

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY JOURNAL



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EDITORIAL: REMEMBERING A SPIRITUAL GIANT

Irvin A. Busenitz
Professor of Old Testament

Nearly twenty years ago, in Spring 1999, The Master’s Seminary published an edition of the journal which served as a festschrift to honor Dr. Robert Thomas, who at that time had completed forty years of seminary teaching (at both Talbot and TMS). In that issue, I wrote the following:

Rare are the opportunities that one has to sit under the instruction of a gifted professor and later to minister alongside him as a colleague. But, that has been my wonderful and rewarding privilege with Dr. Robert Thomas. Reflecting on a relationship that now spans almost three decades, four principles immediately come to my mind in regard to the life and ministry of this spiritual giant.

First, “Theology must always yield to textual integrity.” His passion for precision and accuracy were early and often evidenced in my relationship with him. “If the Biblical text is truly God-breathed,” he would remind us, “then one must zealously and tirelessly pursue its meaning.” Regardless of what one might want the text to say, it must be allowed to say what God wants it to say, and thereby dictate one’s theology.

Second, “Right must never bow to the accommodation of expediency.” It was a principle by which he lived his scholastic life and which he required of his students, ever trying to inculcate it into their lives. Whether the issue smacked of theological compromise or the incorrect division of the word “knowledge” on the final draft of a thesis, the conviction of doing things right was always deeply ingrained and defended.

Third, “Family priorities should not be held hostage by ministry obligations.” Glimpses of marital commitment and child-rearing principles in action, which occasionally invaded the classroom lecture, were reinforced and witnessed outside the halls of academia. He altered the time-honored agenda of a regional ETS meeting so he could attend a child’s sporting engagement. He and his wife, Joan, graciously sacrificed a Sunday afternoon to have dinner with my wife and me in our student apartment. The integrity of his personal life not only lent credibility to his academic life but also, many years later, prompted this student-turned-colleague to seek his counsel in rearing my own sons.

Finally, “Depth of research need not scuttle lay-level understanding and applicability.” When I was a student, Dr. Thomas agreed to give my Sunday School class a thirteen-week study on the book of Revelation. The practicality and applicability of the study, especially when compared to his two-volume commentary, was astounding, both then and now. My esteem for Dr. Thomas has grown continually. I count it an honor to serve the Lord together with him.

Dr. Thomas would go on to teach another ten years before retiring from serving as a full-time faculty member at The Master’s Seminary. Eight years after that, he finished his earthly course and entered his heavenly rest. After a lifetime of faithful ministry, tirelessly defending the veracity of Scripture and the truth of the gospel, what a joy for him to hear the words of our Lord, “Well done.”

I will be forever grateful for the impact, both personally and professionally, that Dr. Thomas made in my life. I know I am not alone in expressing this sentiment. It is shared by his former colleagues here at TMS and by generations of students who sat under his careful tutelage. For that reason, I am delighted to see this issue of *The Master’s Seminary Journal* dedicated to remembering the spiritual legacy of Dr. Thomas by publishing a number of his articles.

A prolific writer and fastidious scholar, Dr. Thomas went home to be with the Lord on Wednesday, September 6, 2017. For those of us who knew him, he will be greatly missed. Yet, we rejoice in knowing that the faith he taught with such precision has now become sight; and the Lord he served with such passion, he now sees face to face. Though his earthly sojourn has ended, the legacy of Dr. Thomas lives on—encouraging the next generation of Bible students to pursue academic excellence as an act of worship in the service of Christ.

Dr. Robert L. Thomas Memorial Lecture in Bible Translation

In honor of the late Dr. Robert L. Thomas (1928-2017), the Tyndale Center for Bible Translation at The Master's Seminary launched an annual memorial lecture on the topic of Bible translation on September 19, 2017.

After announcing the new lecture series at the Tuesday chapel, Dr. Aaron Shryock, director of the Tyndale Center, welcomed Dr. William Barrick to deliver the first lecture. Dr. Barrick presented a detailed exposition of Nehemiah 8, impressing upon the students that “the Word of God is the focus, the center of all that God’s people are to be doing.” Yet this cannot be done without understanding God’s Word and, ultimately, translating God’s Word.

Dr. Barrick was uniquely qualified to present the first lecture. In addition to being a colleague of Dr. Thomas at TMS beginning in 1997, Dr. Barrick likewise devoted many years to translation work. He was the Old Testament consultant for the Bengali Bible and contributed to work in five other languages as well. Regarding his time as a colleague of Dr. Thomas, he recently noted that it was one of the greatest privileges God had granted him.

It was a privilege to have two of Dr. Thomas’ five children attend the first memorial lecture. Mr. Jon Thomas of Chino, CA, and his brother, Mr. Mark Thomas, of Villa Park, CA, appreciated the lecture and also had some encouraging time with the seminary faculty at a special luncheon honoring their late father.

“Dad would have been both embarrassed and excited about the memorial lecture,” shared Mark Thomas. “The seminary has given us a great gift by honoring our dad in this way.” Each fall, the seminary will look forward to the Dr. Robert L. Thomas Memorial Lecture in Bible Translation. “We hope that

this series will be an occasion to remember Dr. Thomas and to praise the Lord for the many ways He used this faithful servant for His glory,” Dr. Shryock explained.

On September 18, 2018, Dr. Stephen Lonetti will give the second memorial lecture. He will speak about Bible translation, but from the perspective of a pioneer church-planter whom the Lord used to bring the gospel to the Taliabo people of Indonesia.

For more information about this memorial lecture series and the Tyndale Center for Bible Translation, please visit our website at www.tms.edu/tyndale.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SINGLE MEANING

Robert L. Thomas
(Originally published Spring 2001)

That a single passage has one meaning and one meaning only has been a long-established principle of biblical interpretation. Among evangelicals, recent violations of that principle have multiplied. Violations have included those by Clark Pinnock with his insistence on adding “future” meanings to historical meanings of a text, Mikel Neumann and his expansion of the role of contextualization, Greg Beale and Grant Osborne and their views about certain features of Revelation 11, recent works on hermeneutics and their advocacy of multiple meanings for a single passage, Kenneth Gentry and his preterist views on Revelation, and Progressive Dispensationalism with its promotion of “complementary” hermeneutics. The single-meaning principle is of foundational importance in understanding God’s communication with mankind, just as it has been since the creation of the human race. The entrance of sin in Genesis 3 brought a confusion in this area that has continued ever since.

* * * * *

Many years ago, Milton S. Terry laid down a basic hermeneutical principle that contemporary evangelicals have difficulty observing. That is the principle of single meaning:

A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.¹

¹ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 205. Milton Spenser Terry (1840–1914) was a nineteenth-century Methodist Episcopalian. He was a graduate of Yale Divinity School and professor of Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis and theology at Garrett Biblical Institute. He was the author of *Biblical Apocalypics* and numerous commentaries on Old Testament books, but is most often remembered for his book, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, which was viewed as the standard work on biblical hermeneutics for most of the twentieth century.

Not quite as many years ago, Bernard Ramm advocated the same principle in different words: “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one, application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study.”² Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy concurred with this principle: “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.”³

Current Status of the Single-Meaning Principle

Almost anywhere one turns these days, he finds violations of this principle, however. As a consequence, evangelicals have drifted out “upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture,” as Terry predicted about a hundred years ago.⁴ The following discussion will cite several examples to illustrate this sea of uncertainty and conjecture, and will then elaborate on the importance and background of the principle.

Clark Pinnock

In November of 1998, I was asked to respond to a paper by Clark Pinnock in the Hermeneutics Study Group that met prior to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. The title of his paper was “Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings,” a paper that has since appeared in print.⁵ In his paper and his article he offered an alternative to antiquarian hermeneutics— as he called them⁶— otherwise known as grammatical-historical hermeneutics. I studied his alternative carefully and came to the conclusion that his approach was extremely close to Aquarianism. In responding to my response, he denied any leanings toward New Age teaching, but the similarities are undeniable.

As the title of his paper suggests, he proposed the combining of future meanings with past meanings in interpreting Scripture. I addressed this proposal in one section of my response:

² Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook on Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 113. Ramm’s work served as a standard textbook on hermeneutics in many evangelical institutions through the middle decades of the twentieth century.

³ Article VII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” adopted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, November 10–13, 1982.

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., noted this same trend among evangelicals over twenty years ago when he said that the assigning of multiple meanings was part of the slippage of evangelical scholarship into “easy-going subjectivism” (“The Single Intent of Scripture,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer [Nashville: Nelson, 1978], 123). He urged evangelicals “to begin a new ‘hermeneutical reformation’ to correct this type of growing malpractice” in exegetical practice (*Ibid.*, 138). His warning has gone unheeded by many.

⁵ Clark Pinnock, “Biblical Texts— Past and Future Meanings,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34/2 (Fall 1999):136–51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 137, 138.

Professor Pinnock is apparently unwilling to sever connections with past methods of hermeneutics as evidenced in these words: “While making use of literary and historical scholarship, we are not the prisoners of the textual past, but are privileged for the opportunity and accountable for listening for the Word of the Lord and watching for the fulfillment of God’s promises which are still outstanding.”⁷ But he wants to combine the “traditional” method with the method that will yield the “new” and “fresh” meanings.

He seems unaware, however, that the moment he does that he has junked the traditional method. Traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics place tight restrictions on what the text can yield by way of interpretation. Proposals such as Professor Pinnock’s violate those restrictions so that his approach cannot fall into the category of “literary and historical scholarship.”

One of the restrictions he violates is that which limits the meaning of the text to what it meant in its original setting. He exceeds that limitation in his statement, “Witnesses to the gospel cannot be content with past meanings in an antiquarian way.”⁸ That statement is contrary to the principle that according to traditional guidelines the past meanings are the substance of biblical interpretation.

He writes elsewhere, “The meaning of the Bible is not static and locked up in the past but is something living and active.”⁹ On the contrary, meaning *is* static and locked up in the past insofar as traditional hermeneutics are concerned.

He adds to this: “It [i.e., cruciality] means that we ask not only whether a given interpretation is true to the original meaning, but also whether it is pertinent to the present situation or an evasion of what matters now.”¹⁰ From these words it would appear that a given interpretation could be true to the original meaning and also an evasion of what matters now. In the latter case, presumably a traditional interpretation could be at odds with a new interpretation pertinent to the present situation. That too goes against the principles of traditional interpretation.

