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Editorial

Welcome to the Fall 2026 issue of the *Journal for Faith and Ministry*—our very first issue! I am especially grateful to those who have contributed to realize this goal. Special mention goes to Twyla Hernandez and Joseph Early for their invaluable assistance in the early planning stages; to Michael O'Neal for the time and energy he invested in this issue as the book review editor; and to Sherry Bowen for all that she so kindly and efficiently does in the background. Thank you also to our administration for allowing us to do a journal, and to our editorial and review board members who offer advice and vet articles.

The *Journal for Faith and Ministry* is a digital, peer-reviewed academic journal written to assist Christians and churches in making disciples throughout the world. Published twice a year, each issue includes articles on biblical, theological, historical, and practical studies along with reviews of important books.

We are very pleased with the contents of our first journal. We open this issue with Bart Barber's article, "100 Years of the Baptist Faith and Message," which the Southern Baptist Convention adopted as its statement of faith at its 1925 meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the BF&M, and Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church, Farmersville, TX, and former SBC president, looks at its history and its various developments. We next present Campbellsville University historian and theologian Joseph Early's essay: "My Favorite Texas Baptist Heresies," which focuses on Martinism and Fortunism, named after Matthew T. Martin and George Fortune. Information on these men is rather limited, primarily furnished by those who accused them of heresy. Because of this, the data is often ignored or skewed in Texas Baptist history. No stranger to Texas Baptists, Early takes a fresh look at these men and their teachings. Then, in "Engaging the Biblical Evidence for Divine Simplicity," theologian Adam Harwood (New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) "engages the biblical reasoning of Thomas Aquinas and two contemporary advocates of 'Divine Simplicity,' Steven Duby and Thomas Joseph White, to summarize and reply to their biblical support for the doctrine." In "Chupacabras and Elephants in the Room," New Testament scholar E. Randolph Richards (Palm Beach Atlantic University) points out that interpretive perils can occur when anyone reads a biblical text because they often overlook or are unaware of

their presuppositions, assumptions, and cultural biases. So, he suggests a few ways that culture can influence how we read the biblical text. In doing so, he uses a metaphor of the two creatures mentioned in the article's title. In "Biblical Patterns of Church Government," Gregory Lamb, an independent researcher and Baptist pastor, explores whether there is a model of church government more biblically correct than the other models. In our penultimate article, "The Need for a Metaphor," Campbellsville University Old Testament professor Michael O'Neal explores whether Jonathan Haidt, a very influential voice in contemporary social analysis, uses the Tower of Babel account in a way consistent with the biblical text. Finally, in "Beyond the Mosaic," New Testament scholar Cory Marsh (Southern California Seminary) "examines connections between the biblical covenants established through Moses and Jeremiah, particularly highlighting the covenant declared in Deuteronomy 29:1 as distinct from its Sinaitic predecessor." This issue closes with relevant, thought-provoking book reviews, acquired and edited by book review editor Michael O'Neal.

If you are interested in submitting an article for consideration, please submit a Word document to the editor, Terry Wilder, at tlwilder@campbellsville.edu. Articles should be around 5,000 words, though we do not impose a strict word limit. Every article submitted will be reviewed and, if accepted for publication, will be formatted after acceptance. No particular style is required for submission, though we appreciate articles using the *SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd edition. We regret that we are not able to publish every article we receive.

One Hundred Years of the Baptist Faith & Message

Bart Barber
Pastor, First Baptist Church, Farmersville, TX
President, Southern Baptist Convention, 2022–24

Last year marked the one-hundredth anniversary of the Southern Baptist Faith & Message. At its 1925 meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted the Baptist Faith & Message as its statement of faith. This action, together with the creation of the Cooperative Program and the incorporation of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, formed the cocoon from whence emerged a Southern Baptist Convention that, while it was the same corporate creature as the chrysalis that preceded it, had undergone a thorough metamorphosis. The new convention, a national cooperative effort of thousands of churches to fund a multifaceted array of independent boards and agencies through a unified budget, was *sui generis* among Baptist organizations. As has always been the case for confessions of faith among Baptists, the Baptist Faith & Message was created to solve a problem, and the modern existence of the Southern Baptist Convention depends upon it.

A Brief History of Baptist Confessions of Faith

William Joseph McGlothlin (1867–1933) went too far in claiming, "Primitive Christianity drew up no Confessions of Faith."[1] At best, it is an argument from silence; at worst, it is disproven by what appears to be confessional source materials appearing in the New Testament in places like Colossians 1:15–20. McGlothlin's claim, however, does give voice to an early negative experience with state-enforced creedal statements that has lived long in the memory of Baptists, shaping the convictions and the instincts of Baptists. Baptists have historically met confessions of faith with some measure of suspicion.

[1] W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia; Boston; Chicago; St. Louis; Toronto: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), ix.

Baptists have nonetheless produced so many confessions of faith that McGlothlin states just a few lines later in his introduction: "Baptist Confessions are almost numberless."[2] Baptists generally produce confessions of faith because need drives them to do so.

When Baptists face a need to explain themselves to outsiders, they tend to use confessions of faith to do so. In the seventeenth century, no one outside of a Baptist church could be expected to know what a Baptist was, did, or believed. Early Baptist confessions of faith were substantially outward-facing documents offered as an apologetic for Baptist convictions to those who were not Baptists. Indeed, these seventeenth-century Baptists frequently took the statements of faith that their interlocutors had produced, modified those documents such that they matched the distinctive views of Baptists, and then published them to explain both the similarities and the differences between Baptists and the various Protestant sects in their milieu.[3]

When Baptists face a need to teach, transmit, or defend the doctrinal principles upon which their churches were founded, they tend to use confessions of faith to do so. By the eighteenth century, alongside the outward-facing function, Baptists were frequently employing confessions of faith as inward-facing documents offered as instruction and subscription documents employed within the confines of a local congregation.

A collection of General Baptist congregations in England called the "New Connexion" employed a confession of faith in this way. The preceding General Baptist group, the General Association of General Baptists, had forsaken Trinitarianism in favor of the Unitarian teachings of Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714). General Baptist pastor Dan Taylor (1738–1816) had hoped to restore the General Assembly to Christian orthodoxy, but his hopes had fallen into despondency by June 1770. He subsequently led eighteen General Baptist churches to form a breakaway assembly. They were leaving the mostly

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[2] McGlothlin, xii.

[3] In their preface to the Second London Confession (titled "To the Judicious and Impartial Reader"), the authors stated that they considered themselves to be "under a necessity of Publishing a *Confession of our Faith*, for the information, and satisfaction of those, that did not thoroughly understand what our principles were" (McGlothlin, 223). They nonetheless determined to adhere wherever possible to the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith, "the more abundantly to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, as also with many others whose orthodox confessions have been published to the World, on the behalf of the protestants in diverse nations and cities; and also to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words" (McGlothlin, 224).

Unitarian General Assembly that had emphatically rejected the idea of setting any confessional boundaries for their association, and so Taylor's New Connexion immediately adopted a six-point document entitled "Articles of Religion" that they hoped would govern the membership of their new association and protect it from doctrinal decay.[4]

One way that Baptists began to employ confessions of faith in teaching and defending their theological convictions was by creating ancillary documents—catechisms and covenants—for the purpose of applying the confessions to the life of the churches. The father-son duo of Benjamin (1640–1704) and Elias Keach (1665[?]–1699), following the Second London Confession, published both a church covenant and a catechism related to the confession (or, more accurately, to the Keaches' revision of the confession). The catechism applied the confession to the teaching ministry of the churches, and the covenant applied it to the constitution of the churches. The Keaches also published alongside these documents a tract entitled "The Glory and Ornament of a True Gospel-constituted Church," which expressly applied the confession to the discipline of the churches.[5] Individual churches like the Baptist Church in Middletown, New Jersey, made use of these documents to police their own membership and maintain church order.[6]

Among the confessions of faith produced in this era was the New Hampshire Confession of Faith. In 1832, Baron Stow (1801–1869), John Newton Brown (1803–1868), and Jonathan Going (1786–1844) accepted an assignment from the Baptist Convention of New Hampshire to author this statement of faith. The resulting confession of faith and its associated church covenant achieved widespread adoption among Baptist churches.[7]

Problems Solved by the Baptist Faith & Message

The need to explain themselves to outsiders had so completely waned for Southern Baptists by the early twentieth century that Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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[4] Ollie Latch, *History of the General Baptists* (Poplar Bluff, MO: General Baptist Press, 1954), 93; Adam Taylor, *The History of the English General Baptists* (London: for the author by T. Bore, 1818), 2:134, 139–42; James Taylor, *Statistics of the New Connexion of General Baptists; from Its Formation in 1770, to 1843* (Ashby-de-la-Zouch, UK: J. Goadby, n.d.), 9–13.

[5] James Leo Garrett, Jr., "Baptist Church Discipline," Revised Edition, (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2004), 16.

[6] McGlothlin, 294.

[7] McGlothlin, 299–300.

President Edgar Young Mullins (1860–1928) felt justified in describing his manifesto of Baptist doctrine not as the peculiar beliefs of some sect but rather as a universal recitation of "The Axioms of Religion."[8] The need for instruction and covenantal boundaries within local Southern Baptist churches was being met well enough by the widespread adoption of Brown's church covenant, by confessions like the New Hampshire Confession, and by a recent innovation that was somewhat displacing the use of catechisms: dated Sunday School publications. The Convention also published polemical tracts like "Baptist Why and Why Not" by James Marion Frost (1848–1916) for catechetical use. What had become the usual reasons to develop confessions of faith were not the reasons that brought into existence the Baptist Faith & Message.

One might reasonably trace the necessity of the Baptist Faith & Message back to 1792 in Kettering, England. Various members of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, led by William Carey (1761–1834) and Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), formed the Baptist Missionary Society in that year. Although the "Primitive Baptists" or "Anti-Missionary Baptists" in America had come to reject such parachurch structures by the late nineteenth century, the "Missionary Baptists" had embraced a phalanx of societies, commissions, and committees through which churches were funding purposes ranging from missionary-sending to the publication of evangelistic tracts.

As these parachurch ventures multiplied and grew, so did the occasions for controversy over their practices and principles and the need to give assurances to supporters that these entities were theologically sound. The very origin of the Southern Baptist Convention is a schism over the position a missionary board had taken on the question of slaveholding. At its formation, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary confined itself to the theological boundaries of its "Abstract of Principles." From the earliest days of the Southern Baptist Convention, its boards, seminaries, and other entities have simultaneously constituted both the strongest unifying factor and the greatest risk of division affecting the churches of the Convention. The Convention adopted the Baptist Faith & Message to employ it in neither the outward-facing nor the inward-facing use. Rather, the document became a laterally facing document by which churches were expressing their expectations to the Convention's supported entities, sometimes in an accusatory tone and sometimes to accomplish their vindication.

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[8] E[dgar] Y[oung] Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908).

The Evolution Controversy

Vindication was on the mind of the aforementioned E. Y. Mullins in 1925. He was the immediate past President of the Southern Baptist Convention, the current President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the spokesman for the "Committee on the Baptist Faith and Message" reporting to the assembled messengers at the 1925 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Memphis, TN. The Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy was at a fever pitch, and Baptist leaders like John Franklyn Norris (1877–1952) had greatly agitated the Baptist churches of the South with allegations that Southern Baptist schools were adopting liberalism, naturalism, German higher criticism, and the theory of evolution.[9]

Mullins, as the leader of one of the targeted institutions, regarded Norris's accusations as specious, yet rather than ignore the risk posed by these charges, Mullins led the Convention to adopt a made-to-order revision of the New Hampshire Confession, along with a reaffirmation of a statement on "Science and Religion" that the 1923 meeting of the Convention had published. Putting Norris's fulminations aside was strategically important. One of Norris's targets, L. R. Scarborough, sat on the Baptist Faith and Message committee and was the chair of the Commission on the Co-operative Program. Clearing these leaders of the charges of doctrinal infidelity safeguarded not merely two seminaries but also their entire vision of the Convention's future.[10]

Mullins's victory was complete. An effort to amend the confession by making Article III ("The Fall of Man") a more explicitly anti-evolutionary statement was defeated 68% to 32%. All elements of the new plan for the Convention passed easily.[11]

The Elliott Controversy

The Cooperative Program succeeded well enough that the scope of cooperative work within the Southern Baptist Convention had grown considerably by the 1960s. In 1961, the Convention heard reports from an Executive Committee, four general boards (the

[9] Norris's targets included Joseph Martin Dawson (1879–1973), Samuel Palmer Brooks (1863–1931), and Grove Samuel Dow (1889–1977) of Baylor University; Lee Rutland Scarborough (1870–1945) of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; and John Richard Sampey (1863–1946) of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. See Barry Hankins, *God's Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism*, Second Edition; America's Baptists, ed., Keith Harper (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2022), 18–19.

[10] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred Twenty-Five (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co, 1925), 70–76, 132.

[11] Annual 1925, 76.

Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, the Sunday School Board, and the Annuity Board), six seminaries (Southern, Southwestern, New Orleans, Golden Gate, Southeastern, and Midwestern), the Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans, the Southern Baptist Foundation, and seven commissions (the Education Commission, the Christian Life Commission, the Radio & TV Commission, the Historical Commission, the Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary[12], the Brotherhood Commission, and the Stewardship Commission).[13]

The rapid influx of new entities and new personnel in the intervening 36 years fueled triumphalist visions in the hearts of many Southern Baptists, but it raised suspicions in the hearts of others. The meeting in 1961 was the last tranquil gathering for the Convention in this period. Less than a month later, the Sunday School Board's imprint Broadman Books published *The Message of Genesis* by Midwestern Seminary Professor Ralph Harrison Elliott (1925–2022). The book's treatment of the biblical Book of Genesis became a source of controversy that dominated the next two years of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Critics complained that Elliott's interpretations of Genesis treated much of the material as either ahistorical mythology or inaccurately recorded accounts. Kansas City pastor Walter Ross Edwards (1910–1993) was a member of Midwestern's board of trustees and was one of the most vocal critics. As a local trustee, Edwards enjoyed direct access to Elliott and to his students. Edwards took issue with Elliott's interpretation of Genesis 22, alleging that Elliott believed the idea of God's asking Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, if taken as true, would "smear the character of God." Edwards also complained that Elliott believed Melchizedek to be a priest of Baal.[14]

Rising to Elliott's defense were numerous members of the student body at Midwestern Seminary, the administration and trustee board of the seminary (at first), and an *ad hoc* organization named "Baptists for Freedom." These voices followed a similar pattern of defending Elliott's freedom to articulate his views without consequence while holding short of stating their endorsement of Elliott's specific positions. The Baptists for Freedom newsletter stated, "In writing about the Elliott

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[12] The American Baptist Theological Seminary was a seminary in Nashville, TN, with an entirely African-American student body.

[13] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-One (Nashville: Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1961), 4–22.

[14] W. Ross Edwards, "Pastor's Paragraphs: Midwestern Seminary Situation," *Swope Park Baptist Voice*, XVII, no. 5 (January 31, 1963), Ralph Elliott Controversy Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

controversy, Baptists for Freedom is not concerned either to endorse or condemn the theology asserted in the book, *The Message of Genesis*." The president of the seminary, Millard J. Berquist (1902–1990), wrote, "I think in some places elaboration and amplification would have been helpful. . . . Some things I would very probably have stated differently." The "Student Protest Committee" described their position thusly, "[The points of our statement] do not necessarily imply agreement or disagreement with Dr. Elliott's theological position, but with the violation of principles which we consider basic to Baptist integrity and practice."[15]

The Southern Baptist Convention convened in 1962 in San Francisco, California. Elliott's critics brought two motions at the conclusion of the Wednesday afternoon session. Kenneth Owen White (1902–1985) was the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, and was a member of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. He moved,

> . . . that the messengers to this Convention, by standing vote, reaffirm their faith in the *entire* Bible as the authoritative, authentic, infallible Word of God, that we express our abiding and unchanging objection to the dissemination of theological views in any of our seminaries which would undermine such faith in the historical accuracy and doctrinal integrity of the Bible, and that we kindly but firmly instruct the trustees and administrative officers of our institutions and [other] agencies to take such steps as shall be necessary to remedy at once those situations where such views now threaten our historic position.[16]

Three items later, Ralph Franklin Powell (1912–2001) of Missouri moved ". . . that this Convention instruct the Sunday School Board to cease from publication and printing the book, *The Message of Genesis*, by Dr. Elliott, and that they furthermore recall from all sales this book which contradicts Baptist conviction."[17] Earl Otha Harding (1912–1973), the Executive Secretary of Powell's state convention, asked from the platform on

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[15] "Concerning the Elliott Controversy," *Baptists for Freedom* (February 1963), Ralph Elliott Controversy Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives; Millard J. Berquist, "To All Midwestern Seminary Students," Ralph Elliott Controversy Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives; "The Action of the Board of Trustees as Interpreted by the Student Protest Committee," Ralph Elliott Controversy Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

[16] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-Two (Nashville, Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1962), 65.

[17] Annual 1962, 65.

Thursday morning for Powell to withdraw his motion. Powell did so, but to little avail. In the afternoon session, Ben D. Windham (n.d.) of Portland, Oregon, reiterated the withdrawn motion, moving "That this Convention instruct the Sunday School Board to cease publishing and to recall from all distribution channels, the book, *The Message of Genesis*, by Dr. Ralph Elliott."[18] White's motion was adopted. Powell's motion was lost.[19]

In this meeting, where the Convention refrained from ordering a book ban upon the Sunday School Board but overwhelmingly instructed "trustees and officers" to "remedy at once" situations like that of Elliott's book, the Convention empaneled a committee to produce a revision of the Baptist Faith & Message. Elected to lead that committee and to serve as the Convention President for the coming year was Herschel Harold Hobbs (1907–1995) of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Referring to the 1925 adoption of the Baptist Faith & Message, the messenger body requested that the committee produce "some similar statement which shall serve as information to the churches, and which may serve as guidelines to the various agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention." The laterally facing nature of the confession of faith appears clearly in the differing roles specified for the confession with regard to the churches on one hand and the agencies on the other.[20]

Hobbs's committee reported back to the Convention the following year in Kansas City. The proposed modifications were significant and ranged far beyond the contemporary matters of controversy.

In the revised Preamble, the committee took a position that acknowledged the concerns of groups like "Baptists for Freedom," while refusing to give them absolute sway. "The soul's competency before God, freedom in religion, and the priesthood of the believer" are indeed cherished elements of historic Baptist thought. That notwithstanding, there remain "certain definite doctrines that Baptists believe, cherish, and with which they have been and are now closely identified." Article I concerning "The Scriptures" contained two interesting additions. Early in the article, the committee added language describing the Bible as "the record of God's revelation of Himself to man." The committee appended to the end of the article the sentence, "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." Each of these insertions became controversial later in the century.[21]

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[18] Annual 1962, 71.
[19] Annual 1962, 68, 73.
[20] Annual 1962, 64.
[21] Annual 1962, 270.

The committee greatly expanded Article II by adding more detailed and robust language concerning each member of the Trinity. Rather than being titled "The Fall of Man," Article III of the revised confession was simply entitled, "Man." The article changed the language that the 1925 confession had employed to discuss the condemnation of mankind for sin. The revised language opened the confession to greater compatibility with the concept of an "age of accountability" held by many Southern Baptists. To this article, the committee also added the sentence, "The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created man in His own image, and in that Christ died for man; therefore every man possesses dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love." This sentence undergirded and guided Southern Baptist efforts toward racial reconciliation for more than six ensuing decades.[22]

The committee combined what had been articles IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, and X into a new Article IV entitled simply "Salvation." Both the New Hampshire Confession and the 1925 version of the Baptist Faith & Message were moderately Calvinistic documents. The theological modifications to these soteriological articles were slight, resulting in a statement of soteriology that perhaps no quarter of Southern Baptist life would pen but that all quarters of Southern Baptist life could affirm.[23]

The new Article V, "God's Purpose of Grace," replaced articles IX and XI in the 1925 version. The major addition was language explicitly extending the promise of perseverance to those believers who "may fall into sin through neglect and temptation."[24]

Article VI was a restatement of the twelfth article in the 1925 version. The committee's revisions reflected a desire to stipulate that there are two and only two church ordinances, a reluctance to use the word "laws" to describe Christ's teachings regarding the conduct of church life, insistence upon democratic processes of congregational church governance, and some assertion of the role and responsibility of the church member before turning to consider church officers. The committee eschewed the words "bishops" and "elders," replacing them with the word "pastors," which was absent from the 1925 article. The most striking and courageous addition, considering the lingering influence of Landmarkism in the 1960s, was the committee's affirmation

[22] Annual 1962, 271–73.
[23] Annual 1962, 273–74.
[24] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-Two, 274–75.

that the word "church" sometimes appears in the New Testament referring to something other than an individual local congregation presently gathering on earth.[25]

Article VII on the ordinances made some small changes (e.g., "fruit of the vine" in place of "wine" and the addition of "church ordinance" to the language about baptism). The committee's revisions expressly depicted the second ordinance as a memorial supper. Article VIII on "The Lord's Day" was barely changed. Article IX on "The Kingdom" adopted new language that was less compatible with postmillennialism, which had fallen out of favor.[26]

The former articles XV, XVI, and XVII were subsumed under the new Article X, "Last Things." The new article greatly reduced both the verbiage and the content of these three articles, making the new confession a safe statement for Southern Baptists of a variety of different eschatological viewpoints. Article XI on "Evangelism and Missions" echoes the previous version.[27]

Ralph Elliott and Midwestern Seminary emerged again in Article XII on "Education." The new article included a pointed addendum:

> In Christian education there should be a proper balance between academic freedom and academic responsibility. Freedom in any orderly relationship of human life is always limited and never absolute. The freedom of a teacher in a Christian school, college, or seminary is limited by the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ, by the authoritative nature of the Scriptures, and by the distinct purpose for which the school exists.[28]

Articles XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, and XVII are largely unchanged. One noteworthy change in Article XVI on "Peace and War" is the removal of a final sentence that is more compatible with postmillennialism.[29]

Four observations about the revisions are in order. First, there is no discernible contemporary conflict or question within Southern Baptist life that prompted the substantial expansion of Article II. This is theology for theology's sake, which has not

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[25] Annual, 1962, 275.
[26] Annual, 1962, 276.
[27] Annual, 1962, 277–78.
[28] Annual, 1962, 278.
[29] Annual, 1962, 279–81.

generally been the Southern Baptist motivation for composing statements of faith. Here perhaps we see most clearly the interests of Hobbs.

Second, the new version of the confession loosened the confession as it pertained to the churches. The diminished tones of postmillennialism made the confession more easily embraced by those churches imbibing from the widening stream of premillennialism in the South. The Calvinism in the soteriological articles was blurred a little more, making greater room for Southern Baptist congregations that were cooling in their relationship with Dort. All of this happened without inserting any new language that would be offensive to postmillennialists or stricter Calvinists. Hobbs's committee mastered the use of deliberate vagueness to build a wider tent of Southern Baptist churches.

Third, as it pertained to the academy, the 1963 revisions tightened the confession. Hobbs's answer to reassure people like White, Edwards, Powell, and Windham came in Article XII's subordination of academic freedom to the authority of scripture and to the denominational purposes of seminaries. Southern Baptists' interest in the confession of faith was in its potential for keeping entities sufficiently within the mainstream of Southern Baptist thought to maximize the appeal of the Cooperative Program to churches.

Fourth, although the revisions of the Baptist Faith & Message in 1963, taken together with the firing of Elliott at Midwestern, succeeded in securing a momentary peace among Southern Baptists, the seed of every subsequent Southern Baptist controversy in the remainder of the twentieth century was planted into the confession of faith by the messengers in 1963.

The Family Article of 1998

The Southern Baptist Convention amended the Baptist Faith & Message twice between 1998 and 2000. The two occasions are best understood when considered as one, since each fits neatly within the overall project widely known as the conservative resurgence.

At the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas, TX, messenger Charles Lawson (n.d.) moved that President Thomas David Elliff (1944–) appoint a committee "to review the Baptist Faith & Message of May 9, 1963, for the primary purpose of adding an article on 'The Family.'" The messengers adopted Lawson's motion, and Elliff appointed the committee, designating as its chair Anthony

Jordan (n.d.), who was the Executive Director-Treasurer of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma at the time.[30]

The committee reported to the 1998 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention and recommended that the messengers add a new article—Article XVIII—to the confession of faith. After surviving two failed attempts at amendment, the recommendation passed.[31]

The general flow of the Baptist Faith & Message already moved from theology to soteriology to ecclesiology, and then mostly to Christian ethics. The new article drew from a few statements about Christian anthropology to draw conclusions about family ethics. Ethical questions addressed in the article include adoption, divorce, homosexuality, premarital or other extramarital sex, feminism, abortion, and domestic abuse.

In some ways, the new article on the family hearkened back to the pattern of publishing confessions of faith that Baptists had been following in the seventeenth century. The Convention did not adopt this article to rein in rogue entities or employees. Not yet in 1998 was sexual orientation and gender identity a serious topic of disagreement within many Southern Baptist churches, nor was it a matter of controversy regarding the entities. Southern Baptist churches enjoyed a consistent position on abortion that the Convention had articulated numerous times since 1979. Indeed, one might best characterize this article as content written by the entities rather than as content imposed upon the entities. Two of the committee members were the wives of seminary presidents, two were executives at state conventions, one was the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (an entity), and only two were pastors of local congregations.[32]

The new article faced outward instead of inward. At the time of Article XVIII's adoption, the President of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton (1946–), had implemented a "Don't Ask; Don't Tell" policy allowing homosexual men and women to serve in the armed forces. President Clinton was also trying to champion an abortion policy slogan that claimed an aspiration that the act be "safe, legal, and rare," although

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[30] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Seven (Nashville: Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1997), 36; "Elliff names study committee for Baptist Faith & Message," *Baptist Press* (February 3, 1998).

[31] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Eight (Nashville: Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1998), 78–79.

[32] "Elliff names study committee," *Baptist Press* (February 3, 1998).

he had controversially vetoed a ban on partial-birth abortion in 1996. Also, the Southern Baptist Convention was in its second year of an official boycott of the Disney Company in response to Disney's promotion of special days promoting homosexual attendance and celebrating homosexuality at Disney-themed parks.[33]

Where the article might have spoken inwardly to address ongoing disputes within the churches, it adopted a much gentler tone. The article never uses the word "divorce," opting instead to state rather obliquely that marriage is a "commitment for a lifetime." A brief survey of the Convention's publication arm reveals that divorce was a matter of significant controversy within the churches. Former Convention President Charles Frazier Stanley Jr. (1932–2023) had barely avoided divorce when his wife withdrew her divorce suit in 1996. That same year, Baptist Press published an article spelling out four different positions that Southern Baptist churches were taking regarding the permissibility of divorce and remarriage. The next year, a Southern Baptist pastor in Kentucky formed a support group for divorced Southern Baptist pastors. Also in 1997, the State of Louisiana adopted a "Covenant Marriage" law designed to encourage those so inclined (presumably people like Southern Baptist parishioners) to enter into marriage covenants that were more difficult to exit by divorce. The new article deftly avoided taking any position on what conditions, if any, made divorce permissible for obedient Christians.[34]

The most heavily debated portion of Article XVII was the language instructing wives to "submit [themselves] graciously to the servant leadership of [their] husbands." The minority party in the Convention called instead for an ethic of equal power and equal submission in marriage.[35]

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[33] Thomas L. Friedman, "Chiefs Back Clinton on Gay-Troop Plan; President Admits Revised Policy Isn't Perfect," *The New York Times* (July 20, 1993); Alison Mitchell, "Clinton, in Emotional Terms, Explains His Abortion Veto," *The New York Times* (December 14, 1996); "Resolution No. 2—On Moral Stewardship and The Disney Company," in Annual 1997, 90.

