* 110 (1991): 583–96. See James William Thirtle, *Old Testament Problems: Critical Studies in the Psalms and Isaiah* (London: Henry Frowde, 1904).

[49.](#) A. Szorenyi, *Psalmen und Kult im Alten Testament (zur Formgeschichte der Psalmen)* (Budapest: Sankt Stefans, 1961).

[50.](#) Weiser, *Psalms*, 81.

[51.](#) Roland E. Murphy, “A Consideration of the Classification ‘Wisdom

Psalms,' " VT 9 (1962): 156–67.

[52.](#) Otto J. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon, 1949), 59.

[53.](#) Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 183–86.

[54.](#) See DJD, 1:133, and A. Arens, *Die Psalmen im Gottesdienst des Alten Bundes. Eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte des christlichen Psalmengesanges* (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1961), 107. Rabbinic Judaism was also conscious of this division (William Braude, *The Midrash on the Psalms*, Yale Judaica Series [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959], I:5).

[55.](#) Braude, *Midrash on the Psalms*, 1:5.

[56.](#) The first verset of Psalm 1 (1:1a) and the last verset of Psalm 2 (2:12b) begin with *ʾašre* ("how rewarding is the life of "). In other words, *ʾašre* functions as an inclusio unifying the two psalms. The introductory stanzas of both psalms use *hāgā* ('to meditate,' 1:2; 'to plot,' 2:1). The last verses of both psalms use the metaphor of *derek* ("way") in connection with ' *abad* ("perish," 1:6; 2:12). Both psalms also employ terms belonging to the semantic domain of "mock" (*lēšim*, "mockers" [against I AM's law], 1:1, and "*lā'ag*, "derision" of [I AM against rebels to his rule], 2:4).

[57.](#) Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 513; Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 207.

[58.](#) Ernst Jenni, "Zu den doxologischen Schlussformeln des Psalters," *Theologischen Zeitschrift* 40 (1984): 117f.

[59.](#) Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 208.

[60.](#) Ibid., 211.

[61.](#) Ibid., 213.

[62.](#) Ibid., 221.

[63.](#) Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 223.

[64.](#) Daniel the man (ca. 550 BC); 1 Enoch (just before 161 BC); the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70); Apocalypse of Abraham (some time after AD 70); 4 Ezra (= 2 Esdras) (ca. AD 100?). See M. de Jonge, *ABD*, 4:785–86.

[65.](#) Ibid., 781–83.

[66.](#) Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 150–62, 182.

[67.](#) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 145.

[68.](#) For a helpful discussion of Jesus' rejection by the Jewish leaders, see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 185–96. But Thielman fails to

distinguish sharply enough between the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people. Many of the latter, especially in Galilee, believed in him.

[69.](#) Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 23–24.

[70.](#) BDB, 629.

[71.](#) Ibid., 639.

[72.](#) Marvin H. Pope, *ABD*, s.v. “Job,” 75.

[73.](#) *IBHS*, 100, §6.3.1e.

[74.](#) A. B. Ehrlich, *Die Psalmen* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1905).

Chapter 33

THE GIFT OF WISDOM, PART 1: PROVERBS

True fear comes from faith; false fear comes from doubt. True fear is joined to hope because it is born of faith and because men hope in the God in whom they believe. False fear is born of despair because men fear the God in whom they have no belief.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 4.262

I. INTRODUCTION¹

A. What Is Wisdom Literature?

Biblical scholars universally include within the wisdom genre the biblical books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, together with certain psalms (e.g., Pss. 37, 49) and some books of the Apocrypha, notably Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. Some scholars have applied the term to other books, but no consensus has been reached on these other possibilities.² Johannes Meinhold, in 1908, published the first study entirely devoted to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.³ However, the precise nature and setting of the biblical wisdom literature is still debated. It is often said to be humanistic, international, nonhistorical, and eudaemonistic, but as James L. Crenshaw notes, “each term has required qualification.”⁴ The same is true of other alleged distinctive marks, such as a search for order and its distinctive “sapiential”⁵ tone. In my opinion, biblical literature differs from the other genres by its unique vocabulary, style, subjects, and inspiration.

Roger N. Whybray documents the distinctive vocabulary of wisdom literature (e.g., “wisdom,” “knowledge,” “understanding”/“competence,” see Prov. 1:2–6),⁶ but he takes a false step in joining other scholars who allege that wisdom literature is *humanistic*.⁷ Walter Brueggemann⁸ claims that the wisdom corpus announces the joyous news that God trusts people to steer their own lives, and Crenshaw asserts that what is distinctive about Israelite wisdom is its belief “in the sufficiency of human virtue to achieve well-being in this life, apart from divine assistance.”⁹ To be sure, the sages are concerned with the potentiality and limitations of human beings in their world, but to brand the genre “humanistic” is wrong. The books anchor their teachings in “the fear of *I AM*” (see [chap. 17](#)), not in humanity. Proverbs 3:7 warns against being wise in one’s own eyes (i.e., autonomous), and 3:5–6 calls for trust in *I AM* instead of self. Philip J. Nel argues that wisdom’s ethos “does not result from the goodness of man or the superior functions of human reason.”¹⁰ Because of humanity’s limitations, the

righteous commits his way to *I AM* for success (Prov. 16:1–3). Piloting his own life under the sun, Qoheleth finds death better than life (Eccl. 4:2), and Job finds no resolution to his questions of suffering and to the question of why one should be righteous.¹¹ Job’s “angst” is relieved only when *I AM* answers him out of the chaotic whirlwind (Job 38:1).

The *international character* of wisdom, especially its connection with Egyptian instruction literature, has been established since E. A. Wallis Budge published what came to be known as *The Instruction/Teaching of Amenemope*.¹² However, Israel’s wisdom uniquely lays down the fear of *I AM* (Israel’s personal God) as the foundation for acquiring wisdom (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; cf. Eccl. 12:13–14), and it is this concept, as Nel argues, that represents the central religious principle in the wisdom literature.¹³ Moreover, Israel’s laws, hymns, and other types of literature also show strong connections with the ancient Near Eastern literatures, calling into question its international character as a wisdom distinctive.

Regarding wisdom literature’s *nonhistorical nature*, scholars rightly note there is no mention of the promises to the patriarchs, of the exodus and Moses, of the covenant and Sinai, of God’s promise to David (2 Sam. 7), and so forth.¹⁴ Unlike the prophet-narrators and prophet-poets who validate Moses’ worldview as expressed in Deuteronomy, the inspired sage confirms that worldview from his observation and cogent reflections of the creation, including human behavior. In other words, the sage approaches the creation with the worldview expressed in Israel’s historic covenants. Proverbs 1:1 identifies Solomon as king of Israel, who upon assuming Israel’s throne copied the Law of Moses under the tutelage of the Levites (Deut. 17:18), and whose father’s last words charged him to keep that law. The star and kernel of his teaching is that one enters into wisdom through the gate of the “fear of *I AM*.” In contrast to Qoheleth and Job and his three friends, who spoke mostly of “God” *ʾlōhîm* the title for God in his transcendence, Proverbs speaks of *I AM*: the title of Israel’s immanent God who entered into covenant with Israel.

William McKane,¹⁵ Ernst Würthwein,¹⁶ and Walther Zimmerli¹⁷ think the older Israelite wisdom was utilitarian and *eudaemonistic*, rather than religious, but I contended in 1979 that no distinction can be made between secular/profane versus religious/pious in any ancient Near Eastern literature.¹⁸ In 1987 F. M. Wilson appraised critically the distinction between older, profane wisdom and younger, Yahwistic wisdom, and today it is widely rejected.¹⁹ Even Whybray, who formerly made this distinction, later repudiated it.²⁰ With regard to the claim that the book of Proverbs bases its morality on eudaemonism (i.e., a

system of ethics of doing good to obtain pleasure), let it be noted that the wisdom corpus qualifies eudaemonism in the same way as the rest of the Old Testament (cf. Lev. 26 and Deut. 27–28): happiness depends on faith in God to uphold that tendency. I discuss below why God delays the connection between virtue and reward and between vice and retribution.

Klaus Koch,²¹ Hartmut Gese,²² and H. H. Schmid²³ develop the notion that basic to wisdom is *a search for “order”* (i.e., a deed-destiny nexus).²⁴ Gerhard von Rad contends that God implanted wisdom (i.e., the world order of law and justice) in the creation itself, and that this primordial revelation woos people to trust this immanent revelation.²⁵ He bases his thesis on the studies by Koch and others on the conviction that the Egyptian figure of Mavat has been adapted to both the Israelite situation and on the personification of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20–33 and in 8:1–36. However, a careful exegesis of Proverbs 1:20–33 and 8:1–36 shows that Woman Wisdom is a personification of Solomon’s revealed wisdom as taught in the book of Proverbs, not of wisdom in creation (see below). Although other biblical books emphasize God’s revelation of his wisdom in creation and assume natural law, no text in Proverbs teaches that creation reveals wisdom. Moreover, as Nel argues, the book’s epistemological foundation, the fear of the *I AM*, which by definition entails special revelation (see p. 161), “does not allow one to interpret wisdom as natural theology.”²⁶ A better formulation would be that the wisdom literature brings to fuller expression the deed-destiny nexus revealed in Israel’s covenants, not that its authors search to discover it.

According to Derek Kidner, wisdom is distinctive for its tone, its speakers, and its appeal. The blunt “thou shalt” or “shalt not” of the Law, and the prophet’s urgent “thus saith *I AM*” are replaced by the teacher’s cool appeal to reason.²⁷ Certainly the tone of wisdom differs from the legal and prophetic genres, yet the father bluntly commands the son “Listen!” (Prov. 1:8), “Do not give in!” (1:10), and so forth, and represents his sayings as *tōrâ* (“catechetical teaching”) and *mišwôt* “commandments” (see 1:8; 3:1), the same terms used for the Law of Moses. Moreover, his appeal is just as urgent as those of Moses and of the prophets: it is a matter of life and death. Woman Wisdom, with strong emotions, “raises her voice” (1:20). Although the sages are teachers, not lawgivers and prophets, they speak with as much authority, as Kidner would agree. They too claim inspiration (2:6), and their “counsel” *‘eṣā* is a matter of a decree, not of advice to be evaluated (see 1:25).²⁸ Moreover, Woman Wisdom speaks as a prophet in 1:20–33. Wisdom indeed appeals to the mind, but to know wisdom is more a matter of a loving heart. In my opinion it would be better to

speak of its unique style. The sage coins and/or collects proverbs (i.e., short, “salty” aphorisms) to express inspired truth.

The brand-mark of wisdom literature is its unmistakable mode of inspiration. God spoke to his servants in various ways during the time he superintended the composition of the Old Testament, producing its rich variety of literary forms and subject matter (see [chap. 2](#)). In the production of the Bible’s wisdom literature, God used the sage’s keen observations on creation and humanity and his cogent reflections upon them, informed by faith in Israel’s covenant-keeping God. One observes the sage at work in Proverbs 24:30–34. His laboratory is the sluggard’s field (vv. 30–31): “I went past the field of the sluggard ... I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw” (v. 32). Whereupon he either coins or cites a proverb: “A little sleep ... and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man” (vv. 33–34).

Qoheleth begins his essay on futility by observing the cycles of creation (Eccl. 1:3–11) and finds it all “a chasing after the wind,” “a vexation of spirit” (KJV), probably a deliberate double entendre of the Hebrew *rē’ût rūah*. (Sages in the biblical world loved to pun.) He continues his quest for wisdom by reflecting on his experiences under the sun. Job bases his religio-social reflections largely on his experienced misery and finds no resolution to his perplexity until *I AM* opens his eyes to see that chaos and death in the created order are bounded by order and life (Job 38–41).

The sages’ wisdom—it must be emphasized — is not based on what theologians call natural theology (see p. 63). They view creation through the lens of Israel’s covenant faith. In other words, they teach truth through the created order rather than derive truth from it. The animal kingdom of nature’s “dark night” also teaches the law of survival of the fittest (i.e., wickedness), not righteousness. When Solomon erects the harvester ant into a paradigm of discipline and prudence in Proverbs 6, he turns a blind eye to the ant’s disastrous effects.²⁹ Agur argues, along with the author of Job (see Job 28, 31–41), that creation teaches the impossibility of attaining wisdom apart from special revelation (see Prov. 30:1–6). Solomon and King Lemuel’s mother never take off the lens of Israel’s world and life view when reflecting on the creation. By contrast, Asaph removed the lens of faith that enabled him to see life holistically and adopted a keyhole view of reality. He confesses that that view of the world almost caused him to lose his faith (Ps. 73). Though the sages’ observations and reflections are similar to common grace wisdom, they claim to give special revelation — that is, they claim that their writings are inspired by God and have canonical authority in speaking truth (cf. Job 28:28; 42:7–9; Prov. 1:1; 2:1–8;

22:17–21; 25:1; 30:1–6; Eccl. 12:9–13). If that were not so, they would not be part of the canon.

B. Proverbs and Biblical Theology

In contrast to the orientalist's successes in showing the similarities between Proverbs and the ancient, panoriental wisdom literature, Old Testament theologians struggle to integrate Proverbs into the rest of the Bible.³⁰ H. Gese complains, "It is well known that the wisdom literature constitutes an alien body in the world of the Old Testament."³¹ On account of its striking parallels in form and content with the panoriental literature, Horst Dietrich Preuss goes so far as to suggest that Israel's wise men attempted to shape Israel into the image of their pagan environment.³² In the heyday of the biblical theology movement, G. Ernest Wright comments that "in any outline of biblical theology, the proper place to treat the Wisdom literature is something of a problem."³³ This is so because, whereas the rest of the Bible pertains to the irruption of the kingdom of God through God's calling of Israel to be his holy people and his covenants with her, the biblical wisdom never mentions Israel's election and covenants culminating in the messianic age. John Coert Rylaarsdam says, "This striking neglect of Jewish history and religion by the canonical wisdom writers clearly indicates that the Hebrew Wisdom movement had not yet been integrated into the national movement."³⁴

The apparent lack of integration between the *Proverbs* and the rest of the Old Testament, however, is more superficial than real. Walter C. Kaiser rightly integrated them by their common appeal that their audiences "fear *I AM*" (cf. Deut. 6:5; Josh. 24:14; Prov. 1:7; Isa. 29:13 [= "worship of me," NIV] et al.). *I AM* is God's personal name revealed to Israel in connection with his election of and his covenants with them (Gen. 12:7; Exod. 3:15; 6:2–8). To fear him means essentially to submit to his revealed will, whether through Moses or Solomon (see Prov. 1:7). Each in his own way seeks to establish the rule of Israel's covenant-keeping God. Moreover, the theology of Proverbs complements the unified theology of Moses and of the prophets. John Goldingay notes that wisdom focuses "more on everyday life than history, more on the regular than the unique, more on the individual (though not outside of his social relationships) than the nation, more on personal experience than sacred tradition."³⁵ Kidner begins his commentary *The Proverbs*: "There are details of

character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings. Proverbs moves in this realm, asking what a person is like to live with, or to employ; how he manages his affairs, his time and himself.”³⁶

I have noted elsewhere that Solomon ascribes the same attributes and actions to God as those ascribed to him by Moses and the prophets.

According to all three, he is Creator of the cosmos (Deut. 10:14; Isa. 40:21–22; Prov. 3:19–20) and of all humanity (Deut. 4:32; Isa. 42:5; Prov. 14:31; 29:13). He is the same living God who will avenge wrong (Deut. 32:35, 40–41; Nah.1:2; Prov. 25:21–22) and the same spiritual Being who comforts people and knows their ways (Deut. 23:13f.; Jer. 16:17; Prov. 5:21; 15:3). He is the Sovereign directing history (Deut. 4:19; 29:4, 26; Isa. 45:1–13; Prov. 16:1–9, 33; 19:21; 20:24) and is yet present in it, withholding and giving rain (Deut. 11:13–17; Hag. 1:10–11; Prov. 3:9–10), disciplining his children (Deut. 8:5; Isa. 1:4–6; Prov. 3:11–12), and in his mercy answering their prayers (Deut. 4:29–31; Isa. 56:7; Prov. 15:8, 29). He is merciful (Deut. 4:31; 30:8; Isa. 63:7; Prov. 28:13), delights in justice and hates iniquity (Deut. 10:17; Isa. 1:16–17; Prov. 11:1; 17:15), and has aesthetic-ethical sensibilities (Deut. 22:4–11; 23:10–14; Jer. 32:35; Prov. 3:32; 6:16–19; 11:20; 15:9).³⁷

C. Proverbs and Panoriental Wisdom Literature³⁸

The similarity in expression and in theological content between Proverbs and such pagan works as *Amenemope* calls for a theological explanation. J. F. Priest gives a questionable *historical* explanation for their similarity. He says the prophetic age and age of wisdom occurred simultaneously and that there existed “a common religious tradition in early Israel from which prophets, priests and wise men selected specific emphases without necessarily rejecting those emphases chosen by other groups.”³⁹ I say questionable because Priest speaks of “a common religious tradition” instead of speaking of Israel’s earlier Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants and mistakenly suggests that for his explanation to work, sages and prophets must be contemporaneous and, without explaining why, Solomon cannot antedate the prophetic movement. Nevertheless, it is true that prophet and sage together expressed the totality of Israel’s faith, which neither

could do alone.

Better, a *contextual argument* should be made from the book itself. Proverbs mixes seemingly mundane sayings that may have originated outside of Israel with distinctively theological sayings pertaining to *I AM* to give a holistic view and a theological interpretation of wisdom peculiar to Israel. Although there is no evidence for a reinterpretation of so-called secular sayings by later theological sayings, it makes no difference in understanding the canonical book's theology. Solomon testifies that he adopted and adapted sayings of other wise men (Prov. 22:17). But in this saying he also adds, "so that your trust may be in *I AM*, I teach you today, even you" (v. 19). In other words, he anchored the sayings' truths and promises in Israel's God. At the end of [chapter 13](#) I noted, in connection with God's names, that the "people of God are open to other religions to the extent that the belief and practices conform to Israel's distinctive (i.e., ethical monotheism) and allow her religion to come to full flowering as *I AM*'s nature is more clearly grasped and his lordship more fully acknowledged."

To this should be added a *theological* explanation, distinguishing between "the fear of *I AM*" and "the fear of God." The former refers to God's special revelation to Israel; the latter to God's general revelation to all people, especially through conscience. "Fear of God," says Whybray, refers "to a standard of moral conduct known and accepted by men in general."⁴⁰ Fear of God motivates people to right behavior even when a state does not enforce moral sanctions (cf. Gen. 20:10–11; Exod. 1:17). Since "the fear of *I AM*" informing Proverbs in matters of common morality agrees with "the fear of the God" informing Amenemope, one should expect similar content in them (cf. Deut. 4:6; 2 Cor. 4:2). The difference between the Egyptian and biblical corpora is that the God of Proverbs is named and so known; that of Amenemope is not. The neoorthodox theological "no" to natural morality and moral philosophy is an inappropriate response both to God as creator and to man in his image and to the New Testament's "yes" to natural morality. A good example of this is the Christian adoption of the Hippocratic Oath from the Pythagoreans.⁴¹

Proverbs' similarity with pagan literature is part and parcel of Scripture's incarnation within its historical milieu. The theological significance of Proverbs does not depend on the originality of its individual sentences or sayings any more than the theological significance of the so-called book of the covenant (Exod. 21–23) rests in the originality of its individual commandments. Its commandments can be paralleled at point after point in the Babylonian, Assyrian, and Hittite laws, and they clearly reflect a common body of ancient Near Eastern legal tradition. The same is true of Israel's hymns; they are

stamped by a hymnology common to the ancient Near East. In a word, Israel's prophetic tradition is a sponge, ready to absorb elements of other religions to the extent that they are consistent with Israel's covenants, especially the Sinai covenant. But the biblical tradition is a repellant that will resist elements of other religions that are inconsistent with its covenant.

The theological significance of the Old Testament rests rather on ethical monotheism: the connection of all its literature with the rule of *I AM* according to his covenant commitments. The theological significance of Proverbs lies in its affirmation that *I AM* brought "wisdom" into existence, revealed its teachings to humanity, and as Guarantor upholds the moral order that is revealed in it. David Hubbard writes, "Pagan wisdom, though it, too, may be religious, has no anchor in the covenant-God."⁴² Orientalist Henri Frankfort observes this lack in the Egyptian texts: "But is it not remarkable that none of the gods are mentioned by name in any of the 'teachings'? When the Egyptians appeal to 'God,' ... they impart to the divine interest in man's behavior a distinctly impersonal character."⁴³ Louis Keimer puts it this way: "All in all, one has the impression that there is for Amenemope but one God; it remains open to the individual, however, to represent this highest being as he will."⁴⁴ Lennart Boström says that "the reason for the use of the generic term for the deity which is so common in wisdom texts, is ... that the specification intentionally is left open to the reader and to the situation. These generic designations of god function in a way parallel to blank spaces in a liturgical text which is to be filled in with the appropriate expression by the suppliant."⁴⁵

Moses, the prophets, and the sages were true spiritual yokefellows sharing the same *I AM*, cultus, faith, hope, anthropology, and epistemology, speaking with the same authority, and making similar religious and ethical demands on their hearers. In short, they drank from the same spiritual well.

D. Authors of Proverbs

The accredited method of hermeneutics takes into consideration the meaning of a book's terms in light of its historical context (i.e., author/date and addressees). The historical context of Proverbs depends partially on the issues of its authors and their addressees. These issues affect the book's interpretation and theology. Is the book's superscript "The proverbs of Solomon" true? Is the original addressee a king? Does education take place in the home or in school? A biblical theology should address these questions.

A final editor, perhaps in the postExilic period, produced his anthology of seven collections of sayings by Solomon (ca. 950 BC), Agur (no date), and Lemuel (no date). Solomon is responsible for collections 1 ([chaps. 1–9](#)), 2 (10:1–22:16), 3 (22:17–24:23), and 4 (24:24–34). The men of Hezekiah assembled a collection of Solomon’s proverbs in 5 ([chaps. 25–29](#)), and Agur and Lemuel are responsible for the sayings of 6 ([chap. 30](#)) and 7 ([chap. 31](#)) respectively.

Kenneth A. Kitchen, on the basis of comparable “instruction” by sages from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Levant, straddling the biblical world from the third millennium to Graeco-Roman times, showed that Proverbs 1:1–7 serves as a title with preamble to the primary and large composition of two collections by Solomon (1:1–22:16). The corpus conforms precisely in its structure with many of the ancient Near Eastern “instruction” documents: main title with preamble (1:1–7), a prologue (collection 1: 1:8–9:18), a subtitle to collection 2 (10:1), and the main text (10:2–22:16). To this composition Solomon appended collections 3 and 4.⁴⁶

The proto-authors of collections 3 and 4 are not named, but in their present form they are best assigned to Solomon. If they are not by Solomon, then these two collections are an anomaly. The thirty or forty other ancient Near Eastern collections of instructions are all assigned to named authors. Furthermore, if collection 3 is by someone other than Solomon, the “I” who speaks in its prologue (22:17–21) has no antecedent. By the parallelism in 22:17, “listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach,” Solomon implies he has adopted and adapted the wisdom of others. Significantly, this collection shows a close connection with the *Instruction of Amenemope*, whose composition is now usually assigned to the Ramseside period.

The close parallels between the compositional structure in content, form, and high royal office, including kings themselves (Khety I: Merikare’s father; Amenemhat I, all a millennium before Solomon), tend to corroborate the biblical witness to Solomonic authorship of proverbs (cf. 1 Kings 3; 4:29–34 [5:9–14]). Paul Humbert points out thematic analogies between Proverbs and these Egyptian counterparts, and Christa Kayatz shows striking correspondences between the forms and motifs in collection 1 with Egyptian instructions that antedate Solomon.⁴⁷ Kitchen’s comparison of the structure of Proverbs with comparable ancient Near Eastern texts, leads him to conclude: “Basing ourselves firmly on the direct, external, independent, comparative evidence now available, we find that the most probable *literary* date of Solomon I [1:1–24:34] is entirely compatible with that of the named author in the title of the work, i.e., king

Solomon, of c. 950 BC.” No commentator that denies Solomonic authorship of this corpus has answered Kitchen’s argument in the last quarter of a century.