He evidences that he allows for truthfulness of conflicting interpretations of the same passage when he states, “Interpretation is an unfinished task and even the possibility that there may not be a single right answer for all Christians everywhere cannot be ruled out.”¹¹ In such an instance the right brain has clearly gained the upper hand and the rationality of traditional interpretation crumbles into ashes.

⁷ Ibid., 138. My response took wording from Pinnock’s original paper. His wordings cited here have been revised slightly to match those in the published article.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 140. In speaking about “the event of Jesus Christ,” the centerpiece of Scripture, Pinnock writes, “To read it properly, we have to go beyond the historical descriptions and consider the extension of the story into the present and future” (Ibid., 139). “Going beyond” the historical descriptions necessitates assigning additional meanings to that event and to Scripture.

¹⁰ Ibid., 137.

¹¹ Apparently, Pinnock expunged this comment—found on p. 8 of his paper—before submitting his essay for publication, but he still maintains the viewpoint represented in the cited statement. In his published piece he writes, “Different answers are given in the Bible to similar sorts of issues because the text itself has been contextualized in different ways. This leaves room for us to decide about future meanings and applications” (Ibid., 143 [emphasis added]).

Traditional hermeneutics limit each passage to one interpretation and one only. From that one interpretation may stem many applications that are “crucial” to the published article.

My response apparently fell on deaf ears, because the version that appeared in print in 1999 did not differ substantially from what Pinnock read to the Hermeneutics Study Group in 1998. He appears to be completely oblivious to the single-meaning principle. Hence the sea of uncertainty.

Mikel Neumann

At that same meeting in November of 1998 I responded to a paper by missiologist Mikel Neumann of Western Baptist Theological Seminary, Portland, Oregon. He entitled his paper “Contextualization: Application or Interpretation?” In his paper he made statements such as the following: “Contextualization might be seen as an umbrella which covers interpretation and application” (8);¹² “Context is not merely an addendum called application” (4); again, “Contextualization begins with the interpreter’s personality as a function of his or her culture and encompasses the process of interpretation and application” (3).

His point was that contextualization overshadows interpretation of the biblical text. In defense of that theory he said the following: “However, a hermeneutical approach that ignores either the culture of the interpreter of Scripture or the culture of the person to whom he or she desires to communicate, is an inadequate approach” (3–4). My response to that position ran as follows:

Neither the culture of the interpreter nor the culture of the person to whom the interpreter communicates has anything in the world to do with the meaning of the biblical text. The meaning of the biblical text is fixed and unchanging. This is not to say that the exegetical task is finished. It must ever be open to new insights as to a more refined understanding of what the Spirit meant when He inspired the writers to pen Scripture, but that refined understanding must come through a closer utilization of the rules of grammar and the facts of history surrounding the text in its original setting. It is not open to a redefined understanding stemming from a reading back into the text of some consideration either from the interpreter’s culture or from that of the one to whom the interpreter communicates.

Through his insistence on making the cultural situation of the interpreter and that of the people to whom he communicates the message of the text an integral part of interpretation, Professor Neumann—unwittingly I believe—introduced meanings additional to the one meaning of the text as determined by its grammar and historical setting. More paddling around in the sea of uncertainty.

¹² Numbers in parenthesis are page numbers in Neumann’s unpublished paper.

Greg Beale and Grant Osborne

In November of 1999 the chairman of the Hermeneutics Study Group invited me back to respond to Greg Beale and Grant Osborne and their handling of apocalyptic genre in the book of Revelation. Both men described their hermeneutical approaches to the book as eclectic. Osborne's eclecticism combined futurist, preterist, and idealist principles.¹³ Beale's combination was idealist and futurist.¹⁴ It is beside the point for the present discussion, but worth noticing that an eclectic system of hermeneutics allows an interpreter to choose whatever meaning suits his preunderstood theological system in any given passage.

Of relevance to this essay, however, is Osborne's interpretation of "the great city" in Revelation 11:8. He assigns the designation at least two and possibly three meanings: Jerusalem and Rome and secondarily all cities that oppose God. Beale does essentially the same: Babylon = Rome = the ungodly world-city. Perhaps Osborne's identification of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 is a more flagrant violation of the single-meaning principle. He sees them both as two individuals of the future and as a corporate picture of the church. Yet the rapture of these two witnesses pictures only the rapture of the church, he says. One would ask, "What happened to the two individuals?"¹⁵ More waves from the sea of uncertainty.

In the panel discussion following papers and responses at this November 1999 meeting, Osborne challenged my statement that a passage can have only a single meaning. Therefore, I went to his volume *The Hermeneutical Spiral* to refresh my memory on his view of this principle and found that he differs from the time-honored grammatical-historical standard. In his hermeneutical volume he advocates double meanings in cases of single words. He speaks of "deliberate ambiguity" on the part of authors of Scripture. He cites "the famous word-play on wind/spirit in Genesis 1:2" as "a fairly simple example" of this.¹⁶ He also cites the Gospel of John as famous "for its widespread use of double meaning."¹⁷ His examples include γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν, "born from above/again" in John 3:3, 7; ὕδωρ ζῶν, "living/flowing water" in 4:10–11; and ὑψωθῶ, "lifted up (to the cross/the Father)" in 12:32.¹⁸

Such hermeneutical advice as this creates further turbulence on the sea of uncertainty.

¹³ Grant Osborne, "My Interpretive Approach" (paper presented to the Hermeneutics Study Group, November 1999), 1.

¹⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 48–49.

¹⁵ By following grammatical-historical principles, the writer of this essay has identified "the great city" as Jerusalem and the two witnesses as two individuals—probably Moses and Elijah—who will testify in Jerusalem during the future seventieth week of Daniel (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 87–89, 93–94).

¹⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 88–89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard

Among recent books on hermeneutics, Osborne’s volume is not alone in fostering uncertainty. The work *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard offers the same advice as Osborne. In their chapter on “The Goals of Interpretation,” they entitle one section “*An author may intend a text to convey multiple meanings or levels of meaning.*”¹⁹ They cite Isaiah 7:14 as an example of intended double meaning, as being fulfilled in the immediate future (Isa. 8:1–10) and in the distant future (Matt. 1:23).²⁰ They also cite John 3:3 and Jesus’ use of *other* with its double entendre “again” and “from above” followed in its context by the use of *pneuma* with its double entendre of “wind” and “spirit.”²¹

Examples of double meaning cited by Osborne and by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard are at best highly questionable and at worst outright error. Nothing in either context cited justifies the conclusion that the authors or Jesus, the speaker, intended a double meaning in these passages. In isolated instances elsewhere, however, when a text has a double meaning, the context will always make that clear. One case that comes to mind is John 11:50 where Caiaphas the high priest said, “You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish,” as he addressed the Sanhedrin. In 11:51–52 John takes the words in a sense differently from the way Caiaphas intended them. Caiaphas meant them to speak of Jesus’ death being necessary to keep peace with the Romans, but John understood them to refer to Jesus’ sacrificial death for the Jewish nation and for all people everywhere.

The context of John 11 makes the double entendre quite conspicuous. Wherever biblical authors use such a double entendre, it will always be clear. But it is a violation of grammatical-historical principles to find double meanings in a context where no such indicators occur. No such signposts occur with the two witnesses in Revelation 11, Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin birth of the Messiah, Moses’ use of “spirit” in Genesis 1, John’s reference to the new birth and his use of *pneuma* (John 3), living water (John 4), and Christ being lifted up (John 12).

Gordon Fee

The confusion of application with interpretation also causes violation of the principle of one interpretation. The incorporation of application—or as some call it “contextualization”—into the hermeneutical process leads inevitably to multiple meanings for a single passage. Almost every recent work on hermeneutics advocates merging the two disciplines of interpretation and application which were formerly kept

¹⁹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 122 [emphasis in the original].

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 123 n. 19.

quite distinct.²² With that policy advocated, the transformation of some of the many applications into multiple interpretations is inescapable.

This is a feature that distinguishes an egalitarian explanation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 from a complementarian approach. For example, Fee writes,

My point is a simple one. It is hard to deny that *this* text prohibits women teaching men in the Ephesian church; but is the unique text in the NT, and as we have seen, its reason for being is *not* to correct the rest of the New Testament, but to correct a very *ad hoc* problem in Ephesus.²³

In applying 1 Timothy 2:11–15 to modern situations, Fee has, in essence, given the text a new meaning that is an exact opposite of what, by his own admission, is Paul's meaning. As a result, the text has two meanings, one for the kind of conditions that existed at Ephesus and another for the conditions that existed elsewhere and exist today.

Fee's definition of hermeneutics coincides with his conclusion about multiple meanings, however. In a book he co-authored with Stuart, he says that the term "hermeneutics" includes the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, but chooses to confine it to a "narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts."²⁴ In other words, for him hermeneutics is simply present-day application of a biblical text.

No wonder Fee and Stuart in their book on hermeneutics include nothing about limiting interpretation to a single meaning, and no wonder the stormy waves on the sea of uncertainty are getting higher and higher.

DeYoung and Hurty

DeYoung and Hurty strongly advocate seeking a meaning beyond the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.²⁵ Since the NT writers found such a "deeper" meaning in their use of the OT, they reason, we should follow their example of exegetical methodology.²⁶ They call the meaning derived from grammatical-historical interpretation the existential meaning of a passage, and the deeper meaning they call

²²Cf. Brian A. Shealy, "Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 8/1 (Spring 1997): 89–91.

²³Gordon D. Fee, "Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics, Part III: The Great Watershed—Intentionality & Particularity/Eternality: 1 Timothy 2:8–15 as a Test Case," *Cruz* 26 (December 1990): 36 [emphasis in the original].

²⁴G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 25.

²⁵James De Young and Sarah Hurty, *Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture* (Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995), 67–80.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 33–48, 225.

the essential meaning. They allow that a single passage may have a number of essential meanings because the essential meaning of a word may differ from that of a sentence and its passage and its whole story.²⁷

How do they limit the possible essential meanings? They apply a paradigm of reality that they call “the Kingdom center.”²⁸ They call this the central theme and worldview of the Bible. Yet that control seems to have no significant impact on their finding whatever deeper meaning they choose. It does not restrain them from presenting an egalitarian view of women’s role in the church.²⁹ In this case their “deeper meaning” overrides the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.