[34] Stanley's wife resumed her quest and obtained a divorce in 2000. Lee Weeks, "Charles Stanley recounts lessons God taught during marital crisis," *Baptist Press* (April 2, 1998); "Charles Stanley, wife divorce; Atlanta church affirms pastor," *Baptist Press* (May 23, 2000); Dwayne Hastings, "Divorce: An Interpretive Maze," *Baptist Press* (February 1, 1996); Ken Walker, "Divorced pastors form network to help others facing crisis," *Baptist Press* (May 14, 1997); Lacy Thompson, "La. aims to reduce divorce via marriage covenant law," *Baptist Press* (July 21, 1997).

[35] Phil Strickland, "Equal Submission, a Better Biblical Model," *Texas Baptists Committed* (December 1998).

In addition to adding Article XVIII, the messengers took one other action in 1998 that would significantly affect the content of the confession of faith. They elected as the new SBC President Leighton Paige Patterson (1942–).[36]

The 2000 Revision

In Patterson's first year to preside over the Annual Meeting, Thomas Cotesworth Pinckney (1930–2021) moved to appoint a committee to revise the Baptist Faith & Message yet again. The motion narrowly carried with 54% in favor, 46% against. Patterson appointed a fifteen-member committee chaired by Memphis pastor and former SBC President Adrian Pierce Rogers (1931–2005). Among the fourteen other members, Patterson appointed Pinckney, the maker of the original motion.[37]

The Convention gathered in Orlando, Florida, for its first business session on June 13, 2000. Rogers brought the report of the committee that morning, but with the presentation, he offered a last-minute revision to the proposed preamble, described below. The messengers rebuffed three attempts to amend the committee's report, adopted the report unchanged, and created a new version of the Baptist Faith & Message.[38]

Rogers led the committee to make fewer changes to the confession of faith than had the committee Hobbs led in 1963, but the effect of the changes was more long-lasting and more divisive. A former President of the United States declared himself no longer to be a Southern Baptist in response to the adoption of the new version of the confession, and a quarter of a century later, there remain a few churches and state conventions that do not acknowledge the latest version of the Baptist Faith & Message, instead owning the 1963 version of the confession.[39]

The committee had stricken some language from the preamble that had been added by Mullins back in 1925. Of particular interest was the removal of the phrases "the soul's competency before God" and "the priesthood of the believer." So severe was the debate over this change of language that Richard Albert Mohler Jr. (1959–), who was

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[36] Annual 1998, 66.

[37] Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Nine (Nashville: Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1999), 36, 87; Herb Hollinger, "Adrian Rogers named chairman of BF&M study committee," *Baptist Press* (August 24, 1999).

[38] Annual of the 2000 Southern Baptist Convention (Nashville, Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2000), 76.

[39] "Jimmy Carter Leaves Southern Baptists," ABC News (October 20, 2000); Calli Keener, "NAMB, BGCT leaders meet to discuss bridging gaps," *Baptist Press* (August 21, 2024).

a member of the committee and was the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, appeared in *The Alabama Baptist* supporting the removal of the language, while Robert S. Terry (n.d.), editor of the paper, published in the same edition a rebuttal of Mohler's claims.[40]

At the eleventh hour, the committee brought a revision to their report restoring some of Mullins's language, albeit slightly modified: "Baptists cherish and defend religious liberty, and deny the right of any secular or religious authority to impose a confession of faith upon a church or body of churches. We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God." The new language featured the plural "priesthood of believers" rather than the singular "priesthood of the believer." Furthermore, not all of Mullins's language was restored. On these grounds, Charles R. Wade (1940–) unsuccessfully moved to amend the report to restore portions of the original language to the preamble.

The Convention amended Article I ("The Scriptures") by removing some of the language that Hobbs and his committee had drafted in 1963. Specifically, rather than describing the Bible as "the record of God's revelation of Himself to man," the new article said that the Bible "is God's revelation of Himself to man." Additionally, the old language "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ," yielded to new wording declaring that "All scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation."[41]

Southern Baptist seminary professor Daniel Lowell Akin (1957–) justified the revisions to Article I as a necessary response to "neo-orthodox manipulation which had used the 1963 statement to say, [first], that some of the Bible is God's revelation but not all of it is, and secondly, that sometimes the teachings of Jesus must be set in contrast to and even in opposition to other texts and writings of the authors of Scripture." Russell Hooper Dilday (1930–2023) countered that the "record of" verbiage was not a neo-

[40] "Mohler stresses need for biblical authority," *The Alabama Baptist* (June 1, 2000); Robert S Terry, "Thoughts by Bob Terry: Is Soul Competency Under Attack?" *The Alabama Baptist* (June 1, 2000).

[41] The SBC Annual for the 2000 meeting curiously contains not one word of the originally proposed report from the Baptist Faith & Message Study Committee, other than the wording of the committee's late addition to the report. All quotes from and references to the 2000 version of the Baptist Faith & Message come from the official website of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. "Comparison Chart"; https://bfm.sbc.net/comparison-chart; accessed July 22, 2025.

orthodox dodge of biblical inerrancy and that "the deletion of [the] Christological principle of Biblical interpretation is, to many, the most serious flaw" of the revised confession of faith, because it "appears to elevate the Bible above Jesus and to weaken the idea that He is Lord of the Bible."[42]

Hobbs's language, designed to quell concerns about professorial fidelity to the authority of the Bible, had failed in that aim. Although the new language eschewed the word "inerrancy" that had become the point of greatest contention in the two decades leading up to the turn of the millennium, by subtraction of language rather than addition, Rogers and his committee assuaged the concerns some Southern Baptists had raised about those members of the academic guild whose work was being supported by Cooperative Program funds.

Article II ("God") contains an explicit rejection of open theism, stipulating that God's "perfect knowledge extends to all things past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures." The article also inserted the word "substitutionary" in the section on God the Son, explicitly affirming substitutionary atonement. Article III ("Man"), by the insertion of a single sentence, asserts that the male-female binary of sex and gender in all humanity is the fixed and intentional design of God. Also, the new version expanded Hobbs's language about the dignity of all men to assert explicitly that "every person of every race possesses full dignity" as a bearer of the image of God. Article IV ("Salvation") returns to the confession a section on "Justification" that Hobbs et al. had elided. It also adds a sentence asserting the exclusivity of salvation through personal faith in Jesus.

Article VI ("The Church") includes an addition at the end of the article that remains a point of division through the present day. If Hobbs's new language in Article I failed to establish the lasting clarity that it was meant to secure, the equivalent failure in the 2000 revision must be this sentence: "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

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[42] Michael Foust, "Akin: Correct view of biblical inspiration found in Jesus' words," *Baptist Press* (February 15, 2001); Russell Dilday, "A Serious Look at the Baptist Faith & Message Revisions," in *Stand with Christ: Why Missionaries Can't Sign the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), 20, 26.

Although very few Southern Baptist churches had ordained or employed any women in the office of pastor, the concept created conflict between those determined to increase those numbers greatly and those determined to take them to zero.[43]

Changes to Article VIII ("The Lord's Day") provoked both criticism from some quarters, alleging that the revised article rendered the Baptist Faith & Message more liberal than the 1963 version. Rogers led the committee to remove language that had previously called for believers to "[refrain] from worldly amusements, and [rest] from secular employments, work of necessity and mercy only being excepted." In its place, the revised statement simply reads "Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ."[44]

Article XI ("Evangelism and Missions") added the sentence, "The Lord Jesus has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations." New language in Article XII ("Education") celebrated the salubrious relationship between Christian faith and human learning. Article XV ("The Christian and the Social Order") added to "greed, selfishness, and vice" a substantially expanded list of vices: "all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography." The revised article also obligated Southern Baptists to "speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death." The Convention returned to Article VI ("Peace and War") some of the language that Hobbs's committee had removed in 1963, "Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace." The only alteration that the committee recommended regarding the two-year-old article on the family was an insertion teaching that alongside providing for a man and woman the various benefits it bestows, marriage reveals "the union between Christ and His church."

The following observations are in order: First, whereas the 1963 committee had significantly altered both the structure and the wording of the confession of faith, the 2000 committee's changes extended only to the insertion and deletion of select phrases in most cases. Second, although the changes to the confession were more precise than in 1963, the impact of the changes was much greater because the amended confession of faith was placed into the hands of a network of trustees who stood ready to act in

[43] Sarah Frances Anders reported to a gathering of the Woman's Missionary Union in 1982 that around 140 women had been ordained in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention and that only six Southern Baptist churches at the time were led by female pastors. "Baptist Women in Ministry: A History of the Organization," Baptist Women in Ministry, https://bwim.info/history/; accessed July 22, 2025.

[44] Dilday, 26.

implementation of the changes across the entire phalanx of entities related to the Southern Baptist Convention. Third, although the motion to revise the confession of faith passed narrowly on a marked ballot vote, the revisions themselves passed easily by a show of ballots. Fourth, for all but one of the revisions made in 2000, debate on these topics has largely ceased within the Southern Baptist Convention, and the positions taken that year have become the settled belief of the Convention. Fifth, for that one remaining revision, the language about limiting the office of pastor to men, although the general sentiment of that provision is also the settled belief of the Convention, specific application of that general language to specific situations has caused ongoing controversy. This phraseology has been the seed from which has sprouted further debate about the Convention's statement of faith. Sixth, as with the 1998 Article on the Family, the revisions adopted by the Convention in 2000 were outward-facing statements that the Convention was making to the world (except for the limitation of the office of pastor to men and the changes to Article I). Seventh, in the subsequent two decades, with the *Obergefell* and *Bostock* decisions at the United States Supreme Court, the explicit articulation of the Convention's beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity was especially timely.

The Saddleback Controversy

On May 6, 2021, Saddleback Valley Community Church ordained three women to serve as pastors within the congregation. Saddleback was a cooperating church within the Southern Baptist Convention at the time. The women's job responsibilities in the church involved pastoral care, children's ministry, and student ministry, respectively. The announcement created significant debate. Four announced candidates for the SBC Presidency in June 2021 all weighed in with words critical of Saddleback's decision. At that year's meeting, Shad Tibbs moved that the Convention "break fellowship with Saddleback Church."[45]

The church's long-tenured pastor, Richard Duane Warren (1954–), responded to critics saying, "Saddleback is led by a dozen Elders[.] They're all married men as Titus 1:6 requires." While the controversy was unfolding, Warren retired, and the church selected

[45] George Schroeder and Scott Barkley, "Saddleback ordination service sparks SBC discussion over women and title of pastor," *Baptist Press* (May 10, 2021); Annual of the 2021 Southern Baptist Convention (Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2021), 74.

Andy Wood (n.d.) as Warren's successor. Wood and Warren alike sought to differentiate between "the gift of pastoring" and "the office of pastoring."[46]

The next year, at the 2022 Annual Meeting, the Credentials Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention reported back to the messengers about the Tibbs motion. They appealed to the Convention for help. In their report, they identified uncertainty as to the meaning of the phrase "office of pastor is limited to men" in Article VI:

> It is the unanimous opinion of the Credentials Committee that the majority of Southern Baptists hold to the belief that the function of lead pastor, elder, bishop, or overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture and that this was the intended definition of "office of pastor" as stated in Article VI of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000. The Credentials Committee has found little information evidencing the Convention's beliefs regarding the use of the "title of pastor" for staff positions with different responsibility and authority than that of the lead pastor.[47]

The ultimate outcome of the Tibbs motion and Saddleback Church is a lengthy story that is beyond the scope of this work. Relevant for the current purpose is the motion made by Jared Cornutt (1990–) the following year to try to enhance the clarity of the phrase Article VI. Cornutt moved that the Convention add "the words 'elder' and 'overseer' alongside the use of the word 'pastor.'" Cornutt's motion was adopted, and for the first time in the history of the document, the Baptist Faith & Message was amended in a single session as the result of a motion from the floor.[48]

Cornutt's motion, although historic, did not actually add any new words to the history of the confessional text. The New Hampshire Confession referred to the first office of the church as "Bishops or Pastors." Mullins's version of the Baptist Faith &

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[46] Rick Warren (@RickWarren), "By the way, since NOT ONE critic this past yr took the time to ask: Saddleback is led by a dozen Elders. They're all married men as Titus 1:6 requires. 'Shoot first. Clarify later' shows they have unloving reasons to hate you. 'Speaking before listening is foolish & rude' Pr.18:13," Twitter, June 20, 2022, https://x.com/RickWarren/status/1538999329158930432; Baptist Press, "SBC22 – 5 Tuesday Afternoon – Misc Business," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrFUI8SJUN0&list=PLdwm_-wDgg1xuocdiE606f-0vweayBLTt&index=19; accessed August 22, 2025.

[47] Annual 2022, 60.

[48] Annual of the 2023 Southern Baptist Convention (Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2023), 57, 90.

Message instead reads "bishops or elders." Hobbs's version chose simply to say "pastors." Both the word "bishop" and the word "overseer" are translations of the same Greek word; they are equivalents of one another. Cornutt's proposed solution was to take all of the words used in any of the previous versions of the confession and place all three of them into Article VI. [49]

Whether Cornutt's amendment will finally resolve the questions posed by the Credential Committee remains to be seen. It did, however, accomplish one significant change related to the Baptist Faith & Message. At the 2024 Annual Meeting, the Southern Baptist Convention passed the first of two votes to alter its constitution to require that changes to the Baptist Faith & Message be passed by a two-thirds majority of the Convention in two consecutive years.[50]

Conclusion

Will the nature of the Baptist Faith & Message remain primarily that of a laterally facing document, used principally to set expectations for the beliefs and actions of the employees at Convention-related entities, or will the Convention increasingly seek to enforce the confession of faith in determining which churches are in friendly cooperation with the Convention? Until the late twentieth century, the Southern Baptist Convention was able to presume that the preponderance of churches was in sincere agreement with the various articles of the Baptist Faith & Message. Apart from such a presumption, an increasing temptation to employ the confession similarly to the design of the "Articles of Religion" in the New Connexion will likely result in a more inward-facing use of this document.

If the Convention does trend toward using the confession in this way, can a document like the Baptist Faith & Message serve well in that role? Mullins, Hobbs, and Rogers all employed the lacunae in the document to as great an effect as they achieved by what they did say. On the timing of condemnation in infancy, the privileges of being seated at the Lord's table, the gender requirements of the diaconate, and the permitted activities on the Lord's Day, contributors to the confession who were more concerned about speaking to the entities and to the public at large were able to avoid these

[49] "The New Hampshire Confession" in W. J. McGlothlin, Baptist Confessions of Faith (Philadelphia; Boston; Chicago; St. Louis; Toronto: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 305; Annual 1925, 73; Annual 1963, 275.

[50] Book of Reports of the 2025 Southern Baptist Convention, 50.

potentially divisive issues since they pertained almost exclusively to the internal operations of churches—a realm into which they had little interest in meddling.

Finally, will the Convention need to expand what the Baptist Faith & Message says about doctrines like the Trinity, for which public polling suggests that Evangelical catechesis is failing to do its job? Vocal support has emerged for revising the Baptist Faith & Message to address not only the burning questions of the twenty-first century, but also those of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries.

My Favorite Texas Baptist Heresies

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Baptists often use the word "heresy" when someone disagrees with their theological position. Today, Baptists daily accuse fellow Baptists of heresy on social media over issues such as limited atonement, women in the ministry, inerrancy, and a multitude of other issues. Because of social media, people learn of these debates almost instantaneously, behind the safety of their computer screen, which only adds more superficial self-righteousness to the fire. Before the era of "X" (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, these issues were no less intense and personal but generally contained and rectified within the local church or association. In the mid-1890s, two men were accused of heresy and leading their congregations into their false doctrine. Information on these men is limited and primarily provided by those who accused them and won the day. For this reason, information on Matthew T. Martin and George Fortune is often skewed or ignored by those interested in Texas Baptist history.

Martinism

Matthew Thomas Martin was born on August 6, 1842, in Smith County, Texas. He attended Mississippi College before serving the Confederacy during the Civil War. Following the Civil War, he taught mathematics at Mississippi College (1871–77) while simultaneously serving as the college's chief fundraiser. In fact, Martin raised enough money to save Mississippi College from bankruptcy during the period of Reconstruction. Ordained and licensed in 1877, Martin's first ministerial endeavor was as administrator of Meridian Female College.[1]

[1] Joseph E. Early, Jr., *A Handbook of Texas Baptist Biography* (Indianapolis: Author House, 2004), 151–52.

Moving to Waco, Texas, for his wife's health purposes, he became a member of First Baptist Church, which was pastored by the eminent B. H. Carroll. Martin began to espouse a theology different from that of other Texas Baptists. Dubbed "Martinism," he believed that if someone doubted his conversion, the person's conversion was not sound. Riley described his beliefs as,

> By a strange combination of doctrinal views, such as that of two births, one of the Spirit and the other of the Word; the precedence of sanctification to conversion; positive assurance, which he insisted must precede baptism; a practical denial of repentance as a doctrine, and a discouragement of prayer, both by sinners themselves and by others for them; this was the stock of his views as this erratic man preached and talked as he had the opportunity.[2]

Carroll was fond of Martin and attempted to steer him back to orthodoxy, but he continued to promote his beliefs. To stop his beliefs from spreading, First Baptist Waco held four long and detailed meetings in July 1889, where his views were found errant, and his ministerial credentials were rescinded. The church concluded its report by stating,

> And we further charge that even in so short a time, in some places where his doctrines have been received and his spirit imbibed, the effect has been detrimental to prayer-meetings, Sunday-schools, mission work and other denominational activities.[3]

Despite his views and the removal of his ministerial credentials, J. M. Carroll noted that everyone liked Martin, and the proceedings were very cordial. The church didn't want to destroy him; thus, they gave him a letter of church dismissal in good standing.[4] Martin then moved to Woodstock, Georgia, where he joined the local Baptist church that relicensed him to preach.

In 1890, Martin returned to Texas and joined the Marlin Baptist Church outside of Waco. The Marlin church then asked First Baptist Waco to restore Martin's former

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[2] B. F. Riley, *A History of Texas Baptists* (Dallas: Published by the Author, 1907), 311.

[3] B. F. Fuller, *History of Texas Baptists* (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1900), 389.

[4] J. M. Carroll, *A History of Texas Baptists* (Dallas: Baptist Standard Publishing, 1923), 722.

credentials that the church had revoked in 1889. B. H. Carroll responded to the Marlin Church with a series of questions in an attempt to determine Martin's current theology. The Marlin Church responded, and it was evident that his views had not changed. Without waiting for First Baptist Waco to reply, the Marlin Baptist Church adopted a resolution in February 1890 that provided him with "authority to preach the Gospel and administer the sacred ordinances thereof."[5] As Marlin was a member of the Waco Baptist Association, it did not take long for member churches to react. First Baptist Waco brought charges to the Association, accusing the Marlin church of promoting heresy.[6] The church was found guilty and removed from the Waco Association on September 2, 1890. The following year, the Marlin Church petitioned the Waco Baptist Association for full reinstatement. They conceded that the charges were true and that they had repented of their earlier action. As a result, they were readmitted to the Waco Association. Martin left Texas in 1893 to pastor the Gloster Baptist Church in Gloster, Mississippi, where he died of heart disease in 1898.[7]

Despite his absence in Texas, Martin's teachings became popular among several churches in central Texas. Though he apparently came to his beliefs without relying on Martin, Reverend E. R. Carswell of Gonzalez, Texas, became the most vocal advocate of Martin's teachings in the 1890s and went so far as to write a tract entitled *Bible Assurance,* or *A Reply to B. H. Carroll's Tract on Assurance*, in early 1895. To keep these beliefs from gaining further traction in Texas, the Baptist General Convention of Texas passed an amendment at the 1895 regular session, which refused admittance to anyone who espoused Martin's teachings.[8] The Mississippi Baptist Convention passed a similar amendment in 1897. Martin died of heart disease on October 24, 1898, near St. Louis, Missouri, and was buried in Gloster, Mississippi.[9]

Fortunism

Little is known of George Fortune before he arrived in Paris, Texas, in 1891. He claimed to be a Baptist minister and began to attend the First Baptist Church. Since the church

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[5] Fuller, *History*, 393.

[6] Riley, 312.

[7] Early, 151–52.

[8] Carroll, *A History of Texas Baptists,* 722–23.

[9] Karen O'Dell Bullock, "Martin, Matthew Thomas," *Handbook of Texas Online*; accessed May 11, 2023, https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/martin-matthew-thomas.

was without a pastor, he was asked to preach.[10] The church enjoyed his preaching and, in a few weeks, called him as their pastor. A member of the church noted, "He was a man of fine address, of a literary turn, and seemed to be scholarly in his attainments, and withal a fine pulpit orator."[11]

The longer Fortune stayed, however, the more he moved away from Baptist or even an orthodox theology. He began to preach that "Christ's death on the cross was not effectual for salvation, there was no personal Satan, original sin did not exist, there was no eternal punishment, and the scriptures were not fully inspired by God."[12]

In 1894, he published two sermons/pamphlets, "Atonement: A Sermon and The Atonement: Perspectives and Constructive," in which he denied the vicarious atonement of Christ and that sinners are not saved by Christ's death but rather by his life.[13] As reported by Fuller, these pamphlets stated,

> Looking at this theory, then, as a theory, and analyzing it upon its merits, its meaning obviously leads to two propositions, both of which do the gravest violence, not only to the Christian religion, but to justice and truth. The fundamental principle of this theory is that Jesus *literally* took the sinner's place and bore the penalty of his sins. The first objection to this is that God made His son Jesus Christ sin, who knew no sin. That is to say, if the theory of substitution be correct, God consented to look on Jesus Christ as a sinner, who at the same time was not a sinner, in order that He might be able to look on man, who is a sinner, a righteous man, But one thing is sure—a truth is a truth forever and everywhere. That which is true on earth is true in heaven. The calling of that true, which is not true, does not change its nature.

Furthermore, he stated,

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[10] R. L. Vaughn in the November 7, 2016, edition of Music and Ministry – Seeking the Old Paths, in an excellent article entitled "The Fortune of Texas Baptists: Arguing the Atonement" may have found material concerning his earlier life. Vaughn, however, notes that he cannot be certain that the George Fortune he depicted is the correct George Fortune.

[11] Fuller, *History*, 398–99.

[12] Fuller, *History*, 398–99.

[13] Ministry and Music – Seeking the Old Paths: "The Fortune of Texas Baptists: Arguing the Atonement"; accessed May 29, 2026, https://baptistsearch.blogspot.com.

> This is why we are compelled to dispute the substitutionary theory of Augustine and Calvin. It charges God with both folly and falsehood. To regard Jesus as a sinner is either true or false. If true, He cannot be our Savior. If false, it charges God with untruth . . . So that when it is said God made Jesus a sinner, who was not a sinner, I understand the proposition, and solemnly avow that it is not only unscriptural and unphilosophical, but is not true, and cannot be true, if God be the God of truth."[14]

Several of the Texas Baptist papers quickly denounced these tracts.

Because of these published pamphlets, the Baptist General Convention of Texas became involved with what Fortune was espousing at First Baptist Paris and statewide. At the 1895 annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, it was "Resolved that, no one shall be recognized a member of this body who holds and teaches . . . that Christ is not the believer's substitute, penalty and righteousness, a doctrine held by Fortunism."[15] The First Baptist Paris messengers were thus denied a seat.

Fortune's views soon split the Paris church into a majority who held to their pastor's views and a minority who wanted to remove him as pastor. An investigation into Fortune's past, led by the minority, discovered that Fortune had been a Methodist preacher in Illinois, a temperance worker in Kansas, and a hardshell Baptist preacher in Arkansas.[16] In early 1896, a minority in the church appealed to the Baptist General Convention of Texas in an attempt to claim the church building based on the theory that they retained the original principles on which the church was founded. On February 11, a committee, headed by R. C. Burleson, met in Paris to settle the matter. It was determined that the minority was the true First Baptist Church of Paris, but the building apparently remained in the majority's hands. Fortune was found heretical on nine points:

1. He denies the existence or the personality of the devil.
2. He denies that the Bible teaches that the devil seduced our first parents into sin, and that he continues [to be] the tempter of man till the final judgement.
3. He denies the full and unerring inspiration of the Bible.
4. He denies that Christ is the substitute to bear the penalty of the sinner.

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[14] Cited in Fuller, *History*, 399–400.

[15] Fuller, *History*, 402.

[16] Early, 96.

5. He denies that the sinner's sin was imputed to Christ, that His righteousness might be imputed to the sinner. In other words, he denies the Bible atonement.
6. He denies that justice demands the sinner's death.
7. He denies the eternity of punishment of the sinner.
8. He denies the Bible doctrine of the resurrection.
9. He teaches that heathen and Bible worship are substantially acceptable to God, and are but part of evolution, and are equally of God.[17]

Fortune remained the majority's pastor throughout 1896 when he resigned. He continued to do pulpit supply for them throughout 1897 when he left Paris for McAlester in the then Indian Territory of Oklahoma, where he began a law practice. In the July 1897 edition of the *Decatur Daily Republican* of Illinois, it is reported that Fortune provided the reason for his departure as "For myself I shall not again accept the pastorate of any orthodox church. These churches are so constructed as to place the control of their affairs into the hands of the least admirable part of the congregation . . . I therefore, must seek a place where I may feel the force of present duty in the hand of God."[18]

After his departure, Fortunism gradually faded from Texas Baptist life. As for the majority of the Paris Baptist Church that supported him, Fuller noted, "the strong, majority, however, that adhered to Fortune have become so demoralized in doctrine by Fortune's heresy, that they are not able to do anything for Christ."[19] Though deprived of the physical church building, the minority retained the title of First Baptist Paris, recovered from the incident, and prospered.[20]

Fortune remained in McAlester until 1907. He then moved to Wilson County, Kansas, in 1910, where he was listed in the federal census as a poultry farmer. In 1920, the census listed Fortune as a minister. Fortune died on December 7, 1929, and is buried at Buffalo Cemetery in Wilson County, Kansas.[21]

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[17] Fuller, *History*, 406–407.

[18] *Decatur Daily Republican* (Thursday, 29 July 1893), 9.

[19] Fuller, *History*, 407–408.

[20] Fuller, *History*, 407.

[21] Ministry and Music – Seeking the Old Paths: "The Fortune of Texas Baptists: Arguing the Atonement"; accessed May 29, 2026, https://baptistsearch.blogspot.com.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that by the late nineteenth century Texas Baptist theological standards Matthew Martin and George Fortune were outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Martin's beliefs concerning assurance in one's salvation were troubling for Baptists and led to many second baptisms. A second baptism is looked down upon harshly in Baptist soteriology in this era and still is in the twenty-first century. His teaching is reminiscent of many current revivalists who, when finding few people coming forward, often begin to preach "assurance of salvation" sermons. Fortune's theological errors ran deeper. To challenge the substitutionary theory of atonement cuts to the very core of Baptist soteriology. Fortune's beliefs appear to rely on German higher criticism. Higher criticism had made its way into Baptist life in the previous decades and had challenged traditional Baptist beliefs. It was not to be tolerated. When Martin and Fortune left Texas, they took their theological shadows, went, and they became merely an odd footnote in history.

Engaging the Biblical Reasoning for Divine Simplicity[1]

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Introduction

At a fairly recent meeting of the Southwest Regional Evangelical Theological Society, I presented a paper titled "Divine Simplicity and the Boundaries of Orthodoxy." The paper was later published as an article in the journal *Religions*.[2] In the article, I explored whether one must affirm the classical view of Divine Simplicity (DS) to remain within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. DS is the view that God is not composed of parts, and his existence and attributes are identical.[3] Using Vincent of Lerin's threefold test for orthodoxy (a doctrine is believed everywhere, always, by all Christians), I searched for affirmations of DS in the Christian tradition by examining four ecumenical creeds (Nicaea through Chalcedon), three historic confessions (Augsburg, The Thirty-Nine Articles, and Westminster), and a contemporary statement of faith (The Baptist Faith and Message). What I discovered is illustrated in the table below:

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[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the 76th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Diego, California, on Nov. 22, 2024.