The obvious question, however, arises: If Solomon was so wise, why did he die such a fool (cf. 1 Kings 11:1–25)? He impales himself on his own gibbet: “Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge” (Prov. 19:27). Spiritual successes today are no guarantee of piety and morality tomorrow. Disciples must attend constantly to their spiritual lives. Moreover, the royal proverbs about the ideal king who exercises perfect justice (e.g., 16:10–15; 20:26–28) point to a king wiser than Solomon (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31).

E. Addressees of Proverbs

The court setting for the composition of proverbs and sayings must be distinguished from the home setting for their dissemination. Building on Victor Turner (*Ritual Passage*), Leo G. Perdue argues that King Lemuel’s mother would have passed on her royal instructions to her son when the impressionable new king assumed the throne. He also thinks “these instructions may have been read during the New Year’s enthronement festival that inaugurated the new king’s rule.”⁴⁸ That may well be, but the internal evidence assumes that instruction in wisdom was at the least also transmitted in the home during a child’s formative years (see Prov. 4:1–9). Of the noble wife, Lemuel’s mother says that “faithful instruction teaching is on her tongue” and “she watches over the affairs of her household” (31:26b–27a).

The references to the father and his son(s) in the book’s prologue are best taken literally, even though many scholars wrongly interpret those references as metaphors for a teacher and his pupil.⁴⁹ To be sure, Joseph refers to himself as a “father” to Pharaoh (Gen. 45:8; cf. Judg. 17:10), and the relationship between Elijah and Elisha is implicitly that of a “father” and “son” (2 Kings 2:1–12). Also, the headmaster of a Sumerian school was called “school-father,” and the pupils were called “schoolsons.”⁵⁰ But Egyptian wisdom books are addressed to the author’s sons, never to unrelated students. Evidence for schools in ancient Israel is missing.⁵¹ According to Rabbi H. Freedman, the introduction of schools in Judaism is variously ascribed to the reforms of Rabbi Simeon ben Shetah and the high priest Joshua ben Gamala in the first century BC.⁵² Moreover, in Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature, the speaker is almost always a

fictional or real father speaking to his son.⁵³

The home setting for education in ancient Israel, for both the Mosaic law (cf. Deut. 6:7–9) and Solomon’s proverbs, is put beyond reasonable doubt by references to the mother (cf. Exod. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; Deut. 5:16; 21:18–21; Luke 2:51; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15)⁵⁴ and in Proverbs in particular (4:3; 6:20; 23:24–25; 31:1, 26–28; cf. 10:1; 15:20; 23:22; 29:15). The prologue’s references to mother as a teacher along with the father at the point of the son’s moving into adulthood shows her impact extended beyond small children. King Lemuel’s mother and the noble wife are also mentioned as teachers (31:1–2, 26–27). In Mesopotamian instruction both parents are teachers as well.⁵⁵

Education in a home setting finds further corroboration in Proverbs 4:1–9 where the godly family—including grandfather, father and mother, and son—is represented, though fictitiously, as transmitting the family’s spiritual inheritance. Michael V. Fox finds a strong analogy to the ancient wisdom instructions in the medieval Jewish ethical testament. “Ethical testaments are instructions written by men in their maturity for the religious-ethical guidance of their sons and, sometimes, daughters. These texts are, in fact, descendants of ancient Wisdom Literature, since they use Proverbs as a model.... The father addresses his son (or sons) and through him speaks to a larger reading audience.”⁵⁶ In sum, Solomon intended to transmit his wisdom to Israel’s youth by putting his proverbs in the mouths of godly parents (Prov. 1:8–9), even as Moses disseminated the Law in the home (cf. Deut. 6:7–9). Wisdom’s addresses in public places to the masses (Prov. 1:20–33; 8:1–31) are fictional and in fact intended for the son as the conclusion of her address in 8:32–36 shows. Certainly Folly, her rival, never sat on a chair or throne at the highest point of the city (9:14)! These fictitious addresses show that the sayings could save the masses if they would only listen.

Unlike some other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, Proverbs names no addressees or class in its superscript. In that light, one may presume that the final editor also intended to democratize the book for the entire covenant community and probably anticipated it would continue to be taught in godly homes.

References that the son use his eyes to see and ears to hear in order to store up Israel’s wisdom heritage from Solomon suggest that the material was transmitted both textually and orally (Prov. 3:21; 4:21 with 2:2). David Carr documents from the educational curriculum in several ancient Near Eastern and Eastern Hellenistic cultures that both writing and oral traditions worked in tandem to pass on the basic core of cultural texts that were highly authoritative compositions by virtue of their extreme antiquity and aesthetic spirituality.⁵⁷

II. Wisdom

The book of Proverbs was written to teach God's elect nation to attain wisdom. In this section we ask, What is wisdom? Why acquire it? Who has it? Where can it be found?⁵⁸ I reflected theologically on how to attain wisdom in [chapter 3](#), "Hermeneutica Sacra." Concerning when to attain wisdom — the time is now: "The beginning of wisdom is [this], get⁵⁹ wisdom! In exchange for all your acquisitions, get insight" (Prov. 4:7 TNIV). Kidner says, "What it takes is not brains or opportunity, but a decision. Do you want it? Come and get it."⁶⁰

A. Why Attain Wisdom?

We answer the question, "Why attain wisdom?" by reflecting on the third lecture of the father's ten lectures to his son in the prologue to Proverbs (collection 1), all of which aim to motivate the son to embrace the wisdom sayings in the six collections of sayings that follow.⁶¹ This lecture presents the human partners' obligations in the odd verses (vv. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9) and *I AM*'s obligations in the even verses: life and peace (v. 2), favor with God and people (v. 4), a straight path (v. 6), health (v. 8), and prosperity (v. 10). These rewards are fairly self-evident apart from "life," whose meaning in Proverbs is commonly misrepresented and/or misunderstood. At issue is whether "life" *ḥayyîm* refers to eternal life or temporal life terminating finally in clinical death. To put it another way, is the threatened death of the wicked in Proverbs an eternal death or a premature death?

1. Definition of Life^{ḥayyîm}

The noun *ḥayyîm* occurs thirty-three times and the verb *ḥāyâ* four times.⁶² Sometimes *ḥayyîm* refers to clinical life. Goats' milk and food sustain the clinical life of the female servants (27:27), and "days of her life" means the "lifetime" of the noble wife (31:12). In 4:23 "the wellspring of life" refers to bodily activities, and in 14:30 *ḥayyîm* is qualified as "life to the body." In 4:22 *ḥayyîm* is parallel with physical well-being. In 3:2 "prolong your life" (see also 4:10; 9:11; 15:24) seems to refer to a "lifetime" until it is realized that Isaiah used the same expression to speak of the Suffering Servant's life after his clinical death (Isa. 53:10, "prolong his days").

Most often, however, unqualified *ḥayyîm* refers to “life” that is added to clinical life, apparently an abundant life of health, prosperity, and social esteem (Prov. 3:21–22; 4:13; 8:35; 16:15; 21:21; 22:4). Apart from 16:15, these passages and others hold out life as wisdom’s reward, a reward never said to be tarnished by death (4:22; 6:23; 10:17; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; 15:31; 19:23; 22:4). This is true also of all four uses of the verb (4:4; 7:2; 9:6; 15:27). “Tree of life” figuratively represents perpetual healing ensuring eternal life (3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4; cf. Gen. 2:9; 3:24). The same is probably true of the other source, “wellspring of life” (16:22).

By contrast the wicked enjoy their plunder during their clinical lives, but death is their certain destiny (Prov. 1:10–19). “The wages of the righteous is life, but the earnings of the wicked is sin” (10:16 TNIV).⁶³ Here “life” by its opposition to “sin” implies spiritual life. Kidner comments, “In several places it is not too much to say that ‘life’ means fellowship with God— Some of the major Old Testament expressions for godliness are interchangeable with ‘life’ or to ‘live.’”⁶⁴ In biblical theology abundant life, which is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the breath of life and is symbolized by the tree of life (see Gen. 2:7, 9; 3:22), is essentially a relationship with God. According to Genesis 2:17 disruption of the proper relationship with the One who is the source of life means death.⁶⁵ Wisdom is concerned with this proper relationship (Prov. 2:5–8) and so with experiencing life in his favor. In sum, “life” in the majority of Proverbs texts refers to abundant life in fellowship with God, a living relationship that is never envisioned as ending in clinical death in contrast to the wicked’s eternal death (see Prov. 2:22). As Jesus said to the Sadducees (whose canon was only the Pentateuch and who rejected the doctrine of the resurrection), “He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matt. 22:32; cf. Exod. 3:6).

Solomon never describes the clinically alive wicked as in the realm of light and life; rather, they are in the realm of darkness and death, a state of being already dead because they have no relationship with the living God. The texts predicting death represent that present state terminating with a tragic, final end, not necessarily a premature death. The lascivious person regrets his incorrigibility when his flesh and body are spent (Prov. 5:11). The pursuit of Wisdom and the practice of righteousness save the wise from the realm and destiny of death, but nothing can deliver the wicked (Prov. 10:2; 11:4, 19; 13:14; 14:27; 15:24). Their clinical death is a land of no return without a second chance (1:20–33; 2:9, 22; cf. Ps. 49:8[9], 15[16]; Isa. 26:19). If death is the end of the

wicked, we should assume that life is the end of the righteous (cf. Matt. 25:46).

Other texts teach more explicitly that this abundant life outlasts clinical death.⁶⁶ In Proverbs 12:28 the righteous are rewarded with “immortality” *ʾal māwet*.⁶⁷ Proverbs 14:32 says, “Even in death the righteous seek a refuge in God” (TNIV), and 23:17–18 asserts that their future hope will not be disappointed, in contrast to the wicked who have no future hope (Prov. 11:7a; 12:28; 24:19–20). Proverbs teaches immortality, not resurrection, unlike Job 19:25–27; Psalm 49:15 [16] (cf. 49:8); 73:23–24; Isaiah 14:13–15; and Daniel 12:2 (cf. Gen. 5:24; 2 Kings 2:1). But Proverbs 15:24 implies an ascending upward from the grave below. Taken at face value, the movement from “below,” which is used in connection with the grave *šʿol* to its antithesis “upward,” fits the biblical teaching that the godly terminate their journey in the presence of God himself (Pss. 16:9–11; 73:23–26; John 14:1–4; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 12:2). Salvation from the grave is more than being spared an untimely death; otherwise “the path of life” is finally swallowed up by death. Death is not God and does not have the last word in this book any more than in any other book of the Bible (cf. Gen. 5:24; 2 Kings 2:1; Ps. 49:15[16]; 73:23–24; Isa. 14:13–15).

The hope of an afterlife is entirely in keeping with the well-known Egyptian belief in an afterlife. Their hymns and prayers to Amenhotep IV Akhenaton, carved in the courtier’s tombs at Amarna, record their hopes for a blessed future. Miriam Lichtheim comments: “In recording their hopes for a blessed afterlife, the courtiers could no longer turn to Osiris and other comforting beliefs. Only the king, the son of the Aten, remained as guarantor of their survival.”⁶⁸ The schools where wisdom was taught in Egypt were called “schools of life.” Since Proverbs shows a heavy dependence on Egyptian instructions, it would be surprising if “life” meant less with the living God than the Egyptian hope with a “no god” (Deut. 32:21) and whose *Book of the Dead* mixes magic with morals. Humanity’s intuitive notion of justice demands the doctrine (see below).⁶⁹

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Proverbs and the Egyptian instructions focus on health, prosperity, and social honor in this life, in contrast to the Christian’s focus on eternal life and resurrection.⁷⁰ Perhaps this is due to the opaqueness of the hope before the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (2 Tim. 1:10).

2. Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?

These heavenly promises of life, health, prosperity, and honor seem detached from earth’s harsh realities. The promises seem false to human experience under

the sun, as Job (9:22–23) and Qoheleth (Eccl. 9:2–3) complain, and contrary to sound doctrine. Eliphaz resolves the conflict by the doctrine of original sin (Job 4:17), but the narrator of Job disallows the argument (1:8), and so does *I AM* (42:7). Solomon, however, adds to the covenant obligations in Proverbs 3:1–10 that *I AM* disciplines those he loves (Prov. 3:11–12), probably to motivate a person to keep his covenant obligations to make him or her fit to experience covenant blessings.

If anyone should reckon that Solomon and other sages are dullards who cannot see or think straight, let them recall that keen observation and cogent reflection mark the sage. Kenneth Aitken takes an exceptional misstep when he suggests the sages were too optimistic in their promises: “There is a strong suspicion here Israel’s sages have confused their belief about what ought to be the case with what actually is the case.”⁷¹ Von Rad goes further, suggesting Qoheleth accuses the sages of so-called “old wisdom” of becoming “entangled in a single false doctrine.”⁷² James G. Williams shares that opinion: “His [Qoheleth’s] primary mode of presentation of contrasting proverbs ... is in order to contradict traditional wisdom.”⁷³ These solutions deconstruct with Proverbs, which calls for truthful speech, and the canon, and so undermine Christ’s and his apostles’ claims that all Scripture is inspired of God, who does not author confusion, and that Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Tim. 3:16).

The popular evangelical solution that these are probabilities, not promises, though containing an element of truth, raises theological, practical, and psychological problems by stating the matter badly. According to this wording the human partner is expected to keep his obligations perfectly (Prov. 3:1, 3, 5, 7, and 9), but God may keep his imperfectly (3:2, 4, 6, 8, 10). In truth, however, “if we are faithless, he will remain faithful” (2 Tim. 2:13). Moreover, a sober person would like to know the probabilities, and a psychologically well person could scarcely trust the *I AM* with all his heart (Prov. 3:5), knowing God usually, but not always, keeps his obligations.

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

Second, the epigrammatic nature of the proverbs often causes the audience to overlook the counterproverbs that qualify these promises. “There are many proverbs,” says Raymond Van Leeuwen, “that assert or imply that the wicked prosper ... while the innocent suffer.”⁷⁴ The need to read the first proverb pair

(Prov. 10:2–3) as a unity was discussed above. The wicked has treasures gained by wickedness for a season (10:2a), but they will not deliver him from death (10:2b). At that time the wicked's craving will be frustrated (10:3b). In contrast, the righteous one who is afflicted at death will be delivered from death (10:2b) and be fed (10:3a). The several "better-than" proverbs assume the reality that at present the wicked have material presents and the righteous do not: "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice" (cf. Prov. 16:8, 19; 17:1; 19:1, 22; 21:9, 19; 22:1; 25:24; 28:6; Ps. 37:16; Eccl. 4:6). Without these qualifying sayings, one could legitimately accuse Solomon of being guilty of spouting halftruths.

Third, the genre effect of being a primer on morality for youth causes the Proverbs to focus on a future when the righteous rise, not on a present when they fall: "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down in calamity" (Prov. 24:16). "Seven" symbolizes completeness, like the "count of ten" in boxing and the proverbial "nine lives" of a cat. In a word, "the righteous are regarded as knocked out for good." Yet the saying throws away this harsh reality in a concessive clause for the greater reality that the righteous will rise. By contrast, the genre effect of empiricism causes Job and Ecclesiastes to focus on the sufferings of the righteous before they rise.⁷⁵

Finally, as pointed out above, the righteous rise in a blessed future that outlasts death. In addition to the exegetical arguments presented there, Proverbs' concept of justice demands such a hope. Like so much of the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs is a masterpiece of indirection, preaching its message through the theological reflection of those with ears to hear. Instructively, the opening situation depicted in the father's first lecture resembles the first situation of humanity outside of the Garden of Eden. Even as Cain murdered the righteous Abel, sending him to a premature death, after which Cain lived out a normal life span, so the father represents a traveler's "innocent blood" (Prov. 1:11–19) as being dispatched to a premature death by venal sinners who walk on top of his grave and plunder his house. These initial situations discredit the popular interpretation that life and death in Proverbs refer respectively to living to an old age and to a premature death. For justice to be done, as Proverbs assures it will be (e.g., 3:31–35; 16:4–5), Abel and the innocent traveler must be vindicated and delivered from death in a future that lies beyond their clinical deaths. If clinical death is the last word for the waylaid innocent, then the father's first lecture, along with other biblical stories about the deaths of martyrs, deconstruct the Bible's claim that God upholds justice. Kathleen A. Farmer rightly comments: "One either has to give up the idea of justice or one has to push its execution into

some realm beyond the evidence of human experience.”⁷⁶ Obviously that future is not accessible to verification, as Jerry A. Gladson notes critically,⁷⁷ but without that kind of faith one cannot please God. If these promises could be validated by experience, why does the father command the son to trust in the *I AM* (3:5)?

If God rewarded virtue immediately, the son would confound pleasure with piety, using piety and ethics to satisfy his prurient interests. He would substitute eudaemonism (i.e., the system of thought that bases ethics on personal pleasure) for the true virtues of faith, hope, and love. God develops the character of his saints by calling them to suffer for the sake of righteousness, while living in hope of eternal life. In this way he teaches them virtue while upholding justice (Rom. 5:3–4; 2 Peter 2:3–11).⁷⁸

In sum, Proverbs characterizes the wise as living by faith entirely (“with all your heart,” 3:5), exclusively (“lean not on your own understanding”), and exhaustively (“in all your ways acknowledge him,” 3:5–6a).

B. What Is Wisdom?⁷⁹

“Wisdom” *ḥokmā* means generally, “masterful understanding,” “skill,”⁸⁰ “expertise.”⁸¹ In biblical texts outside of Proverbs, *ḥokmā* is used of technical and artistic skills (Exod. 28:3; 31:6), of the magic arts (Exod. 7:11; Isa. 3:3), of government (Eccl. 4:13; Jer. 50:35), of diplomacy (1 Kings. 5:7 [21]), and of war (Isa. 10:13). Some have the wisdom (or skill) to judge (1 Kings 3:28; Isa. 11:1–6) and to separate the guilty from the community and so rule a nation (Prov. 20:26); it also gives rulers the cleverness to master people and situations (2 Sam. 14:20; Job 39:17). Solomon also ruled by his encyclopedic knowledge (1 Kings 4:29–34 [5:9–14]) and by his ability to answer difficult questions (1 Kings 10:2–4).⁸² The possession of wisdom enables all to cope with life⁸³ and to achieve what would otherwise be impossible. Through their exceptional wisdom, weak and vulnerable creatures, such as the ant and the coney, cope and survive against insuperable odds (Prov. 30:24–28).

Wisdom is inseparable from knowledge *daʿat*. The Wright brothers flew the first airplane because they had first figured out the laws of aerodynamics; a mechanic repairs a car skillfully because he knows the construction of its motor. In Proverbs *ḥokmā* mostly denotes the mastery over experience through the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual state of knowing existentially the deed-

destiny nexus — that is, acting upon moral-spiritual knowledge out of its internalization (Prov. 1:2; 2:1–5), thereby enabling its possessor to cope with enigma and adversity, to tear down strongholds, and so promote the life of an individual and/or a community (Prov. 21:22; cf. 24:5; Eccl. 7:19; 9:13–16).⁸⁴ A person could memorize the book of Proverbs and still lack wisdom if it had not affected his or her heart, which informs behavior. *Hokmâ* in Proverbs does not refer to the Greek conception of wisdom as philosophical theory or rhetorical sophistry (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–24).

Wisdom in the summary statement of the book of Proverbs' purpose (1:2) entails all the other virtues listed in its preamble: “knowledge” *daʿat* “insight” (*bînâ*), “prudence” *haskîl* “cunning” *ʿormâ* “discretion” *mʿzimmâ* “learning” *leqah* and “guidance” *tahbûlôt*. To these 1:25 adds “counsel” *ʿêšâ* 2:1–7, “understanding” or “competence” *tʿbûnâ* and “resourcefulness” *tûšîyyâ* and 8:14, “heroic strength” *gʿbûrâ*. These virtues come packaged with wisdom (8:12–14). Von Rad refers to the Bible’s proclivity for heaping up terms for wisdom as a “stereometric” way of thinking to achieve “the desired extension of the conceptual range.”⁸⁵ These virtues equip one to rule and to give him the *gravitas* (or dignity) associated with wealth (8:15–21).

Moreover, as the preamble of Proverbs makes clear, these capacities are exercised in the realms of “righteousness” (*sedeq*), “justice” (*sedeq*), and “equity” *mêšārîm* giving wisdom a moral dimension (Prov. 1:3; 8:20).⁸⁶ Indeed, “wisdom” and “righteousness” are coreferential terms — that is, they are not synonyms, but they refer to the same referent.⁸⁷ In other words, a righteous person is wise and a wise person is righteous; the fool and the wicked are also coreferential terms. “Righteousness” means to “disadvantage” self to “advantage” the community, and “wickedness” is to serve self at the expense of the community. In practical terms the righteous enrich the community; the wicked impoverish it.⁸⁸ In Proverbs *hokmâ* also has a religious dimension, for its wisdom includes knowledge of the Holy One himself (see 9:10; 30:3). The righteous trust Israel’s God and are pious; the wicked trust self and are impious. In other words, the wise trust the sage’s inspired knowledge to love others and God, not self; the fool trusts himself and loves himself, not God and other people. In sum, the biblical wisdom literature transforms the neutral word *wisdom* and its coreferential terms into virtue.⁸⁹

This spiritual-ethical wisdom is a divine gift (Prov. 2:6; cf. Exod. 31:3; 35:31; 1 Kings 3:4–14; Isa. 11:2) that is acquired by anyone valuing it above everything else (Prov. 3:13–18; 8:11–12) and making a single-minded decision to accept it in humility (2:1–4; 3:5–8). It cannot be bought with money (17:16) or acquired

merely by keen observation and cogent reflection on the created order, as Agur makes clear (30:1–6; cf. Eccl. 8:17; Isa. 19:11–12).⁹⁰ Truth sometimes contradicts what depraved human beings think is right (Prov. 14:12; cf. Judg. 17:6; 21:25; Isa. 8:11–15).

C. Where Can Wisdom Be Found?

The editor of Job asks, “Where can wisdom be found?” and answers his own question: “Mortals do not comprehend its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living ... it is hidden from the eyes of every living thing” (Job 28:13, 21).⁹¹ Rather, God, who alone knows wisdom, must reveal it: “And he said to mortals: ‘The fear of *I AM*— that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding’” (v. 28). The other two wisdom books agree (cf. Prov. 1:7; Eccl. 12:13–14).

In common grace God gifts every farmer with the wisdom to farm (Isa. 28:23–29). According to his sovereign will, he distributes technical and artistic skills to individuals. The content of this revelation, however, comes through human personalities whose thinking is shaped by culture; revelation does not bypass natural theology. That reality explains the many similarities between the Law and the Code of Hammurapi and between Proverbs and Egyptian literature. The history of religion school (see [chap. 2](#)), however, either restricts the content to the human factor alone or so emphasizes it that the divine activity of revelation comes off as what some people credit as revelation in Israel’s testimony.⁹²

The spiritual-ethical knowledge and wisdom of Proverbs, however, goes beyond general revelation, and the sage emphasizes not so much his psychology that gives rise to his revelatory content, though he does do that (Prov. 24:30–34), but the divine origin of the revelation. *I AM* gave birth to his revealed wisdom that gives eternal life to those who find it, grasp it, and do not let go of it (3:13–18, 21–22a; 8:22–24). The Deuteronomist ascribes Solomon’s wisdom to *I AM*: “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight” (1 Kings 4:29 [5:9]). Solomon also attributes his wisdom to *I AM*: “*I AM* gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). When God puts this wisdom in a parent’s mouth, his or her mouth becomes God’s mouthpiece. Agur and King Lemuel label their sayings as *máśšāʾ* the term prophets use to designate their divine “oracles,” and Agur defines his sayings more particularly as “an inspired utterance” (*nʿō ʾum*; 30:1; 31:1).

Human beings must look to the God of all wisdom to reveal spiritual-ethical wisdom. In spite of the general revelation of God’s moral law through

conscience, people still do what is right in their own eyes but are in the wrong (Prov. 14:12; 16:25; cf. Judg. 17–21). To know the skill of living, which entails making wise decisions, one must see the whole to see clearly. A “keyhole” theology is dangerous.