McCartney and Clayton; Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard

The work by McCartney and Clayton and that by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard suggest another route for placing some kind of control on these extra meanings that “go beyond” the grammatical-historical ones. Klein and company advocate a controlled reader-response approach to the text. The limit they place on the meanings beyond the historical meaning of a text is the consensus of the believing community.³⁰ McCartney and Clayton resemble Klein when they speak of typology or *sensus plenior*. They reason this way: “Since the NT writers do not cover everything in the OT, we may expect large areas where the typology or *sensus plenior* has not been stated explicitly in the NT.”³¹ How do they propose to place a limit on these additional meanings of the OT? Their solution involves ultimately observing how “the Holy Spirit’s [is] directing of the church.”³²

That type of limitation essentially leaves the meaning of Scripture “up for grabs.” The evangelical, believing community or the church currently uses the Bible to support all sorts of teachings, everything from covenant theology to dispensationalism or somewhere between the two, from complementarianism to egalitarianism, from homosexuality to heterosexuality, from the openness of God to the narrowness of God, from conditional immortality to unconditional eternal punishment for the lost. Ultimately all these differences stem from someone allowing a given passage to have more than its grammatical-historical sense. The believing Christian community has no consensus that enables an interpreter to place a limit on the meanings beyond the grammatical-historical one. The absence of a consensus leaves him free to follow his own whims.

McCartney and Clayton go so far as to call the practice of limiting a passage to a single meaning “ridiculous from a general hermeneutical point of view” and “perverse from a theological one.”³³ They are obviously disciples of neither Milton Terry

²⁷ Ibid., 230–31.

²⁸ Ibid., 83–98.

²⁹ Ibid., 280–87.

³⁰ Klein et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 139, 145.

³¹ Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994), 157.

³² Ibid., 164.

³³ Ibid., 161.

nor Bernard Ramm nor grammatical-historical principles. They make such statements in connection with their practice of reading NT meanings back into the OT as additions to the grammatical-historical meaning of the OT. That, of course, is the basis for the system of covenant theology when it allegorizes large portions of the OT.

Kenneth Gentry

The writings of theologian Kenneth Gentry also illustrate the contemporary practice of finding multiple meanings in a single passage. When discussing the 144,000 of Revelation 7, he expresses the possibility that they may represent the church as a whole, including both Jews and Gentiles.³⁴ Yet just ten pages later he sees them definitely representing Christians of Jewish extraction.³⁵ He makes the latter identification because he needs something to tie the prophecy's fulfillment to the land of Judea as his theological system requires. The double meaning assigned to the same group apparently does not faze him.

He goes further in connection with the theme verse of Revelation. He identifies the "cloud coming"—as he calls it—of Christ of Revelation 1:7 with the Roman invasion of Judea in A.D. 67–70.³⁶ On the next page he says Christ's cloud coming was the Roman persecution of the church in A.D. 64–68. So for him, the cloud coming mentioned in the Revelation's theme verse refers to two comings of Christ in the A.D. 60s. In other words, the verse has two meanings.

The waves of uncertainty are about to capsize the ship.

Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Marvin Pate

Another recent example of finding multiple meanings in a single passage comes in the methodology of Progressive Dispensationalism. That system allows for complementary additions in meaning which of necessity alter the original sense conveyed by a passage.³⁷ These later alterations are in view when Blaising and Bock write, "There also is such a thing as complementary aspects of meaning, where an additional angle on the text reveals an additional element of its message or a fresh way of relating the parts of a text's message."³⁸ Bock admits at least in part that this amounts to a change of meaning:

³⁴ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell, Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 223–24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 143

³⁷ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392–93.

³⁸ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 68.

Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning? . . . This is an important question for those concerned about consistency within interpretation. The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add to the revelation of a promise is to introduce “change” to it through addition.³⁹

He goes on with an attempt to justify the “no” part of his answer by calling the change “revelatory progress.”⁴⁰ Revelatory progress, however, has to do with later additional revelation on the same general subject through another writing, not—as he holds—additional meanings being affixed to a single earlier passage.

Blaising and Bock illustrate their “multi-layered” approach to hermeneutics by identifying Babylon in Revelation 17–18 in three different ways: as Rome, a rebuilt Babylon, and other cities in “the sweep of history.”⁴¹ Progressive dispensationalist Pate further illustrates the multi-meaning approach of that system when he joins with preterists in adding Jerusalem of the past to the meanings assigned to Babylon.⁴² His approach to Revelation utilizes an eclectic hermeneutic, combining elements of preterism and idealism with futurism.⁴³ In other words, he can agree with preterists, idealists, and futurists regarding the meaning of almost any passage in the book. His eclecticism leads him to ridiculous interpretations such as having the second, third, and fifth seals predictive of wars occurring long before Revelation was written.⁴⁴

Bock goes so far as to accuse this essay’s writer of holding to “a similar multiple setting view for some prophetic texts in a way that parallels” what he means by typology.⁴⁵ He then quotes a lengthy paragraph from my chapter in *Israel: The Land and the People* to prove his point.⁴⁶ In that paragraph I point out how Paul in Acts 13:47 applies a portion of one of Isaiah’s Servant Songs (Isa. 42:6) to himself and his ministry. Acknowledging my recognition that this is an additional meaning not gleaned from a grammatical-historical analysis of Isaiah 42:6, he cites my further statement: “The new meaning of the Old Testament prophecies applied to the church introduced by New Testament writers did not cancel out the original meaning and

³⁹ Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” *Trinity Journal* 15NS (1994):71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 93–96. The “layered” approach approximates that of amillennialist Poythress who proposes four levels of communication in the symbolism of Revelation (Vern S. Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneuticism *Rev* 20:1–6,” *JETS* 36 [1993]:41–43).

⁴² C. Marvin Pate, “A Progressive Dispensational View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 160–61, 168–69. Pate actually allows for dating the book both early in the sixties and late in the nineties.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 145–46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 151–57. Even with Pate’s highly improbable early dating of the Revelation in the sixties, the predicted events preceded the prophecy that predicted them, which sequence is of course absurd.

⁴⁵ Darrell L. Bock, “Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. by Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 107.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

their promises to Israel. God will yet restore the nation of Abraham's physical descendants as He promised He would."⁴⁷ Then he immediately adds, "This final statement is precisely what progressives say about how complementary meaning works."⁴⁸

In order to cast me in a "complementary hermeneutical" role, however, Bock had to skip a paragraph between the lengthy paragraph he quoted and my summary statement about God's continuing purpose to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy to Israel. In the intervening paragraph that he chose to omit, I made several points that complementary hermeneutics would not tolerate. In the first sentence I stated, "That [i.e., Paul's use of Isa. 42:6] was not a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. . . ."⁴⁹ Complementary hermeneutics would say that it was a fulfillment. I also stated, "It [i.e., Paul's use of Isa. 42:6] was an additional meaning furnished through the apostle to the Gentiles during the period of Israel's rejection."⁵⁰ In the same paragraph I made this point: "Any [OT texts] that they [NT writers] used relating to the new program and new people of God, the church, of necessity took on a different nature simply because OT prophecy did not foresee the NT church."⁵¹ No progressive dispensationalist advocating complementary hermeneutics would speak of the church being a new program and a new people in the sense that it was unforeseen in the OT.

I cannot say whether or not Professor Bock's omission of that paragraph was intentional, but the fact is he hopped right over the intervening paragraph so as to portray me in a certain way. His omission could have resulted from another characteristic of progressive dispensational hermeneutics, one that I have elsewhere called "hermeneutical hopscotch."⁵² A player in hopscotch chooses the squares he wants to hop into and avoids stepping in others that would lose the game for him. That parallels PD's selective use of passages to support their system of complementary hermeneutics. Perhaps that accounts for the exclusion of the paragraph from my work that explicitly opposed complementary hermeneutics.

The Foundational Importance of the Single-Meaning Principle

The Standard

With statements such as the following, Terry puts special emphasis on the importance of single meaning when interpreting prophetic passages.

The hermeneutical principles which we have now set forth necessarily exclude the doctrine that the prophecies of Scripture contain an occult or double sense.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Robert L. Thomas, "The Mission of Israel and the Messiah in the Plan of God," *Israel: The Land and the People*, ed. by H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 272.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Robert L. Thomas, "A Critique of Progressive Dispensational Hermeneutics," *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1995), 423.

. . . We may readily admit that the Scriptures are capable of manifold practical *applications*; otherwise they would not be so useful for doctrine, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. iii, 16). But the moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult or double sense we introduce an element of uncertainty in the sacred volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation. “If the Scripture has more than one meaning,” says Dr. Owen, “it has no meaning at all.” “I hold,” says Ryle, “that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense, and that our first object should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigidly to it. . . . To say that words *do* mean a thing merely because they *can* be tortured into meaning it is a most dishonorable and dangerous way of handling Scripture.”⁵³

Terry adds,

We have already seen that the Bible has its riddles, enigmas, and dark sayings, but whenever they are given the context clearly advises us of the fact. To assume, in the absence of any hint, that we have an enigma, and in the face of explicit statements to the contrary, that any specific prophecy has a double sense, a primary and a secondary meaning, a near and a remote fulfilment, must necessarily introduce an element of uncertainty and confusion into biblical interpretation.⁵⁴

Though Terry’s use of his own principles in eschatology are at times suspect, his basic principles of hermeneutics make the most sense. That is what grammatical-historical interpretation consists of. Interpret each statement in light of the principles of grammar and the facts of history. Take each statement in its plain sense if it matches common sense, and do not look for another sense.

Initial Departure from the Standard

That is the way God has communicated with humans from the beginning. His first words to man in Genesis 1:27–30 were,

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so [NASB].

⁵³ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 493.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 495.

Scripture does not detail man's response to God's instructions, but apparently he understood them clearly, responded properly, and the human race was off to a great start.