[2] Adam Harwood, "Divine Simplicity and the Boundaries of Orthodoxy," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (Aug 2024): 1012 (8 pp.), available at https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15081012.

[3] "God's simplicity entails that his essence and existence are identical, signifying that there is no composition or division within the divine nature." Brandon Smith, "God's Simplicity," in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Jeremy Thompson et al. (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018). Though this definition is helpful and will be used in the present study, there is no consensus on how to define DS. See Jay Wesley Richards, "Divine Simplicity: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," in *For Faith and Clarity*, ed. James K. Beilby (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 157–77, who identifies eight senses of DS, from weak to strong. One's assessment of DS depends on which senses are included in the definition. See also Ross D. Inman, ed. *Contemplating Divine Simplicity: Five Views from Philosophy and Theology*, Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy of Religion (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026).

Table 1. Explicit Affirmations of DS in Select Councils, Confessions, and Statements of Faith.

Council, Confession, or Statement of Faith	DS Is Explicitly Affirmed	DS Is *Not* Explicitly Affirmed
First Ecumenical Council, *The Creed of Nicaea* (325)		✔
Second Ecumenical Council, *The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed* (381)		✔
Third Ecumenical Council, *Canon 7 on the Nicene Creed* (431); *The Formula of Union* (433)		✔
Fourth Ecumenical Council, *The Definition of Faith* (451)		✔
The Augsburg Confession (1530)		✔
The Thirty-Nine Articles (1571)	✔	
The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)	✔	
Baptist Faith and Message (2000)		✔

The table is *not* intended as evidence that church leaders at the ecumenical councils *denied* DS. The finding is merely that DS is not *explicitly affirmed* in those documents. The same is true with the Augsburg Confession and the Baptist Faith and Message. DS is not explicitly affirmed, though this does not mean the documents *deny* DS. Notice, however, that The Thirty-Nine Articles and Westminster *explicitly affirm* DS. What conclusions can be drawn, if any? If Vincent's threefold test for orthodoxy is legitimate and the first four creeds are appropriate markers for Christian orthodoxy, then DS is not required for orthodoxy, though it can be regarded as an orthodox belief.

This exercise in historical theology was instructive, but the research was only one step in exploring the history of Christian thought on DS. The absence of explicit affirmations of DS does not mean the doctrine was *not affirmed* or that denying DS is appropriate. Also, the writings of major Christian thinkers could be examined for indications of whether they affirmed DS.[4]

[4] For an argument that pre-Nicene orthodoxy assumed DS, see Pui Him Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity Before Nicaea* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022). For a study that analyzes DS in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, see Jonathan M. Platter, *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity: A Critical Dialogue with the Theological Metaphysics of Robert W. Jenson*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, vol. 195, ed. Bruce McCormack, Friederike Nüssel, and Christoph Schwöbel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 31–72.

The next step in this investigation of DS is to consider its biblical basis. Typically, theological resources describing DS will frontload a caveat explaining that DS is not an explicit teaching of Scripture, though DS is consistent with the teachings of Scripture. Thus, there is biblical reasoning for DS, a doctrine not explicitly stated in Scripture. By biblical reasoning, I am referring to John Webster's rich concept that biblical reasoning comprises both exegetical and dogmatic reasoning.[5] Biblical reasoning identifies ideas that are faithful to Scripture and help us interpret Scripture. However, the ideas, such as orthodox conceptions of the Trinity and Incarnation, are not explicitly revealed in the text of Scripture.[6]

In this article, I will engage the biblical reasoning of Thomas Aquinas and two contemporary advocates of DS, Steven Duby and Thomas Joseph White, to summarize and reply to their biblical support for the doctrine. One may affirm Christian doctrines undergirding DS without adopting DS. The following doctrines undergird DS: God is Triune, one, eternal, *a se*, uncreated, and spirit. Consider an analogy to Jenga, a game in which players remove blocks from a tower and place them at the top of the structure. Some blocks can be removed with no effect on the tower. The risk, however, is that a player will pull out a block that is essential to the tower, and it will collapse. Suppose beliefs about God are Jenga blocks for constructing a tower representing an orthodox view of God. In that case, the question is whether DS is a block that can be removed from the structure without impacting the tower's structural integrity.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was probably the most significant figure in preparing for DS to be adopted and affirmed by Reformed theologians. The view that God is pure act affirms that God is the uncreated Creator and has no potential, or passive potency. God is *actus purus*.[7] This view of God as pure act pairs nicely with DS, and the concepts are mutually beneficial and reinforcing. In *Summa Theologica* First Part, Question 3 concerns "Of the Simplicity of God." In that section, Aquinas explores and defends DS in eight Articles, formed as the following questions:

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[5] See John Webster's influential essay, "Biblical Reasoning," *Anglican Theological Review* 90 (2008): 733–51, republished in his *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

[6] See, for example, R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.16; *Summa Theologica* I.2.3.

1. Whether God is a body?
2. Whether God is composed of matter and form?
3. Whether God is the same as his essence or nature?
4. Whether essence and existence are the same in God?
5. Whether God is contained in a genus?
6. Whether in God there are any accidents?
7. Whether God is altogether simple?
8. Whether God enters into the composition of other things?[8]

In Article 1, Aquinas answers that God is a spirit and cites John 4:24, though his first line of support is that a body must be put in motion. God, however, is the First Mover, thus unmoved (ST I.2.3). Second, "the first being must of necessity be in act, and in no way in potentiality." Third, God could not have a body because, as a soul animates a body, God (if he had a body) would depend on something outside of himself, but does not. Thus, God has no body.

Perhaps Aquinas provided the proper answer to Article 1, but also inserted arguments not required to support his position, which complicates the matter. Aquinas asked whether God has a body, quoted John 4:24 to say that God is a spirit, and could have ended the inquiry at that point. However, his first line of support, stated as a syllogism, is:

Premise 1: No body is in motion unless it is put in motion.
Premise 2: God is the First Mover and is Himself unmoved.
Conclusion: God is not a body.

Aquinas claimed that Premise 2 had already been proven in ST I.2.3. However, Aquinas also explained in ST I.2.3 that "motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality." Also, "whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another." The First Mover was "put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God." It is unclear why God—understood as the First Mover—who was not put in motion by another must also be pure act, as Aquinas concluded in ST

[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.3.1–8. Quotations are from the 1920 translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

I.3.2.1. To clarify, I am not arguing that God is a body. On that point, I agree with Aquinas. However, I question whether noting that God is the First Mover supports the claim that God is not a body. The larger question is how affirming God as the First Mover requires one to conclude God is pure act. What constrains one from identifying God as the First Mover with potential, other than Aquinas's insistence that no potentiality can be in the First Being?[9] Stated another way, what if Thomas's metaphysic is incorrect?

Also concerning Article 1, Aquinas argued that if God had a body, he would depend on something outside himself to exist, as bodies depend on souls to animate them. However, isn't it the case that orthodoxy affirms that God has life and existence within himself? Jesus declared, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (John 5:26 NIV). As Thomas Oden comments, "It is God's very nature to be alive, so much so that God is properly known as the life of all that lives. John's Gospel proclaimed that God the Father 'has life-giving power in himself' (John 5:26)."[10] Granted, a body's animation depends on external sources, and God is not a body; it is also possible to affirm that God is *a se* (he exists within himself) without affirming DS.[11] A fuller treatment of this topic would continue by examining ST I.3.2–8. However, due to the constraints of this study, I will end here: When Aquinas argued for DS in his article on DS, he made no other attempt to reason to or from the Scripture other than an appeal to John 4:24, which doesn't require an affirmation of DS.[12]

Steven J. Duby

In his 2016 monograph advocating for the view, Phoenix Seminary theology professor Steven J. Duby (b. 1985) defines DS as "the teaching that God is not composed of parts

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[9] See, for example, Aquinas's assertions in ST I.3.1.2.

[10] Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 45.

[11] Contra, see Jared Michelson, "Thomistic Divine Simplicity and its Analytic Detractors: Can one Affirm Divine Aseity and Goodness without Simplicity?" *The Heythrop Journal* 63 (2022): 1140–1162, who argues that Aquinas's view of DS is necessary to secure divine aseity and ultimacy, though Michelson does not attempt to ground Aquinas's case in Scripture.

[12] I acknowledge that Aquinas might have made a stronger case for the biblical support for DS in his other writings. My focus was on his use of Scripture in the passage in which he made an explicit case for DS.

but rather is identical with his own essence, existence and attributes, each of which is identical with the whole being of the triune God considered under some aspect."[13] Later in the book, he explains, "Simplicity is that which opposes composition."[14] Before Duby makes his case for DS, he explains that his dogmatic account draws from the work of Aquinas and the Reformed Scholastics who built on Aquinas's insights and employs "metaphysics for unfolding the theological content of the biblical text."[15] Duby acknowledges concerns about DS by respected systematic and analytic theologians, such as Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland.[16]

The Case for Divine Simplicity from Scripture by Contemporary Advocates

Contemporary advocates of DS are not making their case from a plain reading of Scripture. Rather, as Duby explains, "The dogmatic account of divine simplicity advanced here aims first to be governed by biblical exegesis and also to employ a Thomistic Reformed orthodox approach to theology proper and the use of metaphysics for unfolding the theological content of the biblical text."[17] It seems that the method of contemporary advocates of DS is to exegete the Scripture via a Thomistic Reformed hermeneutic, using metaphysics to filter out a doctrine of God from the content of Scripture. That method has been used since Aquinas and perhaps by earlier Christian interpreters. Though the method has a long history of use, it is reasonable to ask whether it is the best method for interpreting Scripture.[18]

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[13] Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, vol. 30, ed. John Webster, Ian A. McFarland, and Ivor Davidson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2. Duby essentially restates the definition in his *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 31, though (thankfully) the 2022 definition uses the Oxford comma.

[14] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 81.

[15] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 3.

[16] Duby, Divine Simplicity, 4. Chapter 5, pp. 179–234, is dedicated to "Objections to Divine Simplicity."

[17] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 3.

[18] John C. Peckham raises similar concerns about the lack of biblical warrant for four doctrines, including DS, advocated by strict classical theists. Though Peckham engages James Dolezal as the representative figure in his article, Duby is properly situated within the theological view. Peckham writes, "The strict classical theist is thus faced with a choice. Either employ Scripture as the supreme judge such that, at least in principle, the Bible could be understood as teaching something

Duby explains the relationship among exegesis, metaphysics, and theology in chapter 2 of *Divine Simplicity*. He begins his case by making claims with which few Christian theologians would argue. The Bible is God's word for God's people; its content touches on God's being, and theological points can be derived from secondary points of a biblical text.[19] Also, New Testament authors sometimes use terms and concepts broadly understood as philosophical, and philosophy and metaphysics can serve as a handmaiden to theology.[20]

Duby then contrasts dogmatic theology and analytic philosophy, focusing on those philosophers who reject DS. First, he explains that theologians remain "answerable to the teaching of Holy Scripture," in contrast to the analytic philosophers who "sometimes exhibit only a vague connection to Scripture."[21] Duby indicts Plantinga, Moreland, and Craig for their "clumsiness in reading older theologians" such as Augustine and Aquinas.[22] Is it more likely that those Christian philosophers were working with only a vague connection to Scripture and clumsy readings of Aquinas or that Duby bristled at their critique of Aquinas's view of DS? Second, Duby cites the noetic effects of the fall as a liability for those utilizing natural theology. Third, the Creator-creature distinction hinders the creature from reflecting on God rightly, apart from revelation and analogical language.[23] Fourth, the dogmatic and analytic disciplines employ different ontologies; the former replicate Aquinas's view while the latter (improperly) read contemporary views of ontology into Aquinas's writings.[24] In these four ways, Duby holds up the dogmatic theologian—by which he means the theologian committed to Reformed Scholasticism—as better able to handle the investigation into God's being. After all, the theologian's work is more firmly grounded in Scripture, more dependent on God's Spirit to enlighten the mind, rightly recognizes God's distinction from his creation, and is a more faithful interpreter of Aquinas. These are bold claims.

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other than strict classical theism. Or, abandon the standard of biblical warrant so that one can consistently appeal to 'the Great tradition' as a normative hermeneutical arbiter of Scripture." John C. Peckham, "Classical Theism and Theological Method: A Critical Inquiry," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (Aug 2024), 915 (17 pp.), available at https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080915. Quotation from page 9.

[19] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 57–58.

[20] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 58–67.

[21] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 67–68.

[22] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 69.

[23] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 69–74.

[24] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 74–79.

Duby acknowledges that "the use of philosophical language becomes prominent," while he claims DS is "a doctrine that emerges from biblical exposition." His ten-point "cartography of divine simplicity," which depends on philosophical rather than biblical claims, follows:

1. God is pure act and is therefore not composed of act and potency.
2. God is entirely spiritual and is therefore not composed of corporeal parts.
3. God is his own form (*deitas*) and is therefore not composed of matter and form.
4. Therefore, as immaterial, God is his own divinity subsisting and is therefore not composed of nature and *suppositum* or individual.
5. God is really identical with each of the persons of the Trinity and is not composed by them.
6. God, who is his own essence, is identical with his own existence also.
7. God transcends classification and demarcation and is therefore not composed of genus and species.
8. God is identical with each of his own attributes.
9. God is wholly himself and not susceptible of any composition at all.
10. Finally, while God is fully himself and incomposite in himself, he is also not joined to other things as though he might become part of a composite.[25]

Consider the first of Duby's ten points. The claim that God is pure act is also Aquinas's starting point for building the case for DS. At the risk of sounding like a biblicist who resists claims articulated in philosophical categories and informed by biblical reasoning, Duby makes no effort to identify the biblical reasoning for this fundamental claim in his explanatory paragraph.[26] However, Duby dedicates chapters 3 and 4 to locating the exegetical case for DS. Thus, readers should suspend judgment at this point in the inquiry.

Point 2 seems non-controversial, for if God is spirit and spirit is incorporeal, God has no corporeal parts. Similarly, points 3 and 4 merely state that God is not composed of matter or material. Point 5 rules out God being composed of the persons of the

[25] These ten points were taken verbatim from Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 81–86. Italics in the original text.

[26] See Duby's citation of John Webster's remark that "Christian theology is biblical reasoning." Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 68.

Trinity but states that God is identical with each of those persons. At this point, the doctrine of the Trinity introduces questions about how one affirms both three persons and DS. Duby identifies the proper concern as affirming that the divine persons subsist in the one simple God.[27] Points 6 and 8 are related because they equate God's essence, existence, and attributes. Point 7 is uncontroversial: God transcends classification. Points 9 and 10 can be taken together as affirming that God is whole in himself, not composite, and not part of a composite.

Points 1 and 5, considered separately, and points 6 and 8, considered together, seem to be the ideas at which DS requires one to affirm more than orthodoxy requires. Put simply, affirming God as uncreated Creator does not require one also to affirm God as pure act; an orthodox articulation of the Trinity doesn't require one to affirm DS; and collapsing all divine attributes into one another and into God himself also is not required to affirm biblical statements about God's attributes.

Duby's "Exegetical-Dogmatic" Case for Divine Simplicity

In chapters 3 and 4 of *Divine Simplicity*, Duby makes his "exegetical-dogmatic" case for DS by identifying the biblical basis for three divine attributes and one divine action and then suggesting how each attribute or action implies DS. The three attributes are divine singularity, aseity, and infinity; the divine action is *creatio ex nihilo*. Each of these four sections is structured uniformly—"Biblical teaching," which reveals the biblical teaching on the attribute or action; "Toward simplicity," how the concept implies DS; and "Conclusion," which restates the biblical teaching and how that teaching implies DS.

Duby's method reveals that he can identify a biblical basis for the three attributes and one divine action, but he explains only how the attribute or action *implies* DS. There is no biblical case for DS.[28] I will detail Duby's presentation of the first attribute to

[27] Tom McCall identifies and compares three versions of DS with the doctrine of the Trinity: Generic, Formal, and Strict Simplicity. McCall writes of the third version, "I fear that this version of the doctrine truly may be inconsistent with trinitarian theology. If there are no distinctions within God, then the divine persons cannot be distinct. But if the divine persons cannot be distinct, then we do not have any doctrine of the Trinity." Thomas H. McCall, "Trinity Doctrine, Plain and Simple," in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 42–59. Quotation from p. 57.

[28] Ronnie Campbell notes Duby's attempt in this section of his book to ground DS in Scripture. Campbell writes, "While such efforts ought to be commended, it is not at all clear how these doctrines land us with Aquinas's strong notion of simplicity." Beyond the lack of biblical

illustrate his method. He begins with a subsection titled "Biblical teaching," in which he makes the case for God's singularity, meaning God is the one and only God.[29] There is no attempt to argue for DS in the biblical subsection because Duby establishes the biblical case for divine *singularity*. The next subsection is titled "Toward simplicity." This subsection explores "how the divine uniqueness and exclusivity with which God is God *implies* that he is simple."[30] It's important to pause and note Duby's clear admission. He regards DS as an *implication* of the teachings of Scripture. The task is to evaluate the legitimacy of that assumption. How does Duby support his view?

Again, we're considering only the *first* of the three divine attributes Duby identifies. He presents "four ways in which the singularity and radical uniqueness of the biblical God entail that he is simple." First, "God's singularity entails the identity of nature and *suppositum* in God, which means that God is deity itself subsisting."[31] In other words, the claim is that divinity is not a category apart from the one true God. Further, because the three persons of God are infinite, one can still claim God is one nature. Second, "God's singularity entails that he transcends the categories of genus and species, and so is not composed of genus and species."[32] Duby appeals to Barth to argue that God is not one of many of the same kind of created beings; instead, the Creator-creature distinction situates God in a different category than his creation. Third, "God's singularity implies that God is really identical with each of his perfections."[33] Rather than viewing God as a substance with accidental properties, Duby argues that God alone is each of his attributes, and those attributes exist eternally, actually, and particularly in God himself, not as abstract objects.[34] Fourth, "God's singularity implies broadly that all that is in God is really identical with God himself (*quod habet*, *quod est*) and that there is therefore no composition whatsoever in God."[35]

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support for DS, Campbell questions whether a strong doctrine of DS conflicts with the views that God is free and created all things *ex nihilo*. Ronnie Campbell, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Relations, and the Problem of Robust Persons," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (2024): 874 (18 pp.), available at https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070874. Quotation from p. 5.

[29] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 91–100.

[30] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 100. Italics added.

[31] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 102.

[32] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 103.

[33] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 106.

[34] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 107.

[35] Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 107.

The case for God's singularity in the biblical section is that God is the one and only God, which is a claim about God's identity. The case in the next subsection that God's singularity *entails* DS depends on philosophical claims that can be rejected while doing no damage to the thesis of the related biblical subsection. For example, one can affirm that God is the one and only God while remaining ambivalent about whether divinity is a category apart from God. Doesn't Scripture refer to other gods?[36] Second, it is unclear why the Creator-creature distinction requires one to affirm DS. Isn't it enough to affirm that the Creator is distinct from his creation? The larger concern with this method is that the case for DS is presented without biblical support and merely as an implication from other doctrines that do find biblical support.

Thomas Joseph White

Rather than begin his encyclopedia entry on DS with a definition of the doctrine, Catholic priest and scholar Thomas Joseph White (b. 1971) produced a paragraph of questions revealing a constellation of related concerns. The questions concern God's ontological composition, his distinction from creatures, the relationship between his attributes and existence, and how one distinguishes among the persons of the Trinity. White documents Aristotle's early and explicit discussions of the first principle as pure act and Plotinus's view that the maximally perfect One is primary, which implies simplicity.

White acknowledges that DS is not an explicit teaching of Scripture. That point bears repeating. White acknowledges that DS is not an explicit teaching of Scripture. Instead, White suggests "five biblical notions that implicitly require recourse to topics involving divine simplicity." The following is a summary of White's carefully stated case for the notions in Scripture that implicitly involve DS:

1. In the OT, God is one God alone (Deut 6:4). He is unique and one (Exod 3:14–15; Isa 45:5–13; Ps 102:24–25) rather than a plurality of gods in a polytheistic perspective.

[36] See, as examples, these prohibitions given to God's people: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3), and "Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you" (Deut 6:14). I affirm there is only one true God. I am questioning the absence of a category for divinity apart from the true God, because even Scripture refers to prohibitions against worshiping false gods.

2. Biblical visions of Yahweh that suggest God has a body (Exod 24:9–11; Ezek 1:4–28) should be interpreted metaphorically or anthropomorphically.
3. Biblical texts referring to "sons of God," interpreted as references to either angels or a council of heavenly beings, should nevertheless regard Yahweh to have a nature distinct from angels or other heavenly beings.
4. God alone created all that is not God (Isa 45:14–25). Also, all created things are composite, but God, who is uncreated, is not composite. Also, God simply is.
5. Like the union of two natures in the one person of Christ, the ontological simplicity of God follows from the ontological unity of three persons in one divine essence.[37]

For each of the five notions, the biblical texts or assertions related to but did not require a commitment to DS. I'll demonstrate how this is the case by replying to each of White's biblical notions:

1. One can—and should—affirm that God is one and unique. However, these affirmations do not require a commitment to DS. Instead, the statement "God is one" can be interpreted as a reference to God's unique identity and singular status as the only true God, not a statement of God's ontology.
2. One can—and should—employ theological presuppositions when interpreting Scripture. It is unavoidable. However, the help or harm of the influence depends on the presuppositions. Determining that biblical visions suggesting God has a body should be interpreted metaphorically or anthropomorphically is a presupposition that predetermines the outcome. The presupposition (meaning, the idea held before considering the text which will shape one's reading of the text at hand) seems to be: Because God is simple, which entails God does not have a body, biblical texts which refer to God's body must be interpreted in a way that concludes that God does *not* have a body. The presupposition of DS determines hermeneutical rules.

[37] Thomas Joseph White, "Divine Simplicity," in *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology* (St. Andrews: University of St Andrews, 2022), available at https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/DivineSimplicity.

3. One can—and should—affirm that God has a nature distinct from angels or other heavenly beings. However, this affirmation does not require one to affirm DS.
4. One can—and should—affirm that God alone created all that is not God. Also, one can—and should—affirm that God simply is. However, neither view requires one to also affirm DS.
5. One can—and should—affirm the hypostatic union. However, one can also affirm distinctions among the persons of the Trinity and their shared divine essence without affirming DS.

In the technical sense, these replies are not offered as defeaters of DS. Instead, I merely intend to demonstrate that the primary concerns underlying the biblical texts can be sufficiently addressed without appealing to DS. In that way, DS is orthodox but not a requirement for orthodoxy.

Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to engage the biblical reasoning for DS articulated by three advocates. Though I could have interacted with other writers, Aquinas, Duby, and White represent (respectively) a Doctor of the Church, a contemporary Protestant, and a contemporary Catholic advocate.[38] Though I did not interact with all their writings on the topic, I aimed to represent their views of DS accurately and fairly. If an Aquinas scholar, Duby, or White read this article, I hope the reader would conclude that it accurately reflects the subject's biblical reasoning for DS.

At the risk of oversimplifying the matter in the conclusion after providing careful nuance in the body of the paper, I will restate the conclusion concisely. Aquinas's biblical support for DS is that God is spirit (John 4:24), which does not require an affirmation of DS. Duby employs a hermeneutic that respects Scripture but privileges extrabiblical, metaphysical commitments. Duby identifies no biblical basis for DS. Instead, his ten-point cartography depends on philosophical rather than biblical claims. Further, Duby's exegetical-dogmatic case for DS highlights three divine attributes and one divine action

[38] Further development of this topic would require additional conversation partners such as those mentioned at footnote 14 in this paper, James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), and the writings of Edward Feser and R. T. Mullins.

that *imply* (but do not *require*) DS. White argues that five biblical notions "implicitly require recourse to topics involving divine simplicity." He says DS is implied, not explicitly required. Instead, what is implicitly required is not DS but recourse to topics involving DS. White acknowledges the implicit nature of DS and stops short of claiming one must affirm DS or that an affirmation of DS is required.

For all three theologians, DS is an *implication* of explicit teachings of Scripture about God. Suppose beliefs (those explicitly stated in Scripture and others reasonably inferred from Scripture) comprising the doctrine of God were Jenga blocks. In that case, the question is whether a robust and tall tower would retain its structural integrity if the block of DS were removed. If DS is not an explicit teaching of Scripture but merely an implication of related biblical teachings, and if one affirms the other orthodox and related beliefs about God (namely, God is Triune, one, eternal, *a se*, uncreated, and spirit), then is the Jenga block of DS necessary?

Chupacabras and Elephants in the Room: The Perils and Blessings of "Culture" in Reading a Biblical Text

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Prefatory Remarks

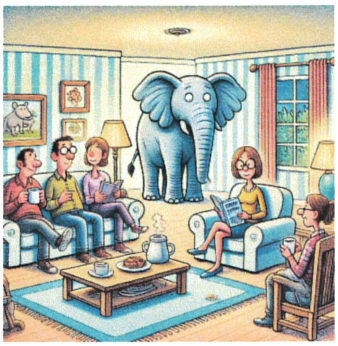
Interpretive blessings and perils occur when anyone reads a biblical text. When the exegete and the readers are all someone "like me" (modern, Western, white, male), then often my presuppositions, assumptions, and cultural biases go unnoticed. When the exegete is an Indonesian scholar-friend,[1] her interpretations sometimes take me by surprise. The surprise may have arisen from her seeing the text through a lens very different from my own.[2]

Today, however, I want to suggest two ways that culture can influence how the text is read. I will use a metaphor of two creatures: the imaginary chupacabra and the proverbial elephant in the room. The chupacabra is considered an urban myth[3] dating to

[1] When needed, I will use an unnamed Indonesian scholar rather than some awkward term like "a non-Western scholar" who then has only an undefined, vague cultural background. This is not to imply an Indonesian scholar has an advantageous or disadvantageous position, but only that I have dear friends in this category, speak their language, and am somewhat familiar with their culture.

[2] Allow me also a broader caution. I can place pressure, albeit usually unintentional, upon her to bring a new "cultural reading" of the text. Thus, I expect from her, not necessarily solid biblical exegesis, but rather, some exciting insight from her culture that makes me read the text differently. This subtle form of racism may imply that the contribution of an exegete from Indonesia, for example, needs to be an "Indonesian reading" of the text, as if "normal exegesis" is reserved for European and North American (often white male) scholars. While an Indonesian exegete may indeed bring new insights into the text, there is often unreasonable pressure to bring exegesis only if wrapped in a sarong. This is not fair.

[3] While I am personally dismissive of the existence of chupacabras, the legend persists courtesy of dead livestock in Central and South America—see Benjamin Radford, *Tracking the Chupacabra* (Alburquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011)—and recurring "sightings,"



the 1970s. I will use this creature as a metaphor for things I "see" in a biblical text that are the product of my imagination. I will also speak about elephants. While you may not be familiar with chupacabras, most are all well acquainted with the metaphor of an elephant in the room. It refers to "an obvious major problem or issue that people avoid discussing or acknowledging."[4] More academic definitions stress that the topic is seen but deliberately avoided. In more popular usage, it can refer to something that folks don't even see, although they certainly should have. I will be using the metaphor in this popular sense, to refer to something in the biblical text that I just didn't "see."[5] Perhaps I am ignoring it, or perhaps it never occurred to me.

Before beginning, it might be helpful to indicate I am not advocating social-scientific readings.[6] While social scientific criticism is considered (by some) to be in "close relationship with the historical-critical method"[7] and helpful at times, I find myself

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such as reported on NBC (2014), https://www.nbcnews.com/video/texas-chupacabra-caught-on-camera-137555523606, and on CBS (2022), https://cbsaustin.com/news/local/the-mystery-and-truth-behind-the-chupacabra, accessed September 17, 2025, and on ABC (2023), https://abc7news.com/chupacabra-animal-legendary-creature-mythical/5305873/, accessed September 17, 2025. Biologists suggest chupacabras may be wild dogs or more likely coyotes, with severe cases of mange, making them hairless and scrawny; see https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/101028-chupacabra-evolution-halloween-science-monsters-chupacabras-picture; accessed September 17, 2025.