In Proverbs old age has superiority over youth because the aged have seen and experienced more than the young. Gray hair is their crown of splendor (16:31). But no human being sees and knows everything. By contrast Woman Wisdom is represented metaphorically as having been born out of God’s very being before anything existed (8:22–23) and as being *constantly* (*ʿāmôn*, 8:30) by God’s side even when he brought the great cosmological spheres of air, water, and land into existence (8:24–29). Moreover, she was paying attention because she was delighting in every aspect of it, especially in the creation of humanity, which she — and no human being—witnessed (8:31). As a result, Woman Wisdom herself is transcendent, before and above all things. Only she can answer in the affirmative God’s challenge to Job, who tried to usurp God’s throne, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?” (Job 38:4). Wisdom answers, “I was there, constantly at your side [Prov. 8:30] and so can give sound counsel” (1:23–25; 8:14).

In plain words, Solomon, who represents his teachings as Woman Wisdom, claims that his sayings originate in the very character of the eternal God and are in accord with a comprehensive knowledge of the universe, both in the realms of time (from before the creation) and cosmic space. That comprehensive, universal knowledge, which represents Reality, endows his teaching with absolute and infallible authority and cannot be relativized by an unknown factor or a theology that God is a Work in progress of becoming.

Agur, a sage and a prophet,⁹³ confesses his philosophy of knowledge to an unknown official named Ithiel, who in the canon of Scripture represents all the people of God:

The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance:
This man’s utterance to Ithiel:
“I am weary, God,
but I can prevail.
Surely, I am only a brute, not a man;
I do not have human understanding.
I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Whose hands have gathered up the wind?

Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is the name of his son?
Surely you know!
“Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.” (Prov. 30:1–6 TNIV)⁹⁴

By “wisdom” and “understanding” Agur has in mind ethics and social skills: the skill to establish proper behavior and how to relate to God and neighbor. (In the following reflections on his confession, I will transform his first person singular “I” and its equivalents into the plural “we” and its equivalents, which is his intention.)

Agur introduces his philosophy of knowledge in a summary statement “I AM weary, God, but I can prevail.” In this succinct statement he assures us that we can climb out of the human weariness to find wisdom to the high ground in understanding of how we should live. He does this by constructing a ladder with five rungs.

The first rung of the ladder is made from the stuff of human experience. The first rung that we must climb is an honest confession that on our own we, as mere mortals, cannot attain sure moral and social skills: “Surely I AM only a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One.” This honest confession contrasts sharply with the self-assurance of the Enlightenment. Its philosophers had full confidence that by designed experiments with cogent human reasoning, humankind can determine how to behave.

After having been tried for three centuries, the Enlightenment philosophy has enabled the human race to make achievements that before the Enlightenment would have been regarded as miracles. Remarkably, physicists and engineers enable us to walk on the moon; chemists have eliminated some dreaded diseases. But in social and moral skills the Enlightenment has proved to be a colossal failure. In *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre documented how the Enlightenment moved Western civilization from the Greek virtues to Friedrich Nietzsche’s will for power. In its wake came Nazi genocide and ethnic cleansing. Geneticists, social scientists, and medical practitioners sometimes play God and kill unwanted human beings. Today no human life can be assured it is precious or safe.

Agur’s second rung leading from moral and social incompetence to

competence is made out of his cogent reflection on his confession that human beings on their own do not know how to behave. He sets this rung in place by four “who” questions in verse 4a: “Who has gone up to heaven [i.e., to see everything holistically] and come down [i.e., with wisdom to teach us]? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth?” One might almost think that Agur raises these four “who” questions to confirm the postmodern philosophy of knowledge that all human knowledge is relative and uncertain. This is so, Agur reasons, because without *comprehensive* knowledge the human race cannot derive *absolute* knowledge.

For example, on account of their limited knowledge, engineers used to think damming up rivers was good; now ecologists tell us that sometimes dams are bad. People used to think forest fires were always bad; now horticulturalists tell us they may be necessary. In other words, what we once thought was good and wise now turns out to be bad and foolish.

Westminster Theological Seminary, where I once taught, rightly prides itself on its superb library, located prominently on a hill overlooking the surrounding valleys. Around the library’s core of books are the faculty offices. One of the students, prior to his coming to Westminster, worked for the department of the United States government that measures concentrations of the deadly radon gas in atmospheres. The highest concentrations of that gas are typically found in uranium mines; in fact, the U.S. government requires uranium miners to take every third year off to detox. This student discovered and confirmed that the atmosphere of the Westminster library, where my office was located, had a concentration of that poisonous radon *ten times* higher than that in a uranium mine. The government immediately shut down the library down with black and yellow tape emblazoned with the words “Danger, Lethal, Keep Out!” The point: the architects who located and designed the library thought they had built wisely, but in truth they built foolishly. Unknown to them, according to geologists, there was a fracture in the earth’s crust, forty miles directly below the library, that was spewing out one of the largest concentrations of the radon gas ever measured in the United States.

Postmoderns of the twenty-first century, unlike modernity of the past three centuries, echo Agur’s view that all human knowledge is relative. But unlike Agur, the atheists among them have drawn the perverse conclusion that there are no moral absolutes by which to evaluate social behavior. According to their philosophy of knowledge, human beings must own up to the reality that they can no longer speak of values; they can only speak of the evaluations of others. And no culture is better than another. Postmodernism, cultural relativism, utopian

pacifism, and moral equivalence have now filtered down through media, universities, and government to the general public. We are seeing the pernicious wages of such theories. For the first time in Western civilization, marriage is no longer defined as solely between a man and a woman, and fruitless cohabitation of any form is tolerated. Those wages are also paid in the Western nonchalance toward jihadist Islam. The devil is always on the lookout for the moral relativism that signals a latter-day Faust, and it seems he is finding eager recruits among some prominent spokespeople in the West.

Agur, by contrast, composes his next three rungs of the ladder out of faith. To climb above the failed modernity of the first rung, which depends on experimentation and reason to determine values, and the postmodernity of the second rung, which denies the possibility of establishing absolute values, Agur's third rung calls on God's people to answer the first of two "what" questions? "What is his name?" (v. 4b). Agur challenges us with the assertion "surely you know" to name the Creator "who has established the ends of the earth" and its Sustainer "whose hands have gathered up the wind" and "wrapped up the water in a cloak." Who created the earth, and who withholds the wind and the rain that inflict a draft? Our intuitive answer to Agur's question is "I AM," whose name signifies that he is the ultimate Reality, the creator and sustainer of this time-space-mass continuum we call history.

Agur's fourth rung on which we must step to escape from our moral and social inadequacy to adequacy is his second "what" question: "What is the name of his son?" The third rung called us to name the competent teacher. Now Agur calls us to name the privileged student. Although he says to his original audience "surely you know," his later Christian audience may not know. The answer to this question must be deduced from the firm lexical evidence that in the book of Proverbs, *son* always elsewhere refers to a student who listens to his father, who is also his teacher.

As we read in the Old Testament, *I AM* brought Israel into existence (cf. Exod. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; 32:5f., 18f.; Isa. 43:6; 45:11; 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:4, 19; 31:20; Hos. 11:1).⁹⁵ The LXX reads "his son" as plural — "his children" — apparently referring to "the children of Israel." This is also the interpretation in the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni.⁹⁶ The striking parallel in Baruch 3:37 confirms the interpretation. G. T. Sheppard, commenting on Baruch 3:37b, says, "In the end the author concludes that created humanity can know the way only if God gives it by his elective will and that he has so chosen Israel (v. 37b)."⁹⁷ In the fullness of time Jesus Christ was born and demonstrated himself to be the quintessential Son of God, and his church is baptized into him, making each of us who trust in

Jesus Christ God's child. In short, the triune God is our teacher and we are his children and students.

Agur's challenging questions to identify the God of Israel as the Father-Teacher competent to teach wisdom to us as his sons-students radically reshape the crisis of knowing into a crisis of relationship. The human epistemological crisis in ethics and social behavior is now defined in relational categories rather than intellectual categories. True wisdom is found in a responsive and receptive relationship with the triune God, who is wisdom's sole possessor.

Looking back down the ladder, we have come a long way. Thus far we have confessed (1) that we have failed to find out how we should behave, (2) that we cannot establish absolute values by which to determine what behavior is good or bad, (3) that only the omniscient God of Israel is competent to make such evaluations, and (4) that we must confess that we are his children and his students.

Agur now leads us to take the fifth and final step out of our own relative and unreliable knowledge to the firm ground of God's absolute knowledge. We step on that firm ground when we confess that the triune God has spoken to us in the Bible: "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar" (vv. 5–6). Brevard Childs similarly interprets verses 5–6: "As an answer to the inquirer's despair at finding wisdom and the knowledge of God, the answer offered is that God has already made himself known in his written word."

Verse 5 is a citation from a psalm of David: "As for God, his way is perfect: *I AM's* word is flawless; he shields all who take refuge in him" (Ps. 18:30). Agur's further confession, "Do not add to his word or ... he will prove you a liar," is known as the canonical formula. This formula warns us not to add to or subtract from any part of God's Word. The formula is taken from Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy 4:2; 13:1. In other words, Agur locates his own teachings that follow in the rest of [chapter 30](#) within the framework of the Word of God to the extent that the canon existed in his day.

Agur makes no attempt to validate by human reason Scripture's absolute claim for its reliability and canonical authority and perfection. If such an attempt were made, it would make limited human reasoning the final arbitrator of truth, turning the argument back on itself and of necessity once again ending in skepticism. The finite mind can neither derive nor certify infinite truth. Certain truth is found in the Scriptures themselves as the Holy Spirit certifies them to obedient children (cf. Matt. 11:25–27; 16:13–17; John 5:45–47; 8:47; 10:2–6; 2 Cor. 3:14–4:6; 1 Thess. 2:13).

In Christian theology Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of typical Israel, for he

alone was perfectly obedient to his Father (Matt. 2:15; Luke 2:41–50; Heb. 5:7–10). But he is more than a son. He identifies himself as the Son of Man who comes on the clouds, the biblical symbol of divine transcendence. In Luke he is the incarnate Son of God by virgin birth (Luke 1:29–33), and in John, he is the eternal Son of God (John 17). As such he speaks with an immediate authority (cf. Matt. 7:28; 9:1–8; 12:8, 42; Heb. 3:3–6; Rev. 5:1–14) and through the Holy Spirit guides his apostles into all truth (John 16:12–15).

In other words, the authors of Proverbs view the creation through the lens of faith ground to prescription by Moses' Law. The book's title identifies its author specifically as "king of Israel." Israel's covenant-keeping God commands him as Israel's king upon his assuming the throne "to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites" (Deut. 17:18). David instructed Solomon, "keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses" (1 Kings 2:3). Agur, probably a proselyte to the faith, regarded Israel's canonical literature as the perfect word of God and within its context composed his sayings (see p. 916).

In spite of Job's three friends' rhetorical apologia for God's upholding a moral order, Job's honest testimony to his experience painfully refutes them (Job 9:22; cf. Eccl. 9:2). Observation of nature's "dark night" without the biblical lens of faith and values could teach survival of the fittest, destruction of others for self-preservation, the law of the fang and the claw. The authors of the Bible's wisdom book draw inspiration through keen observation and cogent reflections on creation, but they bring to their task Israel's world and life view and use the creation to enrich it.⁹⁸

In the prologue to Proverbs, as well as in its preamble, Solomon equates his teachings, now placed in the parent's mouth, with wisdom. "My son, if you accept my words ... wisdom will enter your heart" (2:1–10).⁹⁹ When he calls for faith in *I AM* in 3:5–6, he means *I AM* who inspired his teachings as the argument of the unified poem in 3:1–12 implies. The versets of 16:20 put in parallel the one who gives heed to instruction with him who trusts in *I AM*. The first of the Thirty Sayings calls for faith in *I AM* to uphold the rest of the sayings: "So that your trust may be in *I AM*, I teach you today, even you" (22:19).

In spite of this clear testimony, von Rad arbitrarily dismisses these sayings and other proverbs that call for trust in *I AM* (see also Prov. 14:26; 16:3; 18:10; 19:23; 28:25) as essentially irrelevant.¹⁰⁰ According to him, a searched-out impersonal world order is a given that demands no faith in *I AM*. Not so. Solomon calls upon the son to trust *I AM*, not his sayings per se, because his

sayings are only as good as *I AM*, who revealed them and who inspired his sage,
is committed to uphold them.

III. GOD

A. Names of God

God is referred to by name in 94 verses of the book of Proverbs, by pronouns in 11 verses in [chapters 1–9](#), as well as by other epithets in 23:11; 24:12; and possibly 21:12, for a total of 100 verses out of 915 or in more than 10 percent of the book’s verses.^{[101](#)} Proverbs refers 87 times to God by his covenant-keeping name *I AM* (see pp. 359–62, 902).^{[102](#)} His other name, “God” *ʾēlōhîm* occurs only five times (2:5; 3:4; 25:2; 30:5 [singular], and 9). This generic name functions in the Old Testament to signify God’s power, strength, and heavenly transcendence over earthly mortals (e.g., Num. 23:19; 1sa. 31:3; Ezek. 28:2).^{[103](#)}

B. God as Creator

The creation motif in Proverbs is mentioned in two poems in the prologue (3:19–20; 8:22–31), six times in the proverbs of collection 2 (“Solomon 1,” 14:31; 16:4, 11; 17:5; 20:12; 22:2), once in collection 5 (“Solomon 11,” 29:13), for a total of seven proverbs, and once in Agur’s autobiographical poem (30:2–4), for a total of ten times. The poems deal with the creation of *the world* and the proverbs with the creation of *human beings*. These references to the creation are totally consistent with the teachings elsewhere in the Bible about creation (see [chap. 7](#)). Sometimes the poems, like others in the Old Testament, depict creation in imagery and expressions drawn from pagan myths without borrowing their theology (cf. 3:20; 8:29; 30:4). All these texts refer to *I AM* as the Creator — none speaks of creation apart from his activity—and all assume that he is sole and sovereign Creator. Apart from this faith the sage’s arguments based on creation lose much of their cogency.

The first poem, 3:19–20, is part of the father’s fourth lecture (3:13–35) and points to the creation of *the world* as firmly established and constantly sustained by rain (3:19–20) and as being both protected from the chaotic depths below

(3:20a) and refreshed by life-giving water from the clouds above (3:20b). The theological focus of the passage, however, is not on God as creator (3:19) and sustainer of the creation (3:20), which is assumed; the point is rather that he effected an enduring creation by wisdom. Solomon is now offering his son that same divine wisdom to effect a life that endures forever, a life firmly established and sustained by his divine wisdom. The second poem, 8:22–31, also presents wisdom in connection with *I AM* as creator and sustainer of the world, but this time instead of being his instrument that effected creation, wisdom is personified as *I AM*'s companion throughout his creating process. This poem about the creation aims to show the authority of Solomon's divine wisdom, not its enduring effectiveness (see above).

The proverbs about *I AM* as the Creator of *human beings* represent him as both transcendent and immanent, as both the Sovereign in heaven and present on earth to experience human misery. But these proverbs aim to teach the son wisdom. *I AM* created hearing ears and seeing eyes among other things to hear and study wisdom (Prov. 20:12). The other proverbs serve a social-ethical function, a chief concern of wisdom literature. They represent God as sovereign in heaven and/or as present on earth so that he can effect justice. As sovereign in heaven, *I AM* made the scales that the king uses to administer fair weights and measures (16:11), and under God's sovereignty and the king's administration, no cheat escapes judgment (16:4, 14). Moreover, the Sovereign created all, rich and poor alike, investing both with dignity and with responsibilities, especially of the responsibility to give the poor dignity (22:2; 29:13), and whoever mocks them, reviles *I AM*, for he created them (17:5). As present on earth, *I AM* experiences the misery of the oppressed, and he will punish the oppressor just as certainly as he will honor those who take compassion on them (14:31). In short, "creation functions as the philosophical basis for social ethics."¹⁰⁴

C. God's Transcendence and Immanence

L. Boström notes that God's transcendence and his immanence feature prominently in Proverbs.¹⁰⁵

1. *I AM's Transcendence*

God's activity as creator entails his being transcendent — that is, he is not bound in either his nature or in his scope of activity by any spatial and/or

temporal limitations. Nothing in heaven or on earth is hidden from his vision (Prov. 5:21; 15:3, 11; 22:12; 24:12). If even the mysterious depths of the grave and of Abaddon below the earth do not escape his vigilant vision, how much more the hearts of human beings lie open before him (17:3). The human heart is deceptive, but it is not concealed from God (see 15:3, 11; 16:2; 17:3; 20:27; 21:2; 22:12; 24:12). However, God is not a passive spectator. Rather, he brings judgment even on a passive spectator of wrongdoing (22:22–23; 23:10–11; 29:26).

God's transcendence as creator and sustainer of the world assures *his sovereign supremacy*, his freedom to enact his will. Chance does not rule, but *I AM* rules chance, symbolized by his rule over the casting of dice (Prov. 16:33). Earthbound mortals cannot thwart his will and purposes (Prov. 16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30; 27:1). The wicked, who renounce and/or disregard God's rule, are obviously fatuous. Proverbs promises the faithful blessings (i.e., health, wealth, honor, and victory over enemies) (cf. 3:1–10; 16:7), but ultimately only the living, transcendent, omniscient God can carry through these promises in a world where the wicked try to thwart the life and prosperity of the righteous. All blessings, however they may be mediated, come from the *I AM* (10:6). Proverbs does not explain how and when blessing will crown the head of the righteous, only that they will. In Proverbs God's sovereignty extends over all, even over the adulterer, just as it extended over the idolater in Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:19; 29:26). On the one hand, the adulterer falls into the deep pit of the adulteress's "mouth" because the angry Sovereign cast him there, though he may hardly be aware of it (Prov. 22:14). On the other hand, the heart (or motives) of the king, who is unfathomable to his subjects, is like a watercourse which he directs wherever he pleases (21:1).

God's transcendence and sovereignty also involve *his inscrutability*. If the king's heart or motives are unfathomable in his earthly realm; how much more the Sovereign's ways are inscrutable. The king searches out the affairs of state (Prov. 25:2b), but none, not even the king, comprehends the complexity of the heavenly Sovereign's acts (25:3). Both God and king gain glory by their incomprehensibility (25:2), but how much more the heavenly *I AM*, since his ways are hidden even to the king. Since the inscrutable *I AM* directs a person's steps, how, then, can a mortal, such as the adulterer mentioned above, understand his ways (20:24)? Since human beings are confused about their own motives (16:2), the best they can do is to roll everything on the omniscient *I AM*, who knows their motives, to establish their works (16:2–3). These sayings about God's incomprehensibility qualify sayings about his justice. He repays evil and rewards good in his own time and own way.

2. *I AM's Immanence*

Sayings about the *I AM's* sovereignty over human beings are complemented by sayings that he is personal and near to people, especially the helpless and the righteous.¹⁰⁶ *I AM* is the Defender of the weak and the defenseless (14:31; 15:25; 17:5; 22:2, 22–23; 23:10–11; cf. 22:2; 29:13). On the one hand, “the one who is kind to the poor lends to *I AM* and he will reward him for what he has done” (19:17). On the other hand, “*I AM* detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished” (16:5). Even the non-involved will be held accountable by him for not delivering the helpless and oppressed (24:11–12). *I AM* will prove to be both prosecutor and judge on behalf of the wronged (23:11).

As noted, the immanent *I AM* tries every heart, but only the righteous, used here as an umbrella term for the other terms signifying piety (or trust in *I AM*) and ethical character and behavior, find his acceptance and favor (Heb. *rāṣôn*; Prov. 8:35; 10:32; 11:1, 20; 12:2, 22; 15:8; 18:22) and so life, health, and prosperity (3:1–10; 16:20; 19:17; 28:25). As his friends they are taken into his confidence (3:32). As such they find he is their Shield and Defender to protect them (14:26; 18:10; 30:5), and so they can run without fear of stumbling (3:23–26) and avoid deadly snares (14:27). By contrast he brings destruction on mockers and the wicked (3:33–34; 10:3, 27, 29).

D. Retribution

In Proverbs God's traits of transcendence and immanence are not celebrated in praise as in the Psalms but are brought to bear on being wise. Faith in God's sovereignty and in divine retribution makes one wise. “Only a transcendent God,” says Boström, “can be entrusted with the ‘impossible’ task of dispensing justice to each individual and situation!”¹⁰⁷

All agree that the book of Proverbs presents a world order involving deed and destiny — the idea that what one does now will determine what will happen later. A more precise formulation is a *character determines conduct determines consequence* connection — that is, what you are determines what you will become. But the relationship of *I AM* to this nexus is debated. Klaus Koch and others remove God altogether from involvement in the world, or at best reduce him to a first cause within a deistic view of reality (a so-called *synthetische Lebensauffassung*).¹⁰⁸ According to Roland E. Murphy, the thesis that biblical

wisdom issues from the effort to discover order is held by so many scholars that it seems to be one of the “assured results,” but he himself has misgivings about this approach to Israelite wisdom.¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth F. Huwiler complains against the notion of a fated order: “In its extreme form, the deed-consequence syndrome removes the deity from activity in the world. According to this view, the consequence follows the deed of itself, and *I AM*, whose power is limited, is directly involved merely as a midwife or a chemical catalyst, although indirectly involved as creator, who set into motion the deed-consequence syndrome.”¹¹⁰ Many sayings assert the deed-destiny nexus, but they do not presuppose divine inactivity. In short, Israelite wisdom tradition cannot properly be described as deistic or secular.

Many sayings represent the character-consequence nexus without appealing to *I AM*’s involvement, but Proverbs aims to protect itself against interpreting the deed-destiny connection as being fatalistic in several ways. Goldingay noted that the sequence of observations on righteousness and wickedness (Prov. 10:2) is followed by an observation about *I AM*’s involvement in people’s lives (10:3), and he finds the same sequence as in 10:2–5 again in 10:23–27; 12:1–14; 14:1–4; and 15:2–7.¹¹¹ The failure of paremiologists to grasp the significance of the restricted ability of epigrams to express the whole truth and the rectification of this problem by grouping them has bedeviled the discussion.

The admonitions and sayings of collection 1 provides the hermeneutical key to the book. The preamble fashions the key that opens the book: “the fear of *I AM*.” This phrase connotes that piety toward God, a religious lifestyle, not a rational understanding of an impersonal order, shapes the character and destiny of the truly wise. In the book’s prologue, the father’s first lecture places the blame for final and certain death on the sinner (Prov. 1:19), and Woman Wisdom adds that this came about because the sinner refused to fear *I AM* (1:29). Protection against sinners, according to the father’s second lecture, depends on accepting the teachings involved in the fear of the *I AM* (2:1–5). The third lecture represents *I AM* and the faithful as each having covenant obligations (3:1–10), concluding with truth that *I AM* himself takes over the father’s role in disciplining his children. The fourth lecture concludes by showing the connection between *I AM*’s retribution with human social behavior (3:27–35). The first full lecture against the unfaithful wife certifies the adulterer’s death as due to *I AM*’s omnivision (5:21–23).

Some proverbs in collections 2 and 5 clearly assert *I AM*’s involvement. We already looked at 10:2–3. Other proverbs also speak clearly of his active role in retribution (12:2; 16:7; 19:17; 25:21–22; 29:25, 26). Some proverbs speak of *I*

AM's moral sensibilities as, for example, those exhibiting the "abomination formulation" (11:1; 12:22; 15:8, 26; 16:5; 17:15; 20:10, 23), implying he will vomit out the abominable, though only 16:5 states explicitly they will be punished. According to 21:30 no human wisdom nor understanding nor counsel can stand against *I AM*, not against some impersonal order. Also, lest the wise think it all depends on their character and conduct, 16:1–9 asserts *I AM*'s sovereignty transcends human activity.

According to its prologue, The Thirty Sayings of the Wise have as their aim to establish the son in trusting *I AM* (22:19). The longer sayings in this collection affirm the doctrine of retribution. Significantly, the first and last sayings that frame its first section, a decalogue prohibiting injustice, threaten *I AM*'s retribution (22:22–23; 23:10–11). The emphatic rhetorical question "Will he not repay every person according to his deeds?" provides a classic formulation for the doctrine of retribution.

The book of Proverbs draws to a conclusion with a call for a song of praise for the woman who embodies wisdom through her fear of *I AM* (31:30).