But then God added to His communication with man. In Genesis 2:16b–17 He said, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" [NASB]. How did Adam understand this statement? Apparently as God intended it, according to the grammar of His command and the historical situation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. In fact, he communicated it to Eve so well that Eve in Genesis 3:2b–3 was able to repeat it to the serpent quite accurately: "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die'" [NASB]. That was her answer to the serpent when he asked about God's prohibition against eating from trees in the Garden of Eden. So far Eve's hermeneutics were in great shape as was God's communicative effectiveness with mankind. She worded her repetition of God's command slightly differently, but God probably repeated His original command to Adam in several different ways. Genesis has not preserved a record of every word He spoke to Adam.

When did confusion enter the picture? When the serpent suggested to Eve that God's plain statement had another meaning. He said, "You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4b–5, NASB). The serpent was probably not calling God a liar—he knew better than to suggest that in the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden—but simply suggesting to Eve that she had misinterpreted God's statement, or that by limiting her understanding to the plain sense of God's words, she had missed a second meaning intended by God's command. That she had missed God's double-entendre or *sensus-plenior* was the serpent's implication. The serpent's message to Eve was, "This is just God's way of telling you how to gain a knowledge of good and evil." The first human experience on the "sea of uncertainty" resulted when Eve and then Adam bought into the serpent's suggestion that God's statement was not limited to a single meaning. Such was how hermeneutical difficulties in understanding God's Word began.

Danger of Even a Slight Departure from the Standard

Zuck chooses the principle of single meaning, but treads on dangerous ground when, in following Elliott Johnson, he adds related implications or "related submeanings."⁵⁵ To speak of a single meaning on one hand and of related submeanings on the other is contradictory. A passage either has one meaning or it has more than one. No middle ground exists between those two options.

⁵⁵ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991), 274; cf. Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 34.

Zuck uses Psalm 78:2 to illustrate related implications or related submeanings. The psalmist Asaph writes, “I will open my mouth in a parable.” Zuck limits the passage to one meaning, but says the passage has two referents, Asaph and Jesus who applied the words to Himself in Matthew 13:35.⁵⁶ Instead of saying the psalm has two referents, which in essence assigns two meanings to it, to say that the psalm’s lone referent is Asaph, thereby limiting the psalm to one meaning, is preferable. Either Psalm 78:2 refers to Asaph or it refers to Jesus. It cannot refer to both. It is proper to say that Psalm 78:2 refers to Asaph, and Matthew 13:35 refers to Jesus. By itself, Psalm 78:2 cannot carry the weight of the latter referent.

In defending his double-referent view, Zuck apparently makes this same distinction, though he does not repudiate the double-referent terminology. He discusses Psalms 8, 16, and 22, noting that David wrote them about his own experiences, but that the NT applies them to Christ in a sense significantly different from how David used them.⁵⁷ His conclusions about these psalms and the NT use of them is accurate, but the psalms themselves cannot have more than one referent, hermeneutically speaking. Such would assign them more than one meaning. Neither the human author David nor the original readers of the psalms could have used the principles of grammar and the facts of history to come up with the additional referent or meaning that the NT assigns to the psalms. The source and authority for that additional meaning is the NT, not the OT.

A discussion of how this single-meaning principle works out in the broader discussion of the NT use of the OT must await a future article on the subject.

The Contemporary Dilemma

Evangelicals today are drifting on the sea of uncertainty and conjecture because of their neglect of foundational principles of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. They have become sophisticated in analyzing hermeneutical theory, but in that process have seemingly forgotten simple principles that exegetical giants of the past have taught. They are currently reaping the harvest of confusion that neglect of the past has brought upon them.

Daniel Wallace has provided a recent grammatical work entitled *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, a work that has a number of helpful features. In seeking to advance beyond the basics, however, Wallace has fallen into the same pit as so many others by his neglect of the basics of hermeneutics. One of his glaring errors violates the principle of single meaning about which the discussion above has spoken. In his consideration of a category he calls the “Plenary Genitive,” he labors the point that a particular passage’s construction may be at the same time both objective genitive and subjective genitive. In defense of his position he writes,

One of the reasons that most NT grammarians have been reticent to accept this category [i.e., “Plenary Genitive”] is simply that most NT grammarians are

⁵⁶ Ibid.

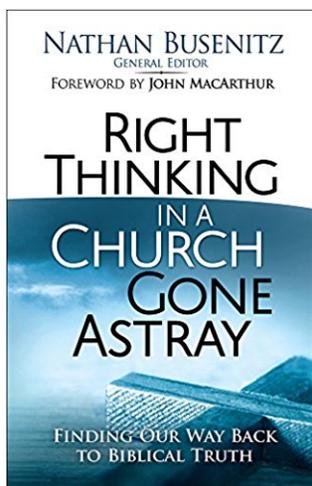
⁵⁷ Ibid., 275–77.

Protestants. And the Protestant tradition of a singular meaning for a text (which, historically, was a reaction to the fourfold meaning employed in the Middle Ages) has been fundamental in their thinking. However, current biblical research recognizes that a given author may, at times, be *intentionally* ambiguous. The instances of double entendre, *sensus plenior* (conservatively defined), puns, and word-plays in the NT all contribute to this view. Significantly, two of the finest commentaries on the Gospel of John are by Roman Catholic scholars (Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg): John's Gospel, more than any other book in the NT, involves double entendre. Tradition has to some degree prevented Protestants from seeing this.⁵⁸

Instead of following traditional grammatical-historical interpretation and its insistence on limiting a passage to one meaning, Wallace consciously rejects the wisdom of past authorities so that he can keep in step with "current biblical research" and Roman Catholic scholars advocating multiple meanings for the same passage. His volume could have been very helpful, but this is a feature that makes it extremely dangerous.

Someone needs to sound the alarm about recent evangelical leaders who are misleading the body of Christ. A mass evangelical exodus from this time-honored principle of interpreting Scripture is jeopardizing the church's access to the truths that are taught therein. Whether interpreters have forsaken the principle intentionally or have subconsciously ignored it, the damage is the same. The only hope of escape from the pit into which so many have fallen is to reaffirm the principle of single meaning along with the other hermeneutical principles that have served the believing community so well through the centuries.

⁵⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 120 n. 134 [emphasis in the original].



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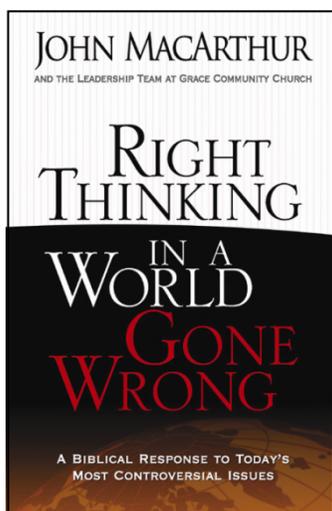
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HERMENEUTICS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

Robert L. Thomas
(Originally published Fall 2005)

Recent changes in evangelical hermeneutical principles have opened a wide door for new-perspective (NP) proposals on Pauline literature and more basically NP proposals about second-temple Judaism. Setting aside the time-honored ideal of objectivity, the proposals have raised questions about longstanding views of Augustine and Luther and of the nature of first-century Judaism. E. P. Sanders has been a major figure in raising these questions. The questions arise in part through an allegorical versus a literal handling of God's OT covenants with Israel, i.e., through devising a system known as "covenantal nomism." The NP system also seeks support through a neglect of the established principle of single versus multiple meanings for a given passage and through disregarding the importance of immediate context in interpretation. The NP builds on an erroneous base of wrong-headed conclusions about first-century Judaism and commits multiple hermeneutical errors in its approach to Pauline literature.

* * * * *

As one has appropriately put it, the new perspective on Paul is more accurately termed a new perspective on second-temple Judaism,¹ which inevitably results in a new perspective on Paul. This new perspective brings to the surface a number of hermeneutical principles that twenty-first-century evangelicalism desperately needs to avoid if it is to maintain a high view of biblical inspiration.

¹ Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 178. Westerholm writes, "The conviction most central to the 'new perspective on Paul' pertains in the first place to Judaism, not Paul: first-century Jews, it is claimed (in dependence on E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*), were not legalists who supposed that they earned their salvation (or membership in the people of God) by deeds they did in compliance with the law."

Preunderstanding Versus Objectivity

Elsewhere, I have dealt with the highly significant change that occurred in evangelical hermeneutics in the 1970s and early 1980s, a change which most basically incorporated a new first step in biblical interpretation.² That new beginning point is the preunderstanding of the interpreter that then theoretically undergoes correction as he studies a biblical text. Until the 1970s, traditional grammatical-historical principles dictated that the interpreter repress whatever opinion about what he thought the text should teach and adopt a firm goal of letting the text speak for itself, in other words, the goal of objectivity. As harmless as the difference in starting points between traditional evangelical hermeneutics and the new evangelical hermeneutics may seem, it has wrought havoc in the way many evangelicals are now reading and interpreting the Bible.³

New-perspective proposals offer a classic example of the drastic effects of preunderstanding on the interpretation of Pauline literature as well as the rest of the NT. The impact of this hermeneutical principle on new-perspective scholars is visible in two areas, in rethinking the interpretations of Augustine and Luther and in rethinking the nature of first-century Judaism.

Rethinking the Interpretations of Augustine and Luther

A 1977 work by E. P. Sanders in which he advanced a radically new view of first-century Judaism gave birth to the new perspective.⁴ The new perspective (hereafter NP⁵) views Augustine as having introduced an “introspective conscience” into an interpretation of Paul’s writings, a conscience that was not present in the writings themselves.⁶ Sanders does not see guilt as the main problem with Paul; the problem Paul dealt with was that of people not recognizing the lordship of Christ.⁷ Martin Luther allegedly erred the same way as Augustine. As Paul deals with the problem of circumcision in Galatia, N. T. Wright—another NP advocate—sees the issue Paul faced as far different from the questions debated between Augustine and Pelagius or between Luther and Erasmus.⁸

² Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) especially 41–62 on “The Origin of Preunderstanding.”

³ I have elaborated on this extensively in various parts of *Evangelical Hermeneutics*.

⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Two of the purposes of the work were “to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which is still prevalent in much, perhaps most, New Testament scholarship” (xii) and “to establish a different view of Rabbinic Judaism” (Ibid.).

⁵ The customary abbreviation for the new perspective on Paul is “NPP,” but since the issue has more to do with first-century Judaism, this essay will use the abbreviation “NP” to designate the new-perspective position on both.

⁶ Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 17.