[4] So, *e.g.,* Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elephant%20in%20the%20room; accessed September 17, 2025.

[5] Since the metaphors are merely illustrative, it really doesn't matter even if I am misusing the metaphor. This image was created by ChatGPT, https://chatgpt.com/c/67cb0ffa-5438-800a-aa18-881742665072; accessed March 7, 2025.

[6] The perhaps godfather of social science in biblical texts, Bruce Malina, noted that social-scientific criticism is not hermeneutics (not "translating the essence of a text into contemporary terms"), but rather "translating (transferring) a contemporary person into the social system of persons who authored and populated the pages of the New Testament"; see Malina, "Social-Scientific Methods in Historical Jesus Research," *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels,* 3–26, eds. W. Stegemann, B. Malina, and G. Theissen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002), 17, n. 5.

[7] So, Zachary Dawson in his helpful analysis; "Bruce J. Malina and Models of Cultural Anthropology," in *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 3: *Further Essays on Prevailing Methods*, edited by Stanley E. Porter and Zachary K. Dawson, 354–83, McMaster Biblical Studies Series 6 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), here p. 357.

in agreement with Wayne Meeks (a social historian) who prefers a more utilitarian or eclectic approach, borrowing from anthropological as well as sociological models.[8] Aware of the common critiques of social-scientific criticism,[9] I shall use some insights where it seems appropriate but not as a defining framework. So, with these caveats and armed with these two metaphors: chupacabras for things I imagine into the text, and elephants for things I never saw in the text, let us ponder some blessings and perils from the cultural lenses.

Introduction: What Goes Without Saying

As modern biblical scholarship seeks justly to move beyond an Anglo-centric, Euro-American reading of the biblical text, more voices are coming from the Majority World, such as the new Asia Bible Commentary series by Langham. Exegetes from other cultures enrich our exegesis, but today I want to discuss two other ways they can be helpful to me, represented by these two animal metaphors. Chupacabras in my own exegesis arise when I have superimposed (imagined into) some element from my culture onto the text. While I was cautioning my Indonesian scholar-friend not to eisegete her culture into the text, I stand in a tradition that has already done so. Since she is beginning with different presuppositions than mine, she may more quickly notice eisegetical elements that I brought to the text from my own male white Euro-American culture.[10]

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[8] "Piecemeal, as needed, where it fits"; Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 6.

[9] Dawson summarizes the two common ones: (a) it can be top-down and prescriptive, prone to the ethnocentrisms of the user; and (b) we naturally read through the lens of our own social system. To these, Dawson adds a third: the challenge we face as low-context cultures reading a high-context document. See Dawson, "Malina and Models," 358–61.

[10] Social-scientific criticism advocates argue for "cultural scripts" that define the cultural landscape. Six seem to have bubbled to the top: (i) honor and shame, (ii) collectivism, (iii) limited good, (iv) purity and impurity, (v) envy and the evil eye, and (vi) kinship; see Bruce Malina, *New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology,* 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001); and more concisely, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 20–21; and cf. Philip Esler, *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1994), esp. "Reading the Mediterranean Social Script," 19–36. I structure the biblical cultural grid differently, arguing the basic worldview is collectivism, which has three major elements (kinship, patronage, brokerage), which

The risk of cultural eisegesis arises because in every culture the most important things usually go without being said, since "everybody knows that." Here I can agree with Malina: "readers and writers always participate in a social system that provides clues for filling in between the lines."[11] In other words, all cultures leave unspoken common, shared knowledge.

> This "unwritten part" includes the things an author presumes the audience knows about how the world works, which he or she can leave between the lines of a text, so to speak, yet which are crucial to its understanding.[12]

Jesus states, "A farmer went out to sow his seed" (Matt 13:3). He doesn't explain anything about sowing seed, the impact of different types of soil, or more significantly, what constituted a good harvest. Without this information, I failed to be stunned that all the harvests were amazing.[13] Similarly, when Paul stated, "While people are saying (ὅταν λέγωσιν), 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" (1 Thes 5:3). Paul didn't need to identify who are the "they." His readers all knew Rome's slogan.[14] It was left unspoken.

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teaches, enforces, and reinforces its values with three main tools (honor, shaming, boundaries); see Richards and James, *Individualist Eyes*.

[11] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 9.

[12] Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 9.

[13] Columella (*Rust.* 3.3.4) stated it was unusual to have a harvest beyond fourfold in Italy. Douglas Oakman, *Jesus and the Peasants* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 100, estimated fivefold was common in Jesus' day; see also the fuller discussion in Llewellyn Howes, "The Agricultural Background of the Harvest Logion in Matthew 9:37–8 and Luke (Q) 10.2," *NTS* 69 (2022): 57–75, esp. 69.

[14] So argues Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "'Peace and Security' (1 Thess 5:3): Prophetic Warning or Political Propaganda?" *NTS* 58 (2012): 331–59, esp. 332: the phrase "stems from . . . a popular theme or slogan of the imperial Roman propaganda machine." Although Weima provides extensive ancient epigraphic, numismatic, and literary evidence, White pushes against this argument by stating that it depends upon what is meant by slogan, conceding "peace" was well established but not so with "security"; see Joel R. White, "'Peace and Security' (1 Thessalonians 5.3): Is it Really a Roman Slogan?" *NTS* 59 (2013): 382–95. Nonetheless, I suspect Paul's readers were not confused as to *who* was the implied subject of λέγωσιν.

In addition to shared knowledge, including agrarian customs and political dynamics, cultural preferences, even biases, also can be left unspoken. Biblical societies were high-context cultures, while most Euro-Americans are from low-context cultures.[15]

> One major challenge that modern Westerners (especially North Americans) face is that the ancients wrote in a high context culture, and therefore did not provide the specifics of their messages, presuming that the shared ways of perceiving context and meaning sufficed for their communicative purposes. This does not match with the low context culture of North America and much of Europe today, which expects many modes of communication to contain detailed explanations that leave little ambiguity or flexibility to interpretation.[16]

Thus, the text suffices to say, "they crucified him" (Mk 15:25). Mark felt no need to explain how crucifixion worked, and without other ancient sources, a modern reader would be clueless about what happened to Jesus. Perhaps more significantly, the biblical writer (and equally, our ancient sources on crucifixion) might say little or nothing about the shaming dynamics involved and how the honor of the Jewish leadership previously lost to Jesus might be restored to them by Jesus' crucifixion. It went without being said.

> Thus, writers in such [high-context] societies usually produce sketchy and impressionistic texts, leaving much to the reader's or hearer's imagination. They encode much information in widely known symbolic or stereotypical statements. In this way, they require the reader to fill in large gaps in the unwritten portion of the text.[17]

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[15] This is commonly articulated in discussions contrasting high and low context cultures, but both cultures still leave unsaid those things that they believe are obvious. Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) and Hall, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimensions of Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), is often cited for contrasting these two types of cultures.

[16] Dawson, 360–61. For more detailed explanations of high- and low-context cultures, see also Hall, *Dance of Life,* 91–101; and Malina, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 2–5.

[17] Malina, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 11. Elsewhere he notes, "High context societies produce sketchy and impressionistic texts, leaving much to the reader's or hearer's imagination. This is because people have been socialized into shared ways of perceiving and acting. Hence much can be assumed . . ."; Malina, "Reading Theory Perspective," 3–23, in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation,* ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), here p. 20.

Traditionally, Euro-Americans come from low-context cultures, which assume little shared knowledge and tend to explain many things. Writers for Euro-American readers provide the necessary background. Far less is left unwritten. It may even be argued:

> Such [low-context] people assume they are free to fill in the gaps from their own experience because, if that were not the case, the New Testament writers, like any considerate low-context authors, would have provided the unfamiliar background a reader requires.[18]

And herein lies our peril. For example, the biblical writer notes Naomi was an older widow with no surviving children, and Ruth was a Moabite widow with no children.[19] No additional elaboration was deemed necessary. The writer did not need to expound on the social status of barren women in a society that stressed kinship, or the social plight brought by ancient gossip. The peril is that I deemed myself sufficiently informed to read Ruth well, until hearing Dr. Dharamraj on unspoken social biases providing Ruth limited options (starvation or prostitution).[20] Much (too much?) from Ruth's high-context culture had gone unwritten, and I subconsciously filled in the gaps.

Chupacabras

The material may have been omitted because of a shared background (in a high-context culture), or the text may actually include the relevant piece, but I ignored it, since it didn't fit into my culture. In whatever way a crucial piece of a story went without being said, or went without being noticed, the story may leave essential explanations or motives unspoken. Ideally, I should supply those missing pieces with a study of the

[18] See this popular level caution in a blog by Marc White, "Being Careful with His Word: High Context (Mid-East) and Low Context (Western) Societies," (https://www.walkworthy.org/?s=being+careful+with+his+word+high+context; accessed September 18, 2025). For the challenges this creates in Bible translation, see, e.g., E. R. Wendland, "Contextualising Bible reading in south-central Africa: The preparation of an annotated edition—with special reference to the Gospel of Luke in Chichewa," *Neotestamentica* 34 (2000): 143–72.

[19] This seems the implication of the text, by omitting any reference to Jewish grandchildren in Ruth 1 and perhaps by the wording of Ruth 4:13, so argues Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth,* NAC 6 (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 725–26.

[20] Noted in her featured lecture at the Lanier Theological Library, March 4, 2023.

ancient culture (as in information about Roman crucifixion, Palestinian harvests, or widowhood in Judah); however, sometimes I fill in, albeit subconsciously, those missing pieces with unsaid things from my own culture. Perhaps a few examples may help.

Biblical Stories are about Individuals

To me, it is a tautology that the story of the patriarch Joseph is about, well, Joseph. His family are plot foils and supporting characters.[21] I also read him as the hero of the story, causing me to admire him, unfortunately, for traits that the biblical writer likely expected me to be appalled about. [We'll come back to this story.] The story of Abraham is about Abraham. When I read that Abraham considered adopting Eliezer of Damascus, it seemed to me a personal matter. I don't consider how competing kinsmen fragmenting his estate would weaken the entire community. I don't consider the wisdom of adopting a grown man, who has survived high childhood mortality. In whatever way I read these Abrahamic narratives, they are read through my modern individualist lens. Ancients were not individualists the way that I am: "[biblical] authors and their audiences did not at all comprehend the idea of an individual person in his or her uniqueness."[22] I identify myself (to myself and to others) with an amalgamation of my idiosyncratic personality, personal preferences, current profession, etc. "The dyadic person is essentially a group-embedded and group-oriented person . . . They perceive themselves and form their self-image in terms of what others perceive and feed back to them."[23] In other words, I don't need a group to tell me who I am, but my dyadic friend doesn't know who she is without her group telling her, often by classifying her with some group. Thus, as the crowds wrestled with understanding who Jesus was, they labeled him into a group, "teacher" (Matt 12:38) or "demon-possessed" (Matt 12:24), "Samaritan" (John 8:48), etc. It was a means of identification, but in a sociological rather than individual way.[24] Most modern individualists find descriptions of biblical characters to be disappointing.

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[21] An Arab friend hearing the story of Joseph for the first time exclaimed after the opening verses, "Where is Jacob? Surely a father is responsible for solving conflict among his sons!" In my mind, the story of Jacob had ended.

[22] Bruce Malina, "Dealing with Biblical (Mediterranean) Characters: a Guide for U.S. Consumers," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 19 (1989): 127–41, here p. 128.

[23] Malina, *New Testament World,* 62.

[24] For this contrast of ancient dyadic and modern individualist identifications, see Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 169.

God is the God of the Supernatural

For most of human history, lightning was supernatural. In the NT, Jesus is asleep in a boat, and a thunderstorm comes. It was a supernatural event. Jesus "rebuked" (NIV, ἐπετίμησεν, Mark 4:39) the wind, using the same word ("said sternly" NIV, ἐπετίμησεν, Mark 1:25) to the unclean spirit.[25] For ancients, storms, particularly lightning, were supernatural. Thus, ancients would find nothing amiss in the Psalmist's understanding of lightning as the arrows of Yahweh. Lightning belonged to Yahweh and not to Ba'al, as Elijah argued. In any case, lightning was held by a god's hand. Elijah's contest over lightning was only over whose arrows. Thus, I may imagine the members of St. Mark's church in Venice wondered, "Why is God angry with our bell tower?" Lightning destroyed it in 1388, 1417, 1489, 1548, 1565, 1653, and in 1745.[26] In 1766, one of Ben Franklin's new-fangled lightning rods was installed, and the tower has never been damaged again by lightning. Most of us would not conclude that Benjamin Franklin had found a way to thwart the will of God. Rather, I would argue that thunderstorms and lightning are the result of low-pressure systems and were never signs of God's anger—despite what Psalm 18:14 or 77:17 or 144:6 might suggest.

How does this illustrate a chupacabra? In typical Western dualism, I divide the cosmos into "natural" and "supernatural." For many Western Christians, God focuses on the supernatural (only?). But how are natural/supernatural differentiated? For many, "natural" are those things which we understand, while "supernatural" are those things that we do not. Once pointed out, I immediately dismissed it as insufficient; yet I suspect it lurks under the surface of my thinking. Thus, after Ben Franklin, lightning moved from "supernatural" to "natural." I am not objecting to this, necessarily, but I will note an underlying chupacabra in my hermeneutic: God is no longer involved in lightning (since we understand how lightning works). When thunder rumbles, I don't pause to hear if God is speaking. When Acts 9 tells Paul's Christophany, which surely was supernatural, then I (subconsciously) assume there must have been more than lightning and thunder; there must have been elements that clearly marked it as "supernatural," even though the text mentions none.[27]

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[25] Notably in Mark 7:39, Jesus rebuked (ἐπετίμησεν) the wind but spoke (εἶπεν) to the sea. My American worldview encourages me to gloss over the difference.

[26] See John Matthews, "Fear of Lightning Grounded in Myth," *ASU Research* (Fall 1994): 8.

[27] Before someone objects: "Voice!" (Acts 9:4), the Greek word for noise and voice is the same word: φωνή. Translators decide.

"Women in the Bible" is Usually about Sexuality

Luke 7:37 tells us that Jesus is anointed by a woman who was a sinner in the city (γυνὴ ἥτις ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἁμαρτωλός). In English translations, the implication is sexual sin. This same word applied to males is usually just "sinners," and in the NT, it carries no particular sexual connotation, e.g., just three verses earlier Jesus ate with tax collectors and "sinners" (7:34). It seems to refer to those in "debt" to God for failing to reach his righteous standards.[28] Yet, when the word ἁμαρτωλός is connected with γυνὴ, modern English translations imply sexual sin.[29] There were other ways for a woman to be sinful. For example, midwifery often involved incantations, fetishes, potions, etc.[30] Soranus (fl. 80–110 CE) noted that midwives should be able to *write*. While this is typically interpreted today as indicating their use of medical texts, such as those by Galen,[31] Soranus doesn't refer to reading but writing.[32] Perhaps Jewish (Aramaic) incantation bowls are a parallel, and perhaps midwives used magical formulae, like the cures for

[28] See the helpful discussion of ἁμαρτωλός, as well as its Hebrew (and more significantly Aramaic) roots when tracing back through the LXX, by Bruce Chilton, "Jesus and the Repentance of E. P. Sanders," *TynB* 39 (1988): 1–18, here 9–11.

[29] So, the rather neutral "who lived a sinful life" in the NIV, is blunter in other translations: "the town harlot" (MSG), "a woman of the streets—a prostitute" (TLB), "notorious as a woman of ill repute" (VOICE). Yet, in the earlier reference, verse 34, ἁμαρτωλός is not translated (MSG) or as "lowest sort of friends" (TLB) or "scoundrels" (VOICE)—all of which do not require a sexual overtone.

[30] Pliny, *NH* 7 lists various means of easing child delivery, such as placing a hyena's paw on the mother or drinking potions of powdered sow's dung or goose semen or the liquid expulsion from a weasel's uterus.

[31] So argues, e.g., https://imperiumromanum.pl/en/roman-society/childbirth-and-childcare-in-ancient-rome/; accessed September 18, 2025; see, *Soranus' Gynecology,* trans. Owsei Temkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). For the common modern conflation of reading and writing, see, *inter alii*, Richards, "Reading, Writing, and the Production and Transmission of Manuscripts" in *The Background of the New Testament: An Examination of the Context of Early Christianity,* 300–17, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), esp. 301–304; or Richards, "Literacy in New Testament and Greco-Roman Antiquity," *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception,* vol. 16: Lectionary-Lots, eds. Nicole Rupschus, Michaela Göbels, Gary Helft (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

[32] It is not always clear to me when Soranus was discussing the qualifications of *maia* versus *iatros gynaikeios*. I assume *maia* were trained by apprenticeship, which still does not preclude some training in "writing."

migraines, infertility, etc.[33] Midwives were also critiqued for greed, overcharging for their services, as Plautus' comedy indicates. In other words, I should allow that other behaviors and professions might label a woman a "sinner." I should not presume it is about sex.

When I read texts differentiating Adam from Eve, traditionally I have defaulted to gender: male/female.[34] Most of us don't consider an Adam/Eve discussion to be about birth order. This is a bias from my American culture. In English, siblings are distinguished by gender. Thus, I have two sisters. In many cultures, birth order is the distinguishing characteristic; thus, in Indonesian, I have one *kakak* (older sibling) and one *adik* (younger sibling). It is awkward to translate, but more significantly, it often caught me by surprise. I would be having quite the family discussion with an Indonesian colleague to realize later I had no idea if her siblings were male or female, and she likewise had no interest in the gender of my siblings but wondered who was the eldest. When I read Paul's discussion about Eve versus Adam, I *assume* it is a discussion of gender. I will return to this momentarily.

Elephants

In addition to imagining chupacabras into the text, the other danger is elephants in the text that I didn't even see. I am particularly noting those elements being stressed in the

[33] See *Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Their Late Antique Jewish Contexts,* eds. Alexander W. Marcus and Jason S. Mokhtarian, BJS 376 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2025). I am not suggesting anachronistically the medieval practice of labeling midwives as witches. For that practice, see the helpful discussion in David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Society for the Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990): 1–26. Nonetheless, unsurprisingly, Egyptian and Aramaic texts show the use of incantations related to childbirth; for Egyptian practices, see Susanne Töpfer, "The Physical Activity of Parturition in Ancient Egypt: Textual and Epigraphic Sources," *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* (University of Granada Spain) 34 (2014), https://dx.doi.org/10.4321/S0211-95362014000200003; accessed September 18, 2025; for Aramaic, see e.g., no. 24 for a safe delivery by a pregnant woman; James A. Montgomery, "The Clients." In *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 49–50 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1913); and also, Douglas Penney and Michael Wise, "By the Power of Beelzebub: An Aramaic Incantation Formula from Qumran (4Q560)," *JBL* 113 (1994): 627–50, esp. apotropaic texts for safe childbirth or for the banning of Lilith who would enter the room of a pregnant woman as a fly (p. 634).

[34] So, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy,* AB 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 200–204.

text that I have overlooked, since those elements are not significant in my culture (such as birth order). My Indonesian colleague, for instance, may have noticed them (when I didn't) because they also occur in some way within her culture. While I am busy squeezing a biblical story into my narrative framework, I subconsciously edit out details that don't fit. Worse, these may not be "details" at all, but rather a major element or even theme—an elephant in the room, so to speak. So, I ignored a mountain or perhaps turned it into a molehill. Let me suggest a few possibilities.

Honor and Shaming as Biblical Virtues

In most modern discussions, honor is linked with shame, often literally with a virgule: honor/shame. While most would agree on some sort of definition for ancient Mediterranean honor,[35] there is considerable disagreement over shame. Today in the West, shame is often read as the opposite of honor. I think this may be a fairly recent development, as may be illustrated by two recent English translations of Prov 3:35:

> The wise inherit honor but fools display *dishonor* (NASB 1963).
> The wise inherit honor but fools he holds up to *shame* (NIV 1977).

In modern English, shame has replaced dishonor as the negation of honor. Aside from other challenges, shaming has lost any positive value; it is now a cultural vice. My students are convinced that shaming someone is a sin. When I note that God shames people (1 Cor 1:27), Jesus shames people (John 3:10), and Paul shames the Corinthian church twice (1 Cor 6:5; 15:34), my students don't know what to do with it. Shaming actually happens more often in Scripture, but modern translators try to avoid the English word "shame" when the text uses it in a positive context, for example, 1 Tim 2:9, "I also want the women to dress modestly (κοσμίῳ, appropriately, respectfully), with decency

[35] Most would agree with Malina's definition: "Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) *plus* that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group"; Malina, *New Testament World,* 30. I would point out the individualism in his definition. I suspect ancients would not have even understood the first part of his definition. The value in one's own eyes is merely the reflection of what the group thinks. So also, Dawson, "Malina and Models," 365: "a person's self-awareness depended entirely on the group(s) to which he or she belonged." I would also add that I list honor as a *tool* for teaching and enforcing values. Thus, at Calvary, Jesus, the thief, and the Centurion all valued honor, but what they considered honorable was strikingly different.

(αἰδοῦς, shame, discretion, respect)[36] and propriety (σωφροσύνης, self-control), adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes" (NIV). I will return to this Pauline text in a moment but suffice here to note that in English, "shame" has lost its positive meaning,[37] although English had retained it until perhaps a generation or two ago. My grandmother asked me, "Have you no shame?" where shame meant knowing the appropriate way to act. She was concerned I had acted in a shameless manner.

I offer a few OT possibilities: Judah with Tamar, and Abraham with Sarah. Judah had shamed Tamar *unjustly* by sending her to her family home after the death of Onan, allowing his superstitions to override his familial obligations (Gen 38:11). Once his promise was proven empty, she had few recourses. I'll let OT scholars decide if she acted appropriately by the roadside. When Judah acts to publicly shame her, she responds (ripostes, as was done in honor contests) by indicating his complicity (in the entire matter). As the patriarchal voice, he is to express the conclusion of the community, which is actually against him. He concludes, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen 38:26). This is not a statement of her righteousness, but rather as to how much more unrighteously he had acted. Her desperate action was still better than his neglect. Similarly, Sarah attempts to shame Abraham by implying Hagar's barrenness was Abraham's fault and thus also her barrenness, and hence to remove some of her shaming. When Hagar becomes pregnant, despite Abraham's age, it underscores Sarah's barrenness.

In Matt 9:10–11, the Pharisees try to gently shame Jesus over table fellowship *by asking his disciples*, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" even though, it is asked within Jesus' earshot (ὁ δὲ ἀκούσας εἶπεν[38]). Similarly, Jesus shames Simon the Pharisee for not "seeing" the sinful woman as part of his community (Luke 7:44), especially when she was the one rescuing their community's reputation as

[36] So LSJM, MM, and Spicq; see also George Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 134, where he concedes this basic meaning.

[37] As argued by Te Li Lau, *Defending Shame: It's Formative Power in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), as well as multiple blog postings by Jackson Wu on HonorShame.com.

[38] The NIV assumes that the disciples later told him: "On hearing this . . ." Thus, I am led to see Jesus' response was only for the disciples and not for the Pharisees.

hospitable. In order to avoid an honor contest by a public question,[39] Nicodemus visits Jesus at night in John 3.[40] It is the bridge between the Temple incident, which John indirectly implies was initially seen as an honor contest Jesus lost[41] and a series of "testimonies" that Jesus doesn't need (since the signs tell us who Jesus is).

Racism (of a different kind)

I have heard Moses' second wife is "a black Cushite woman from the Cushite civilization south of Egypt."[42] Furthermore, this text is often read as anti-racism (which it probably is) but Hays argues the text is read with a more subtle racism. The text notes Miriam is upset. My cultural biases may cause me to ignore the elephant in the text (repeated twice). I *assume* Miriam is upset because the woman is *black* (Num 12:1) and clearly there is a pun on this (Num 12:10). Miriam is upset, Hays suggests, because Moses presumes to marry upward socially, since Cushites were held in higher esteem than Hebrews.[43] Moses should have married Miriam, at least in her estimation.

Admire (or Appalled at) the Wrong Thing

Solomon's failures are well known, but today it is often assumed his failures began with the multiple wives. In other words, Solomon was strong through the first ten chapters.

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[39] For a quick summary of an honor contest, see Dawson: "People could lose honor, especially through their interactions with others where, if publicly bested by another, they would be dishonored—that is, one would decrease in their honor status while the challenger would increase in honor status in the eyes of the public—and people were conscientious of this possibility"; "Malina and Models," 363–65.

[40] John likely accomplishes two goals with the reference "at night." Likely, Nicodemus had a genuine question; he was confused over Jesus' failure to produce a sign when Nicodemus knew Jesus could. Nicodemus came as night to avoid a public honor contest; see the discussion in Richards, *John,* WBC 36 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, forthcoming). Yet, the Gospel also uses this as part of the Johannine theme of light: Nicodemus comes out of the night (John 3:2) and Judas goes into the night (John 13:30).

[41] See E. Randolph Richards, "The Shaming of Jesus in John," 73–85, in *Honor, Shame, and the Gospel,* eds. Chris Flanders and Werner Mischke (Pasadena: William Carey Publishing, 2020); and Richards, *John*, forthcoming.

[42] J. Daniel Hays, "A Biblical Perspective on Interracial Marriage," *CTR* 6 (2009): 5–23.

[43] J. Daniel Hays, "Racial Bias in the Academy . . . Still?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34 (2007): 315–29; and idem, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race,* New Studies in Biblical Theology 4, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003).

As Hays pointed out, Solomon was likely being critiqued from the beginning.[44] I failed to notice the elephant that the Chronicler was pointing out. Solomon gathered up horses, gold, and wives, as Moses warned:

> The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. (Deut 17:16–17).

I was supposed to be appalled that Solomon returned to Egypt to get a wife and horses (2 Chr 9:28). Solomon built cities with conscripted Israelites (1 Kgs 5:13), like Pharaoh did (Exod 1:11). The Chronicler was subtly telling me that Solomon was not the son of David promised by Nathan. I was too busy admiring Solomon to see the Chronicler's critique.

I will discuss the story of the patriarch Joseph more in a moment, but my cultural lens encourages me to *ignore* Joseph's complicity in alienating himself from his community (repeatedly). I failed to notice Joseph's plights arise from his own actions against his community. My individualism tells me to admire him for his independence, rather than be appalled at it.

Missing the Elephants Leads to Seeing Chupacabras, or Conversely, Seeing Chupacabras Leads to Missing the Elephants

Often these two elements, seeing chupacabras and ignoring elephants, work in tandem. In my own cross-cultural hermeneutics, one encouraged the other. Let me provide a few examples.

Western Understandings of Rules

In my culture, rules are 100%. A rule needs to apply to everyone, or it is "unfair." Equally, a rule must apply all the time, or it is "broken." Since God is neither unfair nor broken, then (I assume) his rules will apply to everyone 100% of the time. I learned otherwise in a shocking encounter with an Indonesian Christian view of rules. They assume the boss

[44] Again, I am indebted to the insightful scholarship of Danny Hays, "Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtlety in 1 Kings 1–11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (2003): 149–74.

has the prerogative to grant exceptions. The Indonesian view of rules is that rules apply except when they don't. In my culture, this makes an inferior rule and therefore would not be applicable to biblical rules. God tells the Hebrews to invade Canaan, so that every Hebrew gets land[45] and no Canaanite gets land, because God says to utterly destroy them all (Deut 20:17). I ignore the elephants that the first story is about a Canaanite who gets land, and the second story is about a Hebrew who doesn't.[46]

"Women in the Bible" is Usually about Sexuality

Let's return to this. The Samaritan woman by the well in John 4 is often painted in my culture as immoral.[47] Since she has had five marriages and is now involved in some form of relationship that Judaism did not term a marriage, she must be (it is usually concluded) sexually immoral. Yet, this is likely a chupacabra. Multiple marriages were not uncommon in the first century,[48] especially if I don't presume she was young. The Samaritans never considered her unreliable or untrustworthy (John 4:24). She is clearly

[45] This biblical metaphor, which shows up in 1 Kgs 4:25 and Mic 4:4, was frequently used by George Washington in America's early history as a metaphor for the ideal agrarian life; see Daniel Dreisbach, "Under Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 211–28.