The conclusion can now be drawn that it is more appropriate to speak of personal divine retribution in Proverbs than of an impersonal world order. The sages believed in and taught a harmonious world order created and sustained by *I AM*, not an impersonal one. In that world order, justice will finally be meted out, but the sages assign that justice to *I AM* without specifying the time or the manner. These texts sometimes seem to assume that society's social and legal safety nets for the welfare of the oppressed have failed. They assert only that, although human intervention on behalf of the helpless may fail, *I AM* will not fail (Prov. 23:10–11). Moreover, they do not assert that divine retribution works like clockwork. Statements like 11:5–6 need to be qualified by other proverbs, not by claiming they are too optimistic and/or exaggerate the truth.¹¹² There are many counterproverbs that nuance their radical thrust by asserting or implying that the doctrine of divine retribution also involves divine inscrutability. For some people and for some situations, the divine order of retribution seems overturned. The righteous may now live in a topsy-turvy, turbulent world.

THOUGHT QUESTION

Rudyard Kipling wrote,

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are WHAT and WHY and WHEN
And HOW and WHERE and WHO.

Applying these six little “men,” answer these questions: What is wisdom? Why should I gain wisdom? How do I gain wisdom? Where can wisdom be found? Who am I: a simpleton, or wise?

[1.](#) Taken from Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 50–55.

[2.](#) For the debated influence of the wisdom tradition on other parts of the Old Testament, see J. A. Emerton, “Wisdom,” in *Tradition and Interpretation: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, G. W. Anderson, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 221; Robert P. Gordon, “A House Divided: Wisdom in Old Testament Narrative Traditions,” *WIAI*, 94–105; J. A. Soggins, “Amos and Wisdom,” *WIAI*, 119–23; A. A. Macintosh, “Hosea in the Wisdom Tradition: Dependence and Independence,” *WIAI*, 124–32; H. G. M. Williamson, “Isaiah and the Wise,” *WIAI*, 133–41; William McKane, “Jeremiah and the Wise,” *WIAI*, 142–52; B. A. Mastin, “Wisdom and Daniel,” *WIAI*, 161–69.

[3.](#) Johannes Meinhold, *Die Weisheit Israels in Spruch, Sage und Dichtung* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1908).

[4.](#) James L. Crenshaw, “The Wisdom Literature,” *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress/Decatur, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1985), 369.

[5.](#) Adjective from Latin *sapere*, “to be wise.”

[6.](#) R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974), 71–155.

[7.](#) R. N. Whybray, “The Social World of the Wisdom Writers,” in *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological, and Political Perspectives*;

Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 227.

[8.](#) Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Richmond: John Knox, 1973).

[9.](#) James L. Crenshaw, *Wisdom Literature: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 373.

[10.](#) Philip J. Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1982), 127.

[11.](#) J. Gerald Janzen, *Job, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 3.

[12.](#) E. A. Wallis Budge, *Second Series of Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1923), pls. I – XIV.

[13.](#) Nel, *Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs*, 127.

[14.](#) Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

[15.](#) William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, 1965); and idem, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

[16.](#) Ernst Würthwein, *Die Weisheit Agyptens und das Alte Testament* (Egyptian Wisdom and the Old Testament) (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1967), reprinted in *Wort und Existenz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 197–216.

[17.](#) Walther Zimmerli, “Zur Struktur der alttestamentlichen Weisheit,” *ZAW* 10 (1933): 177–204 (trans. B. W. Kovacs and reprinted in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* [New York: Ktav, 1976], 175–99).

[18.](#) Bruce K. Waltke, “The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology,” *BSac* 136 (1979): 302–17.

[19.](#) F. M. Wilson, “Sacred and Profane? The Yahwistic Redaction of Proverbs Reconsidered,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.*, ed. H. G. Hoglund et al., JSOTSup 58 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1987), 313–34. See also Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 57–73.

[20.](#) R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (London: SCM Press, 1965); idem, *Proverbs*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[21.](#) Klaus Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament,” *ZTK* 52 (1955): 21–42.

[22.](#) Hartmut Gese, “Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit,” *Um des Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972): 213–35.

[23.](#) H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung. Hintergrund und*

Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffes, BHT 40 (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968).

[24.](#) For their distinctive views, see Emerton, "Wisdom," 215–19.

[25.](#) Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 191; see also 144–76.

[26.](#) Nel, *Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs*, 127.

[27.](#) Derek Kidner, *Introduction to the Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 11.

[28.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, "The Authority of Proverbs: An Exposition of Proverbs 1:2–6," *Presbyterion* 13 (1987): 65–78; idem, "Lady Wisdom as Mediatrix: An Exposition of Proverbs 1:20–33," *Presbyterion* 14 (1988): 1–15.

[29.](#) So William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 323.

[30.](#) Taken from Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 64–65.

[31.](#) Gese, "Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit," 2.

[32.](#) Horst Dietrich Preuss, "Erwagungen zum theologischen Ort alttestamentlicher Weisheitsliteratur," *EvT* 30 (1970): 393–417.

[33.](#) G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 115.

[34.](#) John Coert Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1946), 20. His assumption of "the Hebrew Wisdom movement" and the popular appeal to "wisdom circles," as though there were some distinct wisdom guild in contrast to a priestly caste or prophetic schools, has no biblical or historical support.

[35.](#) John Goldingay, "The 'Salvation History' Perspective and the 'Wisdom' Perspective within the Context of Biblical Theology," *EvQ* 51 (1979): 194–207.

[36.](#) Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove and Leicester: InterVarsity, 1964), 13.

[37.](#) Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology," 305.

[38.](#) Taken from Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 65–67.

[39.](#) J. F. Priest, "Where Is Wisdom to Be Placed?" *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, 281.

[40.](#) Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 96.

[41.](#) Allen D. Verhey, "The Doctor's Oath – and a Christian Swearing It," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Stephen E. Lammers and Allen D. Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 72–82.

[42.](#) David A. Hubbard, "Wisdom," *NBD* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 1256.

[43.](#) Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation* (New York:

Harper & Row, 1961), 76. While most scholars think *Amen-em-ope* has an “urgott” in view, both Frankfort and Hellmut Brunner (“Der freie Wille Gottes in der agyptischen Wesiheit,” in *Les Sagesses du Proche-Orient Ancien* [Wisdoms of the Ancient Near East], ed. J. Leclant, Central Eurasian Study Society [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963], 103–20) suppose that Egyptian *netjer* (“god”) designates an individual’s personal god, *his* god. J. Vergote (“La notion de Dieu dans les Livres de sagesse égyptiens,” also from *Sagesses du Proche-Orient Ancien*, 159–90) believes that a distinction can be made between the mention of “specified god” and the anonymous “unique” god.

[44.](#) Louis Keimer, “The Wisdom of Amen-em-ope and the Proverbs of Solomon,” *AJSL* 43 (1927–28): 11.

[45.](#) Lennart Boström, *God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 44–45.

[46.](#) Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East: The Factual History of a Literary Form” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 69–114.

[47.](#) Paul Humbert, *Recherches sur les sources Égyptiennes de la littérature sapientiale d’Israël* (Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l’Université, 1929); Christa Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966).

[48.](#) Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 270–71.

[49.](#) For a good treatment of home school in ancient Israel, see James L. Crenshaw, “Education in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 104 (1985): 601–15.

[50.](#) W. Chomsky, “The Dawn of Jewish Education,” *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies*, ed. I. Passow and S. Lachs (Philadelphia: Gratz College Press, 1972), 3:20.

[51.](#) Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 132–56.

[52.](#) H. Freedman, “Kiddushin,” *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino, 1948), 4:140n8.

[53.](#) Michael V. Fox, “Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” *JBL* 113 (1994): 620–21n11.

[54.](#) Kings and Chronicles name the mothers of good and bad kings, suggesting they partook in their credit or reproach (see Prov. 31:1).

[55.](#) One Akkadian proverb says, “Pay attention to your mother’s speech as to your God’s speech” (J. J. van Dijk, *La sag esse sumero-accadianne* [Leiden: Brill, 1953], 105). By contrast, in Egypt only one reference is found in a very late Egyptian instruction, and Ankhsehshonq (13:20) is a real put down of teaching women: “instructing a woman is like having a sack of sand whose side is split open” (*AEL*, 3:170).

[56.](#) Michael V. Fox, “The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs,” in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: Essays in Honor of Menahem Haran*, ed. Michael V.

Fox *et al.* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 227–39.

[57.](#) D. M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xivf.

[58.](#) For a fuller discussion of theology in Proverbs, including anthropology and Christology, see Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 63–132.

[59.](#) Or, “Wisdom is supreme; therefore get” (TNIV note). See Eccl. 12:13.

[60.](#) Kidner, *Proverbs*, 67.

[61.](#) Taken from Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 104–9.

[62.](#) William Cosser, “The Meaning of ‘Life’ (H.ayyim) in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes,” *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions* 15 (1955): 48–53.

[63.](#) The TNIV adds “and death” to explain the metonymy of cause: sin brings death.

[64.](#) Kidner, *Proverbs*, 53.

[65.](#) Pace C. H. Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899; latest printing, 1977), 48, and many others.

[66.](#) The LXX strangely vacillates between accentuating either the afterlife (14:32; 15:24) or this life (12:28; 23:17–18; 24:19–20). V. Cottini (*La vita futura nel libro dei Proverbi: Contributo alla storia dell'esegesi*, SBF 20 [Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1984]) draws the conclusion that priority must be given to the MT in its belief in an eschatology open to transcendence.

[67.](#) See Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 543–45, 607–8.

[68.](#) Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1973–80), 2:6.

[69.](#) The image that wisdom holds “long life” in one hand and “riches and honor” in the other in 3:16 probably derives from a great number of representations of Egyptian Ma'at, who holds in one hand the *ank* sign, the symbol of life, and in the other the scepter, the symbol of riches and honor. This image finds pictorial expression in “the tree of life” in 3:18. Kayatz (*Studien zu Proverbien 1–9*, 106–7) questionably connects this tree with Egyptian beneficent trees, such as the sycamore at the edge of heaven. For example, a Pyramid text reads: “N. grasps both sycamores, which are found on that side of heaven. Ferry him over! And they set him down on that eastern side of the heavens.” The Egyptian Isched-tree, she notes, also serves as a type of a tree of life. In earlier texts on its leaves the names and years of the kings are eternalized, and in later texts the life of the soul is assured eternal life through Thot himself writing down a record for the dead under this “tree of life.”

[70.](#) See Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 171–74, but in my judgment Thielman misrepresents the Old

Testament expectation of eternal life as being realized only in the last day. On the contrary, as in the teaching of Jesus, Proverbs represents eternal life as a present realm of the wise/righteous in contrast to the realm of death of fools/wicked.

[71.](#) Kenneth Aitken, *Proverbs*, Daily Study Bible Series, ed. William Barclay (Philadelphia: Westminster/Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1986), 43.

[72.](#) Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 233.

[73.](#) James G. Williams, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981), 53.

[74.](#) Raymond Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs," *HS* 33 (1992): 29.

[75.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, "Proverbs: Theology of," *NIDOTTE*, 4:1089–93.

[76.](#) Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

[77.](#) Jerry A. Gladson, "Retributive Paradoxes in Proverbs 10–29" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt Univ., 1978).

[78.](#) In 2 Corinthians Paul teaches that God's power is perfected through human weakness. The theology of 1 Peter is all about suffering as Christians (see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 323–37, 569–84). This may be so because they expected a soon Second Coming.

[79.](#) Taken from Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 76–78.

[80.](#) M. Saebo, *TLOT*, s.v. "*ḥkm*," 2:420–22.

[81.](#) Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 32–34.

[82.](#) A. Alt ("Die Weisheit Salomos," *ThLZ* 76 [1951], cols. 139–44; Eng. trans. in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, 102–12) compared Solomon's speaking of plants and animals (1 Kings 4:33 [5:13]) to ancient Near Eastern onomastica (i.e., the serial naming of things) such as the *Onomasticon of Amenemope* (ca. 1100 BC; cf. *Ramesseum Onomasticon* (ca. 1797–1633 BC), which deals with plants and animals. He suggested that these onomastica strove to comprehend all that exists and to bring it into order. However, Michael V. Fox ("Egyptian Onomastica," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, 302–10) argued that Alt failed to establish his thesis, and Weeks (*Early Israelite Wisdom*, 111–13) agrees with Fox.

[83.](#) E. W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 165.

[84.](#) In the Pentateuch it is not the laws themselves that embody wisdom but following and obeying them (see Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* [Louisville: John Knox 1990], 56).

[85.](#) Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 13.

[86.](#) Outside of Proverbs, terms for wisdom may be used with reference to pagan religions and for impious and unethical practices (cf. Gen. 41:8; 2 Sam. 13:3; Isa. 40:20; 44:25; Jer. 10:6; 18:18).

[87.](#) This connection radically distinguishes the wisdom of Proverbs from that of the Sophists: “The Sophists ... were intensely competitive with one another and gathered around them disciples who participated in this rivalry” (Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 281).

[88.](#) Righteousness in Pauline theology mostly denotes the salvation of the faithful both in the present and in the future. For its three distinct meanings and the meaning of justification in Pauline theology, see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 461–72.

[89.](#) See Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 93–100, 109–11.

[90.](#) Pace G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. David M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:418, 428.

[91.](#) Taken from Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 78–80.

[92.](#) Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 206.

[93.](#) Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 464–79.

[94.](#) I lean heavily in this exegesis on student Jerry V. Pauls, “Proverbs 30:1–6: ‘The words of Agur’ as Epistemological Statement” (Th.M. thesis, Regent College, 1998).

[95.](#) Cf. G. Fohrer, *TDNT*, 8:351, s.v. *huioi*.

[96.](#) B. L. Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs*, Yale Judaica Series 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 118.

[97.](#) G. T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* (BZAW 151; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 91.

[98.](#) Moshe Weinfeld (“The Wisdom Substrata in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic Literature,” *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 244–74) shows a clear connection between wisdom and Deuteronomy both in specific legislation and even in identical wordings (cf. Deut. 4:2; 13:1 and Prov. 30:5–6; Deut. 19:14 and Prov. 22:10; Deut. 25:13–16 and Prov. 20:23 [Deut. 6:1–9 and Prov. 3:1–10]). Against the Deuteronomist’s claim, however, Weinfeld gives pride of place to wisdom and proposed that the deuteronomists were schooled in alleged wisdom circles. Moreover, some of his specific verbal and ethical parallels are also met in non-Israelite wisdom.

[99.](#) The heart is the seat of wisdom. One scholar puts it this way: *Cor in Hebraeo sumitur pro judicio* (Among the Hebrews the heart is put for wisdom).

Cf. Job 34:34: “Let men of heart declare, wise men who hear me say to me....”

[100.](#) Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 191.

[101.](#) Ibid., 33–34.

[102.](#) *TLOT*, s.v. “yhwh,” 2:523.

[103.](#) See [chap. 13](#).III and 13.IV on the names of God.

[104.](#) Boström, *God of the Sages*, 60.

[105.](#) A perusal of Boström, *God of the Sages*, will show my heavy indebtedness to him in this section on theology proper.

[106.](#) In other religions the high gods tend to be remote, at

Chapter 34

THE GIFT OF WISDOM, PART 2: JOB

The knowledge of God without that of man's misery causes pride. The knowledge of man's misery without that of God causes despair. The knowledge of Jesus Christ constitutes the middle course, because in him we find both God and our misery.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.527

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Job instructs those who are committed to establishing justice in this world that God’s universal kingdom encompasses an evil kingdom that no mortal can rule. In spite of this mysterious realm, whose existence has no explanation from the human viewpoint of what is “good” (i.e., what serves human interests), they have sufficient reason to trust, because that hostile-to-life kingdom is restrained by what is “good.” The people of God establish God’s rule with a chastened humility that only God rules the whole, that they cannot impose God’s rule as kings themselves, and with a chastened confession that only God is sovereign. Armed with this chastened humility and confession, they become wise and persevere in spite of the inexplicable chaotic energy that threatens them.

As in representing the theology of other biblical books, I introduce the book of Job by first considering the story and its characters and then the plot and its narrator.

A. Story

Job lived in patriarchal times¹ in the unidentified land of Uz, outside of Israel². His is a story of a good man who suffered much. Stripped of his wealth, family, health, and friends — all that wisdom calls “success” — he suffered as if he were cursed by God. Suffering is the common burden of all humanity and the lonely burden of each person. Job’s friends explain all suffering, including Job’s, as punitive, corrective, and exemplary, but Job rejects their explanations of his suffering as baseless and calls into question whether the Sovereign of the universe is good and just. He suffers not as one of humanity’s worst moral specimens, but as its best. The narrator teaches sufferers through Job’s protestations that God is neither limited nor evil but sovereign and good beyond human understanding.

B. Plot

By way of introduction, we will consider here the implied author, the structure of his book, and his purpose in writing it.

1. Author

With regard to the author of the plot, no consensus has been reached on his date, though the orthography³ of his book suggests the seventh century BC. Its language is obscure: 3 percent of the Hebrew text is unintelligible. The implied author is a prophet of *I AM*. He — not Job and his friends — frequently uses the Israelite covenant name for God, *I AM*. In the prologue (Job 1–2), divine discourses (38:1–42:6), and epilogue (42:7–17), the name *I AM* occurs a total of thirty-one times (in the Hebrew text), while in the speeches of Job and other characters in the story (3–37) it appears only in 12:9, the text of which is uncertain. The tetragrammaton also occurs in 28:28, but the narrator, not Job, is probably the author of the meditation on wisdom found in that chapter (see below). The author represents Job and his friends as having a deep spiritual commitment to God based on ethical monotheism. All are committed to the “fear of God/the LoRD.”⁴

The author, who puts these speeches in the mouths of Job and his three friends, is a literary genius. Francis I. Andersen says, “Job is one of the supreme offerings of the human mind to the living God and one of the best gifts of God to men.”⁵ This literary genius escalates the rhetoric and tempo of the dialogues round after round, from climax to climax, until the final resolution in *I AM*’s two speeches.⁶ His rhetoric—if we may judge from the dialogues—points to his inspiration (see below). Moreover, if the prologue is not fictitious, the author is a prophet who, with an eagle’s-eye view, peers into the heavenly court and then descends like an angel to tell us what no other mortal, including Job, saw and heard. Finally, he is a sage who writes wisdom literature (i.e., he uses wisdom vocabulary and establishes truth by appealing to the creation [see pp. 900–901]).

2. Structure

In terms of its genre, the author develops his biography of Job according to the contest literature of the ancient Near East. The protagonist and his antagonists do not proceed by closely woven dialectic and irresistible logic to confute an opponent; instead, they aim to win their debate and prove their inspiration by brilliant rhetoric. In addition, the book’s structure formally

constitutes a type of “frame tale.” In this kind of ancient literature, a mythological or legendary narrative frame surrounds an extended dialogical core consisting of a disputational contest. The closing part of the frame is a judgment scene in which the winner of the dispute is announced.⁷

The book is structured into five parts.

1.The prologue (Job 1:1–2:13), written in prose, introduces Job’s misfortune as a divine demonstration to the heavenly court that God’s faithful mortals continue to persevere in their faith in God’s goodness and justice even though tested to the maximum limit.

2.The dialogues (Job 3:1–31:40). After an opening statement by Job that he can no longer testify that life is good (3:1–26), the dialogues continue with three cycles of dialogues between Job and his three false friends (4:2–26:14; 4:1–14:22; 15:1–21:34) and are drawn to a conclusion with Job’s soliloquies (27:1–31:40), interrupted by the author’s meditation on wisdom (28:1–28).

3.Elihu’s four speeches represent the younger generation’s attempt to answer the question of theodicy but in fact add little (Job 32:1–37:24).

4.Speeches by *I AM* and Job’s responses (Job 38:1–42:6) bring the book to its dramatic peak: the creation itself demonstrates that *I AM* has bounded “evil” with “good”; there is sufficient reason to trust in spite of the mystery of suffering. Puny mortals — born yesterday and knowing next to nothing, let alone thinking they can establish utopia — are unworthy to hail *I AM* into the dock to defend his way. Seeing how awesome *I AM* is, Job repents of challenging God’s right to rule.

5.In the denouement, *I AM* commends Job’s honesty, restores him, and uses him to restore his three friends (Job 42:10–17).

3. Purpose

Most scholars think that exploring the issue of theodicy (the question of God’s justice in the light of suffering) is the author’s purpose. Gerald Janzen refines this theme to “Why be righteous?”⁸ Thomas F. Dailey, however, cogently notes that although most interpretive efforts focus on the book’s themes, the book is about the development of Job to become not only the most righteous among mortals, but also the most wise. The book’s clear focus on this human protagonist sets this book apart from the other wisdom books. Job is a sapiential, literary icon, a spiritual picture that presents a transcendent vision, differing from the realism and illusion of other art forms. He is commended as the prototype of a wise man: he speaks the truth (see Job 42:7–9).⁹ In other words,

the author traces the trajectory of Job's development from a good man to a wise man.

In the prologue we observe Job as an idealist in elementary school ([chaps. 1–2](#)); in the dialogue, Job is a sophomore in college on the way to becoming wise ([chaps. 3–31](#)); finally, the *I AM* speeches address him as a student in graduate school, where he is humbled and accepts that there are sufficient reasons to trust *I AM* without demanding of him rational explanations (37:1–42:6).

II. PROLOGUE: JOB IN PRIMARY SCHOOL (JOB 1:1–2:13)

A. Text

1. Introduction to Job: A Man in Covenant with God (1:1–5)

Job lives in the unidentified land of Uz, not Israel. In this land conducive to raising crops (Job 1:14) and cattle (v. 3), Job is not a nomad but an elder in a major town (29:7). More important for the plot, he is blameless (i.e., abstains from evil) and upright; he fears God and shuns evil. Like Noah, Job is a man enjoying a covenant relationship with *I AM*, though he seemingly does not know the name. He has “seven sons” (the divine number of completeness) and is the “greatest man [in] the East.” In other words, he enjoys the blessings of God’s covenant. His is the ideal family. His children, taking turns “each on his day” (i.e., their birthdays), celebrate their lives by feasting together. Nevertheless, “Job would have them purified,” showing his “extraordinary scrupulousness that must cover even unseen sin, that must bestir itself ‘early in the morning,’ that must offer not one sacrifice but ten, that must never fail in its responsibility but ‘do so continually.’”^{[10](#)}

2. Job’s Testing: Two Interviews of I AM with Satan (1:6–2:10)

The first episode of the prologue narrates Satan’s first accusation in heaven (Job 1:6–12) and Job’s faith despite loss of family and property (1:13–22). In its first scene, *I AM* sets the drama in motion. He asks Satan as the “sons of God” meet before him in the heavenly court: “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless, and upright, a man who fears

God and shuns evil.” Of course, the heavenly sphere, which lies beyond the veil of humankind’s experience, always has an “as if,” a figural character (see pp. 193–94, 371). Satan (i.e., “the accuser”) is more than merely the Lord’s prosecutor general. He also assumes the role of one who opposes the will of God, in keeping with the role of the Serpent in Genesis 3. The accuser replies to God, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” “For nothing” refers to creaturely possessions. This is the ultimate question that the book of Job aims to answer: Why are the righteous righteous? To prove that the faithful do not serve God for creaturely comfort but out of their love for God, *I AM* allows Satan to plunder Job of his property, but God “puts a hedge” (i.e., a protective barrier) around Job himself. Satan’s power is restricted by God’s sovereign will.

The scene now shifts to earth to portray the disasters Satan visits upon Job. The calamities fall on the feast day of the firstborn, the quintessential symbol of God’s blessing of life. Satan has power over both politics and nature. Job’s enemies are alternatively from earth (Sabeans [Job 1:13–15] and Chaldeans [v. 17]) and heaven (fire from heaven [v. 16], mighty wind from the desert [v. 19]).

The episode is drawn to conclusion with a wisdom poem by the grief-stricken Job and with the narrator’s evaluation. Repeating the divine name three times, Job attributes life, children, and possessions to God, who freely gave them, and acknowledges God’s sovereign right to withdraw them (vv. 20–21). The narrator evaluates Job’s response as without sin by not charging God with wrongdoing (v. 22).

The second episode of the prologue begins in heaven with God again challenging Satan to validate Job’s faith. Satan gives the question, Why are the righteous righteous? a sharper point: Is a covenant person’s integrity more than skin-deep (Job 2:4)? Satan’s reply, “Skin for skin!” means that “all that a man has” is like so many layers of skin about him. Satan alleges that humankind is willing to give up all that “skin” if by maintaining his integrity he can retain his “skin” (i.e., his life, his ultimate possession). God allows the test but spares Job’s life, taking full responsibility for Satan’s activity, but he acts from entirely different motives. The scene again moves to earth, and Job’s wife succumbs to Satan’s calumny. She calls upon her husband to renounce his faith, saying, “Curse God” (v. 9) as Satan had said Job would do (1:11; 2:5). Unlike Adam, however, Job refuses to identify with his wife’s allegiance to Satan and continues to acknowledge God’s right to give and take material possessions. The narrator again approves of his response (v. 10b). In other words, Job graduated *summa cum laude* (“none like him”) from primary school.