⁷ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 500, 503.

⁸ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 120.

In essence, Sanders—the godfather of the NP—and his followers say that Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and others have been wrong in their reading of Paul. Such later Christian voices have read into Paul doctrines—justification by faith, the doctrine of imputed righteousness, and other related doctrines—that Paul did not teach. That NP understanding of Luther and company anachronistically attributes to them the more recent development of preunderstanding which affected their interpretation of Paul's writings. Luther allegedly interpreted Paul as though he were writing about issues of later times instead of the ones he was actually facing. According to NP proponents, the well-known advocates of justification by faith—such as Luther and Calvin—imposed their own biases on the text rather than letting the Pauline text speak for itself.

Such proponents as Sanders fail to acknowledge that a basic hermeneutical principle of the Reformers, of whom Luther was one, was to exclude their own biases and follow the principle of *tabula rasa* (“clean slate”).⁹ This meant to study the text with an open mind in applying grammatical-historical data to arrive at the meaning intended by the original author and understood by the original readers. Sanders and company say that the Reformers failed in the process because of their preunderstanding of what they felt the text *should* say. Yet preunderstanding was not a hermeneutical principle in orthodox Christianity until a time much later than the Reformers.¹⁰ It is Sanders' own preunderstanding of second-temple Judaism that forced him into attributing preunderstanding to interpreters who consciously attempted to avoid it.

Rethinking the Nature of First-century Judaism

Critique of Sanders' View of Rabbinic Literature

Sanders summarizes his view of Judaism as follows:

On the assumption that a religion should be understood on the basis of its own self-presentations, as long as these are not manifestly bowdlerized, and not on the basis of polemical attacks, we must say that the Judaism of before 70 kept grace and works in the right perspective, did not trivialize the commandments of God and was not especially marked by hypocrisy. The frequent Christian charge against Judaism, it must be recalled, is not that some individual Jews

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977), 105. Sproul writes, “The interpreter was expected to strive as hard as possible for an objective reading of the text through the grammatico-historical approach. Though subjective influences always present a clear and present danger of distortion, the student of the Bible was expected to utilize every possible safeguard in the pursuit of the ideal, listening to the message of Scripture without mixing in his own prejudices.”

¹⁰ Ramm describes orthodoxy thus: “The true philological spirit, or critical spirit, or scholarly spirit, in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is *exegesis*—to lead the meaning out of the text and shuns *eisogesis*—bringing a meaning to the text. . . . Calvin said that the Holy Scripture is not a tennis ball that we may bounce around at will. Rather it is the Word of God whose teachings must be learned by the most impartial and objective study of the text” (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970], 115–16).

misunderstood, misapplied and abused their religion, but that *Judaism necessarily tends* towards petty legalism, self-serving and self-deceiving casuistry, and a mixture of arrogance and lack of confidence in God. But the surviving Jewish literature is as free of these characteristics as any I have ever read.¹¹

Through use of his three sources, particularly the Tannaitic literature, Sanders reaches several conclusions about the rabbinic teaching.

(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement."¹²

A closer look at the sources cited by Sanders reveals, however, that Sanders' reading of the rabbinic material is totally biased.

For example, he says that election was "totally gratuitous without prior cause in those being elected,"¹³ which cannot be true. Even he himself acknowledges three reasons assigned by the rabbis for God's choice of Israel, only one of which said election was totally gratuitous.¹⁴ The other two reasons given by the rabbis involved Israel's earning election, thereby making election "at least partially grounded on the merits of the patriarchs or Israel's foreseen obedience."¹⁵

Sanders argues that obedience to the commandments in rabbinic literature is the result of God's election and that the rabbis included the intention, not just the outward act, in this obedience.¹⁶ Though humans have a tendency to disobey, they do not have a sin nature that requires divine enablement in order to obey.¹⁷ In reality, however, sometimes rabbis taught that God's judgment would depend on a hermeneutics of the majority of good deeds.¹⁸ Other times they taught that condemnation would come on the basis of one transgression.¹⁹ Still others said that salvation would result from one

¹¹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 426–27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 422.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 51.

¹⁶ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 107.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

¹⁸ Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 42–44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44–45. Waters expresses this in another way: "In summary, Sanders has corrected the portrait of Judaism as a religion of pure Pelagianism, and has demonstrated that this religion is semi-Pelagian

righteous act.²⁰ The rabbis were in complete disagreement among themselves on this issue too.

According to Sanders, salvation comes by membership in the covenant community and by atonement provided for every transgression.²¹ Yet the means of atonement for the rabbis was elusive. Sometimes they said it was through repentance, other times through OT sacrifices, in still other cases through sufferings and even through death.²²

With such widespread differences of opinion in rabbinic literature, only minimal parts of which are biblical, Sanders has to pick and choose among conflicting statements to come up with his system of covenantal nomism. For example, as Waters notices, "In two distinct arguments ('the rabbis are not systematic theologians' and 'there are numerous "fulfillment of one command" statements as well as "majority of deeds" statements'), Sanders dismisses the significance of the 'majority of deeds' comments."²³ To grasp the inconsistencies of the rabbis takes no systematic theologian; any person with common sense can tell that a unified system of belief was non-existent in their writings. Though Sanders has provided a fuller picture of first-century Judaism, his interpretation of that evidence is flawed. When taking into account *all* the evidence he cites, he has not established a case that proves Judaism contemporary to Paul was a system based on grace.²⁴ The origin of covenantal nomism is therefore traceable to Sanders, not to the rabbis. But such an observation is not nearly as alarming as the way Sanders dismisses the four canonical Gospels.

Sanders' View of the Gospels

Since the "Sanders revolution" has affected so many,²⁵ who is E. P. Sanders? His self-identification is,

I am a liberal, modern, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by low christology and the social gospel. I am proud of the things that that religious tradition stands for. I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it, or that he died for the sake of its principles.²⁶

A person with his perspective of a "low christology" would not, of course, have a high view of the Jesus of the NT. That expectation turns out to be accurate.

in nature. In election, human ability, obedience, atonement, and acceptance at the judgment, rabbinic opinion is universally and incontrovertibly synergistic. Human actions and endeavors have preeminence over divine grace."

²⁰ Ibid., 45–47.

²¹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 147, 157.

²² Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 48–51.

²³ Ibid., 46.

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁵ Wright reflects the opinion of many when he writes, "But the scholar who has affected current Pauline scholarship more than all the rest put together is Ed P. Sanders, a former colleague of mine in Oxford, now Professor at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 8).

²⁶ E. P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 334.

Sanders' forte has been his investigation of rabbinic literature. His sources have included rabbinic (Tannaitic) literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphical writings, from Ben Sirach to IV Ezra.²⁷ On the basis of these studies, he concludes,

By consistently maintaining the basic framework of *covenantal nomism* [the name assigned to Judaism's beliefs by Sanders], the gift and demand of God were kept in a healthy relationship with each other, the minutiae of the law were observed on the basis of the large principles of religion and because of commitment to God, and humility before God who chose and would ultimately redeem Israel was encouraged.²⁸

Stated in other terms, Sanders' view was that "Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him."²⁹ Judaism was rather similar to Paul in its advocacy of grace: "God took the initiative, when he made a covenant with Judaism; God's grace thus precedes everything that people (specifically, Jews) do in response. The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude, as the proper response to grace— not, in other words, in order to *get* into the covenant people, but to *stay* in. Being 'in' in the first place was God's gift."³⁰

In formulating his opinion about second-temple Judaism, however, Sanders in his 1977 work conspicuously fails to use the historical books of the NT, the four Gospels and Acts. In a later work, however, he clarifies this omission. In one such clarification he writes,

We know about Jesus from books written a few decades after his death, probably by the people who were not among his followers during his lifetime. They quote him in Greek, which was not his primary language, and in any case the differences among our sources show that his words and deeds were not perfectly preserved. We have very little information about him apart from the works written to glorify him. Today we do not have good documentation for such out-of-the-way places as Palestine; nor did the authors of our sources. They had no archives and no official records of any kind. They did not even have access to good maps. These limitations, which were common in the ancient world, result in a good deal of uncertainty.

²⁷ Ibid., 24–29.

²⁸ Ibid., 426–27.

²⁹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 18–19.

³⁰ Ibid., 19 [emphasis in the original].

Recognizing these difficulties and many others, New Testament scholars spent several decades—from about 1910 to 1970—saying that we know somewhere between very little and virtually nothing about the historical Jesus.³¹

Through consistent application of tools of historical criticism, Sanders concludes that “very little or virtually nothing” in the Gospels is factual.

Scholars who follow in his NP train entertain similar views regarding NT historical books. Wright, for example, describes the Gospels as combinations of “neither simply biography nor simply religious propaganda, yet sharing the main characteristics of both.”³² He pictures the following as the current stage in the Third Quest for the historical Jesus: “First-century Judaism and the Gospels are opposite edges, and all discourse about Jesus must take place between them.”³³ Wright and other “questers” along with NP advocates exemplify an extremely low view of biblical inspiration of the Gospels. The Gospels are at best only on the “edge” of truth, they say, and are less reliable than rabbinic writings in their portrayal of first-century Judaism.

The View of Jesus and John the Baptist

Among scholars—evangelical scholars not excluded—that trend of viewing the Gospels as only the edge of truth is occurring right before the eyes of contemporary Christians and is cause for great alarm. Now it has affected Pauline writings as well as the Gospels. In contrast to the positive portrait of Judaism painted by the NP, recall some of the statements by John the Baptist and Jesus about second-temple Judaism:

- John the Baptist saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized by them and called them a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7). That characterization of second-temple Judaism hardly fits the description advanced by the NP.
- Matthew 5–7, Jesus’ Sermon the Mount, whose theme verse is Matthew 5:20: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were rabbis. The whole sermon heralded the apostasy of rabbinical Judaism’s leadership.³⁴

³¹ E. P. Sanders. *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1993), xiii. Note how Sanders dismisses Gospel descriptions of Jesus because of their tendency to glorify Jesus, but takes rabbinic writings at face value without recognizing their tendency to glorify Judaism.

³² N. T. Wright. *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 73.