[46] Similarly, I must apologetically defend how God can order the death of all the Canaanites. When I do notice Canaanites who are still around later, I assume this was a sign of Israel's disobedience to God's absolute rule. In the same manner, Pharoah orders all male children sacrificed to Hapi, the Nile god (thrown in the Nile, as Exod 1:22 ridicules it). I don't notice the elephant that Moses wasn't leading a group of women out of Egypt.

[47] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 216, calls her a "moral outcast" and Andreas Köstenberger, *John,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 153, labels her a "serial fornicator." Since Lynn Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), there is a minority of scholars who concede that the woman might not have been immoral, see e.g., Marianne Thompson who observes that the woman's marital history may not indicate immorality but rather desperation; *John: A Commentary,* NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 102–104.

[48] To cite a famous example, Cleopatra was married at least three times, twice to younger brothers, with one marriage while she was the mistress of Julius Caesar, all before age 30. She scarcely seemed the exception; see the marriage complexity of Babatha in Philip Esler, "Ancient Judean Families and Households: The Babatha Archive as a Case Study," 213–25, in James Harrison and E. Randolph Richards, *Inscriptions, Papyri, and Other Artifacts,* eds. James R. Harrison and E. Randolph Richards, ALNTS 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), esp. p. 214. After Babatha was widowed, she married a second man who already had one wife, making her the second wife.

John's positive contrast to Nicodemus. He was the teacher of Israel yet could not figure Jesus out (John 3:10). She does (John 4:29). It is possible the entire text may have a secondary level of meaning, where Jesus, as a prophet, denounces the Samaritan people for having five previous gods and for now worshiping Yahweh but not in a true way. Commentators usually dismiss this as being too subtle (for a woman?). If there is an underlying message, then she is cleverly following Jesus when she questions which temple of Yahweh is the correct one; otherwise, I must dismiss her comment as diversionary.[49] Perhaps my boxing a woman into a sexual role is making it difficult to see an elephant in the room.

Let us also return to Paul's admonition to the women in the Ephesian church to *dress with modesty*. I have argued elsewhere that we misread this.[50] It is assumed Paul is referring to being *sexually* modest.[51] This happens because I read into the text an assumption that modest + women equals sexuality. This chupacabra encourages me not to see the elephant in the verse. Paul states what he means by dressing modestly: "not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes." Paul meant *economically* modest. We misread this verse by reading in sexual references. BAGD tells us that κοσμίῳ (respectable, appropriate) here refers to decorum as "the opposite of conspicuous consumption" and is referring to adornment;[52] yet English translations use the ambiguous "modestly." Similarly, BAGD lists for αἰδώς (shame, discretion) a special meaning *when referring to women:* modesty.[53] There, BAGD cites 1 Tim 2:9 and two

[49] So, e.g., Köstenberger, *John,* 158; and Marianne Thompson, *John,* 102–104.

[50] Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2023), 42–44.

[51] Knight, *Pastoral Epistles,* 134, begins with the correct conclusion: "Paul is saying that when such attitudes self-consciously control a woman's mind, the result is evident in her modest apparel." Yet his subsequent discussion indicates he means *sexually* modest. Our main point is that modern Westerners default to this assumption.

[52] In addition to 1 Tim 2:9, BAGD lists Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.153, where it is describing the appearance of the priests.

[53] Knight, *Pastoral Epistles,* p. 134, defines αἰδώς as "reverence, awe, respect for the feeling or opinion of others" adding "shame, self-respect . . . sense of honor" as appropriate translations. He concludes that in Paul's discussion, αἰδώς is addressing adornment, adding that "elaborate hairstyles, ornate jewelry, and extremely expensive clothing" in contemporary literature indicated "ostentatious display" (135). Nonetheless, he concludes: "so Christian women needed to be warned that their interest in beauty and adornment should not produce immodesty and indiscretion" (136). Without

other texts: Diod. S. 13.55.4, although the LCL for Diodorus Siculus translates αἰδώς as "sense of shame,"[54] and Jos. *Ant.* 2.52 (from the story of Joseph with Potiphar's wife), where it is also not "modest dress" but rather proper or appropriate behavior.[55] It seems justified to question if there is a unique meaning for women. Rather, I suggest αἰδώς means for Paul (everywhere) a sense of shame (or discretion or propriety) which indicates one knows the proper or appropriate behavior in a given situation.[56] Here Paul is arguing that women "know" the way to dress appropriately (economically) in a service (so as not to say, "I have more money than you" to other church members). Also, I should not read this through an individualist lens to mean that each individual woman should make that decision. Rather, the "church women" are to make that decision. Paul is not dictating to women how to dress but rather urging the women of the church to exercise authority over the (economically) appropriate dress of members.

Similarly, I was taught to view Adam and Eve discussions as a gender, not a birth-order issue. I was taught the relevant difference was male/female, rather than older/younger sibling. Thus, when Paul mentions that it was Eve who was deceived, not Adam (1 Tim 2:14), I subconsciously make gender, not birth order, the cause of her weakness. I conclude Paul is arguing Eve was more easily deceived because she was a woman.[57] Yet, Paul opens the argument by explicitly mentioning birth order: "For Adam

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justification, he concludes Paul's warning against ostentatious displays meant not wealth but sexual immodesty.

[54] Actually, vv. 4–5: [4]γυναῖκες δὲ καὶ παῖδες τάς τε τροφὰς καὶ βέλη τοῖς ὑπὲρ τῆς πατρίδος ἀγωνιζομένοις παρεκόμιζον, τὴν αἰδῶ καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς [5]εἰρήνης αἰσχύνην παρ᾽ οὐδὲν ἡγούμεναι. LCL: "and women and girls supplied the food and missiles to the defenders of the fatherland, counting as naught the modesty and the sense of shame which they cherished in time of peace." Here it seems referring to the impropriety of women aiding in the military defense of a city (in 409 B.C.).

[55] ἀλλ᾽ οὐ συνεξαμαρτάνοντος αἰδοῖ· H. St. J. Thackeray, the LCL translator, nearly borders on paraphrase: "as she could not with the guilty feeling of being his partner in sin." The referent however remains upon the (im)propriety of her behavior. BDAG (3rd ed.) adds a tertiary reference in the Acts of Paul and Thecla (AcPl Ox 6 [Aa I 241, 15]), but I could not locate any use of αἰδώς.

[56] I am not arguing that αἰδώς never has sexual connotations, but rather that there should be some indication in the text instead of just assuming it. I wonder if there is a Western gender bias in translating αἰδώς. For example, could μετὰ αἰδοῦς καὶ σωφροσύνης be modifying κοσμεῖν ἑαυτάς, thus, describing how to adorn themselves?

[57] So Tim Johnson, "Once more, the story of the first parents is taken as inscribing the essential qualities: women are more easily deceived than men are"; Johnson, AB 35A, 202.

was formed first" (1 Tim 2:13). If the elephant in the room was birth order,[58] I ignored it. In fact, in most American exegesis of this passage, you don't need verse 13.[59] I suggest Paul would argue it is the key. The prohibition, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:16), is given to Adam *before* Eve is created (2:22). Eve did not hear the command of God, except via Adam. Nonetheless, Christians in my culture see the topic as gender, and I am left with the unenviable position of arguing that somehow Paul wasn't saying Eve was the weaker sex. I think we are defending women the wrong way. I think Paul did mean Eve was the weaker one. Paul wasn't arguing Eve was weaker because she was female, but because she came later. Incidentally, as such, Eve—not Adam—becomes the prototype for all of us. We were created out of another human. We receive the revelation of God secondhand. We are all the weaker ones. And the Serpent tempts us the same way: "Can you trust the revelation you received?"

Kinship (and Inheritance): Individualism, Joseph and the "American Success Story"

To return to our story of the patriarch Joseph, I never really saw the strong kinship theme in the narrative. I didn't need those to fit Joseph into the "American success story" that I was overlaying on the Joseph narrative. While I was busy making this story about Joseph and his heroic personal success, I edited out details related to inheritance. In fact, I never noticed that the Joseph story begins with "This is the account of Jacob" (Gen. 37:2, NET). Actually, the entire Joseph story is about inheritance. I was supposed to catch this in the way the story began. It starts by mentioning the other sons from two of his four wives. I was expected to wonder who the inheriting wife was. Since it was usually the first wife, the text tells us the essential piece in the very next verse (37:3): it wasn't the first wife.

This raises the plight of the sons (with their own families) of the non-inheriting wives, which the story addresses. What provision remains for them? Their hope is for the inheriting son to take care of them. Joseph's options range from providing for them from his inherited resources to the opposite end of the spectrum, making them servants

[58] Knight states the "reason or basis for the prohibition is the creation order," even noting that her fall was substantiation of her created order; yet he draws no conclusions other than gender; George Knight, *Pastoral Epistles,* 138–39.

[59] Jerome Quinn and William Wacker, in their fine commentary, note the argument begins with created order but immediately apply it to male/female relationships and the marriage relationship; 194–200, 226–28.

(slaves) in his household. I was supposed to recognize that tension. It tells me how to interpret the very next story: Joseph's dream of the sheaves. Since I ignored that elephant, I interpret Joseph's dream as merely a prophecy of the end of the story. Nonetheless, Joseph's brothers knew how to interpret it (Gen 37:8). The action of his brothers is quite understandable, since he has threatened their families. (What would I do to protect my children?) When caravans passed through, one's family protected the individual from capture and enslavement. I was supposed to notice how Joseph's treatment of them removed their protection. Similarly, on Potiphar's estate, his fellow slaves should have defended Joseph, even tacitly, but he had alienated them as well: "No one is greater in this house than I am" (Gen 39:9). Only in prison does Joseph learn how to live in a community. I am supposed to see in the climax of the story that Joseph finally does what he should have done in the beginning: he provides for his brothers and their families (Gen 46:31). The elephant in the text was kinship/inheritance. The story assumed I knew that—it went without being said—and only told me the relevant parts, such as starting the story of Joseph with sibling tension (Gen 37:2–5). Because I didn't see the elephant, I was missing key elements to interpret the story of Joseph. To compensate, I subconsciously added a chupacabra. I superimposed on the Joseph narrative a framework called "the American success story." It basically goes:

> Boy grows up on a farm (in the country, etc.). He encounters difficulties there, not usually his fault (although it is not elaborated). He migrates to the big city. There he overcomes adversity and through honesty, integrity, and hard work, he becomes a big (financial) success. Eventually, he is reunited with his family who all admire him now for his success.[60]

[60] My rendition. I am unsure of the origins, but I could trace it back at least to 1963; John Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr. and the American Dream* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). Older stories are then retold into this framework, e.g., the Bill of Rights Institute's retelling of the life of Alexander Hamilton (ca. 1757–1804), https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/the-american-success-story-of-alexander-hamiliton-and-diligence-handout-a-narrative; accessed September 18, 2025. See the common threads in four examples listed by Andrea Moran, "American Success Stories and How They Started," Charles Close School of Entrepreneurship, Drexel University, https://drexel.edu/close/news/announcements/2017/July/American%20Success%20Stories%20and%20How%20They%20Started/; accessed September 18, 2025.

Thus, in my reading of Joseph, the story concludes (for me) with Joseph being appointed #2 in Egypt. Everything else is epilogue (even though it is half the story). The American success story is all about the individual, and so the story of Joseph is all about Joseph overcoming adversity. I admire Joseph. Rather, I was supposed to be appalled that Joseph, by his own arrogance, alienated himself from his community (twice). Nonetheless, YHWH kept his promise to Abraham and continued to build a people. (Sadly, the American success story version of Joseph has only a supporting cast role for YHWH.)

Conclusion

By reading with a colleague from another culture, she may catch when I have added a fictional piece from my own culture (a chupacabra) or missed an obvious piece from the ancient culture (an elephant in the room). Abandoning my (overworked) animal metaphors, the point is that there are rewards from reading the Bible together with others who have different cultural lenses: it can reveal places where I have inserted something from my culture into a biblical text, or conversely, I have ignored an emphasis in a biblical text because it isn't a part of my modern culture.

I should also point out that my Indonesian colleague is no more immune from this risk than I am. Thus, an exegete from a culture outside my own ultimately faces the same perils (eisegesis) and blessings (unnoticed exegetical treasures) that I do, but sometimes *different* ones than I do. The risks of cultural influences are not to be reduced by ignoring them but rather by including more voices (cultures) around the hermeneutics table.

Biblical Patterns of Church Government: The Case For a *Via Media*—The Democratic Theocracy

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> *But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.*
> — Matt 23:8–10 (NASB)

One of the most hotly contested debates in ecclesiastical circles is the issue of church government. No ecumenical consensus exists on the form of church governance that most faithfully models scriptural teaching, as evidenced by the rise of denominationalism over the last four centuries of church history.[1] This fact creates a hermeneutical dilemma—everyone cannot be right, can they? Obviously not, because this postmodern rationale contradicts a bedrock tenet of human logic—the law of non-contradiction—since contradictory models of church government cannot all be true in the same sense at the same time.[2] Given this logic, it seems to follow that there should be one model of church government that is more biblically correct than the alternative models being set forth.

Traditionally, church government models have been classified into three distinct categories—Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational.[3] However, further distinction

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[1] Daniel Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, eds. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 21–22.

[2] Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *For the Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009), 18, 457.

[3] Leon L. Morris, "Church Government," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 256.

needs to be made and perhaps a better categorization of church government models may be thought of in terms of Monarchy, Oligarchy, Democracy, and Theocracy.[4] This paper will argue for a *via media* approach regarding church governance—the "Democratic Theocracy" model. The "Democratic Theocracy" model is defined as follows: a model that is congregational in nature; has a plurality of elders that serve amongst each other as co-equals without any other authoritative distinctions whatsoever, being "leaders amongst equals" in the eyes of the congregation in which they serve; one that is hierarchical only in the sense that Christ, alone, is the Head of the Church; and one that both bolsters and fosters an "every-member ministry" mentality in the development of future leaders from within the congregation—thus, protecting and preserving doctrinal purity for future generations. This *via media* approach is derived from the biblical evidence, hermeneutical considerations of key terms, and theological and pragmatic considerations of doctrinal purity in the internal development of future church leaders.

Biblical Teachings on Church Governance

> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;* — 1 Pet 2:9 (NASB)

The Old Testament (OT) is bedrock in understanding the theological tenets of church government unveiled in the New Testament (NT). An evidentiary fact is that Israel was a "Democratic Theocracy" until the crowning of King Saul. Israel was *democratic* in that horizontally, elders (זָקֵן) led in communal fashion with every tribe's (שֵׁבֶט) voice accounted for; and vertically, Israel was *theocratic* in that YHWH was its Supreme Ruler

[4] The "Monarchy" model is representational of the primacy of the pope in Roman Catholicism as well as some single-pastor-led congregations (even those in Baptist circles) that claim congregational polity. "Oligarchy"—rule by committee—is representational of Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and similar church structures that are hierarchical in structure, but not monarchical as is the case for Roman Catholicism. Larger Baptist churches with a multi-staff, "senior" pastor model would fall into this category as well. The "Democracy" model can be thought of in terms of traditional Baptist and Independent polity as evidenced by the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9) and "bottom-up" structural authority. "Theocracy"—literally, "ruled by God," is the governance model of OT Israel prior to the reign of King Saul. The NT Church has Christ as King and Head (Colossians 1).

(1 Sam 12:12).[5] Indeed, it was YHWH's heart to be Israel's King,[6] but Israel desired their government to mirror that of the pagan nations surrounding them and, ultimately, forsook God (1 Sam 8:5, 19–20; 12:9). This concept of a "Democratic Theocracy" is continued and fulfilled in the NT in that Christ's Bride is to be a priesthood of all believers, presided over by elders—leaders amongst equals—and whose King is Jesus, the Christ (1 Pet 2:9; Acts 14:23; Matt 23:10; Phil 2:5–11; Rev 17:14; 19:16).

Moreover, the terms dealing with the pastoral office in the NT—"elder," "shepherd," and "overseer"—appear frequently in the LXX text. The Hebrew term, "זָקֵן," is translated in the LXX as "πρεσβύτερος."[7] The term, "זָקֵן," conveys the idea of "old age," "the elders," and "heads of family."[8] These terms seem to suggest an intercovenantal correlation in communal leadership deeply rooted in the OT patriarchs and fulfilled in the NT ecclesiastical concept of "elder."[9] The Hebrew term, "רָעָה," conveys the meaning of "shepherd," "feeder of the flock," or to "protect as a shepherd."[10] As expected, the familiar Greek term, "ποιμήν," is used in the LXX translation.[11] Lastly, the Hebrew term, "פָּקִיד,"[12] connotes the idea of "overseer," "leader," or "governor."[13] The expected Greek term, "ἐπίσκοπος,"[14] is used in the LXX translation—suggesting continuity in terms of governance.

In the NT, one sees the fulfillment of the theological tenets outlined in the OT. The highly symbolic terms set forth in the LXX (ποιμήν, πρεσβύτερος, and ἐπίσκοπος) are given full expression in the NT in that they will be used not to describe various, distinct offices in the church, but to describe the already familiar role of "זָקֵן"—spiritually mature men (elders), who will shepherd and oversee the spiritual care of the flock God

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[5] Norman K. Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 36–39.

[6] This concept is implied by 1 Sam 8:5; 10:17–19; and elucidated in 1 Sam 12:12.

[7] The term πρεσβύτερος and its cognates are used two hundred ninety-six times in the LXX text.

[8] Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, "זָקֵן," in *HALOT: Study Edition*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson; 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:278–79.

[9] L. Roy Taylor, "Presbyterianism," in *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 76–80.

[10] Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, "רָעָה," *HALOT*, 2:1258–61.

[11] The term ποιμήν and its cognates are used two hundred nine times in the LXX text.

[12] The NASB translates פָּקִיד as "overseer" in all but two verses—Num 4:16 and Judg 9:28.

[13] Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, "פָּקִיד," *HALOT*, 2:960.

[14] The term ἐπίσκοπος and its cognates are used sixty-five times in the LXX text.

has entrusted to them (1 Pet 5:2; Heb 13:17). Yet, as important as these "זָקֵן" are, they still needed assistance to do their work well (Exodus 18). A new office is established in 1 Tim 3:8–13 (and quite possibly in Acts 6:1–6, although the term "διάκονος" is absent from the text)—the office of διάκονος (generally, "a servant"), who would assist with the daily administrative tasks of the church.[15] Interestingly, the selection process of Acts 6:1–6 and qualifications for the office of διάκονος in 1 Tim 3:10–13 seem to echo the resonance of Jethro's advice in Exod 18:21 for Moses to "select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain. . . ."[16]

Hermeneutical Considerations

> *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;* — Eph 4:11–12 (NASB)

While some church governance models make distinctions between the terms ἐπίσκοπος and πρεσβύτερος (Monarchy and certain Oligarchy groups), given the evidence, it seems best to see all three terms related to pastoral ministry (ἐπίσκοπος, πρεσβύτερος, and ποιμήν) as synonymous.[17] While the term ποιμήν is not listed in the pastoral epistles, it's verbal form (ποιμάνατε) is used in the imperatival sense *synonymously* in conjunction with the other two terms for "pastor" (πρεσβύτερος and the participle ἐπισκοποῦντες—again being used in the imperatival sense—stemming from the noun ἐπίσκοπος) in 1 Pet 5:1–2.[18] However, some superfluously look to texts such as Eph 4:11 and 1 Tim 5:17 to justify a further multiplicity of church offices and even nuanced distinctions within certain offices—such as Calvin's distinction between "ruling" and "teaching" elders that is currently codified into the dogma and praxis of certain Oligarchy governance models.[19]

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[15] George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 17.

[16] Akin, *Perspectives*, 66. Although Akin uses this passage to argue for the office of "senior" pastor, Exodus 18 seems to be more closely related to Acts 6 and the functioning of the diaconate ministry.

[17] Paige Patterson, "Single-Elder Congregationalism," in *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 142–43.

[18] Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 231–35.

[19] John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II*

Ephesians 4:11 states that God has called the, "ἀποστόλους," the, "προφήτας," the, "εὐαγγελιστάς," the, "ποιμένας,'' and "διδασκάλους." Most evangelical scholars would agree that the office of ἀπόστολος is no longer extant, having been abrogated upon the death of the last Apostle.[20] It is perhaps best to look at the four remaining terms as well as those not mentioned (ἐπίσκοπος and πρεσβύτερος) as various ways of describing the *same* office—that is, a pastor is a *prophet* heralding the word of God under the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:20–21); he does the work of an *evangelist* (2 Tim 4:5); he is an *undershepherd* following the example of the Good Shepherd who laid his life down for his sheep (John 10:11); he is apt to teach (1 Tim 3:2); is spiritually mature and not a novice to the things of God (1 Tim 3:6); and finally, a pastor is an *overseer*, a watchman who cares for the souls of the people God has entrusted to him (Ezek 3:17; Heb 13:17). Lincoln has shown that the τοὺς μὲν . . . τοὺς δὲ construction in the text of Eph 4:11 does not necessarily show distinction (as in most English translations that render the construction, "some as,"),[21] but simply is a listing of God-given pastoral gifts for equipping, edifying, and educating future leaders within the body of Christ.

Theological and Pragmatic Considerations

> *Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;* — 1 Pet 5:1–2 (NASB)

Theologically, the concept of mutual "one-anothering" in eldership is seemingly defined in 1 Pet 5:1 by the *hapax legomenon*, "συμπρεσβύτερος." Συμπρεσβύτερος connotes the idea of a "fellow ambassador," "fellow minister," and a "fellow elder."[22] Davids writes regarding συμπρεσβύτερος, "[T]his is an inclusive term, rather than stressing his

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Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, Calvin's Commentaries 21, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 138–39.

[20] Akin, *Perspectives*, 34–35.

[21] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Nashville: Nelson, 1990), 249.

[22] Walter Bauer et al., "συμπρεσβύτερος," in BDAG (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 959–60.

authority, [Peter] stresses his empathy with the elders in their task. . . ."[23] One would be hard pressed to harmonize a monarchical system of church governance with Peter's emphatically communal term. Peter does not see himself here as a "pope," or as a "first amongst equals." Peter describes himself as a "fellow elder," co-laboring amongst his peers. The theological concept of συμπρεσβύτερος coined in 1 Pet 5:1 seems to be echoed in 2 Tim 2:1 as well. In 2 Tim 2:1, the author explains a paradigmatic process of mentoring and discipling future leaders. Paul commands Timothy, "And these things that you have heard from me through/in the presence of many witnesses, these (same) things you *must* entrust (imperatival aorist) to faithful men, who will be *qualified* to teach others also."[24]

Pragmatically, it seems that this once pastoral role of mentoring future leaders from within the congregation has largely been abdicated and replaced by seminary professors. While much can be said regarding the value of a seminary education, Paul elucidates that the task of mentoring and discipling future leaders is a pastoral duty.[25] By their praxis, it seems that many (if not most) local churches see more value in hiring from without (at the risk of doctrinal purity), than preparing young men from within the congregation for the God-called office of pastor. One of the most troubling aspects of this mentality found in congregations both large and small is that many aspiring pastors who have experienced God's calling on their lives will not have ample opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts, which include, as a primary constituent, the right preaching of the word of God (2 Tim 4:2). Pastoral ministry is not an autocratic, one-man show.

Conclusion

> *When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.* — Acts 14:23 (NASB).

It seems in consideration of the evidence above, that church governance is to be a

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[23] Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 176.

[24] Author's translation. While the Greek term, "ἱκανοὶ," can mean "able" as in most English translations, "qualified," is also a valid rendering and better captures the Pauline emphasis on personal character in the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3.

[25] Alfred Plummer, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The Expositor's Bible (Toronto: Willard Tract Depository and Bible Depôt, 1888), 335–37.

"Democratic Theocracy." The Monarchy and Oligarchy models are untenable in their superfluous distinction between the synonymous terms ἐπίσκοπος, πρεσβύτερος, and ποιμήν. "Democratic" models with a "senior," or worse, singular pastor are, in essence, hierarchical, and not truly democratic in their structure. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic position of apostolic succession derived from their exegesis of Matt 16:18–19[26] is untenable in consideration of the NT praxis of plurality of elders (Acts 14:23). While "thirteen centuries of church life"[27] may have indeed been marked by monarchical popery, the zenith, the quintessential truth set forth in Scripture regarding church governance is that Christ, alone, is Head of his Church (Eph 5:23; Col 1:18).

[26] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 622.

[27] Peter Toon, "An Episcopalian's Response," in *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 153.

The Need for a Metaphor: Jonathan Haidt's Use of the Tower of Babel Story

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Jonathan Haidt is one of the most influential voices in contemporary social analysis, a best-selling author, social psychologist, and professor of ethical leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business.[1] His major article in the May 2022 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* generated a great deal of discussion, not unexpected for a writer of Haidt's stature and influence: "After Babel: How Social Media Dissolved the Mortar of Society and Made America Stupid."[2]

Haidt's thesis is that American society, and particularly its political culture, has become devastatingly fractured due to the effects of today's social media, notably Facebook and Twitter (now called "X"). The purpose of this paper is not to argue with Haidt's premise, but rather to analyze his choice of metaphor to convey it: the Tower of Babel story from Genesis 11:1–9.

This paper will explore whether Haidt uses the Babel story in a way consistent with the biblical text. After an overview of Haidt's article, the paper will evaluate his appropriation of the Tower of Babel story by evaluating two major aspects of it: his use of it as a metaphor for understanding society, and secondly, that the main teaching of the narrative is to illuminate the deleterious effects of social fragmentation.

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[1] Haidt's bestsellers include *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024); *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013); and with Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019).

[2] See the subsequent posts and comments, www.afterbabel.com/p/welcome-to-the-after-babel-substack.

Summary of Haidt's Article

Haidt's article is accompanied by a reproduction of Albrecht Durer's famous woodcut of the destruction of the Tower of Babel, but modified with digital blurring, alluding to Haidt's use of the story: the "story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit." Admitting that the biblical text does not actually depict that the tower was ever destroyed, "in many popular renderings of the story he does, so let's hold that dramatic image in our minds: people wandering amid the ruins, unable to communicate, condemned to mutual incomprehension." Babel is "a story about the fragmentation of everything . . . the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community."[3]

Haidt explains his focus on this particular biblical story, the imagery it conjures, and a specific malady of modern life: "Babel is a metaphor for what some forms of social media have done to nearly all of the groups and institutions most important to the country's future—and to us as a people."[4] American society is currently and devastatingly fragmented, with its citizens left to wander among the ruins.

Haidt sketches a brief narrative of technological advancement, with all of its pluses and minuses. His survey begins with the proliferation of internet access in the 1990s and the connections made through chat rooms. The next major advancement was around 2003 with the initial wave of social media platforms, followed by the rollout of the first iPhone in 2007. The high point for all of this technological connection and what it could achieve was in 2011, noteworthy for both the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, neither of which would have been possible without Facebook and Twitter. That same year Google Translate was introduced; Haidt comments that since it was "available on virtually all smartphones, . . . you could say that 2011 was the year that humanity rebuilt the Tower of Babel . . . (W)e had effectively overcome the curse of division by language."[5]

Haidt then points out changes to social media platforms beginning in 2009 that would destroy the rebuilt Tower, specifically the ability to "Like" a post on Facebook. Twitter made a similar move with the introduction of its "Retweet" feature, which

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[3] Jonathan Haidt, "After Babel: How Social Media Dissolved the Mortar of Society and Made America Stupid." *Atlantic Monthly* (May 2022): 55-66.