B. Reflections on the Prologue

The prologue clarifies the nature of the covenant relationship between God and his saint: its reason, basis, and endurance in spite of Satan's threats. God challenges Satan to test the piety and morality of his human partner. Do the pious love, trust, serve, and fear God for his intrinsic worthiness or for what they can acquire out of that relationship? Do they serve God in order to be blessed or because they have sufficient grounds to trust, worship, and serve God, earthly possessions and creature comforts denied? This is not a matter of disinterested piety. Rather, the issue is whether there are grounds for committing oneself to a covenant relationship with God even when the reason for suffering, which tests that relationship, may be forever hidden from mortals — Job never knew the reason for his suffering.

Job's covenant relationship with God, like that of the patriarchs' relationships with God before Abraham, is based on God's general revelations of his wisdom, power, and goodness in the creation and of his justice in the conscience (Rom. 1:18–32). It is not based on Israel's special covenants. To reach maturity, however, Job will need to have his eyes opened to the reality of a conflicted created order (Job 38:1–41:34). In the covenant relationship between God and Job, God commits himself to his elect saint to put a protective hedge around him lest he perish, and Job commits himself to trust God to do what is right and to behave justly toward his neighbor—in other words, to covenant fidelity (piety and morality).

The “sons of God” in the heavenly court represent the divine governance of the earth and include Satan, the adversarial prosecutor against mortals. Satan, the epitome of impiety and immorality, represents the opposite of a covenant relationship between God and mortals but nevertheless unwittingly serves God's ultimate purpose. In other words, the relationship between God and mortals is not closed. Other spiritual personalities are at work influencing that relationship. Satan's activities give full vent to the immorality that stems from his impiety. Cain, whose failure at the altar led to his failure in the field, is Satan's seed: neither one values God or God's image.

God's challenge to Satan to prove Job's faith in him despite counterevidence shows that *I AM* uses mortals to validate truths about himself; in this case to prove the inviolability and the genuineness of the covenant relationship between him and Job in contradistinction to Satan's calumny. History is the crucible of truth, conferring awful dignity upon mortals.

The conventional wisdom that God upholds a moral order is established in the

prologue and epilogue. Virtue may be downtrodden, but in the end it is recognized and rewarded. The disasters climactically end with the death of all the children. If covenant life is to be affirmed as good, it must outlast clinical death.

Job graduates *summa cum laude* from elementary school (Job 1:1–6; 2:10). With regard to being blameless, no mortal is his peer; with regard to fidelity, he perseveres.

III. DIALOGUES: JOB A SOPHOMORE IN COLLEGE

The prologue is drawn to conclusion with the coming of Job's three "friends" to comfort him. Their dialogues pit the protagonist's raw honesty against his antagonists' *reductio absurdum* orthodoxy.

A. Text

Here in outline form is the context of the dialogues:

- I. Job's Opening Statement: Curses the Day of His Birth (3:1–26)
- II. Three Cycles of Speeches with His "Friends" (4:2–26:14)
 - A. First Cycle of Speeches (4:1–14:22)
 - 1. Eliphaz and Job: 4:1–7:21 (4–5 and 6–7)
 - 2. Bildad and Job: 8:1–10:22 (8 and 9–10)
 - 3. Zophar and Job: 11:1–14:22 (11 and 12–14)
 - B. Second Cycle of Speeches (15:1–21:34)
 - 1. Eliphaz and Job: 15:1–17:16 (15 and 16–17)
 - 2. Bildad and Job: 18:1–19:29 (18 and 19)
 - 3. Zophar and Job: 20:1–21:34 (20 and 21)
 - C. Third Cycle of Speeches (22:1–26:14)
 - 1. Eliphaz and Job: 22:1–24:25 (22 and 23–24)
 - 2. Bildad and Job: 25:1–26:14 (25 and 26)
- III. Job's Soliloquies (27:1–31:40)
 - A. Job's First Oath (27:1–6)
 - B. Job's Imprecations against His Wicked Friends (27:7–10)
 - C. Job Parodies Zophar (27:11–23)
 - D. Narrator's Meditation on Wisdom (28:1–28)
 - E. Job's Summing Up (29:1–31:40)

B. Reflections on the Dialogues

1. With Regard to the False Friends

Job prompts the dialogue by his initial denial that creation (light and life) is good. He renounces life as God's good gift and inferentially denies the Creator's goodness and his right to sovereignty. Nevertheless, he does not curse God (i.e., refuse to acknowledge him as his God who rules him). He pushes away the creation, not God. Job's "friends," however, contend that life is manifestly good for the good but bad for the bad. Therefore, suffering Job must be sinful and must repent to be restored to his former good fortune. They base their argument on three faulty epistemic principles.

1. Eliphaz appeals to a mystical experience validating that no mortal can be righteous and wise (Job 4:12–21). But is his mystical experience an encounter with God or with Satan? Does not the spirit that glides by him, making the hair on his body stand on end, agree with Satan that all mortals are foolish and incapable of acting without self-regard?

2. They also base their authority on the traditions of the wise (Job 5:27; 8:8–10). Learning from history has the advantage of giving one a broader and deeper base of experience, but tradition is no match for Job's raw experience that deconstructs it.

3. Finally, their argument is reductionistic (i.e., a closed system of epistemology based on inadequate premises). Their first premise that we reap what we sow is valid. Their second premise, however, that we reap only what we sow is false. All suffering, as Job's experience validates, is not due to sin. They rightly assert that God is all powerful, righteous, and wise, but they deny his freedom by not allowing God the freedom to use evil to accomplish his sovereign purposes. Ever since the death of Abel, the innocent have perished (cf. Job 4:7). It is often alleged that the three friends represent the viewpoint of Proverbs. If so, they were poor students of that book (see pp. 132, 911–12).

Basing their dialogue on each other's words, rather than humbly and prayerfully looking to God for insight (Job 42:9), the dialogue between Job and his false friends becomes more and more acrid, sarcastic, and damaging, breaking apart the community of friends. To sustain their argument the false friends concoct sins against Job. Eliphaz begins his first discourse by assuming Job is blameless: "Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" (4:6). But in his concluding discourse, he contradicts himself with trumped-up charges against Job: "Is it for your piety that he rebukes you

and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?” (22:4–5).

Zophar rightly acknowledges that God is inscrutable and unwittingly approaches the divine resolution: God has hidden wisdom to which mortals are not privy (Job 11:7–9). Eliphaz similarly rebukes Job for implying he was in on the divine council at the creation (15:7–8a). Mortals, he argues, must not presuppose that they can determine the divine intent in creation from their experience. Ironically, however, the two “friends” continue to interpret Job’s sufferings within their restricted frame of reference.

Job’s three friends presage Jesus’ three friends: “Jesus seeks some comfort at least in his three dearest friends, and they are asleep. He prays them to bear with him for a little, and leave him with entire indifference, have so little compassion that it could not prevent their sleeping even for a moment. And Jesus was left alone to the wrath of God” (Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.553).

2. With Regard to Job

For his part, Job’s raw honesty calls into question God’s goodness and justice and at the same time lays a firm foundation to lead him in a trajectory toward Christian theology. Job’s bitter experience at God’s hand forces him to bray like a starving donkey against God and his friends (Job 6:2–13). As we have seen in the case of Israel’s slavery in Egypt, to complain that human existence may be a harsh slavery (7:1–6) is better than confronting suffering with stoicism, which says, “Grin and bear it,” or with denial, which says, “All is well,” or with false optimism, which says, “I will be happy” (see pp. 358, 936, 943). Job experiences the full pain of his suffering because he is psychologically well and values honesty. Had Israel embraced their sufferings in Egypt with stoicism, denial, or false optimism they would still be there.

The friends’ accusations against Job are blatantly false. In fact, Job desires death so as not to deny God’s words (Job 6:8–10), but he will speak only honest words. In his honesty, which he assumes God values, he attests his faith that God is honest, whereas his “friends,” who speak lies to defend God’s goodness and justice, in fact break covenant with the God who loves truth. Spiritual friendship is based on honesty, not on faulty theological systems. In addition, by justifying themselves rather than loving Job, they prove themselves unworthy covenant partners: “Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty” (6:14 TNIV). Loyalty to a friend is equated with true piety.

Job does not question traditional monotheism: a belief in one God who is

omniscient, omnipotent, and sovereign. But he increasingly questions that God is good and righteous (Job 9:1–35). Without those attributes the otherwise sublime God becomes a monster. Instead of a God who is creative and ordering, he becomes a God who is destructive and baffling. From that perspective praise of God turns into accusations against him. At his spiritual nadir, Job brays that the Almighty despises the work of his hands and smiles on the wicked (10:3–7; cf. 40:8), and that in a trial the mortal has no chance to defend himself because the Prosecutor can and will outwit and overpower him for no reason (9:14–20). In truth, none observes a reliable moral order (9:21–24). These verses represent the lowest point of Job’s speeches. As Job sees it, his only means of escape from his raw ordeal is death. For him life has become absurd. God had skillfully fashioned him as a fine piece of pottery but now is smashing his creation on the ground (10:8–17). Without justice, God’s artistry is unintelligibly destructive, not creative.

Job’s faith vacillates; he teeters toward apathetic fatalism, blowing hot and cold, hoping and doubting. In [chapter 9](#) he doubted God would give him a hearing; in [chapter 13](#) he is convinced he will get a hearing and be vindicated. In 17:1 he is convinced only death awaits him, apparently never having been vindicated, but he is also convinced his counselors will not triumph (i.e., he will be vindicated).

Job sets his case before God, confident that God prizes truth (13:1–14:6). He finds freedom in becoming vulnerable to truth. The doubter has not broken off a covenant relationship with God. Indeed, he is confident that if he is truthful God will eventually vindicate him (13:13–19). Though God may slay Job for speaking in a way that exposes his divine wrath, Job will trust him (13:13–15). His willingness to be vulnerable proves his innocence (13:16–19). The covenant people cannot find justice in the present in terms of space (Job 23) and have no guarantee of justice in the future in terms of time (Job 24). Yet Job affirms his concern for justice and his hatred of wickedness.

Though Job waffles, one detects in him a trajectory toward the hope that he will be vindicated — that is, that God in the end will prove to be good and righteous. “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (i.e., to be vindicated, 13:15). Of course, without faith in God’s wisdom, sovereignty, and power, hope is a chimera. In fact, Job begins to reach out for the Christian hope for ultimate justice and renewal, without sin and death, in a future that outlasts clinical death:

☺☺☺☺“If only you would hide me in the
☺☺☺☺grave and conceal me till your anger has passed!
If only you would set me a time

☺☺☺☺and then remember me!
 If a man dies, will he live again?
 ☺☺☺☺All the days of my hard service
 ☺☺☺☺I will wait for my renewal to come.
 You will call and I will answer you;
 ☺☺☺☺you will long for the creature your hands have made.
 Surely then you will count my steps
 ☺☺☺☺but not keep track of my sin.
 My offenses will be sealed up in a bag;
 ☺☺☺☺you will cover over my sin.” (Job 14:13–17)

In keeping with Christian apocalypticism, Job divides existence into what has gone before as suffering and what will follow after as redemption. Gerald Janzen notes that the new hope for which Job hopes “is inaugurated in a fashion which may include individual resurrection.”¹¹ In Job’s imaginative apocalypticism, death is sleep (14:12); God’s anger against sin is for a limited time only (v. 13); and humankind can live in hope (v. 14). He will revive when he hears God’s voice calling to wake him up (v. 15).

Job cannot yet affirm this faith, but the desires of his heart point to a hope beyond death. Job 17:11b–12a—by changing the Masoretic accents and following normal Hebrew grammar—should be glossed, “The desires of my heart turn night into day” (TNIV). His faith peaks in his proclamation:

☺☺☺☺“1 know that my Redeemer lives,
 ☺☺☺☺and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
 And after my skin has been destroyed,
 ☺☺☺☺yet in my flesh 1 will see God;
 1 myself will see him
 ☺☺☺☺with my own eyes — I, and not another.
 ☺☺☺☺How my heart yearns within me!” (19:25–27)

After this confession Job does not doubt again. Job is “patient”/“persevering” (James 5:11 contra Job 21:4), not in serenity and in tranquility, but in the energy to persist in faith (see 21:16) in the midst of contrary experiences.¹² In other words, like Qoheleth, in spite of life’s absurdities, his faith wins out (see [chap. 35.11.B](#)).

Through his honesty and persevering faith, Job graduates summa cum laude, the valedictorian of his college peers (cf. Job 42:7).

IV. ELIHU'S SPEECHES (JOB 32–37)

Elihu represents the younger generation, who think they can correct the errors of their elders. In truth, he merely “remouths” what the elders said.

A. Text

On the basis of rhetoric criticism, David Diewart analyzes Elihu's speeches essentially as follows:¹³

1. Elihu's First Speech: A Defense of his Intrusion Job 32
 - A. Theoretical Justification: True Source of Wisdom 6–10
 - B. External Justification: Failure of Friends to Refute Job. Elihu will speak 11–16
 - C. Internal Justification: Pressure of Spirit within: Elihu speaks with integrity 17–22
11. Elihu's Second Speech: A Defense of Divine Goodness Job 33
 - A. Introduction 1–7
 1. Call to listen 1–3
 2. Divine Spirit 4
 - Call to speak 5–7
 - B. Citation of Job's Words 8–11
 - C. Elihu's Response: God Acts for Humankind 12–30
 1. An initial response 12
 2. First argument: divine warning → deliverance 13–18
 3. Second argument: divine chastening → deliverance 19–28
 - a. Divine chastening/human suffering 19–22
 - b. Heavenly mediator 23–25
 - c. Human prayer and confession 26–28
 4. Summary 29–30
 - D. Rhetorical Appeal to Listen 31–33
- III. Elihu's Third Speech: A Defense of Divine Justice Job 34
 - A. Introduction and Citation of Job's Words 2–6
 1. Call to wise to listen and discern 2–4

2. Citation of Job's words 5–6
- B. Elihu's Response: God Is Upright in Judgment 7–33
 1. Criticism of Job 7–9
 2. Defense of God: just and sovereign 10–15
 3. God is righteous and mighty in justice and beyond criticism even in silence 16–30
 4. Appeal to Job: to repent and choose 31–33
- C. Assessment of Job: He Speaks without Understanding 34–37
- IV. Elihu's Fourth Speech Job 35
 - A. Citation of Job's Words 2–3
 - B. Elihu's Response 4–14
 1. Introduction 4
 2. Job's behavior does not affect God 5–8
 3. Divine silence is warranted: oppression the absence of piety 12–14
 - C. Assessment of Job: He Speaks without Substance 15–16
- V. Elihu's Final Speech: Balance of Divine Justice and Power Job 36–37
 - A. Introduction 36:2–4
 - B. God's justice Brings life 36:5–21
 1. Scenario of righteous suffering: justice 5–15
 - a. God's justice and blessing 5–7
 - b. Divine message 8–10
 - c. Choices and their consequences 11–14
 2. Application to Job: repent 16–21
 - C. God's Great Power 36:22–37:13
 1. God works in the moral realm and in creation 36:22–25
 2. God's great power in the heavens: used in judgment 36:26–37:13
 3. Application to Job: call to silence 37:14–20
 - D. Conclusion 37:21–24
 1. Majesty of God 21–22

Divine might, justice, and transcendence 23–24

Diewart notes the following five rhetorical phases in Elihu's last four speeches ([chaps. 33–37](#)):¹⁴

	II	III	IV	V
Introduction	33:1–7	34:2–4	—	36:2–4
Citation	33:8–11	34:5–6	35:2–3	—
Response	33:12–30	34:7–30	35:4–13	36:5–15; 36:27–37:13
Application	33:31–33	34:31–33	35:14	36:16–21; 37:14–20
Assessment	—	34:34–37	35:15–16	37:21–24

Regarding “Introduction,” Elihu devotes his first speech exclusively to a personal defense of his intrusion into the debate. This introduction stands apart from the other four speeches, which deal with defending God in response to Job’s accusation. Three of the last four speeches also have their own introductions. In his second speech, addressing Job, Elihu insists on the integrity of his words as a reason to listen to him (33:2–3). In the next speech he addresses the wise — numbering himself among them — and becomes their spokesman. In the last speech (36:2–4) he introduces himself as presenting arguments in God’s favor, no longer pretending to be Job’s equal in an impartial debate.

As for the second pattern, “Citation,” the third and fourth speeches are unified: in the third one Job is cited for accusing God of giving him what he does not deserve (34:6) and in the fourth of not giving him what he does deserve (35:3). Elihu sets out to vindicate God on both counts: God punishes the wicked ([chap. 34](#)). Whether active or inactive, God is beyond condemnation and refuses to act for the innocent or oppressed ([chap. 35](#)).

In the third pattern, “Response,” the second and final speeches show unity. Both speeches pertain to warning. The former adds chastening (33:19–28), while in the latter ([chap. 37](#)), affliction and divine warning are interwoven, and this is intended to turn a person from a potentially destructive course of events. The former, however, stresses deliverance from imminent destruction; the latter focuses on the choices and their consequence. By heeding the warning, a person will experience restoration; by rejecting it, he will experience humiliation and death.

As for the fourth pattern, “Application,” the main thrust is to apply to Job implications drawn from preceding arguments. In the second speech Elihu aims to set Job straight, to teach him wisdom, hinting at their intellectual inequality. After a forceful argument defending God’s justice, Elihu calls upon Job to confess his sin and repent publicly. Probably Elihu has in mind Job’s sin in his verbal opposition to God. Failing to coax Job to repent, in Elihu’s final speech he tells Job to keep silence before God and not to argue with him. Thus Elihu first counsels Job to dialogue with man, then to pray to God, and to be silent before Elihu (36:2–4) and God (37:14–20).

B. Reflections

Elihu is an adjudicator, not a protagonist. He is the first of two who record

their impressions of what has been said in [chapters 3–31](#). Elihu represents the next generation of sages wrestling with the problem of theodicy. He too does so apart from God’s special revelation in chapters 38–41. In the end he gives the human estimate of Job’s friends and fails to advance the argument. Andersen says, “The last human word on the question, which is intentionally weak and turgid, in spite of its pretentious claims, contrasts with the final word from God, for which our author reserves his best talent.”¹⁵ Elihu claims to speak with “perfect knowledge” in 36:4, an expression he later uses to describe God’s understanding in 37:16. Norman C. Habel says that the language of Elihu “convicts him of being a bloated fool” (32:17–20).¹⁶ The Lord gives the divine appraisal and introduces an entirely new dimension toward the human understanding of “evil.”

V. *I AM*'S SPEECHES: JOB IN GRADUATE SCHOOL (38:1–42:6)

I AM's two addresses to Job put the question of theodicy in an entirely new light. God's governance, it is argued, includes chaos (i.e., evil: energy to inflict damage), but that chaos is always bounded by God's goodness. God has no obligation to explain this chaotic energy to mere mortals. Indeed, mortals can rule best when they acknowledge this reality.

The first discourse points to obvious, but ignored, paradoxes within creation. These paradoxes show that evil is part of God's "order" (i.e., they play a role within the scheme of things) and God's governance of the whole. The second discourse torques this reality by pointing to mythological creatures, quintessential representatives of evil's power, to show that humanity cannot subdue evil. Rather, they prevail by a chastened humility before the Creator and a chastened confession of faith that he alone is God and competent to rule the whole.

A. *I AM*'s First Discourse and Job Humbled (38:1–40:5)

1. The Text

The author now speaks of "I AM," God's covenant name, as *I AM* restores Job in their covenant relationship. God ignores Job's sufferings and gives no explanation for them. Rather, he asks Job existential questions to give the proud mortal an insight into the Creator's moral government of his creation and into Job's place as a mere creature bearing his image in that government. In this way *I AM* denies Job's allegations that his purposes in the creation are dark and evil and that he is indifferent to justice. Human beings are treated not as part of the creation but addressed as those involved in its government.

In a significant scenic depiction *I AM* speaks from the whirlwind (Job 38:1)—that is, God is present in the surd chaos that troubles Job. By choosing that

setting for his speech, *I AM* prepares and reinforces the new insight into the dimensions of God's created order, an order that does not fit neatly into humanity's understanding of "good" (i.e., energy beneficial to life).

The issue that *I AM* addresses is Job's accusation against God of dark designs (Job 38:2; 12:13, 22). He answers by challenging Job with "existential questions" about the Creator, about God's moral government of the creation, and about humankind, the mortal creature. The Creator has no need to explain to his creature the existence of chaotic energy within boundaries. If he had such an obligation, he would crown the finite mortal's reason as ultimate authority. His existential questions, which point only to the reality of the creation, make no attempt to justify the reality because the Creator, not the mortal creature, is God.

God begins with questions regarding the complex universe (Job 38:4–38). His first question exposes that he bypassed counsel from mortals in the founding of the earth, the *topos* of life (38:4–7). Job claims to be privy to the divine purposes (10:13–17), yet he played no role in the creation and so is without understanding (38:3) or knowing (38:4). How can a person apply his heart to what he has not seen?

I AM then asks questions about his hedging in of the sea (Job 38:8–11). "The Sea" (*yām*) symbolizes chaotic energy and human pride: "here is where your proud waves halt" (v. 11). The sea is associated with the equally symbolic thick darkness. Yet God used clouds to "clothe" the "sea" and "thick darkness" as his "swaddling bands." God protects the sea, though the primordial abyss stands apart from his creation of the land that produces and sustains life (see pp. 180–82). In other words, God paradoxically both restrains and protects that which is hostile to human existence. The chaotic energy of the sea operates within strict limits. Nevertheless, it retains an element of freedom within divine restraint and in that sense retains meaning in the cosmos, in the scheme of things, in the created order.

The same point is made with regard to light in the sky, which exposes the wicked on earth (Job 38:12–15). The image of the primal lawless sea is now matched by lawless humanity. Whereas the sea was contained, the wicked are exposed. In this case light finally conquers the primordial darkness. God does not smile on the wicked with approval (contra 10:3). Nevertheless, darkness hiding the wicked has a place within God's moral government. Also, no mortal has seen the netherworld and thus lacks basic knowledge to empower him to replace God. God, however, knows the beginning and end of all things and thus is alone worthy to govern the world (38:16–18). God's questions regarding the sources of light and darkness (38:19–21) make the same point. Both light and darkness have their place in God's government, beyond humankind's

manipulation. God gave each its place (Gen. 1:3). Light “bounds” darkness and keeps it in its place.

I AM now takes up the matter of the “troublesome” weather (Job 38:22–30). Job had accused *I AM* of arbitrary use of weather (12:15). But the weather is “freakish” only from the human perspective, not from the divine. Mortals cannot know its ultimate origins or its use; they can only observe the reality. If one works within the conventional categories of desert and cultivable land, God’s control and distribution of water make no sense. Similarly, mortals have no dominion over the heavens with their constellations (38:31–33), yet they observe a pattern: each constellation knows its place. In the case of flood and drought, mortals are ignorant and powerless.

The same is true of “wild” animal life (Job 38:39–39:30). All the animals mentioned here — the wild and the strange — do not fit into the pattern of what human beings call “good.” They are not domesticated and do not fit people’s preunderstanding that all creation should obviously serve their prurient interests. From humankind’s perspective they all are mysterious: the “predator” lion that hunts its prey and the young ravens that call out to God for food (38:39–41); the “unseen” mountain goats that give birth, watch their young grow up, leave, and never return (39:1–4); and the “unrestrained” wild donkey (39:5–8). The wild donkey is unrestrained by humankind’s ropes and commands to serve its interests and the wild ox is unrestrained by humankind’s harness to work their fields (39:9–12). As for the “stupid” ostrich (39:13–18), whose eye is bigger than the brain, God endows her with none of humankind’s conventional wisdom to serve herself. Job had complained of paradoxes in his life. Here he becomes aware of natural paradoxes that are resolved only in God: the “ferocious” warhorse at home in battle (39:19–25) and the high-flying hawk and eagle that hunt their prey (39:26–30). God gives them wisdom and phenomenal eyesight to hunt for their food.