³³ *Ibid.*, 73. Regarding Wright, Waters writes, “A second reason that one should study Wright is that he has done more than any other single individual to mediate NPP exegesis into the mainline and evangelical churches. . . . Wright’s popularity among evangelicals is also due to his general respect for the integrity of the New Testament. His scholarship on Jesus stands out from contemporary lives of Jesus and theologies of the Gospels in at least one respect. Wright purposefully approaches the Gospels as credible historical records, sidestepping *many* of the source-critical and redactional-critical concerns that New Testament scholars often bring to the text.” (Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 119–20 [emphasis added]). Waters’ opinion notwithstanding, Wright—like all other “third questers”—is far from accepting the historical reliability of everything in the Gospel accounts.

³⁴ About the Sermon on the Mount, Sanders writes, “Only modern New Testament scholars have thought that part of the Sermon on the Mount expresses opposition to the Mosaic law, but that is because

- Mark 2:1–3:6 records a series of five “conflict” stories in which Jesus’ opponents were the scribes, Pharisees, and/or Herodians. Sanders dismisses these episodes of Jesus’ disagreements with Judaism as having been read back into the life of Jesus by Mark, a previous author, or the early church.³⁵ In other words, it is improbable that the events ever happened and that Jesus ever made such criticisms of Judaism’s use of the law.
- Mark 7 and Matthew 15 record Jesus’ disagreements with first-century Judaism regarding the washing of hands. Sanders flatly pronounces, “Deadly enmity over handwashing is, I think, historically impossible.”³⁶ He takes issue with Jesus’ attack on the Pharisaic view of *korban* by writing, “No Pharisee would justify using a semi-legal device to deprive his parents.”³⁷ This NP advocate flatly rejects the historical accuracy of the Gospels.
- Matthew 23:13–36 records Jesus’ opinion of second-temple Jewish leaders in His woes pronounced against them. He calls them snakes and a brood of vipers (23:33), blind guides (23:16), and blind fools (23:17; cf. Matt 15:14). That is hardly a description of a “covenantal nomism” that guards the truth.
- Jesus consistently portrayed Judaism of His day as a religion of externals only. One example is in Matthew 23:27–28: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” That is just the opposite of NP descriptions of the covenantal nomism of first-century Judaism which says that the system “was not especially marked by hypocrisy”³⁸ and describes its faith as “the badge of covenant membership, not something someone ‘performs’ as a kind of initiation test.”³⁹ Rather, the badge of covenant membership for the Judaism of Jesus’ day was compliance with outward Pharisaic prescriptions.
- In John 8:44a Jesus addressed the Jews who opposed Him with these words: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.” This is hardly a fit description for loyal upholders of the religion of the OT as Sanders and others of the NP want to portray Judaism in Jesus’ day. The Gospels and Acts provide many examples of Judaism’s inclination toward an external kind of religion and toward the neglect of internal matters of godliness.

they have not considered the numerous levels of legal agreement and disagreement” (Sanders, *Historical Figure*, 212). He misses Jesus’ point. Jesus did not speak against the law; He spoke against the scribal and Pharisaic interpretation of the law.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 216–17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 427.

³⁹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 125.

First-Century Judaism

New-perspective proponents seem to have lost sight of the fact that the Judaism of Jesus' day was not the religion of the OT. It was largely a product of Israel's captivity years in Babylon. Because of circumstances that brought a cessation of the temple sacrifices, a study of the law took the place of the temple sacrifices. That increased attention to the law brought into existence the office of the scribe or teacher of the law who became as important to the religious life of the people as the priest had been while the temple was still standing.⁴⁰ For the most part, the scribes, most of whom were Pharisees, were the rabbis of the first century A.D.

The new set of circumstances also created a need for a new center of worship, the synagogue. The widespread dispersion of the Jewish people during the exile necessitated local forms of gathering, i.e., synagogues in various locations. The synagogue became a firmly established institution wherever ten men were available to form a regular congregation. The synagogue adapted older rites and observances of Judaism to the new conditions under which the people had to live. Synagogues continued to function even after the temple was rebuilt.⁴¹

Before the captivity, sin was evaluated and judged on a communal scale rather than individually. The uprooting of the nation destroyed the connection of reward and punishment with national responsibility, thereby reaffirming individual responsibility. Messianic hope for the advent of a political deliverer remained strong during this period.⁴²

The troops of Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple of Solomon in 586 B.C. A second temple was begun and completed by the returning remnant in 516 B.C., only to be plundered by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. In 165 B.C. Judas Maccabaeus cleansed and repaired the second temple. The repaired structure remained until 37 B.C. when Herod the Great took Jerusalem and burned some of the temple structures. In 20-19 B.C. Herod started to rebuild the temple, work that was not completed until A.D. 62 or 64. It was in this rebuilt second temple that Jesus and His disciples taught and preached and Saul of Tarsus offered sacrifices. The Roman army destroyed this temple in A.D. 70.⁴³

The synagogue was the social center where Jewish inhabitants of a city gathered weekly to meet each other. It was also the educational medium for keeping the law before the people's attention and served as a substitute for temple worship, which was impossible because of distance or poverty. The synagogue service consisted of five parts: a recitation of the Shema (Deut. 6:4), a ritual prayer concluding with an opportunity for individual silent prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, a sermon which explained the Scripture that had been read, and a blessing pronounced by a priestly member of the congregation. Such a sequence eventually became influential in the services of the early church.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 82.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 85-89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89-92.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

Five of the Jewish feasts had their origin in the OT: Passover or Unleavened Bread, Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets or the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The other two feasts originated during the intertestamental period: the Feast of Lights, commemorating the cleansing of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus, and the Feast of Purim, commemorating the deliverance of Israel during the time of Esther.

All the sects of Judaism originated during the captivity: the Pharisees (the largest and most influential), the Sadducees (the priestly party during the days of Christ), the Essenes (an ascetic brotherhood), the Zealots (fanatical nationalists who advocated violence to obtain liberation from Rome), the Zadokites (a priestly element who wanted to reform the priesthood), and the Herodians (a left wing of the Sadducees who favored perpetuation of the Herodian dynasty).⁴⁵

The dispersion of Jewish people began in 721 B.C. with the captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel. It spread gradually until Jews were found in almost all the large cities of the Mediterranean and Middle East, including North Africa, and many smaller cities too. Within the dispersion there were two distinct groups: (1) The Hebraists retained the religious faith of Judaism and utilized the Aramaic language and the Hebrew customs. Paul was a Hebraist (Phil. 3:5). (2) The Hellenists were far greater in number than the Hebraists and had absorbed the Graeco-Roman culture, but had ceased to be Jewish except in matters of faith. They spoke only Greek or whatever happened to be the language of the area where they settled.⁴⁶

Sanders says very little if anything about such facets of first-century Judaism as resulted from the Babylonian exile. In his 1977 work on rabbinic literature, his “Index of Subjects” has no entry for “synagogue,” which was the rabbi’s main locus of operation. His entry on Pharisees is relatively brief, and the Day of Atonement is the only feast that has an entry. One can only conclude that the rabbinic literature consulted by Sanders is a poor source for reconstructing a picture of first-century Judaism. And with crumbling of the foundation for the “Sanders revolution” falls the case for a new perspective on Judaism and, consequently, that for the new perspective on Paul also. The system falters because it is based on an unsupported preunderstanding, not on allowing the biblical text to speak for itself.⁴⁷ Following the dictum of “all truth

⁴⁵ H. E. Dana, *The New Testament World* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937), 66–139.

⁴⁶ Tenney, *Survey*, 117–20.

⁴⁷ James D. G. Dunn acknowledges the role of preunderstanding in his *Jesus Remembered* (vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]): “In short, if we sum up the hermeneutical issues by responding to the postmodern question ‘Is there meaning in the text?’, the answer has to be either a qualified Yes or a qualified No. . . . The truth has to be somewhere in between, indeed precisely in the integration of these two too simplistically separated terms, in the ‘fusion’ of these two polarities. . . . As with the critically realist approach to the history of Christianity’s beginnings, so with the hermeneutics of reading the NT, there is neither an absolutely objective meaning ‘in’ the text, nor an absolutely subjective meaning imported to the text by the reader” (124–25). Wright does likewise when he denies the existence of an antithesis between objective and subjective: “Instead of the spurious antithesis between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective,’ we must hold to the proper distinction between public and private” (*Contemporary Quest*, 80).

is God's truth," it seeks to integrate rabbinic tradition with Scripture, thereby reducing the voice of Scripture to a whisper.⁴⁸

Wright describes how Sanders reasons from solution to plight:

What is the key, the focal point around which everything else organizes itself? And where did Paul begin his train of thought. The answers Sanders offers to these questions are as follows. First, Paul began with the solution, and worked back to the problem: that is to say, he did *not* . . . begin with a problem in search of a solution and then perceive Christ as that solution, but came to the matter the other way around. His statements, and still more his arguments, about the plight of man and the inadequacy of other methods of salvation are not therefore the base of his scheme, but the result of it, and their various inconsistencies may thereby be more easily understood.⁴⁹

Based on Paul's alleged reasoning from the solution back to the problem solved by the solution, Sanders and other NP advocates have built into their explanations of Paul's writings an understanding of second-temple Judaism that is fraught with misinformation about Paul's relationship to the Judaism of his day, i.e., that he could not have differed with Judaism on soteriological grounds.⁵⁰ In implementing grammatical-historical principles of interpretation, one must get the history right. Otherwise, his exegetical conclusions will be thoroughly flawed.

Allegorical Versus Literal Handling of the OT

Illustrations of such flaws in the case of the NP are plentiful. Covenantal nomism makes much over God's OT covenants with Israel, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant. Wright's words are typical:

Romans 4, in which Paul discusses the faith of Abraham, is not, as is so often suggested, a detached 'proof from scripture' of an abstract doctrine. It is an exposition of the biblical covenant theology which has now been unveiled in the gospel. Genesis 15 is the backbone of the whole chapter—Genesis 15, that is, seen as the chapter in which the covenant with Abraham was established in the first place.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See my discussion of "General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 113–40.

⁴⁹ Tom [N. T.] Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1988), 426 [emphasis in the original].

⁵⁰ Waters expresses the same fact as follows: "It is simply not true (unless our narratives deceive us) that there is a virtually seamless continuity between the Judaism(s) of Paul's day and the specimen of religion that he adopted and promoted subsequent to his encounter on the Damascus Road" (*Justification and the New Perspectives* 157); cf. Richard B. Gaffin, "Paul the Theologian," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000): 134.