[4] Haidt, 56.

[5] Haidt, 56.

Facebook then responded with its "Share" button. YouTube made similar changes. Writes Haidt,

> Shortly after its "Like" button began to produce data about what best "engaged" its users, Facebook developed algorithms to bring each user the content most likely to generate a "like" or some other interaction, eventually including the "share" as well. Later research showed that posts that trigger emotions—especially anger at out-groups—are the most likely to be shared. By 2013, social media had become a new game . . .[6]

As a social scientist, Haidt designates three sources for social cohesion: social capital, strong institutions, and shared stories. He then states, "Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a few other large platforms unwittingly dissolved the mortar of trust, belief in institutions, and shared stories that had held a large and diverse secular democracy together."[7] The social media of 2024, with its corresponding algorithms, encourages extremism from both right and left and "makes a political system based on compromise grind to a halt."[8] And although the impact of artificial intelligence on these factors is still being clarified, it is hard to imagine it making the current situation much better.[9]

The Tower of Babel Story as a Metaphor

Haidt writes that the "story of Babel is the best metaphor" he has found to understand fully the social fragmentation of American society.[10] "Metaphor" in this sense is defined as "a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract."[11] Does the Tower of Babel story have a similar function in the biblical text? To answer the question of the function of the story, we will start with a close reading of the text.

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[6] Haidt, 57.

[7] Haidt, 59.

[8] Haidt, 60.

[9] Additionally, Haidt maintains a Substack entitled "After Babel," and has a proposed book, *After Babel: Adapting to a World We Can No Longer Share*, to be published by Penguin Press in 2025.

[10] Haidt, 56.

[11] Oxford Languages, accessed via Google.

1. *Close reading.* The story is brief and therefore reproduced here, from Genesis 11:1–9 in the NRSVue:

> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth, and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Questions immediately present themselves from the text, beginning with when these events would have taken place. The narrator indicates the story took place at a time when humanity lived and traveled as one group and had one language. However, the chapter immediately preceding the narrative depicts quite the opposite. The Table of Nations of Gen 10 shows a world teeming with people groups, each "in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations" (Gen 10:5, 20, 31). The verse just before the Tower of Babel story makes this summary: "These are the families of Noah's sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood" (10:32). It is difficult to see how the Tower of Babel story proceeds chronologically after Gen 10.

Another question has to do with the tower itself. Haidt acknowledges that the biblical story does not say that the tower was destroyed, but he still prefers to use the picture of a destroyed tower in his article and what it must have been like walking amongst those ruins. In fact, the story does not mention the tower at all after v. 5; after

human language is confounded and the group is dispersed, the narrator simply says, "they left off building the city" (v. 8).[12]

Yet another question arises from the etiological meaning of the story as assigned by the biblical narrator: "Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth." "Babel" is the Hebrew representation of "Babylon," the capital city of the Babylonian empire. However, the word for "confuse" in Hebrew is *balal*, and the dissimilarity of the two words makes this a confusing etiology at best.

2. *Efforts to Answer the Questions*. The various approaches of the historical-critical method have sought answers for these and other questions generated by this brief yet enigmatic story. We begin with source analysis.

a. *Source criticism*. The repetitions (or "doublets") in Gen 10–11 lend themselves well to source analysis, most notably the report that the post-diluvian world was settled by numerous human groups, each with its own language (compare 10:5 and 11:9). They are not presented chronologically, nor is there any effort at correlation or correspondence.

The predominant explanation for such occurrences (particularly in the Pentateuch) is to see in them evidence of multiple sources behind the text as we have it today.[13] The Tower of Babel story is identified as originating in the J source of the Pentateuch, perhaps written or compiled by an unknown author or editor in approximately 950 BCE. Material from the J source has been identified by its "folksy" narrative style and its depiction of Yahweh in informal, even anthropomorphic ways.[14] These qualities are clearly seen in the Tower of Babel story.

The depiction of human scattering and multiplicity of language in Gen 10 lacks the narrative style or informal presentation of Yahweh. The material in this chapter is purported to originate from the P (or "Priestly") source, possibly written or compiled by an unknown author or editor in approximately 550 BCE.[15] Material from the Priestly source will continue immediately following the Tower of Babel story, from 11:10 forward.

In sum, the Tower of Babel story is from the J source and has been inserted into the overall Priestly account. The final editor of the biblical material did not attempt to

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[12] The phrase "and the tower" is added by the LXX at the end of v. 8.

[13] See "Source Criticism," *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 4th edition, edited by Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 199–200.

[14] "J (Yahwist)," *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 101–102.

[15] "P: Priestly Code; Priestly Document; Priestly Narrative; Priestly Writer," *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 143–44.

reconcile the two accounts of the repopulation of the post-diluvian world; material from two respective sources has simply been allowed to exist on its own.[16]

b. *Form criticism.* Form critics take analysis of biblical text a step further. They explore broader categories of stories (in the case of biblical narrative) and hypothesize about particular life situations that might have given rise to the material in the text.[17]

H. Gunkel places Gen 11:1–9 into the category of "legend" as opposed to "history proper."[18] Legends originated in popular tradition and often utilized poetic narrative, tackling subjects "that interest common people"[19] even if the legend "frequently reports things which are quite incredible."[20] In many cases, legends in biblical literature "are not only similar to those of other nations, but are actually related to them by origin and nature."[21]

S. Mowinckel further categorizes the Tower of Babel story as an etiological legend. An etiology seeks to provide an origin story for something known in the present day. Etiological stories are common in the Old Testament, such as the explanation for the Dead Sea in Gen 19. Many etiologies are for persons or place names, and this is clearly the case for the Tower of Babel story (see v. 9).[22]

c. *Literary criticism.* If the above critical inquiries focus on the individual sources behind a biblical text (often referred to as "diachronic"), the next following categories of analysis focus on the "final form" of the text as we have it today (referred to as

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[16] In a similar way, the biblical editor has a creation account from the Priestly source followed by a creation account from the J source, with no correlation or attempts at conflation, in Gen 1:1–2:25.

[17] "Form Criticism," *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 68–71.

[18] Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, translated by W. H. Carruth (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); and *Genesis*, translated by Mark E. Biddle (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 99.

[19] Gunkel, *Legends of Genesis*, 5.

[20] Gunkel, 7.

[21] Gunkel, 10. For those who might assume that use of the term "legend" somehow denigrates the Bible, Gunkel states: "The conclusion, then, that one of these narratives is legend is by no means intended to detract from the value of the narrative; it only means that the one who pronounces it has perceived somewhat of the poetic beauty of the narrative and thinks that he has thus arrived at an understanding of the story . . . (The use of the term) is the judgment of reverence and love. . . The legends of Israel, especially of Genesis, are perhaps the most beautiful and most profound ever known on earth" (11).

[22] "Legend," *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 114.

"synchronic"). The literary critic focuses our attention on the literary features of the text in much the same way as non-biblical literature is analyzed.[23]

The Tower of Babel shows features of a carefully and even artfully crafted story. G. Wenham shows us how the narrative diagrams into 5 scenes accompanied by an introduction and conclusion:

v. 1	Introduction
v. 2	Scene 1: The travels of humankind
vv. 3–4	Scene 2: Human plans to build a city and a tower
v. 5	Scene 3: Divine inspection visit
vv. 6–7	Scene 4: Divine plans to frustrate humankind
v. 8	Scene 5: Humankind is scattered: building stopped
v. 9	Conclusion: What Babel means

Wenham also notes the use of scenic parallelism, as vv. 1–4 are in parallel with vv. 6–9, with v. 5 being the hinge between the two.[24]

The artistry of the narrative becomes even more appreciated as Wenham points out its chiastic structure (called a "palistrophe"):

A "The whole earth had one language" (v. 1)
B "there" (v. 2)
C "each other" (v. 3)
D "Come let us make bricks" (v. 3)
E "let us build for ourselves" (v. 4)
F "a city and a tower" (v. 4)
G "Yahweh came down . . ." (v. 5)
F[1] "the city and the tower" (v. 5)
E[1] "which humankind had built" (v. 5)
D[1] "come . . . let us mix up" (v. 7)
C[1] "each other's language" (v. 7)
B[1] "from there" (v. 8)
A[1] "the language of the whole earth" (v. 9)

[23] "Literary Criticism," *Handbook of Biblical Criticism,* 118–19.

[24] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1987), 235.

Wenham adds, "This simultaneous use of parallel panels and palistrophe is remarkable and unusual."[25]

In other words, the Tower of Babel story is a highly stylized account. Whoever the author was, a high level of artistry and sophistication was brought to bear on what was probably a well-known story.

d. *Canonical criticism.* This type of analysis seeks to understand the final form of a biblical text within the book in which it appears and then "within the larger context of the Bible as authoritative scripture."[26] The significance of the Tower of Babel story can begin to be understood through such an analysis.

The Tower of Babel story is the concluding narrative in the "primeval history" of Gen 1–11, that is, events that the scripture depicts as having taken place before recorded history. These events include creation (Gen 1–2), the Garden of Eden (Gen 3), the flood and Noah's ark (Gen 6–9), as well as the repopulation of the world after the flood through the descendants of Noah's three sons (Gen 10).

This final story in Gen 1–11 shows some clear connections with the beginning story of the book. Examples of these verbal and thematic parallels include the use of אדם, "humankind" (1:26–28; 11:5), שמים, "heavens" (1:8, 26; 11:4), אחד, "one" (1:5, 9; 11:16), and כל־הארץ, "all the earth" (1:26, 29; 11:8–9). Both stories incorporate the divine plural: "Let us make humankind" in 1:26 and "Let us go down" in 11:7.[27] The story of Gen 3 involves the first human couple attempting to usurp a divine mandate ("Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," Gen 2:17) and Gen 11 tells of humankind not willing to obey God's command to "fill the earth" (11:4, 1:28). In Gen 3:22 and 11:6 God takes preventive measures to shield humankind from further judgment. In the earlier story humankind is banished from a garden; in the final story humankind is dispersed from a city.

The Tower of Babel story also has forward connections in the book of Genesis. Abraham, whose story marks the second major part of the book of Genesis (chaps. 12–50) originates from Ur of the Chaldeans, the ancestral home of the Babylonians (11:31).

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[25] Wenham, 236.

[26] "Canonical Criticism," *Handbook on Biblical Criticism*, 33–34.

[27] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 466–67.

He is called to be a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (12:3), certainly a reference to the scattered, diverse, and multilingual state of humankind as of Gen 11:1–9.

The reality of diverse nations and languages is present in the rest of the Bible. Isa 2:4 is a vision of multiple nations worshipping Yahweh. In Zeph 3:9 Yahweh promises to "change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech," and in Acts 2 the Apostles are divinely gifted to speak in other human languages they had not previously known, to the astonishment of the gathered multilingual group (Acts 2:1–13). One of the final images in scripture shows "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb," giving praise (Rev 7:9).

3. *Summation.* Haidt uses the Tower of Babel story as a metaphor for understanding culture. The review of a close reading and application of historical-critical analysis to the Tower of Babel story reveals a similar use of the story in the biblical text.

The primary use of the story in the biblical text is to give meaning to the culture experienced by its original audience. Whether or not the event literally happened is not the focus of the biblical writer. It is an etiological legend, artfully crafted into its present form by a 10th c. BCE author. Its echoes can be heard through the rest of the Old Testament and into the New. It is a metaphorical story with an honored place in sacred scripture.[28]

The Meaning of the Metaphor

If both Haidt and the biblical text treat the Tower of Babel story as metaphor, the next issue to explore is the meaning conveyed through the metaphor. The dominant idea, hereafter termed "motif," for Haidt in the Tower of Babel story is the tower itself. The tower represents for him social cohesion and unity, built on social capital, strong institutions, and shared stories. Conversely, a destroyed tower symbolizes "the fragmentation of everything . . . the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community."[29] The text of Gen 11:1–9 will be analyzed to determine its dominant motif and the teaching it conveys.

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[28] Interpreters who view the story as primarily an historical narrative include Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990); Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967); and Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996).

[29] Haidt, 56–57.

1. *The tower*. The first motif to be examined will be the tower. It will be necessary to first summarize the understanding of towers in the ancient Near East, particularly Mesopotamian religious practices.

a. *The Tower as ANE cultic structure*. A number of interpreters point out the similarities between the construction of the tower in Babel and towers used in Mesopotamian worship. The grand tower used in ancient Babylonian worship was the ziggurat, constructed as

> early as the third millennium BC. The ziggurat was a step-ladder edifice, whose bottom was square or rectangular . . . It is widely agreed that it formed a stairway between the gods and earth.[30]

An ancient ziggurat dedicated to the worship of Marduk in the city of Babylon had been restored by Nabopolassar in the late 7th c. BCE. It was even referred to by the Babylonians as *ziggurrat Babili*, "the tower of Babel."[31]

The ziggurat played a role in Mesopotamian religion that was greater than one specific edifice. J. H. Walton relates,

> Nearly thirty ziggurats in the area of Mesopotamia have been discovered by archeologists. In location, they stretch from Mari . . . in the northwest . . . to Ur . . . in the south . . . and to Susa . . . in the east. In time, the span begins perhaps as early as (the end of the 5th millennium BC) and extends through . . . Seleucid times (3rd c. BC). [They] are of varying sizes with bases ranging from 20 meters on a side to over 90 meters on a side.[32]

Others point out the sacred qualities bestowed upon such cultic structures as seen, for example, in *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation myth from cuneiform tablets dating to the 13th c. BCE.[33] The account records the construction of Babylon and

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[30] Mathews, 470–71.

[31] Matthews, 471. Caution is advised for seeing this as a direct parallel to Gen 11:1–9, however. If the J source is responsible for the story, it would have been incorporated into Israelite tradition by about 950 BCE, some 300 years earlier than the neo-Babylonian reign of Nabopolassar.

[32] John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," *BBR* 5 (1995): 156.

[33] W. G. Lambert, "Enuma Elish," ABD 2 (New York: Doubleday 1992), 526–28.

particularly its temple complex named *Esagila*, which included a tower: "The first year they molded its bricks. And when the second year arrived / They raised the head of Esagila toward Apsu (the heavens)."[34]

E. A. Spieser describes the similarities between *Enuma Elish* and Gen 11:1–9, not only in the reference to a tower "with its top in the heavens" (v. 4) but also in the unusual phrase in v. 3, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly." He comments,

> (T)he ceremonial and year-long preparation of the sacral bricks and the solemn laying of the first brick were standard practices bound up with the religious architecture of Mesopotamia.[35]

Walton points out that the specific cultic function of the ziggurat cannot be identified with certainty, but he offers a tentative hypothesis:

> (It) was a structure that was built to support the stairway, which was believed to be used by the gods to travel from one realm to the other . . . The stairway led at the top to the gate of the gods, the entrance to the divine abode.[36]

b. *The Tower in Gen 11:1–9.* The tower is mentioned in just two verses, vv. 4–5. Even then, it is presented as an adjunct to the main building project, a city. However tall the tower might have been, the narrator tells us that Yahweh cannot "see" it unless he comes down from heaven (v. 5). But even with this divine inspection visit, the city is mentioned first. The tower is not mentioned in the narrative after v. 5. The name "Babel" is given to the city, not the tower uniquely.

H. Gunkel points out features of the story related to the tower that are either contradictory, incongruous, or redundant. For example, v. 5 states that Yahweh "came down" to inspect the city and tower (which seems to be the content of v. 6), but in v. 7 he says "Come, let us go down" with no indication of time having passed between the two verses to explain that perhaps Yahweh returned to heaven in the meantime.[37]

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[34] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 75–76.

[35] Speiser, 76.

[36] Walton, "Mesopotamian Background," 162.

[37] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 94.

Additionally, there are at least three different motives given for building the tower: to reach heaven, to make a name for the builders, and to prevent them from being scattered. Any of these motives singularly would seem to be enough to justify such an effort; the biblical narrator shows no correlation between them.

Gunkel isolates more incongruities. For example, in v. 8 the text states, "So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city (with no mention of the tower!)." Gunkel points out, "That humanity, already dispersed over the whole earth, can no longer build the city is obvious." The similar redundancy is present in v. 9: ". . . there the LORD confused the language of all the earth, and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." The redundant expression ("of all the earth") in the final verse seems to exhibit two different conclusions to the story, both preserved but not correlated enough to give the narrative a stronger unity.[38]

The presence of incongruity and redundancy usually (in the estimation of higher criticism) indicates the presence of more than one tradition in a biblical text. Gunkel sees in Gen 11:1–9 the continuing existence of two separate but related traditions, one centered on the city and the other on the tower. The "city recension" recounts the confusion of languages; the "tower recension" the dispersal of human population over the earth.[39] As is often the case in the biblical text, the editor of the narrative allows multiple traditions to exist; any attempt to correlate them to make the text read more consistently (at least to modern sensibilities) is resisted out of respect for the traditions that have been brought together.

C. Westermann takes Gunkel's foundational insights and builds on them, analyzing the story based on three motifs: dispersal of human populations, confusion of languages, and tower building. He sees the story of the tower as the oldest part of the narrative, with no separate "city recension." The motif of dispersion is a later incorporation into the tower story. The last motif to be incorporated is confusion of languages, which, according to Westermann, is "determinative" for shaping the narrative as we now have it.[40]

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[38] Gunkel, 94. He also points out in v. 3 a possible redundancy in describing the building materials: "Let us makes bricks . . . and they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar."

[39] Gunkel, 94–95. G. von Rad has a similar view, *Genesis*, OTL, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 150.

[40] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 535.

Genesis 11:1–9 seems to support Westermann's view that the motif of confusion of languages was added to an existing narrative (consisting of tower building and dispersal of human populations) and that it is now the dominant theme. For example, 11:1, "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words," is redundant considering v. 2: "And as they migrated from the east . . ." The narrator is indicating that the entirety of humankind lived and traveled as one group; naturally there would only be one language. Verse 1 has been added to an existing narrative to emphasize a new theme: confusion of languages. Additionally, v. 1 has an inner redundancy emphasizing the initial solitary language of the human race: "one language (שׂפה אחת) and the same words (ודברים אחדים)."

Verses 2–5 show the earlier version of the story that just had the tower and human dispersion motifs. That earlier version continues at v. 8. If vv. 1, 6–7, and 9 are removed, the narrative still makes sense:

> And (when)[41] they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. (And)[42] the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Vv. 6–7 are from the later addition of a "confusion of languages" motif:

> And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

[41] The phrase "as they migrated" in the NRSVue translates an infinitive plus a preposition, בנסעם. This form can also be rendered with "when."

[42] The NRSVue renders the Hebrew ויפץ as "So the LORD scattered," but a simpler translation would be "And the LORD scattered."

The concluding verse of the narrative shows two motifs combined, but still evident: "Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth, and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

That the motif of confusion of languages is now the dominant theme in the narrative is exhibited in the etiological statement of v. 9a, which now forms an *inclusio* with v. 1 (also added by the final editor; see above). It has already been stated that this is a weak linguistic link at best, the Hebrew word for "Babel," בבל not having an obvious connection with the Hebrew for "confuse," בלל. If it is a forced etiology, the point seems to be that much more obvious: the dominant theme of the story in its present shape is the confusion of languages.

2. *Confusion of languages.* Since the biblical author presents "confusion of languages" as the dominant motif of Gen 11:1–9, it is important to grasp how the motif would have been understood in the ancient Near East, particularly Mesopotamian culture.

a. *Confusion of languages in the ANE.* Reference to confusion of languages exists in one Sumerian account, "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta," dating from approximately 2000 BCE.[43] Enmarkar is seeking to subjugate the land of Aratta. A messenger is sent to Aratta to recite an incantation from the god Enki to compel its submission. Below is a translation of the relevant portion:

> On this day there is no snake, no scorpion,
> no hyena, no lion,
> no (wild) dog, no wolf,
> no anxiety, no fear,
> (and) men will have no (more) enemies.
> On this day the lands of Shubur and Hamasi,
> whose tongue is opposed to that of Sumer– Sumer the land with a noble culture–
> Ur, the famous land,
> and the lands of the nomads, who sleep on the broad steppe,
> the whole inhabited world,
> will speak to Enlil in one language.

[43] S. N. Kramer, "Man's Golden Age: A Sumerian Parallel to Genesis XI. 1," *JAOS* 63 (July–Sep. 1943): 191.

> Enki . . . the lord . . . the prince . . . the king . . .
> Enki, the lord of over-abundance, whose words are reliable,
> the lord of wisdom, who knows the land,
> the ruler of the gods,
> endowed with wisdom, the lord of Eridu,
> will change all existing languages in their mouth,
> and then the language of mankind will be one.[44]

Unity of language is presented here as a promised future era on behalf of a specific god in the Sumerian pantheon and particularly the earthly ruler (in this case, Enmerkar) who served as representative in an effort to compel subjugation. Unity of language could therefore be an aspect of dominion over others. If this is indeed the case, then Yahweh's statement in Gen 11:6 takes on added import:

> Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

Allusions to subjugation of peoples can also be seen in the use of שִׂפָה אחת, "one speech," in Gen 11:1. In the ANE, the phrase can refer to power and hegemony. "One speech" was an expression of world domination for Assyrian kings. Key to establishing an effective rule would be to abolish the native language of the subjugated people. Inscriptions concerning Sargon II of Assyria refer to unifying people under one speech, so that other efforts of the empire could be accomplished, such as building projects and establishing a name.[45]

b. *Confusion of Languages in Gen 11:1–9.* With an understanding of unity of language being an aspect of human subjugation of others, we can now see how the Yahwist uses the dominant motif in the Babel story. Because humanity has one

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[44] Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, OTL (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 86–87. An alternate translation casts the incantation as depicting a past "golden age" when there was unity of language (S. N. Kramer, "The 'Babel of Tongues': A Sumerian Version," *JAOS* 88 (1968): 108–11. See also the discussion in Wenham, 236–37.

[45] P. J. Harland, "Vertical or Horizontal: The Sin of Babel," *VT* 48 (1998), 517, citing C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede": Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzahlung (Gen. 11, 1–9),* OBO 101 (Gottingen, 1990), 445–82.

language, rulers are able to exert control over others, and nothing will be impossible for them. To prevent further exploitation, God confuses human language so that the building project ceases and humankind scatters. Humanity thus begins to fulfill its God-given mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it," something they had been resistant to do by seeking safety and security in the city of Babel.

It can be argued that Yahweh's action should not be understood in strictly judgmental terms. This was not a "negative" for humankind. On the contrary, an impulse to subjugate others for the purpose of a building project was stopped. In this understanding, confusion of languages was not a "curse." It is what stopped the nascent tyranny of Babel's builders.

It can also be questioned whether "confusion" of languages is the best translation of the text. The word Yahweh uses in v. 7, ונבלה, is from the root בלה, meaning "mix up, confound."[46] To say that Yahweh "mixed up" human language affords the needlessly pejorative implications of "confuse."[47]

It should also be noted that multiplicity of languages is not treated in the biblical text as an aspect of fallen creation that will be rectified in the eschaton. The vision of Isa 2:3, "Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,'" says nothing about the abolishment of multiple languages. Another eschatological vision is found in Zeph 3:9, "At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord." The prophet does not say "one speech," but "pure speech," שפה ברורה. Peoples with different languages will call upon the LORD with true words, not like the false or performative lip-service of Judah in the prophet's day.[48]

3. Summation. The main teaching of Gen 11:1–9 is based on its dominant motif, confusion of languages. The attempt of humanity to protect itself from being scattered to fill the earth and subdue it was an affront to the rule of Yahweh, and his intervention by confusing human language not only led to humanity achieving Yahweh's purpose but

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[46] HALOT, 134.

[47] See Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," JBL 126 (2007): 47.

[48] That the eschaton will be multilingual is evidenced in the New Testament as well. Rev 7:9 describes the multitude standing before the throne, "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." The miracle of Pentecost was not that everyone spoke the same language, but rather that assembled Jews "from every people under heaven . . . heard them speaking in the native language of each" (Acts 2:5).

also protected humanity from itself and thus manifested human flourishing. The story etiologically explains why there came to exist multiple languages and the corresponding dispersal of human population, therefore serving as a companion piece from the Yahwist to the Priestly "Table of Nations" in Gen ch. 10.

Contemporary Teaching

The analysis of the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1-9 shows its main teaching. The contemporary meaning of the story can be unlocked if one understands the broader implications of human language.

Human language is key to the culture of any people group. T. Hiebert, in his analysis of Gen 11:1–9, observes: "Language . . . is recognized by sociologists and anthropologists as one of the primary markers of a specific culture, cultural tradition, or ethnic group." When the dispersal of human population is also factored in, Hiebert observes, "Geographical residence . . . is closely associated, as is language, with the identity of a specific culture or ethnic group, and . . . is a prominent means of distinction between cultures." According to Hiebert, much more than multiplicity of languages was accomplished at Babel: "God's two actions, distinguishing languages and dispersing humanity, explain the origin of the world's cultures and provide an etiology of culture difference."[49]

The world that resulted after Babel need not be considered under an additional curse because of the resultant multiplicity of cultures, but rather as one that reflects God's intent. Fallen humanity had retreated into isolationism to avoid being scattered and differentiated; safety and security were sought in staying together "as one," at all costs. God's intervention spurred humanity to do what humanity was created to do. Hiebert concludes: "The world's cultural diversity is represented as the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment of it."[50]

Similarly, Bernard Anderson sees in the story two competing intentions: a human centripetal force which strives to "maintain a primeval unity, based on one language, a

[49] Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *JBL* 126 (2007): 47–50.

[50] Hiebert, 56.

central living-space and a single aim." It is counteracted with a divine centrifugal force that "disperses them into linguistic, spatial, and ethnic diversity."[51]

The contemporary meaning of the Tower of Babel story teaches the danger of human attempts at cultural isolationism. When a group, because of fear, seeks to insulate and thus protect itself from exposure to other cultures or even to being dispersed among them, that group is standing against Yahweh's purpose for humanity and is making itself vulnerable to exploitative leadership. Human flourishing happens when groups trust themselves into God's good purpose for God's multi-ethnic, multi-cultural world.

The biblical author shows us a better way through the life and example of Abraham, who begins to be mentioned before Gen 11 comes to a close (11:27–31). Abraham shows himself willing to do what the builders of Babel had resisted: be sent out into the wider, unknown, unfamiliar world. Through his faith expressed by trusting obedience, God will reach the world with all of its diverse ethnicities and begin a work of reconciliation, with never a hint of subjugation: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

Conclusion

Haidt's use of the Tower of Babel story is consistent with the biblical text in that both treat the story as a metaphor. Haidt and the biblical author each see in Gen 11:1–9 a figurative and symbolic story which brings meaning to the culture and experience of those who hear the story.

It is in the meaning of the metaphor and its application to society that there are differences between Haidt and the biblical writer. For Haidt, the story teaches the disastrous fragmentation of society when the things that contribute to social cohesion are abandoned, such as social capital, strong institutions, and shared stories. For the biblical author, the meaning of the story is a cautionary tale against human attempts at cultural isolationism. Haidt has a very positive view of social cohesion; the biblical writer is far more circumspect.[52]

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[51] Bernhard Anderson, "Unity and Diversity in God's Creation: A Study of the Babel Story," *CurTM* 5 (1978): 70.

[52] Hiebert (57) notes the tension in the story between the competing values of cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity. It cannot be argued that cultural homogeneity can lead to much progress and even human good.

Perhaps there is some agreement in how social media's role in society is evaluated. For Haidt, it is the abusive practices of social media companies and its users that have led to the abandonment of what had held American society together. Insofar as social media can also contribute to cultural isolationism and groups seeking security in their own culture, beliefs, and even shared terminology (language), the biblical author might join Haidt in denigrating the modern use of social media platforms. Many users engage with social media so that they do not have to interact with the outside world and its differing viewpoints. Users can find their own communities online and project their chosen profiles to those who join them. Cultural bubbles, experiential silos, and confirmation bias all thrive in one's own social media sphere, rarely challenged by an opposing or differing point of view.