In conclusion (40:1–3), a mortal cannot instruct God and ought not to seek an arbitrator to whom God must answer. Humanity cannot restrict God to its limited and self-serving understanding of government and justice. The heavenly government of the creation transcends the earthly government of human justice.

Job responds in humbled silence (40:4–5). His confession that he is unworthy even to attempt to give answers shows that he accepts a new understanding of the Creator and his moral government of the creation, and of his own place in it.

2. Reflections

Humankind's self-serving judgment of what is good is an inadequate basis for judging the divine morality (Job 38:1–6). Creation itself clearly teaches that from the human perspective the created order includes the rational and the irrational, the meaningful and the nonsensical, the teleological and the surd. Satan used the “irrational” elements lightning and storm to destroy Job. Herein one sees the connection between the nonsensical and evil so far as human beings are concerned.

Moreover, the threatening “sea,” the netherworld, the troublesome weather, all of which cause humanity anxiety, are under God's government. The irrational, “evil,” is given a place and has a measure of freedom in God's moral government, and as a result human suffering has an ambivalent place within it. Humankind must come to terms with this reality and not interpret it as God's disinterest in law.

In truth, energetic chaos is a kingdom within God's dominion. Those aspects of creation that do not fit conventional wisdom — that is, that all must be comprehensible to humankind and serve its purpose — nevertheless constitute a kingdom that is governed by God. These “free” animals appeal to God, not humankind (Job 38:41), execute his commands, not humankind's (39:27), and exemplify divine wisdom (39:26) or the lack of it from the human perspective (39:17).

In other words, God presents a new perspective on his ordered universe. Job's friends pointed to the creation to illustrate conventional wisdom that everything in creation is “obviously good” in that it establishes retributive justice. Job pointed to the creation to deconstruct the conventional wisdom and set up the rival “wisdom” that the omnipotent God smiles on evil and chaos. *I AM* points to the creation to deconstruct both antitheses and to establish in their stead the “truth” that he orders within his government those aspects of creation that favor human beings and those that do not favor them. He transcends both; the unrestricted God, not restricted humankind, rules over both, what people call good and bad. Within his government both have a place, all is good in that they serve his “plan,” though the human creature cannot know it or understand it. This may be the “good” of Genesis 1.

According to this new perspective, God is freely creative and redemptive, beyond human understanding. His government transcends a simple calculus that rewards good and punishes evil. If God's actions do not conform to earthlings' understandings, that does not mean that he is dark and/or disinterested. He rules by containing darkness and wildness within a government that transcends human “wisdom,” not by eliminating it.

Seen from this perspective, both the wild animals and the domesticated

animals praise God. The unrestrained animals celebrate their freedom from the human yoke. All sing his praise and celebrate that it is meaningful and worthwhile, in spite of the restrictions of human wisdom. In the eschaton human beings will no longer drive animals; instead a child shall lead them. Domesticated animals will serve human interests without the human yoke. Humankind now exercises dominion by allowing wild animals to be free in their place, not by anxiously destroying them or confining them to fit their prurient interests.

B.I AM's Second Discourse and Job's Confession (40:6–42:6)

1. Text

God's rule over the complex created order is tuned to a higher key. The irrational within creation is now replaced by the "proud," the wicked who threaten creation. In accusing God of taking away justice from him, Job had taken away God's right to do justice his own way. He tried to lock God into his restricted calculus of virtue and evil.

I AM now questions Job regarding humanity's power to restrain wickedness and so save itself (Job 40:9–14): "Look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him" (vv. 11–12). Human beings cannot impose through irresistible power from the top on down perfect justice. God did not endow them with the power to impose a utopian state here and now (v. 14).

The truth is established by humankind's impotence to restrain the behemoth, the land monster (Job 40:15–24) and symbol of power in the wasteland,¹⁷ and Leviathan, the sea monster (41:33). Humankind cannot restrain them to serve its purpose. Yet God rules them and everything under heaven (41:1–11). They are more powerful than anything else under heaven, including human beings, and command admiration in their own right (41:12–33). These antichaos monsters represent the proud wicked: "He is king over all that are proud" (41:34).

2. Reflections

Mortals can be innocent and suffer without denying God's justice. Divine justice does not work itself out through a rigorous stamping out of all injustice.

God rules over all, including the untamable and arrogant behemoth and leviathan. He made them and the lamb; he owns each one and protects each one. God's kingdom has both a determinate and indeterminate aspect.

Moreover, God does not give mortals irresistible power to bring about a utopian state, free of injustice. Human royalty consists not in absolute control over the proud and wicked by brute force but by acting in humility, in a chastened awareness of its own limitations and dependence on the God who allows wickedness. Humanity must accept its finitude and redefine what it means to rule with God.

In sum, God does not solve the problem of theodicy. Rather, his creation shows evil, and its consequent sufferings have a restricted place within the creation beyond humanity's understanding and control. The inscrutability of suffering is itself part of the answer. Humankind, restricted both in knowledge and power, needs to come to grips with the partly determinate, partly indeterminate character of the world without denying God's goodness and justice.

3. Job's Confession (42:1–6)

Job's confession falls into two parts, in both of which he quotes segments from *I AM*'s first address (Job 42:3–4). He takes the very words of God upon his lips and agrees with them. This is confession. First, he confesses his ignorance about God's plan (42:1–3) and confesses that God sovereignly implements his plan. Heretofore, Job knew of God's omniscience and omnipotence but failed to realize that "evil" was part of that plan. Both Job and his friends had hit upon truth, but they brushed it off by thinking of its role as merely "inscrutable." Now God enables them to put their limited perspectives in a new whole: mortals, who are restricted in their knowledge, serve God through suffering in mystery, confident that it is part of God's plan in which he retains control over evil.

Second, Job changes his mind about himself in light of God's greatness (Job 42:4–6). He now graduates *summa cum laude* from graduate school. Confronted with the reality that the divine government transcends the prurient interests of human beings and their finite understanding, he repents before the Sovereign and confesses his faith in God's justice to restrain the evil while also allowing it a measure of freedom. He now becomes the "Servant of *I AM*." As such he is ready to become a leader over the covenant community (see 42:7–10). He has become wise — that is to say meek, the sort of person who establishes God's rule in the world by a chastened humility about human weakness and an

informed confidence in the Sovereign's goodness and justice. Armed with these virtues, the saint perseveres undaunted by setbacks.

VI. EPILOGUE: JOB IN THE END OF HISTORY

Without the epilogue the book of Job would be a tragedy, for it would leave light and darkness, good and evil, humility and pride in an eternal struggle within God's design. Belief in the goodness of creation, the justice of God, and the ever-available possibility of redemption, however, make tragedy impossible within the biblical worldview. The epilogue is necessary for the vindication of Job in history, not apart from it. His final end points to the end of all history in which virtue and its rewards, not vice and its retribution, triumph. He dies at 140, twice the perfect number of seven times ten, the numbers signifying divine perfection and fullness respectively, and he sees his offspring to four generations, the full number of generations one can expect to see within a lifetime (42:16–17). Having demonstrated in the dialogues and in the *I AM* speeches that suffering may come upon saints without any discernible relation to their piety, since they live within a divinely designed universe incorporating order and freedom, the epilogue assures us that this ambivalence is not eternal and that the freedom of evil is bounded by the ultimate triumph of good (cf. Rev. 21–22).

A. The Spiritual Restoration of Job's "Friends" (42:7–9)

Both the honest and the less than truthful covenant partners receive a word from God. The basic conflict between Job and his friends pertained to Job's moral nature. To explain Job's sufferings they first inferred his sinfulness and then finally explicitly accused him. He refused to accede to these accusations that provided glib answers to the hard questions of life's misfortunes. They too must undergo a change of mind for the restoration of the covenant community.

Job mediates for his abusive friends and restores the relationship through serving as their priest. He offers up the atoning sacrifice that they bring him, and he prays that they be saved from the wrath they deserve (Job 42:8). They humble themselves by acknowledging as their priest the one they wronged. The restoration of the community demands public confession of the public wrong

done to one of its members. God does not coerce this repentance and confession. All the participants act within a counsel that is both free and restrained. Should any of the covenant partners refuse this free grace, they will miss out on the potential for God's riches and interpersonal restoration. The covenant community, like God, operates within a logic of grace, not of necessity. Ironically, Job fulfills Eliphaz's promise that were Job to reconcile himself to God, he would become an intercessor who could deliver the noninnocent from divine wrath (22:26–30). *I AM* accepts Job's prayer (42:9).

B. Material Restoration of Job (42:10–17)

Job's restoration to his former prosperity is conditioned upon his free acceptance of God's appointment to intercede for his friends (Job 42:10). Having done so, God acts justly, restoring to Job twice what Satan had taken (see p. 430). In addition, Job is socially restored within his community. When a member of the covenant community is in trouble, his family gives him "practical gifts" to help rebuild him, not head-shaking advice. In this way too they restrain evil, including eliminating the evil of words harshly spoken to one another.

Within the covenant community all must be given freely, not of legal necessity. *I AM* also acts in free grace, giving the daughters an inheritance (contrary to the Law [Num. 27:8]), and giving them names, contrary to custom.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How does Job teach us God's way of making wise and godly leaders? Did God make Moses, David, and our Lord into wise and godly leaders in a way that is similar to Job's experience? In what ways is God preparing you for leadership?

1. Job lives to be 140 (240 in LXX) (42:16); the unit of value is the ancient *qēṣītā* (42:11; cf. 33:19; Josh. 24:32); wealth is measured in terms of cattle, slaves, precious metals (Job 1:3; 42:11, 12; cf. Gen. 12:16; 13:2–6; 24:3, 5; 26:12–14; 30:43), not coins; religious practices are simple (i.e., no cult; Job 1:5); Job's name is as legendary as Noah's (Ezek. 14:14, 20; 28:3); he uses the archaic divine name (*Shadday*). The references to “iron” may be an anachronism — smelting of iron was not known until about 1200 BC (cf. Job 19:24; 20:24; 28:2; 40:18; 41:27).

2. See Nahum H. Sarna, “Epic Substratum in the Prose of Job,” *JBL* 76 (1967): 13–25.

3. *Orthography* refers to the way words are spelled.

4. J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 15–16.

5. F. I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 15.

6. *Ibid.*, 19, 20, 22.

7. Michael Cheney, *Dust, Wind, and Agony: Character Speech and Genre in Job*, ConBOT 36 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994).

8. J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 2.

9. T. F. Dailey, “Job as an Icon for Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23/3 (Fall 1996), 247–54.

10. David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, WBC 17 (Waco: Word, 1989), 17.

11. Janzen, *Job*, 111.

12. Clines, *Job 1–20*, 17.

13. David Allen Diewert, “The Composition of the Elihu Speeches: A Poetic and Structural Analysis” (Doctoral dissertation, McGill University, 1991), 576–79.

[14.](#) Adapted from *ibid.*, 583.

[15.](#) Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*.

[16.](#) Norman C. Habel, "Wisdom in the Book of Job," in *Sitting with Job*, ed. R. B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 311.

[17.](#) Behemoth. "Although the Hebrew root is used of bovine creatures (e.g., bulls), the Hebrew form (a plural) implies an intensive sense, the best beyond comparison. The allusion is probably literary or broken mythology, ... 'myth-consciously used- as-symbol.' First, no animal in the natural world of historical times matches this animal. If this is only a hippopotamus or the like, the language is hyperbole. Second, the Egyptians killed and captured both the hippopotamus and the crocodile. Third, the parallel Leviathan, is now well known in Ugaritic mythology, suggesting the mythological nature of behemoth. Fourth, in Enoch (40:7–9), which 'contains a number of other mythological allusions which preserve echoes of ancient pagan mythology' [Marvin H. Pope, AB, s.v. "Job," 75], Behemoth and Leviathan were separated, the one to dwell in the wilderness, the other in the sea. Behemoth and Leviathan are 'the traditional twin chaos monsters representing the dry wasteland and the unformed ocean.' Fifth, earlier in the book of Job the sages appealed to the literary, mythological figures of 'sea,' 'Rahab,' and 'Leviathan.' Why not here? Sixth, if Orion is literary, so may be these creatures. Seventh, 'to suggest that Job can only leave in God's hands the threat of the untamable chaos-monster, the Kraken, the primeval force that threatens to dissolve the order of the cosmos into confusion and meaninglessness, is to say more than that Job cannot create [*sic!* control] a hippopotamus' " (Anthony C. Thistleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

Chapter 35

THE GIFT OF WISDOM, PART 3: ECCLESIASTES

*Nihil admirari prope res una quae posit facere et servare beatum.*¹

Horace, cited by Pascal, *Pensées*, 2.73

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Ecclesiastes² is the black sheep of the canon of biblical books. It is the delight of skeptics and the despair of saints. Kaiser Wilhelm 11 — not known for his piety — named it as the best book in the Bible, and literature courses in secular universities commonly select it as a must-read book of the Bible because it represents the triumph of the human spirit over harsh reality through unflinching honesty. By contrast, the founders of rabbinic Judaism, Hillel and Shammai, questioned its right to be numbered among the canonical books because of its contradictions (cf. Eccl. 5:19–20 and 11:8), skepticism (cf. 4:2), and agnosticism (3:21).³ The church ignores it, and some evangelicals deny that the “preacher/teacher” (Qoheleth, see n. 2) reveals infallible truth. These scholars ask, “Who would teach their children: ‘Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?’” (Eccl. 7:16–17).⁴ The majority of conservative theologians, however, agree that the sayings of Qoheleth are “upright and true,” as the narrator claims (12:10). In this chapter, after introducing the book’s authors and establishing its unity and overall structure, I argue Derek Kidner’s thesis:

As a real citizen of this tantalizing world, [Qoheleth] feels acutely the futility that he describes. He burns at the injustices and disappointment of life, and mourns the passing of youth and the universality of death—even while he bids us set our hearts not on earthly vanities themselves but on the Creator, from whom we can gladly, responsibly, accept the good of life with all its enjoyment for what it is, but in whom alone is the “eternity,” the “for ever” (3:11, 14) of which he has made us conscious.⁵

A. Author and Date

Scholars commonly argue that the superscription, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem,” claims that the author of the book is the

legendary wise king Solomon — “a figurehead to which the ascription of wisdom could be attached”⁶ — and that the internal evidence falsifies that claim. For example, the book’s language points to a much later date of composition than the time of Solomon. If they are right, the book is a pseudepigraphon, one of the falsely inscribed Jewish religious writings of the period 200 BC to AD 200, such as the Psalms of Solomon. The motivation behind pseudepigraphal compositions was to associate the work with a famous person and with the past to invest it with authority. Robert Cordis argues that the rabbis accepted the book into the canon by believing this false claim. The issue is important for biblical theology because it bears on the nature of the Scripture’s inspiration and/or on the boundaries of the canon. If Ecclesiastes is a pseudepigraphon, either the book and the canon are morally tarnished by a lie or the Jewish community and Jesus Christ and the church accepted a fraudulent book as authoritative for its faith and practice (see [chap. 1](#)).

Although many allege that The Sayings of Qoheleth claims Solomonic authorship, the narrator who edited the sayings only credits Qoheleth’s words to a son of David. It seems more convincing that Qoheleth, portrayed as a Solomon-like figure of wisdom, is a fictitious representation of the anonymous narrator himself. The relationship between the narrator and Qoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes, I am arguing, is like that between Solomon and Woman Wisdom in the book of Proverbs (see [chap. 31.I.A](#)). The author makes a studied attempt not to attribute his sayings to Solomon probably in order to avoid the morally questionable practice of pseudonymity. The argument that the narrator credits the work to Solomon to give his book canonical authority fails not only because the narrator does not identify Qoheleth as Solomon but also because other pseudepigrapha attributed to Solomon were not accepted into canon. James L. Crenshaw rightly notes: “The usual answer, that the attribution to Solomon paved the way for the book’s approval as scripture, overlooks the fact that a similar device failed to gain acceptance into the canon for Wisdom of Solomon and for the Odes of Solomon.”⁷

The book points to an anonymous narrator who collected and arranged the sayings of Qoheleth (see Eccl. 12:9–14). In other words, the book presents two speakers: the implied author/narrator and his fictitious Qoheleth.

B. The Implied Narrator

The narrator provides the book’s frame to the sayings of Qoheleth (Eccl. 1:1–

2; 7:27; 12:9–12).⁸ The real identity of the narrator is unknown (see [chap. 4](#) above), but his epilogue (12:9–14) implies he is an inspired sage. As in other wisdom literature, the narrator addresses his book to his “son” and describes Qoheleth, who allegedly authors all the sayings in this book, as wise and as a coiner and/or collector of proverbs (12:9). He evaluates the sayings of Qoheleth as upright and true and warns the son not to add to them, a claim to canonical authority (e.g., Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18–19).

C. Identification of Qoheleth

Many overlook the distinction between the narrator and Qoheleth and mistakenly identify Qoheleth as the real author. Tradition and some conservative scholars regard the name or epithet as a nom de plume for Solomon because Qoheleth identifies himself as “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1), “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12); and he says of himself that he has “grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me” (1:16) and “I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me” (2:9). However, this theory faces serious objections.⁹

First, Qoheleth’s language and style are probably postexilic Hebrew, between classical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew.¹⁰ As a riposte, however, one could argue that the epilogist later modernized Solomon’s original work. Second, as for “anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me” (Eccl. 1:16) — who beside David ruled as king over Jerusalem before Solomon? It is unlikely that he would compare himself to Jebusite rulers. Third, he speaks of himself as a king in past time, not present tense: “I ... was king” (1:12). If Qoheleth was Solomon, was he no longer king when he wrote this book? Was there ever a time after his coronation when Solomon was not king? Fourth, why would the epilogist use a nom de plume when the name “Solomon” would have put his work beyond cavil regarding its authority? Fifth, apart from [chapters 1–2](#), Qoheleth seems to write from a perspective of a subject, not of a ruler.¹¹

More probably Qoheleth is the narrator’s fictitious literary creation of himself. This may explain why many scholars have overlooked the distinction between the narrator and Qoheleth. According to Tremper Longman III, in the ancient Near East fictional royal autobiography was a recognized genre, which readers would not attribute to their ostensive authors.¹² In other words, the narrator creates a figure like “Uncle Remus” to represent himself as the ideal embodiment of wisdom. None would accuse the author of Uncle Remus of

deceiving his audience had he projected Uncle Remus as the fabulously wise “son of David, king in Jerusalem.” In short, in teaching his son his inspired wisdom, the narrator represents himself as an equal to Solomon without claiming to be Solomon.

D. Unity of the Book

Whether the book is a unity bears upon the theologian’s critical thinking about the book’s teaching. In 1985 Derek Kidner reviewed the scholars who deny the book’s integrity,¹³ and in 1999 I surveyed the known literature on Ecclesiastes since 1970.¹⁴ In that extensive literature, one finds a tremendous range of views about the unity of the book. For example, T. Anthony Perry contends that the book of Ecclesiastes is structured as a transcript of a debate (such as the one reported to have occurred between the houses of Hillel and Shammai). Perry suggests that the Hebrew term *qōhelet* may mean “collector” — that is, he collects views and opinions that dissent from his own and brings them into contact with one another. In his view there are two voices: P[resenter] and K[oheleth]. The two conduct a sharp debate from start to finish, emerging as fully fleshed out characters: K, as the man of experience, and P as the man of faith.¹⁵ But his assignment of speakers is arbitrary and not indicated in the text.

Michael Fox¹⁶ argues an epilogist distances himself from affirming the truth of Qoheleth and that the final author allows the reader to choose between Qoheleth and the narrator/epilogist. In 1994 his view was modified by Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III, who saw only two voices/authors. In their view the narrator distances himself from Qoheleth, allowing the reader to decide what is true in the light of the whole canon. They say,

Two voices may be heard within the book of Ecclesiastes: *Qohelet*’s and the unnamed wisdom teacher who introduces the book in the prologue and evaluates *Qohelet* sayings in the epilogue. *Qohelet* is a doubter and skeptic; the unnamed speaker in the frame is orthodox and the source of the positive teaching of the book. The book of Ecclesiastes, therefore, is similar in structure to the book of Job. It also evokes a similar reading strategy. The bodies of both books contain dubious teaching when judged in the light of the rest of the canon (the speeches of the three friends, Elihu, and Job). Not that everything said is wrong, but nearly so.¹⁷

Dillard and Longman's interpretation, which pits the narrator's evaluative point of view against Qoheleth's, fails both exegetically and logically. The analogy with Job breaks down on two counts: (1) Job clearly distinguishes the speakers; Ecclesiastes does not, and this lack would confound the book. (2) The epilogue says, according to their preferred translation: "Qoheleth sought to find fine words and most honest words of truth (Heb. *kātûb yōšer dibrê 'emet*). The words of the wise are like goads, and the (word of) masters of collection are like implanted nails that are given by a shepherd" (Eccl. 12:11). Dillard and Longman curiously think "fine words ... most honest words of truth" is "faint praise." However, the "praise" is strikingly different from *I AM*'s evaluation of the words of Job's friends: "You have not spoken of me what is right." Does one employ even faint praise for false statements? They also think that "goads and nails" are negative assessments because they connote pain, though they admit these figures are normally positive. However, truthful words are painful, but necessary, to spur one on to live wisely. Moreover, "nails" connotes something you can count on. They neither identify the S/shepherd nor evaluate this positive image. In short, the epilogist, if he be regarded as adjudicator, awards Qoheleth the palm for speaking what is right.

With regard to the logical fallacy of Dillard and Longman's positions, is it plausible that the narrator created a fictitious figure to mouth sayings with which he disagrees? Michael A. Eaton argues that it is absurd to think that an editor would issue a book that he fundamentally disagrees with. He observes, "No wisdom document exists in two recensions with opposite theologies."¹⁸ Iain Provan agrees:

I cannot see myself that 12:8–12 offers an evaluation of *Qohelet*'s teaching "which begins with praise and then moves to doubt and finally to criticism" (so T. Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 38), nor do I find it generally plausible that *Qohelet*'s voluminous words which would be cited in full just so that the author of 12:8–12 could append a few comments allegedly doubting and criticizing them (and even then not managing to do so clearly). The wisdom of a wise man who thus so spectacularly shot himself in the foot would surely be in doubt.¹⁹

More plausibly, the narrator modestly claims his sayings are upright, true, and reliable by making that claim for Qoheleth's sayings. In addition there is strong evidence for the book's unity. As will be seen below, it has a unified structure. Graham Ogden says,

It would be correct to say that most modern scholars now [1987] accept that *Qoheleth* (1:2–12:8) is the work of one sage. Evidence for this position resides in the peculiar literary style, the constant return to a chosen theme, the repetitions, phrases, and concepts which bind the work together [cf. the *inclusio* in 1:2 and 12:8]. A strong advocate of the unity of the book is Loader (1979). He concludes, on the basis of his literary investigations, that there is not one contradiction in the original book (1:2–12:8); rather we have a masterly-arranged series of “polar structure.”²⁰

George A. Wright argues inferentially for its unity by noting that there are 111 verses in the first half of the book, three times the numerical value of *hebel*: meaning “vapor,” which is 37 (see above), and 222 verses in the entire book, or six times its numerical value.²¹ He had earlier divided the book into halves on the basis of conceptual differences regarding the significance of *hebel*: in the first half a chasing after wind, and in the second, questions or denials of humanity’s ability to find anything certain “under the sun.”²² Kathleen Farmer essentially agrees with his conceptual division: “[Chapters 1–6](#) concentrate on the question of ‘what is good’ and chs. 7–12 explore the question of human knowing.”²³

E. Structure of the Book

Choon-Leong Seow insightfully analyzes the book’s symmetrical structure as follows:²⁴

1:1 Superscription

Part I

IA. Reflection: Everything Is Ephemeral and Unreliable

1.1:2–11 Preface

2. 1:12–2:26 Nothing Is Ultimately Reliable

3. 3:1–22 Everything Is in the Hand of God

4. 4:1–16 Relative Good Is Not Good Enough

IB. Ethics: Coping with Uncertainty

1. 5:1–7 (Heb. 4:17–5:6) Attitude before God

5:8–6:9(5:7–6:9) Enjoyment Not Greed

Part II

IIA. Reflection: Everything Is Elusive

1. 6:10–7:14 No One Knows What Is Good

2. 7:15–29 Righteousness and Wisdom Are Elusive
3. 8:1–17 It's an Arbitrary World
- IIB. Ethics: Coping with Risks and Death
 1. 9:1–10 Carpe Diem
 2. 9:11–10:15 The World Is Full of Risks
 3. 10:16–11:6 Living with Risks
 4. 11:7–12:8 Conclusion
- 12:9–14 Epilogue
 1. 12:9–12 Qoheleth and the Wise
 2. 12:13–14 Summary

The first verse of the book contains its title and the title of the author of the sayings contained in the book: “*Qōhelet* son of David.” *Qōheleth* (from the root *qāhal*) refers to one who assembles people, presumably to teach them, and/or who collects sayings for the same reason. The patronymic helps to cast him into a Solomon-like figure (see above).

The inclusio around Qoheleth's sayings: “Everything is utterly a vapor” (TNIV: “Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Everything is meaningless”) sounds the book's theme and tone (Eccl. 1:2; 12:8). Within that frame a poetic inclusio reinforces the theme: there is no just compensation from wearisome labor (1:3–11), and a person's life ends in a worn-out body (12:1–8). The book is structured into halves, as noted in Seow's outline and in George Wright's statistics, with 111 verses in each half of the book — 6:10 is the book's midpoint according to the Masorah—and there are 1,491 words in 1:1–6:9a and in 6:10–12:14, apart from the pivot: “This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

II. THEOLOGY

A. Views

Scholars have puzzled over the meaning of Ecclesiastes and created endless books, trudging through every wearying theory. Their efforts attest that there is something uncomfortable and challenging about the book, that the author calls upon his son to be a realist, facing reality for what it is: vaporous, despairing, meaningless, and absurd. But that is not the end of his conversation: he confronts despair with hope and absurdity with unexpected meaning.

There are substantive arguments to be raised against scholars' theories that present Qoheleth as in conflict with faith. Gordis, Crenshaw, and R. B. Y. Scott argue that Qoheleth is a skeptic and pessimist who has lost faith that God is just and/or that life is either good or has any meaning. Gordis says,

Personal experience or reflection, most probably both, had robbed him [Qoheleth] of the traditional Jewish faith in the triumph of justice in this world, preached by the Prophets, or in the redress of the balance in the hereafter, as affirmed by the forerunners of Pharisaic Judaism, who were his contemporaries. Moreover—and this was a deprivation he felt even more keenly—he had lost assurance that man could fathom the meaning of life.²⁵

According to Crenshaw, Qoheleth's worldview is that "life is profitless; totally absurd. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death."²⁶ Scott similarly characterizes Qoheleth and his teaching: "Agnostic and pessimistic philosophy. In place of a religion of faith and hope and obedience, [he] proffers a philosophy of resignation."²⁷ According to Gordis, the book was accepted into the canon on a mistaken assessment of the value and message of the book as a result of the epilogist's deception to make Qoheleth appear more orthodox to the covenant community. In his view the second epilogue (12:12–13) falsely removes the

sting from Qoheleth's skepticism.²⁸ However, as we shall see, the view that Qoheleth lost faith in God's justice and goodness depends on proof texting and not on interpreting the book holistically. When read holistically, the narrator's positive assessment of Qoheleth's teachings is fair and accurate.

According to Frank Zimmerman, Qoheleth is neurotic; the book is revelatory of a neurotic complex.²⁹

He [Qoheleth] is a pathological doubter of everything stemming from a drastic emotional experience, a psychic disturbance. He is doubtful about himself as a person of worth and character. He has no self-esteem or value of himself. His doubt has destroyed all values. [He regards himself as] inferior, of no account, and he demeans himself constantly. His doubt comes from a parathy, a disease of the mind which he shares with many neurotics.³⁰

"A time for killing" means Qoheleth has "hostile, aggressive, criminal impulses in his makeup that would drive him to murder."³¹ Strikingly, Zimmerman's assessment blatantly contradicts the epilogist's assessment and sound theology. Brevard Childs says of this view, "This assumption often results in an approach which fails to deal seriously with the canonical role of the book as sacred scripture of a continuing community of faith."³²

The *New Scofield Reference Bible* (1967) fosters the view that Qoheleth presents a philosophy of rationalism. Its introduction to the book reads: "Ecclesiastes is the book of man 'under the sun' reasoning about life. The philosophy it sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the worldview of one of the wisest of men, who knew that there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment." Scofield's note on "all share a common destiny" (9:2) reads: "This statement is no more a divine revelation concerning the state of the dead than any other conclusion of 'the Preacher' (1:1). No one would quote 9:2 as divine revelation. These reasonings of man apart from divine revelation are set down by inspiration just as the words of Satan (Gen. 3:4; Job 2:4-5; etc.) are so recorded." However, this position is similar to that of Fox and Dillard/Longman and so susceptible to the same critical appraisals of their views (see above).

According to J. A. Loader, the book presents polar tensions to establish the thesis that all is a vapor *hebel*. He writes, "This study is devoted to the phenomenon of polarization in the book of Qoheleth. Polar structures occur in

almost every literary unit of the book. By polar structures I mean patterns of tension created by the counter position of two elements to one another. This tendency is so prominent throughout the book that it may be called its outstanding characteristic.”³³ The pericope 3:1–9 with its multiple polarizations (killing and healing, weeping and laughter, etc.) is an obvious place for Loader to begin. On one pole is the conservation of life, and on the other pole is abandonment in death. Helpless humanity must surrender to the eventualities of life.

Another pole pertains to the worthlessness of wisdom (cf. Eccl. 1:12–2:26):

I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ just as light is better than darkness.
The wise man has eyes in his head,
⊃⊃⊃⊃ while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize
⊃⊃⊃⊃ that the same fate overtakes them both. (2:13–14)

Yet another pole, in Loader’s view, is general wisdom and Qoheleth’s wisdom. “While the latter has preference over the former, both ‘wisdoms’ are worthless.” Loader is helpful, but the polar tensions in the book can be resolved without *hebel* being the last word of the book (see 12:12–13).

Kidner offers two views. His second choice (1985), which I prefer, is to regard the book as an agonizing debate by Qoheleth between skepticism and faith with the latter winning out. His first choice (1976) is to regard the book as a polemic against secularism and a positive assessment of faith. This is also the view of J. Stafford Wright (1947), R. K. Harrison (1969), G. S. Hendry (1970), Roland E. Murphy (1981), Roger N. Whybray (1982), M. A. Eaton (1983), Robert S. Ricker (1983, 1985), Graham Ogden (1987), Kathleen Farmer (1991), and Duane Garrett (1993). Agreeing with Eaton, Kidner says the book affirms “faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.”³⁴

The difference, however, between these two interpretations is slight. According to both interpretations, orthodox statements are the key to the book. I read the book, however, not as a tour de force to drive the son to faith, but as an agonizing struggle of an honest man wrestling with his absurd existence and out of that struggle exhorting his son to fear God. To be sure, Ecclesiastes is in fact a critique of secularism and of secularized religion,³⁵ but is his work intended to be an apology for the faith? There is much to commend the apologetic interpretation, but it obfuscates the obvious theme: “All is *hebel*.” Qoheleth is not presenting a debate between two viewpoints to palm one off as the winner. He is

not trying to show the grimness of life without God in a Francis Schaeffer-like apologetic. He does not fall back on faith to save the day. He is saying, “My eyes see that life is *hebel*, but my heart knows that God is wise, just, and good.” Ecclesiastes is not written as an apology for the faith; nevertheless, as the Christian existentialist Jacques Ellul puts it, “Any study on vanity must be placed under the heading of George Bernanos’s words: ‘In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.’ This is Qoheleth’s whole message.”³⁶ Of the book’s three major themes, the first points us to deceptive hope and the next two to real hope.

B. Three Major Themes

Qoheleth’s rhetoric points to three paradoxical themes whose meanings and interplay lead to his theology: *hebel* (“vapor”), “fear God,” and enjoyment.

1. *Everything Is Hebel*

The book’s dominant theme and tone, which must not be muffled by a happy optimism, is that “all is *hebel* (‘a vapor’).”

a. Key Word

The inclusio framing Qoheleth’s teaching gives the hermeneutical context of his sayings: Everything is “utterly *hebel*” “(1:2; 12:8). In addition to being the operative word in the book’s inclusio, which gives the framework within which the book must be interpreted, *hebel* is the book’s *leitwort* (“leading word”), occurring thirty-seven times. Not coincidentally thirty-seven is the numerical value of *hebel* ($h = 5$; $b = 2$; $t = 30$). Recall also that there are 111 verses in each half, which is three times the numerical value of *hebel*. Unquestionably, *hebel* is the most important term and the clue to Qoheleth’s teaching.

b. Meaning of Hebel

Farmer defines *hebel* in its use in Ecclesiastes by its concrete sense of “vapor.” “In its simplest and most basic sense, *hebel* means ‘a puff of air,’ ‘a breath,’ or ‘a vapor.’ ... I would advise readers of the text in English to suspend judgment temporarily on the meaning of the metaphor and to substitute the phrase

‘breathlike’ (or something similar).”³⁷ By emphasizing the concrete sense of *hebel* as “vapor,” Farmer is able to find some — however little—value in *hebel*. But more important than its concrete meaning is its use as an abstract. In contrast to Farmer, most scholars follow Jerome (*vanitas/vanus*) and think the metaphor has only a negative idea.

Whybray glosses *hebel* by “frustration,” “referring to the generally unsatisfactory and frustrating character of human life as he [Qoheleth] has observed it.”³⁸ Frustration, however, is the result of everything being *hebel*, not its precise meaning. Fox’s gloss is best: “absurdity.” In his view *hebel* is something that does not fulfill what it is intended to do, thereby being absurd and deceitful.

The essence of the absurd is a disparity between two phenomena that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are actually disjoined or even conflicting. The absurd is irrational, an affront to reason, in the broad sense of the human faculty that seeks and discovers order in the world about us. The quality of absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or even in and of itself (although these may, by extension, be called absurd), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.³⁹

Ogden agrees: “For Qoheleth the term [*hebel*] has a very specific meaning: it identifies the enigmatic, the ironic dimension of human experience; it suggests that life is not fully comprehensible.”⁴⁰ David Hubbard similarly says, “*Hebel* stands more for *human inability* to grasp the meaning of God’s way than for an ultimate emptiness in life”; the word “speaks of *human limitation and frustration* caused by the vast gap between God’s knowledge and power and our relative ignorance and impotence.”⁴¹

These broad definitions are useful in seeking a definition of *hebel* to encompass all its uses. In fact, however, Qoheleth uses *hebel* (“absurdity,” “nonsense”) in two ways: for that which is “unsubstantial,” “fleeting,” and “lacking in permanence” and for specific situations for which mortals can find no answer and in that sense are “enigmatic” or “illusory.” Life is absurd because toil produces no enduring profit and because the attempt to make sense of life’s many enigmas is “futile.” Adam and Eve name their son “Abel” (Heb. *hebel* “Vapor” died prematurely (i.e., his life was fleeting), without progeny or a monument (i.e., without gaining any advantage), and apart from faith his life and death are senseless. If one reflects on Abel’s life under the sun, it was *hebel*,

“absurd.”

The book’s structure validates these two uses of *hebel*. Recall that Seow analyzed the Sayings of Qoheleth into two equal halves: “Everything is Ephemeral and Unreliable” and “Everything Is Elusive.” In other words, *hebel* is used for that which is both temporally fleeting (Part I) and intellectually futile (Part II).

The repeated refrain *rēcūt rūah*, which is a double entendre meaning both “a chase after wind” and “a vexation of spirit,” marks off the first half of the book (1:1–6:9). This refrain, which helps define *hebel*, occurs at the book’s pivot in 6:9b. Farmer notes that the phrase “*hebel*, a striving after wind/*hebel*, a vexation of spirit,” occurs seven times between Ecclesiastes 1:14 and 6:9 (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). Then, although *hebel* continues to occur in every chapter except [chapter 10](#), the refrain disappears and is replaced in 6:12–11:6 with phrases that question or deny humanity’s ability to know anything for certain “under the sun.” The second half of the book, she continues to note, has the repeated phraseology “find/not find” (7:14, 24, 28 [2x]; 8:17 [3x]) and “know/not know” in 6:10–11:6 (9:1, 5; 10:14–15; 11:2, 5–6), with a final poem about youth and old age in 11:7–12:8. She concludes: “It seems to me that 6:12 [*sic*] could be considered the pivot from which two distinct parts of Ecclesiastes swing. Both sections depend upon the question, ‘Who knows what is good for humankind?’ [Chapters 1–6](#) concentrate on the question of ‘what is good’ and chs. 7–12 explore the question of human knowing”⁴²

The first use of *hebel* has a correlative term in *mah yitrôn* (“What does anyone gain?”). Together *hebel* and *mah yitrôn* suggest that human activity is absurd in the sense that there is no adequate compensation/gain to toilsome work under the sun. James G. Williams says, “For Qohelet the human condition is vapour, as over against the *‘ôlām* [‘eternal’], and there is no profit in the breathlike quality of everything.”⁴³ Qoheleth connects the two terms in his preamble. Having stated his thesis, “All is utterly *hebel*,” he asks, “*mah yitrôn*” (“What does anyone gain,” see Eccl. 1:3; 3:9; 5:16). *Yitrôn* occurs ten times and is unique to Ecclesiastes. BDB and many others render *yitrôn* as “advantage,” “profit,” “gain,” but more precisely it denotes “adequate compensation” (1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:15; 10:11), which entails profit/gain/reward.⁴⁴ If there is an adequate compensation to wisdom, it is not located in this world, “none under the sun” (2:11).

The constant flux of creation yields no gain in spite of its endless cycle of sunrise/sunset, evaporation/rain, and cycling of the wind (1:2–11): for Qoheleth this is a representation of *hebel*’s first meaning, which pertains to absurdity in

the sense of proving to be ephemeral and so without compensation/gain. When Qoheleth says that there is nothing new under the sun (v. 10), he refers to the lack of something fresh that breaks into the cycle of life and gives it meaning and value, not to nothing ever being unfamiliar or novel. Remember that he has not experienced the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is new. At the first section's end, he concludes that forgetting and alienation of profit are inseparable.

In the second half, *hebel* also refers to specific situations in which “life is enigmatic, and mysterious; that there are many unanswered and unanswerable questions.”⁴⁵ As he addresses the next generation, Qoheleth notes that life is replete with situations to which even the sage, the philosopher-theologian, has no answer. For example, why does a rich person have a table full of food and no teeth, and the poor person have great teeth and no food? (cf. 6:2). Why is it that stupid people rule and wise people serve? (cf. 10:6).

Qoheleth begins the second section with the question, “Who knows?” (6:12), but he has already broached the reality that God's activity in history is both incomprehensible and inscrutable in a summary statement in 3:9–13. He specifies other enigmas in 8:11, 14; 9:1–3, 11; 11:5.

Death casts its shadow over all human activity and renders everything *hebel*: ephemeral and elusive (3:19–20; 4:3; 8:8; 9:3–6, 10–12; 11:8–12:7). Iain Provan notes:

Overshadowing all such human attempts to overcome the limitations set to life is the ultimate empirical reality that demonstrates they cannot: death. It is above all death that mocks human attempts at godlikeness, and to this subject *Qohelet* constantly returns. Death brings the wise and fool in the end to the same place (2:12–16), and it renders futile a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth (2:17–23). Death, which lies in the future, should persuade the young man to embrace life in the present (11:7–12:8). It is the reality of death that makes rational the way of life that *Qohelet* commends to his readers, with its focus on living each moment of life joyfully before God rather than on the pursuit of wisdom, wealth, or any other human end that comes under the heading “chasing after the wind.”⁴⁶

In a word, the entire creation is subject to futility (cf. Rom. 8:19–21). Sociologist Peter Berger asserts that there is a fundamental human need for meaning, and that without a framework of meaning, neither collective nor individual life is possible.⁴⁷ Qoheleth, in his quest for meaning, invested all his aspiration in this world, ascribing ultimate worth to the things of this life. He

searched for meaning in wisdom, pleasure, progress, work, advancement, power, and riches. All of these contemporary symbols of the good life are tried to the fullest, and each is found wanting, utterly meaningless and futile. In “Little Gidding” of his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot captures the essence of Qoheleth’s quest:

We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

2. *Fear of God*

Qoheleth’s dominant theme, “All is utterly *hebel*,” is drawn from the epistemology of empiricism. By empirical observation “under the sun,” he engages in an autobiographical quest to search out some gain of human activity by “[inherited] wisdom” (Eccl. 1:12–18). Gordis rightly says, “Qoheleth’s epistemology is essentially (though not consistently) empirical. His procedure is to deliberately seek experience as his primary source of knowledge and to use experiential argumentation in testifying for his claims.”⁴⁸ On that epistemology he draws the conclusion that everything, nothing excluded, is *hebel*: a chasing after wind and a vexation of the spirit. “Pleasure” yields no (abiding) “gain” (2:1–11). Wisdom yields relative gain with reference to folly but no (abiding) “gain” because of the common fate of wise and fools (2:12–16). Murphy says, “It is surely significant that he *never* considers folly a viable option. He challenges traditional wisdom and even pokes fun at it (1:18; 2:13–15; 9:16–17). But he never recommends folly. Indeed, folly is dangerous; just a little folly can spoil wisdom, which is extremely vulnerable (7:5–7; 9:18–10:1).”⁴⁹ Wealth also yields no (abiding) “gain” because wealth is left to the caprice of heirs (2:17–26).

However, in this literary masterpiece of indirection, Qoheleth counterbalances his empirical epistemology with about forty references to “God” (*ʾēlōhīm*) and specific statements to “fear God.” Statements about God’s goodness and justice arise from the heart, not from observation, as can be inferred from the life of Abel. The importance of this heart epistemology can also be inferred from the book’s structure. Seow analyzes the first half of the book as consisting of reflections on the topic: “everything is ephemeral and unreliable” (1:2–4:16) and

of sayings on “coping with uncertainty” (see above). Significantly, the section on ethics begins with admonitions to fear/stand in awe of God (5:1–7 [4:17–5:6]). Moreover, Qoheleth draws his sayings to conclusion with the famous allegory of likening death among other figures to a decrepit house. He begins his allegory: “Remember your Creator,” and ends with “the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:1–7). Finally, the narrator draws his book to conclusion with the summarizing teaching: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments.” It has been called “the kernel and star of the whole book.”⁵⁰ Unquestionably, “fear God” is a dominant note of this book.

The importance of this theme can also be inferred from its antithesis: “under the sun.”⁵¹ Farmer cogently surmises that the term “under the sun” implies there is a reality beyond that observable realm:

Under the sun is a strange term. Its repeated use (29 times) has the effect of making the readers ponder what may be possible in life that is not “under the sun.” The frequent use of the term “under the sun” in this book seems to indicate that either the audience or the speaker had begun to speculate about life after death as a way of resolving the dissonance between traditional retributive expectations and observed reality.⁵²

She adds:

[This expression (“under the sun”)] seems to imply that the speaker thinks a distinction can be made between what happens in human experience (“under the sun”) and what happens elsewhere. Thus, I would suggest that both Qoheleth and his audience share an interest in the question of the existence of some form of afterlife. Once convinced that the traditional doctrine of retribution fails to reflect human experience, one either has to give up the idea of justice or one has to push its execution into some realm beyond the evidence of human experience.⁵³

With reference to God’s being, Qoheleth assumes God’s eternal power and existence. Farmer says, “If one understands vanity as ‘lack of duration so as to be unworthy’ and fearing God is to ‘regard God as permanent and thus worthwhile to give highest esteem’ ... Qoheleth’s intention to convey the supreme and unalterable position of God in one’s life is clear.”⁵⁴ Qoheleth moves beyond what “can be clearly seen” from the creation about God’s divinity and power (Rom. 1:20), to confessing God’s communicable attributes of being

wise, good, and just. From observing the creation one could draw the conclusion about God's "eternal power and divine nature," as Paul says (Rom. 1:18–20), and about his sublime glory, as the psalmist says (Ps. 19:1–6), but one could not draw Qoheleth's conclusion that God is wise, good, and just. In fact, he argues that observation suggests the opposites. In these assertions about God, Qoheleth has moved from sight under the sun to faith's eagle's-eye view of heaven.

Qoheleth expresses faith in God's wisdom to order life so as to make it beautiful in spite of its absurdities (see Eccl. 3:1–11; 7:14; 8:17). The famous "time for everything" passage (3:1–8) concerns the contradictory and baffling "events that people encounter in life, those that happen whether one is ready or not"⁵⁵ and that are so ordered that mortals, in spite of their best efforts, "cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11b). The hiddenness of the future is locked in with a forgetfulness of the past. Yet, in spite of the apparent meaninglessness of these events, Qoheleth stoutly maintains, "God has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11a). Whybray says, "Qoheleth was thus defending the Israelite doctrine of God against a corruption of it—found in such texts as ... parts of the book of Job — which made the righteousness of God into a rigid principle but in doing so implicitly denies his freedom."⁵⁶

In spite of evidence under the sun to the contrary, Qoheleth also confesses that God is just and will reward the righteous and punish the wicked:

And I saw something else under the sun:

In the place of judgment—wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

I thought in my heart,

"God will bring to judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
and there will be a time for every activity,
a time for every deed." (3:16–17)

Elsewhere he confesses by faith against contrary evidence:

When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will

not lengthen like a shadow.” (8:11–13; see 11:9–10)

Faith in ultimate justice implies faith in God’s wrath. Qoheleth warns the son that God will punish insincere worship. Kidner says, “We face the appalling inference that nothing has meaning, nothing matters under the sun. It is then that we can hear, as the good news which it is, that *everything matters* — ‘for God will bring every deed into judgment.’”⁵⁷

Finally, Qoheleth also affirms his faith in God’s goodness, a truth I will reflect on in connection with the third theme: “Enjoy life.”

3. *Enjoyment*

The theme of *hebel* leads Qoheleth to the theme of enjoyment: “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart.... Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this [absurd] life that God has given you under the sun” (9:7–9; cf. 2:24; 3:12–13; 5:19; 8:15). In other words, meaninglessness is the mother of meaning: enjoy life while you can.

The importance of the theme to enjoy life in spite of its absurdity can be inferred from the book’s structure. Both of its halves are drawn to conclusion with the subject of enjoyment. Seow points out the chiastic structure of the concluding sayings of the first half on enjoyment and not greed in 5:1–6:9, pivoting in 5:20: “[A mortal] seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.”⁵⁸ Qoheleth also draws the second half to conclusion with the admonition to enjoy life:

Light is sweet,
☺☺☺☺and it pleases the *eyes* to see the sun.
However many years a man may live,
☺☺☺☺let him enjoy them all.
But let him remember the days of darkness,
☺☺☺☺for there will be many. (11:7; cf. 11:7–11)

At the end of the first half, Qoheleth calls upon the son *not to remember* the days to come (5:20), but the message of the conclusion of the second half is to *remember* the days to come. The issue is correct remembering. Seow says,

In Ecclesiastes, correct remembering of the days to come prompts one

to enjoy. If remembering the days to come brings only misery, one must *not* remember the days to come (5:20). Yet, if one remembers that there may be days of misery still to come, then one may enjoy while there is the possibility of doing so (11:3). In any case, the message is clear: people should enjoy life while they are able, for there will come a time when they will not be able to do so anymore (11:7–12:1).⁵⁹

If the first theme that “all is *hebel*” leads to the conclusion “enjoy life,” the second theme to “fear God” provides the context for that enjoyment. The Epicurean connects *hebel* and enjoyment within the worldview of practical atheism and tries to find it in a pagan bacchanalian lifestyle. The hedonist says, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” But that is not Qoheleth’s reason; for him, the ability to enjoy life is a gift of God: “This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (2:24–25; cf. 8:15). In other words, God is good. By associating enjoyment in the context of God’s goodness, the preacher also rejects denial (“all is well”) and false optimism (“I will be happy”). When pleasure is pursued as an end in itself, it leads, as Qoheleth painfully learned, to dissatisfaction and emptiness. But when accepted as a gift from God and used responsibly in the fear of God, there is nothing better under the sun: “I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and to do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil — this is the gift of God” (3:12–13). Eaton says, “The preacher wishes to deliver us from a rosy-colored, self-confident, godless life, with its inevitable cynicism and bitterness, and from trusting in wisdom, pleasure, wealth, and human justice or integrity. He wishes to drive us to see that God is there, that he is good and generous, and that only such an outlook makes life coherent and fulfilling.”⁶⁰

To enjoy life is not merely a mortal’s choice, but a gift of God, as the verses cited above show. True enjoyment is the sovereign gift of God’s grace; he decides who should have it and who should not. Seow says, “Human beings are caught in a situation where they are not in control; only God is in charge—just like a sovereign ruler who alone determines who should be favored and who should be left out.”⁶¹ In other words, faith in God’s sublime attributes is a gift of God.