Beyond the Mosaic: Deuteronomy 29, Jeremiah 31, and the Covenant Connection of a Restored and Repentant Nation

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Introduction

This article examines connections between the biblical covenants established through Moses and Jeremiah, particularly highlighting the covenant declared in Deuteronomy 29:1 as distinct from its Sinaitic predecessor, supported by an analysis of the prepositional phrases *millevad* ("apart from, besides") and *plēn* ("excluding, aside from") in the MT and LXX texts (28:69, respectively). Drawing support from leading Old Testament scholars, it also proposes that the Deuteronomic covenant contains unconditional promises concerning land and national repentance, which are reinforced and expanded upon in the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31. With attention paid to various "I will" statements signaling textual markers that connect both books in pericopes surrounding covenant announcements, the central argument is that covenant stipulations in Deuteronomy 29–30 and Jeremiah 31:31–34 anticipate a future fulfillment involving a national restoration for Israel in the promised land upon their repentance.

Such a perspective, rooted in dispensational thought, advocates for a literal interpretation of these covenant promises and their eschatological realization for a restored and repentant Jewish nation, contrasting with approaches that tend to spiritualize or allegorize them. Adopting a method aligned with traditional dispensational scholarship, the paper ultimately develops a biblical theology of covenant that exposes weaknesses in interpretive methods that lessen literal covenant promises, contending that a consistent grammatical-historical approach supports a concrete eschatological fulfillment of these covenant prophecies for ethnic Israel.

Preliminary Assumptions

First, though this article is limited to data concerning two distinct covenants found in Deuteronomy 29 and Jeremiah 31, it is done so recognizing the principle of progressive revelation. It is Scripture's progressive nature that must be consciously maintained in order for any theological method to qualify as truly evangelical. This means that certain doctrines at times are presented in germinal form that will grow in maturity as the canon develops.

Yet this does not mean that its germ or seed form precludes its inerrancy or lacks sufficiency for the generation that received it. Indeed, all of God's recorded thoughts in any of their placements are without error and fully sufficient for their original audience. What it does entail, however, is that a seed, though perfect in its intent, is still incomplete in its growth. Such is the case with the covenants. For example, the New Covenant develops elements from the Deuteronomic Covenant—both covenants being developments of the Abrahamic Covenant.[1]

Second and more germane to the current article is a final assumption: covenants are believed to be present in the Scripture only where formal treaty language is present. More narrowly, an actual covenant in the Bible is a covenant only when it is identified by the term, *b^{e}rîṯ* ("covenant"). To this, there is no question that covenants are explicitly revealed in Scripture, and so designated by the explicit term, "covenant." Undeniably, this is the case for each one of the biblical, God-to-man covenants; that is, they are each identified as a "covenant": Noahic (Genesis 6:18); Abrahamic (Genesis 15:18); Mosaic (Exodus 19:5); Phineas/Levitical (Numbers 23:15); Deuteronomic/Land (Deuteronomy 29:1), Davidic (2 Samuel 23:5); New (Jeremiah 31:31). If one recognizes this as true, one's hermeneutic should remain consistent to the fact. In other words, covenants will remain literal covenants when identified as such in strict covenantal language, with all blessings—physical and spiritual—kept therein. Conversely, if one abandons such an approach, initiated at the outset by dismissing key identifying words, then the covenants inevitably become spiritualized, typified, or allegorized as they are torn from their original intention. Indeed, this latter route is the one chosen by Stephen Wellum and

[1] Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 644. Describing them as Scripture's "turning points," Merrill sees their place in the progression of revelation as building upon those covenants that precede them, without any contradiction. The covenants amplify one another in further detail and precision.

Peter Gentry in their influential work *Kingdom Through Covenants,* as well as Thomas McComiskey's volume, *The Covenants of Promise*, both discussed later.[2]

In contrast to those who allow much of their theological systems to inform their views on the covenants stands the eminent Reformed theologian John Murray. Murray cast doubts on the legitimacy of any such covenant of works, or covenant of creation or Adamic Covenant, setting himself somewhat at a distance from his colleagues.[3] One of his main reasons for rejecting this theological covenant was due to the complete lack of the term *b^{e}rîṯ* to identify it in the Bible: "Scripture always uses the term covenant," Murray rightly observed, "when applied to God's administration to men in reference to a provision that is redemptive or closely related to redemptive design."[4] Murray is to be commended for stepping outside the conventions of his theological constituency, choosing to remain true to the biblical text. His example will be followed in the current study.

Consequently, a truly biblical theology of the covenants will be one that allows the OT to inform all matters pertaining to them—as it is in the OT where they are each announced and identified as "covenants." This should not be thought of as novel, as "Old Testament theology," explains C. Hassel Bullock, "is the explanation of the writings

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[2] Peter J. Gentry, and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

[3] For a persuasive argument against the theological covenants of Covenant Theology see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "An Argument Against Theologically Construed Covenants," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (2007): 259–73. While this author takes issue with Niehaus's postulation of a so-called Adamic or Creation covenant, Niehaus is to be commended for challenging the false notion of overarching theological covenants within Covenant Theology, particularly the so-called "covenant of grace" which virtually assimilates all the biblical covenants. That said, for an outstanding refutation of any "Adamic" or "Creation Covenant." see, P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," *Dictionary of The Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 141–42. Williamson's retreatment exposes the flaws in the usual reasonings that are typically used to support this so-called covenant (e.g., the pronominal suffix of "My covenant").

[4] John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," *Collected Writings of John Murray: Systematic Theology* (Carlyle: Banner of Trust, 1976), 2:49–50.

of the Old Testament in their biblical settings."[5] Applying Bullock's simple and correct idea, this article leaves all unwarranted types, allegories, and New Testament significance aside, relying solely on the data found within the First Testament.

Scholarly Debate on Covenant

There is little doubt that the concept of covenant is fundamental in understanding biblical history and theology and the intertwining of the two. Tiberius Rata observed that in the Old Testament, covenants can extend past mere contracts and customarily contain divine promises from God to His people who enter into covenant with him.[6] The biblical covenants are so valued in the Old Testament, that some choose to single them out as the premier "center" of the canon. Eugene Merrill, for example, structures his OT theology diachronically, reflecting his firm belief in progressive revelation, and sees the concept of covenant as the pervasive principle in the OT denoting man's reconciliation and renewal with God. When the OT speaks of covenant theologically, "In most instances, it refers to an agreement between God and people, one always initiated by him."[7] The Deuteronomic and New Covenant discussed in this article meet both Rata's and Merrill's summation as divine promises are given concerning land and forgiveness, and both are initiated by God Himself.

Interestingly, while all biblical scholars recognize the importance of covenant, not all agree on its function. For instance, starting with the Abrahamic, McComiskey splits the covenants up into a bi-covenantal scheme he calls "promissory" and "administrative." Accordingly, only the Abrahamic is promissory as it is eternally in force and "relates not only to Abraham but to all mankind."[8] The latter covenants are "administrative" in that they explicate Abrahamic elements that govern human obedience.[9] Yet, McComiskey may go too far in his OT theology of the covenants. Not satisfied with remaining within the confines of the OT canon, his re-interpretations of

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[5] C. Hassel Bullock, "History and Theology: The Tale of Two Histories," *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, eds., David M. Howard and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 99.

[6] T. Rata, "Covenant," *Dictionary of The Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. by Mark J. Bota and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 99.

[7] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 238.

[8] McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, 16.

[9] McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 144. For McComiskey, these include a distinct "covenant of circumcision, the Mosaic covenant, and the new covenant."

covenant through the filter of the New Testament abound. For example, in *The Covenants of Promise* he defends the notion that because the author of Hebrews quotes the New Covenant passage of Jeremiah in its entirety, that is, extending past the named Israelite recipients in vv. 31, 33, the benefactors of the covenant must extend beyond national Israel and on to the Christian church.[10] Moreover, he does not stop with merely reaching into the New Testament to help interpret his OT theology of the covenants, but chooses to go a step further. Following many confessionally Reformed scholars, McComiskey deductively subsumes all of the biblical covenants under the theological covenants of Covenant Theology.[11] This is merely a sampling of what permeates his otherwise fine treatise. It seems McComiskey's OT theology is enveloped in a method that is guided by presuppositions devoted to a theological system rather than an inductive dealing with the OT text.

Jeffrey Niehaus, like McComiskey, advocates for a dual-taxonomy for the covenants, but instead of the latter's promissory/administration categories, Niehaus divides them into "common grace" and "special grace" covenants; the former referring to Noahic Covenant, the latter all others.[12] Known for his defense of a shared structure between Israel's covenants and other ancient Near East cultures' suzerain-vassal treaties Niehaus observed, "All covenants involve law, that is, stipulations that must be obeyed by one or both parties."[13] Though correct in his statement, which supports his reasoning for rejecting the traditional conditional/unconditional covenant structure, it is worth pointing out that in all but two of Niehaus's examples of pagan ancient Near Eastern covenants does an any nation actually use the word "covenant."[14] Indeed, much like others prone to "covenantal language" void of any direct language of "covenant," Niehaus largely assumes their presence in his works.

As this brief survey has demonstrated, the conversation over biblical covenants is as diverse as it is myopic. While elements are shared among all evangelical scholars —their divine initiative and importance to biblical theology being unanimous—specific structuring of the covenants and their influence in the ancient Near East are not.

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[10] McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 156–61.

[11] See McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, 179–192; 213–221.

[12] Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Biblical Theology: Special Grace Covenants, Old Testament*, vol. 2. (Bellingham: Lexham, 2017).

[13] Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapid: Kregel, 2008), 56.

[14] Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, e.g. one in Babylon, (59); and one in Assyria, (61).

Scholarship on the Land and Distinction of the Deuteronomic Covenant

Subsumed in the perennial debate over biblical covenants are the similarities and distinctiveness of each of the covenants. More germane to purposes here is the relationship between the covenant announced at Deuteronomy 29 and the covenant previewed in Jeremiah 31. McComiskey is representative of many by assuming the covenant spoken of in Deuteronomy 29 "is a reaffirmation of the Mosaic covenant."[15]

That the Deuteronomic Covenant is a mere "reaffirmation" or "renewal" of the covenant at Sinai is virtually assumed in evangelical scholarship.[16] Major English Bible translations, such as the NKJV, NIV, ESV, CSB, etc., provide a superscription above Deuteronomy, labeling the pericope as a "covenant renewal," which can go unnoticed by the unassuming reader. More accurately, Merrill views the entire book of Deuteronomy, and specifically the covenant announced at 29:1, as distinct from Sinai, though a "greatly amended and expanded" version of its Mosaic predecessor.[17] While he rightly distinguishes the Deuteronomic Covenant from the Mosaic Covenant, unfortunately Merrill does not explicitly treat the word "besides" (מִלְּבַד, *millevad*) at 29:1, a critical textual marker examined later, which provides the crucial lexical marking this covenant as completely distinct from all covenants.

Paul House, following Walter Eichrodt a generation before him, sees Deuteronomy 29 showcasing a covenant that was permanently established earlier at Sinai. However, he views this covenant as still needing renewal because it represented a "living relationship."[18] According to House, who views the Deuteronomic Covenant as structured according to Hittite treaty patterns, the covenant announced at chapter 29 of Deuteronomy is *renewal* of the previous Mosaic covenant in that it "concretizes the covenant."[19] Ironically, House's inconsistencies surface when he later states that covenant renewals were rare in Israel's history such that the "standard was set" not by

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[15] McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, 145.

[16] For instance, Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 24:10–34:12*, WBC 6b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 708, describes it as a "convent renewal in the days of Moses in Moab, and in the promised land at Shechem in days to come." Regrettably, Christensen, like all others surveyed, pays no attention to the critical word "besides" (Deut 29:1), a central argument in this essay, in his otherwise fine commentary.

[17] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 383.

[18] Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 193.

[19] House, *Old Testament Theology*, 172.

Moses, but rather his successor, Joshua.[20] If House is correct in his assessment, this would overturn his argument and would mean the covenant at Deuteronomy 29 *predates* any "covenant renewal" pattern and thus, along with the pericope's direct language, makes this covenant entirely separate and distinct.

Though, House, like the others, does not deal at all with the explicit Hebrew compound "besides" (*millevad*) in 29:1, he correctly places a proper emphasis on the prominence of land surrounding its context: "God's gift of land," observes House, "is a physical symbol of divine grace, just as the promise of presence is the main spiritual blessing God offers (30:17–18)."[21] Likewise, Stephen Dempster is particularly germane to the current study as he recognizes the trend in OT scholarship to ignore the significance of land in the continued biblical story line.[22] Advocating a literary approach which views Genesis and Chronicles' canonical placements as an intentional *inclusio*, Dempster states: "These two books are not only about genealogy that culminates in a Davidic dynasty; they are about land—geography and dominion."[23] While Dempster is right to emphasize the land-motif in the canon, he also makes no mention of the key phrase "besides" at Deuteronomy 29:1. Similarly, McConville places a high premium on the land promised in Deuteronomy, but, like the others, sees no significance in this pivotal word. Rather than understanding "besides" (*millevad*) as denoting separation, McConville oddly views it as denoting "correspondence" to the previous covenant at Horeb without any contrast.[24]

In addition, Walter Kaiser, also like the others, highlights the importance of land for Israel, but does not mention any significance to the phrase "besides" in Deuteronomy 29:1. In fact, in his comparison of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, Kaiser's work is surprising for its complete neglect of any such treating of a covenant at all in

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[20] House, *Old Testament Theology*, 213.

[21] House, *Old Testament Theology*, 193.

[22] Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT15 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 68–72. While Dempster's work is largely focused on the Davidic covenant and dynasty, it nevertheless provides a robust treatment on the kinship of the biblical covenants leading to a recovered dominion ruled by a Davidic King.

[23] Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 48.

[24] J. G. McConville, "Deuteronomy, Book Of." *Dictionary of The Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 184.

Deuteronomy 29.[25] Finally, Michael Grisanti is among the very few OT scholars who devote space to treating the important expression "besides" (*millevad*) at Deuteronomy 29:1. Though he acknowledges word's distinctiveness, even in relation to the Mosaic Covenant as it "exists alongside it," he understands it still as merely a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant. His reasoning seems to be that Moses' new audience gives "Moses' preaching a new identity," hence, its supposed renewal. [26]

As observed in this brief survey, scholarship has shown a surprising neglect of treating the critical word "besides" which strongly suggest a separate covenant at 29:1. This appears to be a common lacuna among OT scholars. Though the current study agrees with the customary underscoring of the land motif in Deuteronomy, ways are parted when others view the Deuteronomic Covenant as merely a renewal, extension, or rhetorical correspondence to the Mosaic Covenant. Indeed, the text taken at face value is clear: *the covenant made at Deuteronomy 29:1 is entirely distinct (separate) from the Mosaic / Sainaitic Covenant; the language does not allow another option.*

Scholarship on the "Newness" of the New Covenant

Regarding the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31, virtually all agree as to its unilateral, unconditional character. If there is any substantial disagreement, it concerns the covenant's future recipients or exact time of fulfillment. Consequently, a briefer treatment on the literature is warranted here. It appears that the concept of "newness" is a trait that attracts scholarly opinion regarding the covenant announced at Jeremiah 31. Brevard Childs, for example, emphasizes this covenant's "newness" as its primary distinction from the Mosaic covenant, particularly stressing its unbreakable nature: "The new covenant, unlike the old which the fathers broke, will be inviolable."[27] Moreover, Kaiser rightly emphasizes the New Covenant's "newness" as pertaining to a restored or renewed version, not of the conditional Mosaic Covenant, but of the unconditional Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants.[28] Adding to this, John Walvoord draws out the

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[25] See Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New* Testaments (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 90–100; 199–203.

[26] Michael A. Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Numbers Through Ruth* 2, rev. ed., ed. by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 745–47.

[27] Brevard Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 27 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 80.

[28] Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 202.

importance of the New Covenant being referred to elsewhere as an "everlasting covenant" (e.g., Isa 61 and Ezek 37), and makes this the chief distinguishing marker of newness separating it from the Mosaic Covenant. "In this description," relates Walvoord, "[the New Covenant's] character as unconditional and eternal is emphasized instead of its difference in quality to the Mosaic covenant."[29]

Yet, it is perhaps Eugene Merrill that comes the closest to the connection of literal land promised for national Israel as advanced in this article. In fact, Merrill sees the notion of both personal and national conversion the main point of the New Covenant. "The driving force behind this wonderful state of affairs," explains Merrill, "would be the Lord's everlasting love toward Israel, the covenantal *hesed* (loyalty) that must find fulfillment if the Lord's reputation is to remain intact (Jer 31:3)."[30] Thus for Merrill, agreed upon by this study, the fulfillment of geographical realm for a resorted national Israel proves the very covenant-loyalty of God Himself.

The Continuity of Deuteronomy 29 and Jeremiah 31

Scholarly interest in seeking elements of continuity between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah found a surge in the late 20th century. During this time, scholars began recognizing that portions of Jeremiah had language similar to that of Deuteronomy; for example, Jeremiah's covenant language in 11:1–8 which reflected Moses's treatments of covenant throughout Deuteronomy.[31] Furthermore, some voices raised questions related to Jeremiah's relationship to the reform efforts of Josiah caused by the discovery of Book of the Law (2 Kings 22–23), which many believed to be an early form of Deuteronomy.[32] Though these explorations were motivated by critical persuasions which saw differing schools of redactors between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, the raising of such similarities between the two books positively heightened academic interests in exploring any congruence between them.

One such finding is that both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah contain textual markers that guarantee Israel a future divinely-graced obedience to Yahweh and national

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[29] John F. Walvoord, "Eschatological Problems X: The New Covenant with Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 103, no. 409 (January 1946): 21.

[30] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 531.

[31] A helpful discussion is J. A. Dearman "Jeremiah, Book Of," *Dictionary of The Old Testament: Prophets,* eds., Mark J. Bota and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 423–448.

[32] J. A. Dearman "Jeremiah, Book Of," 446.

restoration. These are seen by the various "I will" statements splattered throughout both books, especially those pericopes surrounding the covenant announcements (e.g., Deut 30:5–6; Jer 31:33–34). Regarding the conditional clauses in Deuteronomy 29–30 that seemingly indicate conditionality for Israel's future enjoyment of national restoration and blessing, Grisanti makes an interesting case arguing for their capability to obey.[33] Rather than Yahweh dooming Jews to fail by demanding something to which the they were incapable of achieving, Grisanti argues there has always been a believing remnant of faithful Israelites throughout the OT capable of obeying God—individuals who, through their own personal faith-relationship with Yahweh, were able to enjoy blessings due to their individual faith in him. In contrast, it was the corporate nation "in general" that failed God and has since needed the New Covenant where national obedience is guaranteed by divine enablement.[34]

Some have proposed an even more direct relationship between the final chapters of Deuteronomy and the New Covenant; specifically, both covenants' elements of obedience tied together by their concern of future restoration. Dempster, for example, believes "Jeremiah expands on the Deuteronomic concepts and sees things happening as complex of events 'in the latter days.'"[35] The "latter days" in view here are no doubt connected to the promises of the New Covenant and picture Israel's future, national restoration.[36] Moreover, arguing for the pericope at vv. 11–14 of Deuteronomy 30 to be painting a portrait of future Israel rather than Moses describing the generation presently with him, Steven Coxhead believes the text should be considered alongside vv. 1–10 as forming a single oracle "concerning the eschatological or new covenant restoration of Israel."[37] Coxhead offers this in contrast to those who feel the verb sequence in vv. 11–14 suggest a switch from describing a future Israel to the present Israel. While he may go too far in suggesting the chapters surrounding the covenant in Deuteronomy 29 demand a christological-midrashic interpretation, Coxhead does well in maintaining the

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[33] Michael A. Grisanti, "Was Israel Unable to Respond to God? A Study of Deuteronomy 29:2–4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. 650 (April 2006): 176–96.

[34] Grisanti, "Was Israel Unable to Respond to God?" 196.

[35] Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 166.

[36] Cf. Robert Chisolm Jr., "A Theology of Jeremiah and Lamentations," *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, eds., Roy B. Zuck, Eugene H. Miller, and Daniel L. Block (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 355.

[37] Steven R. Coxhead, "Deuteronomy 30:11–14 as a Prophecy of The New Covenant in Christ," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 320.

future aspect of Deuteronomy and connecting it to the New Covenant, as do Dempster and Grisanti.

Twin Themes of Covenant and Land

The books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah share common themes of land and covenant. Some might argue these books are all about land and covenant. As Dempster put it, "The geographical motif [in Deuteronomy] is omnipresent. . . . The land is at the forefront from the beginning to the end."[38] The prominence of land in Deuteronomy is matched only by its emphasis on covenant. This is observed by the Hebrew term "covenant" (*b^{e}rît*) occurring twenty-seven times in Deuteronomy, second in number only to Chronicles (matching Genesis's twenty-seven times).[39]

Dempster is correct in his assessment since Deuteronomy centers on the theme of land, relentlessly anticipating Israel's possession of it. Kaiser, like Dempster, points out the significance of land in Deuteronomy but does so by underscoring the book's repetitious guaranteeing of it: "Sixty-nine times the writer of Deuteronomy repeated the pledge that Israel would one day 'possess and 'inherit' the land promised to her."[40] Likewise, viewing Jeremiah as the first prophetic commentary of the Old Testament's storyline of promised land (dominion) leading to Davidic rulership (dynasty), Dempster observes: "Jeremiah indicates that exile is not God's final word: destruction, uprooting, tearing down and smashing will give way to building and planting (Jer 1:10)."[41] It appears that the "land and covenant" motif in both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah is highly suggestive of a thriving and intimate life with God in a concrete realm. As Mark Kelley argues, land and life are two inseparable concepts permeating the book of Deuteronomy.[42] The obligatory command of Deuteronomy 4:1, for instance, echoes Exodus 4:12 in that obedience and honor are required for possession of and vitality in the promised land.

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[38] Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 118.

[39] Cf. Williamson, "Covenant," 151; Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," 466.

[40] Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 109.

[41] Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 50. He goes on to state, "Jeremiah's prophecy has begun the long chain of events leading to the end of the exile and the realization of the kingdom of God on earth" (ibid.). In agreement with Dempster, this writer believes this future kingdom of God as prophesied by Jeremiah certainly demands a physical land-realm centered around earthly Jerusalem.

[42] See Mark R. Kelley, "The Theme of Life in Deuteronomy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Dec 2025): 727-49; cf., McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise,* 153.

There is also a routine agreement among scholars that the most significant prophetic-historical event underscoring the book of Jeremiah is the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 588–586 B.C.[43] It is within this pivotal period of Jewish history, containing both prediction and actuality, that Jeremiah delivers the New Covenant. It appears covenant violation is a strong theme of Jeremiah, the prophet recalling much of Deuteronomy in his language (e.g., Jer 11:1–8; 23:10–14). By calling out Judah's unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant, a direct link is maintained between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, with the latter being akin also to Ezekiel's promises of future renewal in Ezekiel 36–37.[44] Moreover, Kaiser views the New Covenant as the very heart of OT theology, especially that of Jeremiah, and connects it squarely with the theology of Deuteronomy as "anticipating the benefits of the new covenant."[45] Much like Dempster, Kaiser also sees the promise of land as a pervasive theme within Deuteronomy. Noting the sixty-nine times Deuteronomy repeats the pledge of land to Israel, Kaiser states that, "In Deuteronomy the land became the special area of focus," which is an undeniable theme comprising much of the Old Testament.[46]

While forgiveness is an undeniable tenet of the New Covenant, some see the land motif as most prominent as it looks toward eschatological fulfillment. House, for example, highlights Israel's future return to the land as "a prelude to the New Covenant," and the central motif Jeremiah presents as the marker of faithful Jewish followers of God.[47] In other words, God's very own "covenant people" will be demonstrated as such by their corporate return to the promised land, the same land prophesied and connecting the covenants of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah.[48]

As this section closes, a final point should be made concerning theological systems influencing the interpretation of OT texts. Much like Wellum and Gentry, who are known advocates of progressive-covenantalism, Rata sees all covenants partially or

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[43] J. A. Dearman, "Jeremiah, Book Of," in *Dictionary of The Old Testament: Prophets,* eds., Mark J. Bota and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 425.

[44] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 529–34.

[45] Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 90; cf. 199.

[46] Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 93.

[47] House, *Old Testament Theology*, 207–08.

[48] Additionally, Rata also recognizes the importance of land promised in the New Covenant and understands the universal knowledge of Yahweh" as the "central motif of the new covenant, a knowledge possible only through the forgiveness of sin (104).

totally fulfilled in Christ.[49] This common assumption is the result of a pervasive theological-hermeneutical method that demands the New Testament reinterpret the Old Testament, not allowing the latter to stand on its own right. With this method, vital elements of the various covenants are, without exception, spiritualized. This is certainly the case with McComiskey, who, while correct in viewing forgiveness as the ultimate blessing of the New Covenant, errs in viewing the clear law motif in Jeremiah 31:33 as a rejection of "burdensome regulations," opting rather for an "inward, animating force."[50] Being just one example, McComiskey represents the almost universal tendency of spiritualizing the covenants among confessionally-Reformed scholars. This spiritualizing of the Deuteronomic and New Covenants can yield questionable results, whether it be their fulfillment conveniently absorbed into Christ (Wellum and Gentry, Rata) or when clear law codes embedded in the covenants are considered onerous and legalistic protocols (McComiskey).

The Discontinuity of 29 and Jeremiah 31

As suggested, the current study contends that any view that assimilates the covenant announced at Deuteronomy 29 into the previous Mosaic Covenant is in error. This blunder usually takes shape by reducing the former to a mere "renewal" of the latter and does so by a critical oversight of neglecting a crucial word in the text, *millevad* ("besides" or "in addition to"). Thus, it is particularly in this section where much emphasis is placed on the original text of Deuteronomy 29. In fact, the primary argument advanced here is a grammatical one: the Hebrew compound מִלְּבַד (*millevad*) at 29:1, often translated as "besides" and used in conjunction with *b^{e}rîṯ* (covenant) demands that this covenant is its own separate, stand-alone covenant. The same can be said of the Greek adverb *plēn* ("aside from") used by the LXX at the same place (i.e., 28:69). In other words, it is not merely a "renewal" of the covenant given at Sinai as is often assumed. Because of this important word and the undeniable land motif enveloping Deuteronomy, the covenant announced at 29:1 can legitimately be referred to *not* as a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant, but as a distinct Deuteronomic or even "Land Covenant."

[49] Rata, "Covenant," 64.

[50] McComiskey, *Everlasting Dominion*, 155.

Separation Not Renewal

Deuteronomy 29 opens with a thundering announcement: "These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides [מִלְּבַד, *millevad*] the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb (v. 1). The root בּדּ (*bd*) literally denotes a "separation" or "aloneness," which is then amplified by the attached preposition מִן־ (*min*). Standard Hebrew lexicons define this word as "expressing the idea of separation,"[51] and gloss it as "except, apart from, besides,"[52] and "besides, without regard to."[53] Moreover, the word is used throughout the Old Testament—each usage clearly depicting a separation or addition to its parties stated.[54]

For example, *millevad* is used in Genesis 26:1 to describe a famine in the land different from what Abraham experienced. It appears in Exodus 12:37 when marking a separation of children from adults. Additionally, Numbers 29:30 uses *millevad* to point out different or added offerings Israel was to bring to God. Perhaps most importantly, the word appears in Deuteronomy 4:35 which states: "To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other *besides* [*milvaddo*] him." To think of this word as a mere "renewal" in any of these examples stretches beyond reason. Yet, such license is taken by scholars and translators with the word in Deuteronomy 29:1 identifying a covenant which the text marks off as "separate" from Sinai rather than a renewal of it. This position, virtually assumed in biblical scholarship and unchallenged by non-dispensational thinkers, dismisses Deuteronomy 29:1 which states clearly that its covenant is a covenant "besides," "in addition to," or "separate" (*millevad*) from the one made at Horeb or Sinai.

Although some would see what this study suggests as a distinct "land covenant" as conditional, the promise of land to Israel is ultimately based on God's earlier unilateral covenant to Abraham and furthered by his immediate posterity (Lev 26:39–45, esp. v. 42; cf. Psalm 106:45). On this, the NET Bible offers a correct translation using the temporal adverb "when" for the Hebrew vav-conjunctive instead of the conditional

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[51] Francis, Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1907), 5395, 1020.

[52] Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1061, 5297.

[53] William L Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 943, 4726.

[54] Cf. Michael Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," 747.

conjunction "if" at Leviticus 26:40, thereby validating Israel's future land's ultimate, unilateral sense.[55] Moreover, it is this covenant's eternal aspect that supplies the main element for why the prophet is most likely referring to this covenant in Ezekiel 16:60 since it amplifies the unconditional character of the Abrahamic Covenant—"Yet ***I*** *will* remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and ***I*** *will* establish for you an everlasting covenant [emphasis added]." Therefore, the Deuteronomic or Land Covenant is not only a distinct covenant, but like its Abrahamic predecessor and New Covenant successor, is without condition. Its fulfillment is guaranteed by the God who ultimately achieves the actions required and does so to the glory of His gracious name.

As argued here, this particular covenant is pointed out as something distinct with its own focus which deals specifically with the land originally promised to Abraham and Israel's obedience concerning it throughout the rest of Deuteronomy 29 and 30. Remarkably, virtually every scholar consulted in this study dismisses this important prepositional phrase *millevad* ("besides"). Nevertheless, some in this study do recognize that the Deuteronomic Covenant is distinct from its Sanaitic parent on other grounds. Merrill is one such example as he suggests the Deuteronomic Covenant's distinctiveness is highlighted by Israel's expectant chastening for their disobedience to the previous Mosaic Covenant, while the Deuteronomic Covenant's unilateral nature promises hopeful fulfillment in the land.[56] Moreover, Williamson proposes the covenant at Deuteronomy 29 anticipates the imminent fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, which he is sure to point out is "a covenant guaranteeing the first aspect of God's programmatic agenda: nationhood (Gen 12:2)."[57]

While these scholars' viewing the covenants as distinct from one another is commendable, they do so without placing any significance in the critical expression "besides," which may lead to their seeing the Deuteronomic Covenant as merely a "renewal." Yet, the word's appearance in the context, like its appearance elsewhere in the Old Testament, is used as a strong textual marker denoting the distinctiveness or individuality of the covenant announcement initiating Deuteronomy 29. As with all the

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[55] See *Net Bible Notes* (Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2004), Lev. 26:40, n.61. Additionally, the NET translators title the pericope accurately with "Restoration through Confession and Repentance."

[56] Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck, Eugene H. Miller, and Daniel L. Block (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1991), 17–87, esp. 85.

[57] Williamson, "Covenant" 152.

covenants, some overlap and continuity exist, but that does not preclude the covenant as being formally unrelated to the conditional Mosaic Covenant. On grammatical grounds, therefore, as this paper argues, this covenant is intended as something separate, distinct, and set apart from the Mosaic Covenant with a guaranteed future fulfillment.

Deuteronomic Covenant in Relation to New Covenant in Canonical Context

Virtually all scholars agree that there is a connection between the covenant announced at Deuteronomy 29 and the covenant announced at Jeremiah 31.[58] As this paper has suggested, among other elements, the idea of guaranteed physical land is a prominent theme connecting the Deuteronomic Covenant to the New Covenant.[59] Indeed, the covenant-land motif is a crucial one shared by both books representing the Torah and the Prophets. As prominent a subject land is to the theologies of these two books, so is the unilateral structure for the covenants in both.

Indications have already been made concerning the unconditionality or even "eternal" aspect of both the Deuteronomic Covenant and New Covenant. In fact, it is this eternal and unilateral nature that forms a connecting thread between them.[60] For instance, the Deuteronomic Covenant contains several unconditional promises that can be drawn from within its immediate context. These include not solely a removal of the land temporally for Israel's disobedience, but a guaranteed future national repentance and restoration to the land (Deut 28:63–68; 30:5). Moreover, national Israel's enemies are sure to be judged (30:7) before she receives her blessing in full—linking this covenant back to the original promises given to Abram (Gen 12:2–3). The New Covenant shares similar features. For example, it is a unilateral, unconditional covenant promising a new faithful obedience for Israel accompanied by a universal knowledge of the Lord and forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:33–34).

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[58] Cf. House, *Old Testament Theology*, 207–08.

[59] There is a general, scholarly consensus that view elements of the New Covenant being present in other Prophetic Books, such as Ezekiel 36–37; cf. Rata, "Covenant," 103.

[60] The Hebrew word עוֹלָם, usually translated "eternal" or "everlasting," does not demand a meaning of forever or without end. It does means "eternally without end" in connection with God (e.g., Isa 40:28), though its general meaning is one of a perpetual long-view limited by the author or speaker's perspective. Its most basic and often denotation is simply a "long time, duration" (HALOT, 6867).

Grammatically, these elements are assured by the prophet's use of the conjunctive perfect וְכָרַתִּי "And I will."[61] Further, Jeremiah's New Covenant is directly tied to land and nationhood for Israel in the immediately succeeding verses. In the same unit of thought, the prophet records God promising the continuance of both a Jewish "offspring" and corporate "nation" via a powerful, conditional, rhetorical argument in vv. 36–37.[62] Moreover, Ezekiel's portrayal of this same covenant in chapters 36–37 mirror Jeremiah's emphasis of Israel's "new heart" (Ezek 36:26) and divinely granted ability to walk in obedience (v. 27). Finally, land is the major thematic promise tying all unconditional elements of the New, Deuteronomic, and Abrahamic Covenants: "You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (v. 28; cf. 37: 21–22).

Perhaps the biggest difference between scholarly treatments of the Deuteronomic Covenant and the New Covenant is the virtually exclusive presupposition of the former being patterned after the suzerain-vassal structure, while the latter is more reminiscent of a royal grant structure. This basic assumption, taken on *a priori* grounds, steers the direction of how they are considered, namely, one being conditional and the other being unconditional. It is suggested here that this is the primary reason behind the almost universal understanding of Deuteronomy not previewing an unconditional land covenant—or at the very least, a totally separate and distinct covenant from that at Sinai—opting rather to view it as a mere "renewal" of a previous conditional covenant. Yet, as brought out earlier, troubles arise when attempting to deal with the language consistently, such as the explicit term "besides" (*millevad*) in 29:1.

Tensions also surface if one does not recognize the obvious connection to the New Covenant land promises in Ezekiel 36–37—the latter ubiquitously recognized as unconditional by scholars. Eugene Merrill may serve as the primary exemplar of OT scholarship conflicted over the seemingly conditional, distinct, yet unconditional character of the Deuteronomic covenant. He allows for its distinctiveness, while maintaining it is a mere "expansion" of the Mosaic Covenant structured after ANE treaties. For Merrill, the Deuteronomic Covenant is dependent on Israel's repentance

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[61] Likewise, the LXX ensures the covenant's future guarantee with its use of the future middle διαθήσομαι ("I will make a covenant").

[62] It is worth pointing out the distinction the text makes between זֶרַע (seed or offspring) which highlights its individuality and the more corporate גּוֹי (nation). That both words are used in the same context makes plain that both ethnic Jews and national Israel's future salvation and restoration is guaranteed.

making it *conditional* yet is also an amplification of the land promises which are *unconditional* in the Abrahamic Covenant.[63]

Thus, a tension exists that seems unavoidable if the unilateral connection between the Deuteronomic and New Covenant is dismissed by following an inconsistent hermeneutic. However, that tension dissipates when, as argued here, the covenant announced at Deuteronomy 29:1 is taken at face value following grammatical, historical, and contextual hermeneutical principles, harmonizing with the progress of revelation, that reveal two essential aspects characterizing it: the covenant announced at Deuteronomy 29:1 is a completely separate stand-alone covenant, and it involves a confirmation of land earlier promised to Abram which is later teased out through Jeremiah.

Deuteronomic Covenant and New Covenant Fulfillment

The various elements discussed up to this point tying the Deuteronomic and New Covenants have helped advance this article's thesis that Deuteronomy 29 is a distinct and irrevocable covenant concerning land that is further confirmed with additional blessings in the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31—both of which find their fulfillment at a still-future time in a restored national Israel. Because the New Covenant is the final one presented in the Bible, it understandably receives more attention by scholars in this regard. What does not receive such attention from the OT biblical theologians is the direct connection of simultaneous fulfillment between these two covenants, a fulfillment to be had in the eschaton of Israel's history.

While space limits a full treatment of OT eschatology, both covenants' fulfillment can perhaps be outlined by focusing on the purpose of the New Covenant, which is twofold: (1) to give Israel a reconfirmation of promised spiritual blessings subsumed under the Abrahamic Covenant, which will be fulfilled in a future economy or "latter days" (Jer 30:24); and (2) to give Israel factual hope of its future nationhood guaranteed by this covenant. Both realities demand a physical realm for their completion, which the land embedded in the Deuteronomic Covenant provides—itself an amplification of the land promised to Abraham. This is furthered by Ezekiel's portal of future land and forgiveness brought on by the Spirit of God in Ezekiel 36–37, implying Israel's full repentance and restoration. Because land is such a prominent reality in the history of Israel, its future reality must not be ignored.

[63] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 407–11; cf. 530.

In Relation to Canonical Eschatology

It is theologically significant that in neither Deuteronomy or Jeremiah—or the entire OT canon for that matter—that the land promised to, or occupied by, national Israel is ever spiritualized. Land is always a concrete reality. Contrary to, for instance, Oren Martin's overt reduction of Israel's land as merely a type pointing forward to a spiritualized New Heaven and New Earth, in canonical context, the land belonging to national Israel refuses to be spiritualized in any sense while simultaneously functioning an avenue for God's blessings.[64]

While many recognize a future fulfillment of the New Covenant (and, as this paper argues, the Deuteronomic Covenant), ambiguities abound as to precisely when this will occur.[65] It seems reasonable to conclude that eschatological passages such as Zechariah 12 and 14, Isaiah 11 and 27, and Ezekiel 37, for example, strongly suggest that fulfillment will occur when national Israel repents and enters her restored land under a future messianic king. Indeed, these passages have helped to inform various biblical theologians in their respective understanding of covenant eschatological fulfillment.

For instance, when discussing covenant fulfillment according to latter prophets, Dempster states: "God is going to rebuild not only the nation of Israel and the world but also the house of David. From the reconstructions will come the reconstruction of humanity and the world."[66] Moreover, House sees the ultimate fulfillment of the New Covenant of Jeremiah as one that folds the other biblical covenants within its embrace, at a time when God rules the earth through His Davidic descendant from corporate

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[64] See Oren R. Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God's Redemptive Plan*, NSBT 34 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 31–59; 77–86; 161–72; cf. Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 242–45.

[65] Indeed, scholars are often a bit nebulous in this regard. E.g., Williamson, "Covenant," 153, who believes the promises made to the Abraham find further fulfillment in the promises of Deuteronomy 30:5–6 where "the divine-human relationship will be sustained by an inner change (Deut 30:6)."[65] When exactly this will occur is left unanswered; cf. Childs, *Old Testament in a Canonical Context*, 96, who sees the origin of eschatology in the OT in terms of *theological connections* that can be made exegetically between future-oriented promises and Israel's tradition, some of which was altered from other ANE cultures. Jeremiah's New Covenant passage compared with Amos's terrifying description of the "day of the Lord" in 5:18–27 are two of Childs's notable examples. This element in Childs's thinking is reminiscent of his defense decades earlier of mythical time patterns borrowed and modified by Israel.

[66] Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 161, n. 1.

Israel.[67] Additionally, Chisolm chooses to emphasize the irrevocability of God's covenant promise that Israel will always remain as a geo-political body, in other words, *national* Israel: "The New Covenant," assures Chisolm, "also contain[s] the promise that God would never again reject His people and cause them to cease as a nation."[68]

Merrill, who correctly understands the land promises in Deuteronomy as a development of the Abrahamic Covenant, is more explicit as he sees it relating to the New Covenant in its fulfillment, which "is oriented to the distant future" and "made with eschatological Israel."[69] He then connects the covenant language of Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and views Israel's inheritance of the land promised throughout the covenants as coinciding with their spiritual renewal in the eschaton. For Merrill, this will be realized concretely when Jerusalem is rebuilt, populated, and kept from any harm.[70] Finally, Walvoord likewise sees the covenant of Jeremiah (and resultantly Deuteronomic) as still awaiting future fulfillment in national Israel characterized by global repentant-faith: "Any literal interpretation of the passages requires events and circumstances which are not a part of this age." [71]

Taking into account the Old Testament's eschatological emphasis, this survey of scholarly opinion suggests the most consistent emphasis of the prophetic witness of time-fulfillment of these covenants will be seen when a repentant national Israel will be sharing in the praise of her covenantal God alongside repentant Gentile nations (Isaiah 19:24–25; Zech 12:10; 14:8–9). This is, as Walvoord suggested above, the inevitable result of a consistently applied literal interpretive approach.

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[67] House, *Old Testament Theology*, 320–21. Yet, House errs in assuming that Jesus' death initiated the New Covenant, causing the author of Hebrews to infuse "new meanings" back into the promises of the biblical covenants (320–21). Thus, for House a tension remains between the Old Testament's clear future and literal fulfillments and the New Testament's apparent spiritualizing (or allegorizing) them.

[68] Robert, Chisolm, Jr. "A Theology of Jeremiah and Lamentations," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament,* eds., Roy B. Zuck, Eugene H. Miller, and Daniel L. Block (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 355.

[69] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 646.

[70] Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 530–31.

[71] John F. Walvoord, "Eschatological Problems X: The New Covenant with Israel," 26.

In Relation to Non-Canonical Jewish Eschatology

Several texts from noncanonical, Second Temple literature affirm a future, literal fulfillment of the physical land and spiritual blessing to national Israel reminiscent of the covenant promises treated in this study. Though these should not be considered inspired texts, they do provide a relatedness of eschatological-Jewish-thought between the two inspired Testaments. The theme of future land and prosperity runs through virtually each of them. Several examples should suffice.

The Book of Jubilees (161–140 B.C.) pictures a future time for Israel characterized by length of days of peace and prosperity reminiscent of Jeremiah's prophecy of universal obedience in the land: "And in those days the children shall begin to study the laws, And to seek the commandments, And to return to the path of righteousness" (23:26). Similarly, Psalms of Solomon (100–50 B.C.) speaks of a future day under the messianic king when Israel is regathered in her prophesied land and the entire world "Shall see the good fortune of Israel which God shall bring to pass in the gathering together of the tribes" (17:47–50). In 4 Ezra (A.D. 100), geo-political is in view when a restored Israel is pictured under the rulership of their king, delivering a national people described as "those who have been saved throughout my borders" (12:34).

While more examples could be given, these non-canonical Jewish writings represent only a minor sampling of Second Temple literature echoing promises of geographical (i.e., concrete) land and spiritual blessings assured for national Israel, prophecies reminiscent of both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. These promises, like their canonical superiors, still await fulfillment in the eschaton when Israel is regathered and restored to global prominence under their King.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the theology of covenant found in Deuteronomy's final chapters and the climax of Jeremiah's book of consolation. Specifically, by comparing elements found in both Deuteronomy 29 and Jeremiah 31, this article has demonstrated that a separate covenant, one that is distinct from its Sinaitic predecessor, is announced at Deuteronomy 29:1 and shares in its unconditional structure and land-motif with the only covenant ever given to the entire Israelite nation as its named recipients in Jeremiah 31:31–34.

By way of analysis of the Hebrew text, supplemented by leading OT scholars along the way, this study concludes that Deuteronomy 29 contains an irrevocable

covenant focused on real land that is further confirmed with additional blessings in the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, both of which find their fulfillment at a still-future time in a restored and repentant national Israel under her Messianic King.

Book Reviews

Fogelman, Alex. *Making Disciples: Catechesis in History, Theology, and Practice*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2025. 220 pp. $29.99, Paperback. ISBN: 978-0802883858

It is often observed that the purpose of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) is not exclusively evangelism but discipleship. Few recent voices, however, have asked the follow-up question: "Yes, but *how*?" Alex Fogleman's *Making Disciples: Catechesis in History, Theology, and Practice* answers that question in surprising ways. At 220 pages, it offers not a comprehensive treatise but a clear entry point into the theology and practice of catechesis.

Fogleman, assistant professor of theology at Trinity Anglican Seminary and director of the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future, extends Webber's project of retrieving the wisdom of the past while challenging contemporary churches to apply it creatively today. Following the pattern of the Great Commission, he identifies the core features of catechesis as "mission, initiation, and instruction" (22). Catechesis may be a tough sell among Evangelical traditions that prize congregational autonomy, yet Fogleman makes a persuasive case for structured and repeatable instruction—whether derived from ecclesial hierarchy or locally developed within congregations.

The first third of the book traces the rise of catechesis in the early church, its maturation through the Middle Ages, and its relative neglect in more modern times. The opening chapters, rich in historical detail, may test readers less drawn to ecclesial history, yet they reward close attention with insight into how the early church integrated teaching, worship, and moral formation.

The middle section examines catechesis in relation to liturgical worship and Christian mission: "liturgical catechesis involves a symbiotic, back-and-forth relationship between instruction and liturgy, that is, a back-and-forth exchange between teaching about worship and the actual experience of worship" (62). Fogleman expands the discussion beyond Sunday gatherings, observing that the rhythm of corporate worship has the power to "order daily life in accordance with Sunday worship." While the phrase *liturgical catechesis* may sound foreign to those using seeker-sensitive models, his analysis invites every pastor to reflect on the connection between congregational worship and the weekday piety of believers.

The heart of *Making Disciples* lies in its final third, where Fogleman proposes a "rule of faith, hope, and love" as the foundation of catechesis: faith rooted in the ancient creeds, hope shaped by the Lord's Prayer, and love embodied through obedience to the Ten Commandments. These three provide a vivid portrait of Christian belief, spirituality, and ethics.

> They provide clear images of Christian belief, spirituality, and ethics – the life of the mind, the life of prayer, and the life of virtue. The creed signifies the rule of faith . . . The Lord's Prayer guides the affective and spiritual dynamics of the Christian life, expressing theological virtue of hope. The Ten Commandments represent the moral life, which is our sharing in Christ's own virtue (98).

Pastors burdened by daily demands will find these foundations demanding but fruitful—producing disciples able to "observe all I have commanded you."

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Carty, Austin. *Some of the Words Are Theirs: The Art of Writing and Living a Sermon*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2025. 144 pp. $22.99, Paperback. ISBN: 978-0802884220

To anyone who asks, "Why do we need another book on preaching?" the response, as it regards Austin Carty's *Some of the Words Are Theirs,* is in this book's subtitle: *The Art of Writing and Living a Sermon,* for this book on homiletics is as much about transforming lives, beginning with the preacher, as it is about the mechanics of writing a sermon.

This delightful but brief volume offers an overview (or a refresher for some) of writing sermons. However, Carty gives us more. In his own words: "This book . . . is as much eschatological as it is homiletical, and as much autobiographical as it is methodological." Even more, "it is about faith in our words being one day transformed" (7). In short, this 144-page volume is about transformative preaching, a process, Carty maintains, that is ideally a journey of self-discovery for both the preacher and the listeners.

Carty walks us through the development of a sermon, dividing the book into three sections: 1. Preparation, 2. Writing, and 3. Revision.

Preparation —the spadework for the sermon's fruit —includes topics like choosing the text, the discipline of setting a time and place for research and writing, and the essential practice of prayer. All of these are essential to the exegetical spadework in preparation for the actual writing.

Having set the stage, Carty addresses the process of writing the sermon, concluding with a form of "resolution," a synthesis of exegesis and theology grounded in the hook, story, and thesis/central idea the writer has established throughout the sermon.

In the third major section, "Revision," Carty argues that discipline is a key element. The preacher must apportion adequate time for multiple revisions and oral rehearsals.

Revision may be tedious, but it is essential. The sermon is much more than slapping shingles on a roof; it is an art with the potential to build lives and transform both the listener and the preacher. Indeed, in preparing to write this book, Carty analyzed ten years of his Sunday sermons—roughly 460 messages—in addition to the special church events for which he wrote messages. It was a revealing process in which Carty could, from the perspective of time and distance, glean lessons from his own spiritual formation.

Carty, therefore, gives us more than a "nuts and bolts" manual on how to prepare a sermon. Carty peppers his work with personal stories that bring life to the process of sermon preparation. There is much that is autobiographical in these pages. At the book's beginning, Carty cites Frederick Buechner, who wrote that in the final analysis all theology is autobiographical. If preachers act as communicators of theology, their personal stories will seep into their sermons, for all theology develops within a particular context.

The question Carty is asking the preacher to ponder is, "Have you processed how the people and events in your life have shaped your perspective on how you talk about God?" This is why *Some of the Words Are Theirs* is an essential read for preachers.

We can revel in the mystery of the writing process, for here is found one of the joys of preaching. Carty underscores that truth in quoting Annie Dillard, "When you write, you lay out a line of words . . . You write it all, discovering it at the end of the line." Perfectly said, for it is often not until the sermon has been completed that the light is revealed to the writer.

What Anne Lamott did in her classic, *Bird by Bird,* and what Stephen King did in his *On Writing*, both memoirs of the craft of writing, Carty's work has the potential to do for the art of preaching. Whether it rises to that stature, only time will tell.

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Linebaugh, Jonathan A. *The Well That Washes What It Shows: An Invitation to Holy Scripture.* Eerdmans, 2025, viii + 206 pp. $24.99, Paperback. ISBN: 978-0802885487

Jonathan A. Linebaugh's recent book is "an introduction to Holy Scripture that hopes to be an invitation to Holy Scripture" (2). Creating the title from a line in George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633), *The Well* is an invitation to participate in the ongoing "double work of God" to "show" and to "wash." God's Word both "shows" humans to be under the unbearable power and guilt of sin and mercifully points to the One—Jesus Christ—who alone can "wash" (forgive and transform) anyone. The theme on nearly every page: God graciously invites people to hear his Word, receive it, and then become ministers of it. Indeed, this is both an introduction and invitation to the biblical story.

In the Introduction, Linebaugh answers four questions: "What (or who) is the source, the story, the subject, and the shape of Holy Scripture" (3). The *source* of the Bible is the God who speaks, yet this is "'to the creature through the creature" (4), pointing to the intermediary role that God has graciously given his "ministers of the Word" throughout history. The *story*, the single story, is a narrative whose trajectory is "[f]rom creation to new creation by way of the crucified and risen Jesus" (5). The *subject* is Jesus crucified and risen. Finally, the *shape* of Holy Scripture is dyadic, pointing to the "double work of God," which is seen in the two names of Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew: Immanuel ("God *with* us") and Jesus ("He will save you from your sins," or "God *for* us" (9). God is with us, even though we are unworthy; and this God, through the gift of his Son, is for us, even calling us into ministry.

Apart from the introductory chapter, Linebaugh's *Introduction* to the Bible consists of three chapters on the Old Testament (Torah, Prophets, Writings); three chapters on the New Testament (Gospels/Acts, Paul's Letters, General Letters/Revelation); and one chapter that is an interpretive case study in Paul's Letter to the Romans. The concluding chapter—directed to "Ministers of the Word"—is Linebaugh's *Invitation* to the Bible, in which he provides a nuanced answer to the "first and final question of ministry": "Can you give me any comfort—any hope?" (160). As noted above, it is the word of God "to the creature" and "through the creature": "Ministry is not an exemption from the universal league of the unworthy. Rather, in solidarity and sympathy, ministry means listening and listening ultimately joining the chorus that sings, 'What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord' (2 Cor 4:5); 'weep no more; behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah' (Rev 5:5); 'behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29, 36)" (177).

The book assuredly deserves a second subtitle, namely, "Martin Luther as Guide to the Holy Scripture." Linebaugh provides aspects of Luther's theology of Scripture throughout. Two examples suffice. In speaking of the Psalter: "Martin Luther once called Psalms 'a little Bible.' This collection of songs, he said, is a 'fine, bright, pure mirror' in which 'you will find yourself . . . as well as God and all creatures'" . . . (58). In speaking of the Gospels: "'The gospel is a story about Christ, God's and David's Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell'" (73); however, "Luther does return to the theme of example: Christ, first and finally received as gift, Luther says, will then 'give your good works a good workout'. . . His life is the 'likewise' that recipients of the gift are called to 'go and do'" (74, 75).

The book began ". . . as a series of lectures delivered to Olympians who were training to be chaplains with the United States Council for Sports Chaplaincy (USCSC)" (179). Thus, this book that both introduces and invites could be used in a variety of baccalaureate-level courses (even as a supplemental text): survey of the Bible, hermeneutics, and spiritual formation.

However, what a text for the training of lay ministers in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ!

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Lee, Rhonda Mawhood. *Suicide and the Communion of Saints*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2025. 160 pp. $19.99, Paperback. ISBN: 978-0802884718

In *Suicide and the Communion of Saints*, Rhonda Mawhood Lee discusses the controversial and emotionally laden issue of how Christian churches and communities should respond to suicide both theologically and pastorally. As an Episcopal priest, historian, and spiritual director, Lee provides a thoughtful and keenly sensitive perspective that is informed by her experience of losing her mother to suicide after a long and torturous battle with mental illness. The purpose of this book is to assist "fellow Christians who are ready to think and pray about suicide differently, and who want to find and offer hope to people affected by suicide."

Lee structures the book in two parts. In Part I ("Suicide, Sin, and Grace"), consisting of five chapters, she guides the reader to examine insights into how Christians have understood self-inflicted death historically, to consider the unintended consequences of Christian teachings, to look at the role context has played in leading persons to kill themselves, and to consider Christian divisions over origins and responses to suicide. Lee outlines various ways in which the Bible has been interpreted and cites the thoughts and writings of seminal theologians like Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine of Hippo, making sure at points to interpret each within the overall context of their arguments. In Part II ("The Communion of Saints"), Lee utilizes the final three chapters to explore the concept of the communion of saints and how it might be employed to reimagine how persons relate to those who have died by suicide as well as those who are in danger of dying that way.

A major strength of this book is a nuanced approach that carefully balances the need to deal with hard questions while at the same time considering practical ministry to those who are considering suicide as well as those who have been left behind. "Is suicide a sin?" "How could someone who taught us to love Jesus do this?" "Is my loved one in Hell?" While dealing with questions such as these, Lee also acknowledges the complicated mix of feelings that go along with losing a person in this way. For this reason, while she commends this book for those who are ministering to suicide survivors, for persons who have been suicidal, and for persons who are preparing for working with both, she offers a caution to those who are recently bereaved that "today is probably not the day to read this book."

Lee offers a resource that is brief, profoundly hopeful, and clearly written. The brevity is both a strength and a weakness. For most, brevity probably makes this painful subject more

palatable. Some, however, will find the theology and the pastoral ministry sections under-developed in a book of only 160 pages. Others may wish for a fuller treatment of cross-cultural and global perspectives. These are reasonable concerns. But what makes this book easy to commend is the fact that Lee unflinchingly integrates her own painful personal experience with biblical theology and historical perspectives and makes a believable argument that even in suicide, the irrepressible hope of the Gospel does not exclude any believer from the communion of saints.

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Books Received

Dallaire, Helene M. *Mastering Biblical Hebrew: A Living Language Grammar*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2026. 496 pp. $59.99, Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0310165767.

Erickson, Matthew. *The Pastor as Gardener: A Renewed Vision for Ministry*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2026. 224 pp. $26.99, Paperback. ISBN: 978-0802884145

Starling, David I. *1 Corinthians*. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025. 456 pp. $49.99, Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1683598183