To be sure, work on an assembly line seems without meaning, and even creative work that seems meaningful turns out to be meaningless in death. But thank God if he has given you the grace to be thankful for a paycheck. Thank God that you can clank your fork on a china plate and eat a steak. Life is absurd,

as the existentialist knows too well. But thank God you can put a disk on your CD player and hear Beethoven.

III. CONCLUSION

Qoheleth faces the mortals' despairing condition with justified cynicism and with unflinching honesty, but he also confronts life's grimness with a heartfelt faith in God. His aging body reminds him that life is absurd, but he is thankful to God that his heart knows his Creator is wise, just, and good. The book celebrates the triumph of faith, not the triumph of the human spirit. Qoheleth does not fall back on faith to save the day for the righteous. He is not presenting a debate, asking the son to award the debate to faith, not to skepticism. Rather, he is teaching his son to recognize the stupidity of his existence and the sublimity of God; if he can do that, he can enjoy his brief life not fearing the judgment to come.

The time to enjoy life in the fear of God is now:

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun — all your meaningless days. (9:7–9)

Be happy, young man, while you are young,
☺☺☺☺and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart
☺☺☺☺and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
☺☺☺☺God will bring you to judgment.
So then, banish anxiety from your heart
☺☺☺☺and cast off the troubles of your body,
☺☺☺☺for youth and vigor are *hebel*. (11:9–10)

The wise accept the present time as the proper time for what is at hand. What is proper for tomorrow is unknowable and *hebel*. The aims of wisdom are thus tempered; it shifts expectations from profit to portion, from storing up to enjoyment of God's gifts. The moment to enjoy life is the given time. Wisdom that seeks beyond today strives beyond its limits in an attempt to storm the gates of heaven. The desire for foresight and discernment into the future, such as

through astrology and the simple causality of retribution, hopes to master the world and overcome surprise. It will be frustrated. The striving for the future will never satisfy, for things fail, decay, and are forgotten; the only sure expectations under the sun are injustice and death. Instead of being involved in the futility of trying to master the future, one must find enjoyment in what is at hand. This does not point to a hedonistic or irresponsible existence, but to a life of simplicity and ironic commitment in the fear of God.^{[62](#)}

IV. APPENDIX: REALM OF THE DEAD

A. Introduction

It is fitting in connection with Qoheleth's final command to fear God to escape coming judgment that I draw to conclusion this biblical theology, which finds the Bible's center in the major theme of the in-breaking of God's kingdom, with its correlative theme of eternal and final retribution that finds expression in punishment, destruction — not cessation — and banishment from the kingdom of God for unbelievers who reject God's rule during their clinical lives.⁶³ I begin this study of the realm of death with a paradox regarding the state of the dead in Ecclesiastes, spend most of the survey on the rest of the Old Testament, and conclude with a brief treatment of the New Testament's clarification and intensification of final retribution.

Before reflecting further on death in the Old Testament, we should note that the Old Testament represents "life" as an unending spiritual relationship with God, not terminated by clinical death, and "death" as total separation from God both in this life and after clinical death (see [chap. 31](#) above).⁶⁴ Also, recall that the Old Testament makes no distinction between "soul" and "body." *Nepeš* traditionally glossed "soul," represents the whole being of animals and of humans (see [chap. 8](#) above). Only the *rûah* ("wind"/"spirit") returns to God at death, and the body is resurrected as a prelude to final judgment. That said, let us now consider what the Old Testament teaches about the realm of the dead.⁶⁵

B. Ecclesiastes

Qoheleth's view of the postmortem state can be summarized by contrasting what he sees under the sun with what he knows in his heart. Under the sun human beings share the same fate as animals: both die, cease to breathe, and go to the same place (i.e., the dust), with no assurance that the fate of their spirits differs (3:19–21). In his heart, however, Qoheleth knows that God will bring to

judgment both the righteous and the wicked (3:17; 11:9) and that the human spirit returns to God who gave it (12:7). The epilogist agrees and argues that people should guide their lives in light of ultimate justice.⁶⁶ The doctrine of the afterlife in Ecclesiastes is consistent with the Old Testament in general.

C. Words for the Grave

The Old Testament shares with their ancient Near Eastern neighbors a phenomenological, three-tiered perception of the universe: heaven above — the realm of divine beings; the earth — the realm of the living; and below the earth — the realm of the dead.⁶⁷ In death living beings move from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. Hebrew denotes the realm of the dead by *qeber* (“grave”), *bôr* (“entrance hole into a pit”),⁶⁸ *šāḥat* (“place of thorough ruin”), *ʾereṣ* (“earth beneath”), and *šəʾol* (traditionally transliterated as sheol), which needs definition.

The noun *šəʾol* occurs sixty-six times in the Old Testament, fifty-eight times in poetry. The frequent prepositions with it show that it refers to the grave. The biblical poets use rich and varied figures to depict it. Sheol has a “mouth” (Ps. 141:7) that “enlarges” (Isa. 5:14), and it is “never satisfied” (Prov. 27:20; 30:16). It is so powerful that no one escapes its “grip” (Ps. 89:48 [49]; Song 8:6). It is like a prison with “cords” (2 Sam. 22:6) and a land that has “gates” (Isa. 38:10) with “bars” (Job 17:16). Here corruption is “the father,” and the worm “the mother and sister” (Job 17:13–14). It is “a land” of no return to this life (Job 7:9), an abode where all social and religious distinctions cease. Rich and poor (Job 3:18–19), righteous and wicked (Job 3:17; Ps. 49:10) lie together. It is a land of silence (Ps. 94:17), darkness (Ps. 13:3 [4]), weakness, and oblivion (88:11–18 [12–19]). The destructive nature of this realm is intensified by “Abaddon” (Job 28:22; Prov. 15:11; 27:20; Gk. *Apollyōa*, from *apōleia*, “destruction” [Rev. 9:11]). Pity Job—he finds the prospect of the grave better than the realm of life! (Job 10:18–22).

One errs in using the poets’ imaginative language of the grave to build a doctrine of the intermediate state. However, their vivid and powerful figures transform the grave from a six-foot pit into a transcendent dreadful realm distinct both from life on top of the earth inhabited by living mortals and from heaven inhabited by the immortal God and his court. Those who descend there will never again participate in salvation history before the final end or join the holy throng in the earthly temple (Ps. 6:5 [6]; Isa 38:18). Like the Jordan River and

Mount Zion, the grave symbolizes eternal realities that transcend their physical space to connote the horrors of the “realm of the dead” (Deut. 32:22 TNIV). The living dread it.⁶⁹

D. The Present State of the Dead

There is no reason to pick and choose between the grave and the abode of the dead; the grave is their abode. The textual data suggests that the dead are in a state of death, not consciousness. To refer to the realm of the dead as “netherworld” begs the issue of understanding their state, for netherworld connotes — at least to me — some form of conscious existence.

Biblical Hebrew identifies the deceased as *hammētîm* (cf. “the long dead” in Ezek. 18:32; cf. Ps. 14:3; Lam. 3:6). The oracle in Ezekiel 32:22–32 depicts a massive communal cemetery, in which the graves are arranged by nationality and organized in such a way that the principal grave, such as that of the king, is located in the center, surrounded by the graves of his attendants (i.e., the other slain nations). The pyramids (the pharaohs’ tombs) are surrounded by the tombs of their princes, courtiers, and other high officials and provide an analogy to Ezekiel’s portrayal of the grave.⁷⁰ The royal dead lie on beds, giving rise to the image of death as a sleep but one from which one never awakens (Job 14:12; Ps. 13:3 [4]; Jer. 51:39, 57; but cf. Matt. 9:24; John 11:11; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:14; 5:10). The Old Testament texts do not support the doctrine of “soul sleep,” which entails an awaking, presumably in the resurrection of the body.

As for the *rēpā’îm* (traditionally “shades,” but better “the community of the dead”), nothing can be said with certainty from the eight poetic texts in which it occurs than that it is the poetic equivalent of *hammētîm* (Job 26:5; Ps. 88:10 [11]; Prov. 2:18; 9:18; 21:16; Isa. 14:9; 26:14, 19). Michael Brown draws the conclusion that “the etymology of *rēpā’îm* is unclear and the historical and/or ideological connection between the shades, ethnic Rephaim, and Ugaritic *rpum* (if there was, in fact, such a connection) remains difficult to reconstruct.”⁷¹ The poetic texts use this term figuratively to depict corpses, especially royal ones, and give no revelation about them beyond that which anyone can observe of ancient burial practices and of corpses in a tomb. Isaiah’s vivid description of the grave rousing the *rēpā’îm* to greet the king of Babylon (14:9) is found in a *māšāl* (i.e. “a highly figurative poem,” 14:4) and in dramatic irony depicts Sennacherib’s ignominious death in contrast to the royal burial of the kings whom he had conquered (see below). In Isaiah 26:13–14, the *rēpā’îm* “are now

dead, they live no more ... do not rise.... [God] punished them and brought them to ruin; ... wiped out all memory of them.” In Ezekiel 37 their dead bones being raised to life is a figure of the resurrection of national Israel from exile to return to the Sworn Land, and not those of real people.

As in the case of the “grave” (*šēʾôl*), these highly imaginative texts for the “dead” do not support the theology that the dead are fully conscious of their surroundings in the grave.⁷² For example, it is highly unlikely that the already dead kings actually rise from their thrones (i.e., royal tombs) to announce to the king of Babylon that maggots are his mattress and worms his blanket because he dies in ignominy without tomb and proper burial (Isa. 14:11). As for Isaiah 66:24, Isaiah’s depiction of the eschatological worshipers coming out of the temple and gazing on the dead bodies of the rebellious being eaten by worms that never die and burning in fire that is never quenched refers to Gehenna, not the netherworld. Gehenna is Jerusalem’s garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom. Here the refuse burns endlessly and the maggots feast on the endless supply of dead animal carcasses and so never die.⁷³ In the New Testament this depiction became symbolic of perpetual punishment and anguish (Luke 12:5; Matt. 5:22; Mark 9:43). As for the *ʿam ʿôlām* (“eternal people”) with reference to the dead in Ezekiel 26:20, it is rightly glossed by TNIV as “people of long ago.”⁷⁴ As for the metonymy, the “eternal home” of the dead in Ecclesiastes 12:5, it probably refers to the earth. In Genesis 25:8 “gathered to his people” is probably an idiom meaning nothing more than that the body of the deceased is reunited with the bones of his dead ancestors. The same is true of David’s statement that he will go to be with his dead infant son (see [chaps. 22](#) and [23](#) above). In Ezekiel 39:11, 15 the *gē hāʿôbʾrîm* (possibly “The Valley of Those Who Have Passed On”) may refer to departed heroes buried in a cemetery.⁷⁵

In addition to texts already cited, others also speak of the annihilation of the wicked (Isa. 50:9; Ezek. 26:21; 27:36; 28:19). Elsewhere we treat the witch of Endor’s necromancy (see [chap. 22](#) above). To judge from the silence of those who are raised from the dead about any experiences there, it seems unlikely that they experienced anything in the realm of death, though it must be admitted these are blanks, not gaps (1 Kings 17:17–21; 2 Kings 4:18–37; 13:20–21). In sum, no text clearly supports a netherworld in the sense of “a conscious intermediate state between death and resurrection,” or a postmortem opportunity for those who never heard about Israel’s God.⁷⁶ The doctrine of bodily resurrection (see below) does not logically entail a conscious intermediate state in Hades any more than rising from sleep entails having a dream.⁷⁷

E. The Final State of the Dead

Apart from these phenomenological descriptions of the grave, where social, political, economic, and religious distinctions no longer exist, Israel's prophets, sages, and apocalyptists envision the immortality and even the resurrection of the righteous. The miracles of Elijah and Elisha, giving life to the dead before the end, presage the final resurrection. Isaiah boldly foretells: "But your dead will live, *I AM*; their bodies will rise — let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for you—your dew is like the dew of the morning; you will make it fall on the *reṣpā'īm*" (Isa. 26:19 TNIV). The God-ordained consequence of righteous living is the realm of immortality (*al māwet*, Prov. 12:28),⁷⁸ for *I AM* watches over the way of the righteous and of judgment (Ps. 1:5–6) and "even in death the righteous seek refuge in God" (Prov. 14:32 TNIV).⁷⁹ The same psalmist who in the first half of his poem's body (Ps. 49:5–12 [6–13]) says that in the grave there is no distinction between wise/righteous and fools/wicked distinguishes himself from the wicked in the second half (vv. 13–20 [14–21]): "But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself" (v. 15). Similarly, Job's doubt about a future life (Job 14:13–17) gives way to robust faith:

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in (or apart from) my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes — I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me! (19:25–27)

The resurrection of the wicked, however, was not revealed until Daniel: "At that time [i.e., the end of time] ... multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:1–2). This is the only unambiguous reference to the double resurrection of the dead in the entire Old Testament, and it paves way for that doctrine in the New Testament (Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:28–29). In other words, in Isaiah the wicked "live on" in everlasting shame in the sense that the righteous gaze upon their burning corpses and in Daniel they are resurrected to face this shame. The contradiction suggests that Isaiah's imagery is a type of Daniel's reality (see typology). Isaiah could be interpreted to mean that the wicked do not feel the

opprobrium of the righteous, but in Daniel they are conscious of their shame. Ultimate justice demands that outcome.⁸⁰ Jewish works of the Second Temple period attest the idea of a general resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked as a prelude to reward and punishment (e.g., T. Ben. 10:8; 4 Ezra 7:32, 37; 2 Bar. 30:2–5; 42:8; 49:1–5).⁸¹ The Pharisees held this view,⁸² and so does the New Testament (see below).

The tension between those texts that represent death as annihilation and others as a state from which all will be raised — the righteous to everlasting life and the wicked to everlasting shame — can be resolved in the same way the similar tension in Ecclesiastes between futility under the sun and hope is resolved: by distinguishing between what can be known by sight and by faith. Texts that refer to annihilation depict the visible phenomenon that the dead cease to exist in the land of the living and are annihilated, and texts that refer to the final judgment beyond death are faith statements.

F. New Testament

The New Testament builds on images drawn from the Old Testament for its teaching that the righteous will abide forever in bliss with God in the new heaven and earth and the wicked will live forever with Satan in the torments of hell.⁸³ This is the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 7:13–27; 8:10–12; 13:36–50; 18:8–9; 24:45–25:30; Mark 9:45, 47–48; Luke 13:1–5; 16:9–31; John 3:16–36; 5:24–29; 15:1–8);⁸⁴ of Paul (e.g., Rom. 1:18–2:11; 5:12–18; 9:22; 2 Thess. 1:8–10; 2:9–10), whose teaching on hell Douglas Moo describes as “inaugurated judgment” (i.e., a continuation and intensification of the unbeliever’s present state into the afterlife);⁸⁵ of the general epistles (Heb. 6:1–3; 10:27–30; James 5:1–6; 2 Peter 2; Jude 7, 15, 23); and of Revelation (14:9–12; 20:10–15).⁸⁶ Spirit-filled preaching of the last passage cited convicted me to pray that God would have mercy on me a sinner.

THOUGHT QUESTION

How do the book of Ecclesiastes and the doctrine of an afterlife encourage you to rejoice amid the realization that life is fleeting and futile?

1. “To wonder at nothing is almost the only thing which can make and keep a man happy.”

2. According to 1:1; 7:27; and 12:8–9, *qōhelet* (which in the literature is sometimes rendered Qohelet, Kohelet, or Qoheleth) essentially authored the book. Greek glosses *qōhelet* by *ekklēsiastēs* and Latin *ecclesiastes*. *qāhal*, is a feminine singular participle of *qāhmal*, “to gather, assemble” but with masculine modifiers (except 7:26–27, *ʾmrh qhlt > ʾmr hqhl* as in 12:8). Occasionally professions are designated by feminine singular participles: *sōpheret*, “scribe”; *qōhelet*, “gatherer” (KBL⁴ 768): of wise sayings (cf. Eccl. 12:9–11), of people to teach (meaning of *qāhal* in the Old Testament and the use of the verb always for people), or of both (cf. Qoh. 12:9–11).

3. Michael V. Fox, “Qoheleth and His Contradictions,” *JSOT* 71 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 154–55.

4. The wisdom of this saying becomes apparent when one remembers that “‘righteousness,’ [which is a coreferential term for ‘wisdom’] means to ‘disadvantage’ self to ‘advantage’ the community, and ‘wickedness’ [which is a coreferential term for ‘folly’] is to serve self at the expense of the community” (see [chap. 33.II.B](#)). It is wise to recognize one’s limits and folly to be overly conscientious.

5. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 64.

6. R. E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 19.

7. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 52.

8. A. G. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’ “ *TynBul* 48 (1997): 67–91.

9. Roland K. Harrison, following W. F. Albright, repoints the word to mean “counselor.” See Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*

(London: Tyndale Press, 1970), 1072.

[10.](#) See E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, ed. R. Kutscher (Jerusalem: Magnes and Leiden: Brill, 1982). On a minority “revisionist” position, see D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language: Reevaluating Its Nature and Date*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, vol. 3 (Lewiston, N.Y./Queenston, Ont.: Mellen, 1988). He compares Qoheleth with Mishnaic Hebrew in 61 points of grammar and finds Qoheleth agreed with Biblical Hebrew in 46 points where BH and MH disagree. “The grammatical evidence therefore does not impose a date later than the exile, and would allow a preexilic time of composition” (p. 259). Three words, however, may hint at a late preexilic date (cf. Persian terms *pardes* in 2:5, *pitgam* in 8:11, and frequent Aramaisms). For a critique of Fredericks’s minimalist position, see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 154; A. Schoors, “The Pronouns in Qoheleth,” *Hebrew Studies* 30 (1989): 71–90. The grammar of *Qoheleth* “remains to be written” (Roland E. Murphy, “On Translating Ecclesiastes,” *CBQ* 53 [1991]: 579).

[11.](#) R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2–3.

[12.](#) “Here (1:12–2:6) the author adopts the ancient Near Eastern literary genre of the fictional royal autobiography, the purpose of which typically was to exalt certain rulers as superior to all their contemporaries and predecessors. Such fictional royal autobiographies tended to call attention to the extraordinary statures of these rulers and to preserve their name forever. Given the Israelite context, the author of Ecclesiastes chooses to evoke the memory of Solomon, a consummate wise king who had seen it all, knew it all, and had it all. Hence, we have the traditional association of the entire book with his name (1:1). But the genre is only a rhetorical device employed ironically to show that everything is in fact ‘*hebel*, a vanity and pursuit of wind’ (see 1:14, 17, 21; 2:11, 15, 17, 19, 21; 3:26). The genre that must have been familiar to *Qohelet*’s audience heightens expectations that some exceptional people may be able to have it all. But the reader is, in the end, brought to the surprising conclusion that there are in fact no exceptions to the rule that ‘all is vanity and a pursuit of wind.’ Even a king, a wise and powerful ruler, is subject to the truth that nothing is permanent.... Wisdom may give the wise some advantage, but the advantage is only a limited one. In the face of death, all mortals, whether wise or foolish, are equal, proving once again that nothing is finally reliable” (Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991], 122–28; cf. Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 48).

[13.](#) Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers

Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985): 106–10.

[14.](#) Bruce K. Waltke and David Diewert, “Wisdom Literature,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 295–328.

[15.](#) T. Anthony Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes: Translation and Commentary* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1993), ix – x.

[16.](#) Michael V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83–106.

[17.](#) Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 253.

[18.](#) Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 41.

[19.](#) Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 33n13.

[20.](#) Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 11. See the numerical studies of George A. Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2002).

[21.](#) George A. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited,” *CBQ* 42 (1980): 38–51.

[22.](#) George A. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 313–34.

[23.](#) Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 151.

[24.](#) Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 45–46.

[25.](#) Robert Gordis, *Koheleth — The Man and His Word*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 122.

[26.](#) Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23.

[27.](#) R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 191.

[28.](#) Gordis, *Koheleth*, 42.

[29.](#) Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAV, 1973).

[30.](#) *Ibid.*, 8.

[31.](#) *Ibid.*, 10.

[32.](#) Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 583.

[33.](#) J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 1.

[34.](#) Quoted in Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.

[35.](#) G. S. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” in the *New Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed.

(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 570.

[36.](#) Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 47.

[37.](#) Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?* 146.

[38.](#) Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 26.

[39.](#) Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 31.

[40.](#) Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 14.

[41.](#) David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. The Communicator's Commentary, vol. 15B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 21–22.

[42.](#) Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?* 151.

[43.](#) James G. Williams, "What Does It Profit a Man? The Wisdom of Koheleth," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: KTAV, 1976), 386.

[44.](#) Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 60–62.

[45.](#) Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 13, 14.

[46.](#) Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 39.

[47.](#) Peter Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 166–69.

[48.](#) Robert Gordis, "Qoheleth's Epistemology," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 137–55.

[49.](#) Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1992), 55.

[50.](#) See Bruce K. Waltke, "Fear of the Lord: The Foundation for a Relationship with God," in *Alive to God: Essays in Honor of James D. Houston*, ed. Loren Wilkinson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

[51.](#) Eccl. 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 7:11; 8:9, 15 (2x), 17; 9:3, 6, 9 (2x), 11, 13; 10:5.

[52.](#) Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?* 150.

[53.](#) Ibid., 206.

[54.](#) Ibid., 146.

[55.](#) Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 49.

[56.](#) Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 30.

[57.](#) Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 20.

[58.](#) Ibid., 49.

[59.](#) Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 53.

[60.](#) Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 48.

[61.](#) Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 48.

[62.](#) I am indebted to my student Sean Gallagher (Regent College, December 1992) for this paragraph.

[63.](#) For a good treatment of God's election and human responsibility, see Robert A. Peterson, "Systematic Theology: Three Vantage Points of Hell," in

Hell under Fire, Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 158–65.

[64.](#) For a rebuttal of universalism, the doctrine that every human being will finally enjoy the everlasting salvation that Christians enjoy in the kingdom of God, see J. I. Packer, “Universalism: Will Everyone Ultimately Be Saved?” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 169–94.

[65.](#) For the realm of life, see Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 1 – 15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 104–7.

[66.](#) “All our actions and thoughts must take such different courses, according as there are or are not eternal joys to hope for, that it is impossible to take one step with sense and judgment, unless we regulate our course by view of this point which ought to be our ultimate end” (Pascal, *Pensées*, 3.194).

[67.](#) I lean in this section on Daniel I. Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 43–65. For further discussion, see B. Lang, “Life after Death in the Prophetic Promise,” in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 145–48; Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995).

[68.](#) J.-G. Heintz, TDOT, 1:466, s.v. “*ḥēṣ*.”

[69.](#) From Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 116.

[70.](#) Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: chapters 25 – 48*, NIDOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 219–34.

[71.](#) Michael L. Brown, NIDOTTE, 3:1176, s.v. *rēpāʾīm*. The ancient versions are not helpful in defining *rēpāʾīm* because they confounded the ethnic Rephaim in the historical books with the eight occurrences of *rēpāʾīm* (always plural) in the poetic texts and sometimes pointed the word *rōpēʾīm*, “physicians.”

[72.](#) Pace Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” 56, 58.

[73.](#) D. F. Watson, “Gehenna,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:926–28; see also “Hinnom,” 3:202–3.

[74.](#) Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 410.

[75.](#) Block, *Ezekiel*, 468–69.

[76.](#) Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 168–69.

[77.](#) Pace Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” 58.

[78.](#) Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 544.

[79.](#) Ibid., 608; see also Daniel I. Block, “Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel’s Vision of Death and Afterlife,” *BBR* 2 (1992): 13–41.

[80.](#) Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 107–9.

[81.](#) Murray J. Harris, *From Grace to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 69–79.

[82.](#) Josephus, *Wars*, 2.163.

[83.](#) Christopher W. Morgan, “Biblical Theology: Three Pictures of Hell,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 135–51.

[84.](#) R. W. Yarbrough, “Jesus on Hell,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 67–90.

[85.](#) Douglas J. Moo, “Paul on Hell,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 91–109.

[86.](#) Gregory K. Beale, “The Revelation on Hell,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 111–34.

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