⁵¹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129.

That covenant, along with the other OT covenants with Israel, was God's promise to ethnic Israel. In the original statement of the Abrahamic covenant, God promised,

Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:1b–3).

In the context of Genesis 12, Abraham understood God to promise him a physical lineage that would become a great nation. The fulfillment of those promises and the promises of the other OT covenants with Israel can come only to ethnic Israel, Abraham's physical descendants. NP proponents have allegorized the promises in such a way that they apply to those in the body of Christ, most of whom are not physical descendants of Abraham.

As an example of this allegorization, Wright writes about "the Christian, the fulfilled-Israel, line"⁵² and speaks of "Paul's message to the pagan world" as "the fulfilled-Israel message: the one creator God is, through the fulfilment of his covenant with Israel, reconciling the world to himself."⁵³ Speaking of the predominantly Gentile church as the "fulfilled-Israel" or the "new Israel" is in clear violation of principles of literal fulfillment for which grammatical-historical interpretation stands. Traditionally, non-dispensational systems have followed the same non-literal understanding of Israel's OT covenants, but that does not mitigate the seriousness of the hermeneutical flaw.

The NP approach also necessitates the conclusion that national Israel has no future in God's program: "'Resurrection' was, in Ezekiel 37, a metaphor for the return of Israel from exile. When Paul was faced with the fact of Jesus' resurrection, he concluded that the return from exile had in fact happened. . . . It meant that Israel had in principle been redeemed, in the person of her anointed representative."⁵⁴ For the NP, the first coming and resurrection of Jesus were the fulfillment of God's promises to ethnic Israel. Yet God's promises to Israel in the OT contained no indication of figurative language. To read those promises in an allegorical sense is a severe breach of their plain meaning.

Single Meaning Versus Multiple Meanings

Romans 1:1

In assigning more than one meaning to a word, phrase, or sentence, the NP clearly places itself into the camp of the extreme subjectivism of the new evangelical

⁵² Ibid., 85.

⁵³ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 51.

hermeneutics. Traditional grammatical-historical principles emphasize the importance of assigning one meaning and one meaning only to each aspect of a given text,⁵⁵ but Wright wants at least two meanings for the word “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) in Romans 1:1: a Jewish word of comfort regarding Israel’s return from exile and a pagan announcement of a great victory and a coming ruler. He wants somehow to combine the two meanings:

Which of these backgrounds, then, is the appropriate one against which to read the New Testament evidence? Is ‘the gospel’, for Paul, an Isaianic word of comfort or an imperial proclamation?

I suggest that the antithesis between the two is a false one, based on the spurious either-or that has misleadingly divided New Testament studies for many years.⁵⁶

In calling the separate meanings a *false* antithesis, however, he has committed the error of assigning two meanings to the same word. The two meanings *are* antithetical. He does the same with the Greek word for “Lord” (Κύριος, *Kyrios*) assigning one meaning in connection with Paul’s Jewish upbringing and another in connection with his Greco-Roman audience.⁵⁷ With the latter group Paul used it to connote Jesus as lord of the whole world, but in the context of his Jewish lineage he used the word to refer to the sovereignty of the one true God of Israel (Isa. 43:23).

For Wright the term has both meanings in Philippians 2:11.⁵⁸

Romans 1:17

Wright also assigns a double meaning to the word often translated “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaïosynē*) in Paul’s writings. From a Jewish perspective he sees the “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, *dikaïosynē theou*) in such passages as Romans 1:17; 3:20; 10:3 as referring to God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel (cf. Isaiah 40–55).⁵⁹ In addition, he sees the same phrase in the same passages as a forensic term, the picture of the judge in a law court pronouncing a defendant not guilty.⁶⁰ In the former case the genitive in “the righteousness of God” is a possessive genitive—“a quality in God”—and in the latter case it is a subjective genitive—“an active power which goes out” from God.⁶¹ Wright sees both senses as intended in

⁵⁵ For further elaboration, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 141–64.

⁵⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 42–43, especially 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 56–57, 66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 96–97.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 97–98.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 101, 103.

each passage,⁶² in other words, two meanings for the same expression in each text, another hermeneutical flaw.

Dunn follows essentially the same line of reasoning in assigning a double meaning to the expression *dikaiosynē theou* in Romans 1:17. Like Wright, he views *dikaiosynē* as a relational term because of its background in Hebrew usage. In other words, he views “‘righteousness’ as the meeting of obligations laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he or she is part.”⁶³ On the basis of such a definition, he sees the genitive in *dikaiosynē theou* as both a subjective genitive—“an activity of God”—and an objective genitive—“a gift bestowed by God.”⁶⁴ Though he defines the genitives differently from Wright, he commits the same hermeneutical blunder as Wright by assigning two meanings to the same expression in the same text.

Regarding *dikaioō*, the verb form of *dikaiosynē*, Dunn draws a similar conclusion:

The other dispute . . . was whether the verb *dikaioō* means “make righteous” or “reckon as righteous.” But once again the basic idea assumed by Paul was of a relationship in which God acts on behalf of his human partner, first in calling Israel into and then in sustaining Israel in its covenant with him. So once again the answer is not one or the other but both.⁶⁵

Since a person needs good works to remain in the covenant family, in addition to reckoning a person as righteous, God must also make him righteous in order for that person to obtain deliverance from final destruction,⁶⁶ according to Dunn.

Romans 5:12, 18–19

In discussing the last clause of Romans 5:12—“because all sinned”—Wright prefers to translate the aorist tense of the verb “all sinned” (ἧμαρτον, *hēmarton*) referring to the primal act of Adam, at the same time preferring not to place too much weight on the tense of the verb. His inclination in downplaying the tense of the verb results from equivocating on the meaning of the clause.⁶⁷ As a result, he comes up with the following two meanings for the clause:

Paul’s meaning must in any case be both that an entail of sinfulness has spread throughout the human race from its first beginnings and that each individual has

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 341.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 344

⁶⁵ Ibid.; cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, vol. 38A of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 2015), *dikaion*, ‘to justify’: does it mean ‘to make righteous’ or ‘to count righteous?’ . . . Since the basic idea is of a *relationship* in which God acts even for the defective partner, an action whereby God sustains the weaker partner of his covenant relationship within the relationship, the answer again is really *both*. . .”

⁶⁶ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 39.

⁶⁷ N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in vol. 10 of *The New Interpreters’ Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 526.

contributed their own share to it. Paul offers no further clue as to how the first of these actually works or how the two interrelate.⁶⁸

The two meanings are in obvious conflict with one another: does Paul refer to personal sin or to sin as transmitted from generation to generation? Wright explicitly answers “both” and, in so doing, assigns two meanings to the passage. In the process, he ignores what has been the clause’s predominant interpretation, that when Adam committed his sin in Genesis 3, he did so as the federal (or seminal) head of the human race. He avoids mention of Adam’s federal headship because it would involve imputation of Adam’s sin to the whole race. When Paul continues this line of thought in Romans 5:18–19, the converse doctrine would be imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers, a doctrine that Wright staunchly rejects. He admits that the two verses speak of status, but interprets status as pertaining to the last day, at the final judgment,⁶⁹ not to imputed righteousness presently attributed to believers. He puts it this way: “Justification, rooted in the cross and anticipating the verdict of the last day, gives people a new status, ahead of the performance of appropriate deeds.”⁷⁰ In accord with covenantal nomism, he sees the necessity of good deeds to complete the justification. Absent from Wright’s discussion is any reference to the universal guilt of man through Adam, which would create the need for Christ’s imputed righteousness.⁷¹

At this point in his discussion of Romans 5:19 Wright notes his rejection of the view that Jesus’ perfect obedience to the law (His active obedience) acquired for Him a righteousness that is then imputed to those in Christ through His death on the cross (His passive obedience).⁷² Drawing upon Isaiah 53:11 regarding the suffering servant of the Lord, he sees Christ’s obedience in death as an act to replace Israel’s disobedience.⁷³ For Wright, Christ’s life of obedience has no place in His representation of those in Christ. On the contrary, however, to divorce Christ’s passive obedience from His active obedience renders His passive obedience meaningless. Romans 5:19 points to Adam’s life of disobedience as representative of the whole human race and to Christ’s life of obedience, including His death, as representative of all believers. The imputation of a righteousness derived both from Christ’s active and from His passive obedience contradicts NP teaching.

The conspicuous habit of the NP to assign multiple meanings to single terms, phrases, or clauses in an individual passage signals the utter confusion generated by the system as a whole. Along with its assignment of multiple meanings, the NP also disregards biblical context.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 527.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 529.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 182.

⁷² Wright, “Romans,” 529.

⁷³ Ibid.

Disregard for Biblical Context

Representatives of the NP repeatedly violate the hermeneutical principle of giving closest attention to the immediate context of a given passage. They invariably jump from passage to passage without a thorough consideration of the various contexts. The result is that they read into a given passage something that is not in that passage's immediate context, thereby violating the original author's intention and the original reader's understanding of what was written.⁷⁴ Terry warns against such a practice: "We must avoid the danger of overstepping in this matter [i.e., the matter of using cross-references too carelessly]" and "There may be a likeness of sentiment without any real parallelism [i.e., in regard to verbal parallels between separate passages]."⁷⁵

Several citations will illustrate violations of this principle that are very widespread among NP proponents.

"Gospel" in Romans 1:1, 16

Regarding "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) in Romans 1:1, Wright comments, "In Paul's Jewish world, the word looked back to Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7, where a messenger was to bring to Jerusalem the good news of Babylon's defeat, the end of Israel's exile, and the personal return of YHWH to Zion."⁷⁶ Wright draws his meaning of the word from an OT context, a prophecy of Isaiah regarding national Israel, to define a meaning in Romans 1:1, a letter addressed to a church composed predominantly of Gentiles. He does this, of course, to support his theory of covenantal nomism.

Traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutical principles dictate that this is a use of cross-references which is too careless because no real parallelism exists between the two passages. The proper approach would have been to draw the meaning of the word from Romans 1:9, 15, 16, passages in the same chapter. In Romans 1:15 Paul expresses his willingness to preach the gospel to the predominantly Gentile church in Rome, and in 1:16 he defines the gospel as the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. How would Gentiles in Rome relate to the end of Israel's exile and YHWH's return to Jerusalem? Wright would contend that covenantal nomism, the alleged rabbinic-based system, had already by the year A.D. 55 permeated Gentile thinking in faraway Rome. Such a theory is at best farfetched and at worst ridiculous.

Romans 1:16 indicates clearly the individual salvific connotation of Paul's gospel. To read that verse otherwise involves a redefining not only of "gospel" but also of "salvation." Wright would have his readers believe that justification was not "so

⁷⁴ Elsewhere I have called this "hermeneutical hopskotch" (Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 363).

⁷⁵ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947), 222–23.

⁷⁶ Wright, "Romans" 415; cf. idem, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 40–44.

much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church,⁷⁷ not how to become a part of the people of God as it is about how one can tell who is a part of that community. He can hardly say contextually that justification is not salvific when the word for salvation is in this very context, but he does so anyway by defining salvation as the rescue of Israel from pagan oppression,⁷⁸ a concept that is completely foreign to the context of the book of Romans. *National* salvation is hardly in view when Paul individualizes its recipients with the words “*everyone* who believes” (1:16). Such a series of redefinitions stems from a preunderstanding imposed on the text of Romans, not from the context of Romans itself.

Romans 2:6, 14–15, 28–29

Wright multiplies his contextual errors in comments on Romans 2. Two illustrations must suffice. (1) He treats vv. 1–16 as dealing primarily with the judgment of God even though the chapter falls squarely in a section of the epistle (1:18–3:20) that emphasizes universal human sinfulness.⁷⁹ The section deals with mankind’s guilt, but in it Wright finds proof that justification is based on works,⁸⁰ a clear contradiction to a later section where Paul deals directly with the subject of justification. Romans 3:20 says plainly that no one will be justified by works. Regarding Romans 2:6, Wright writes, “To the surprise . . . of those whose traditional readings of the letter lead them to expect that Paul will here simply declare that all are sinners, so that justification can be by faith alone apart from works of the law, he announces on the contrary that justification will be on the basis of works (v. 6). . . .”⁸¹ Regarding 2:13, he writes, “For the moment, he is content to assert the point: Israel’s ethnic privilege, backed up by possession of Torah, will be of no avail at the final judgment if Israel has not kept Torah. Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession.”⁸² He discounts the possibility that Paul, in the middle of his discussion of human guilt, introduces a hypothetical or theoretical illustration of a human feat that is absolutely impossible to accomplish.⁸³ In essence, he admits the contextual isolation of his position when he writes, “Throughout the section so far Paul has been saying things that cry out for further explanation, which he will provide as the letter moves forward.”⁸⁴

Also, in his disregard for immediate context, he finds references to *justified* Gentiles in chapter 2, before the epistle has reached the point of discussing justification.

⁷⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119.

⁷⁸ Wright, “Romans,” 424.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* He writes, “[H]e [i.e., Paul] announces on the contrary that at the last assize justification will be on the basis of works (v. 6), and that there will not only be tribulation and wrath for all wrongdoers, but glory, honor, immortality, eternal life, and peace for all who seek for these things in the appropriate way (vv. 7, 10).”

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 439

⁸² *Ibid.*, 440.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Regarding 2:14–15, he writes, “[H]ere he is hinting at a theme he will explore later in the letter, namely that the people in question are *Christian* Gentiles (vv. 14–15— indeed, Christian Jews and Gentiles alike (vv. 7, 10)).”⁸⁵ Regarding 2:28–29, he writes, “Paul now transfers the name, and the validation, to a different group. In the previous verses he has referred to Gentiles who, though uncircumcised, keep the law’s regulations; he can only mean Gentile Christians, since this passage, explaining what has gone before, is clearly about membership in the new, or renewed, covenant.”⁸⁶ All this results from importing his covenantal, nomistic preunderstanding into Romans 2, which in turn results in his importing teaching from later parts of Romans into the passage. (2) In 2:17–29 he applies references to Israel’s sinfulness corporately rather than individually when he writes about 2:17, “We should beware of the natural tendency, within our individualistic culture, to assume that when Paul uses the second-person singular (‘If *you*, singular, call yourself a Jew’) he is referring to a typical individual.”⁸⁷ He sees this as a reference to “the national boast of ethnic Israel.” In so doing, he masks the utter corruption of first-century Judaism by focusing on Israel’s failure as a nation to be a light in the world. Yes, Israel did fail in her national responsibility, but at this point in developing his case for universal guilt, Paul is speaking of individual sins within Judaism of that day.

Covenantal nomism would have readers believe that Judaism was not so corrupt that widespread stealing, adultery, robbery of temples, and the like existed within the system, that it was a system that kept faith and works in proper balance. Yet that is not the picture of Judaism derived elsewhere, nor is it the picture Paul paints here. Wright’s allegiance to the Sanders-defined picture of a refined religious system forces him to read into the present context elements that are not present, elements that Paul certainly did not intend.

Romans 3:21–26

Regarding Romans 3, Wright writes,

Paul’s purpose in 3:21–26 is not, then, to give a full “doctrine of the atonement,” a complete account of how God dealt with the sins of the world through the death of Jesus. Rather, as one part of his argument that on the cross the righteousness of God was unveiled, he is content to state, not completely *how*, but simply *that* this had been accomplished.⁸⁸

Wright’s interpretation of “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” in v. 22a is equivalent to “God’s saving justice through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁹ He arrives at such an unusual rendering of *δικαιοσύνη* (*dikaioσynē*,

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 449.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 445.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 467.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 465, 470.

“righteousness”) and πίστις (*pistis*, “faith”) by alluding to Paul’s reference to Abraham in Galatians 3, which he uses as a springboard to pull in the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 15:5, 13–16.⁹⁰ Admitting that the word “covenant” does not occur in this immediate context⁹¹—nor does it occur anywhere in Romans until 11:27—Wright seeks to build a case that 3:21–4:25 affirms that what God has done in Jesus the Messiah is the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.⁹² Paul does refer to Abraham in Romans 4:1, 2, 3, 9, 12, 16 and to the promise God gave him (Rom. 4:13, 14, 16, 20), but emphasizes the importance of Abraham as example of “faith,” a word that occurs 35 times in Romans and nine times in chapter 4.

To arrive at such an interpretation of Romans 3:21–26, Wright must redefine “righteousness”—a word occurring 30 times in Romans—as well as “faith” in ways that are foreign to the context in which they occur. As one has put it, he must “strain Paul through an imposed biblical-theological grid supposedly deduced from the Second Temple literature.”⁹³ In fact, in seeking to prove his point regarding 3:21–26, Wright pulls in Leviticus 16, 4 Maccabees 17:22, and Isaiah 52:13–53:12 to support his rendering of Jesus’ faithfulness,⁹⁴ all of this to the neglect of the context of Romans 3, which so plainly speaks of human sin and guilt and God’s remedy of an imputed righteousness available to people (Rom. 3:9–21, 23–26).

Romans 3:27–28

To continue his “imposed biblical-theological grid” in Romans 3:27–28, Wright must disregard the immediate context again. He admits that the “therefore” in 3:27 normally would draw a conclusion from the section just completed in 3:21–26, but since that sense does not suit his superimposed scheme, he must refer the “therefore” all the way back to Romans 2:17–24,⁹⁵ a very unnatural leap to a faraway context.

He says that in 3:28 Paul resolves the antithesis between “the law of works” and “the law of faith” by declaring that a person is ‘justified by faith apart from works of the law.’ In this verse Wright reports “on a calculation that has taken place, not in the present passage, but elsewhere, which he will shortly unveil.”⁹⁶ In essence, this commentator admits that he must go outside the immediate context to derive meanings for these two verses, meanings to accommodate his preunderstanding of first-century Judaism.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 464.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 183.

⁹⁴ Wright, “Romans,” 467–68.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 480.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 481.

Romans 4:4–5

Wright's preference for noncontextual factors in his interpretation comes through in a striking fashion in Romans 4:4–5.⁹⁷ In his system of thought, faith is not the way one becomes a Christian but is a badge of covenant membership,⁹⁸ and imputed righteousness is nonexistent.⁹⁹ In vv. 4–5 he acknowledges the bookkeeping metaphor of employment and wage-earning in vv. 4–5 a, but says Paul reverts to a metaphor of the law court and the covenant in v. 5b.¹⁰⁰ In connection with 4:3 in the same chapter, he assures his readers that “righteousness” has nothing to do with moral goodness and that “faith” is not a means for obtaining that “righteousness.” Rather, he says, “righteousness” is the status of being a member of the covenant, and “faith” is “the badge, the sign, that reveals that status because it is its key symptom.”¹⁰¹

He rejects reading v. 5 as a direct contrast of v. 4, the picture that “[w]orkers get paid not by grace but by debt, but believers get paid not by debt but by grace.”¹⁰² He prefers the following explanation:

The two sentences are not in fact balanced, partly because Paul pulls himself out of the bookkeeping metaphor halfway through v. 5 and returns to his main points, the lawcourt and the covenant. What Paul says in v. 5 not only contrasts with v. 4 (“working” and “not working”), but also deconstructs the whole frame of thought: The alternative to “working” is to “trust the one who justifies the ungodly.”¹⁰³

His unstated reason for reading in a deconstruction between v. 5 a and v. 5b is his embracing of the NP on first-century Judaism as characteristic of the Pauline perspective also. Neither Judaism nor Paul taught justification by faith. With them justification was only a badge of covenant membership, and final justification—i.e., vindication—was by works. To accept v. 5 as a straightforward reversal of v. 4 would teach justification by faith, thereby condemning the NP to deconstruction.

In applying the term “ungodly” to Abraham in v. 5, Wright points out Abraham's pagan background as explaining that ungodliness, thereby acknowledging the moral connotations of “righteousness” which he has denied on the page before.¹⁰⁴ He

⁹⁷ Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 147–48, 161–62.

⁹⁸ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 125; his words are, “Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something someone ‘performs’ as a kind of initiation test.”

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98; his words are, “If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. . . . To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works.”

¹⁰⁰ Wright, “Romans,” 491–92.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 491.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 491–92.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 492.

further complicates his own inconsistencies by noting that God established His covenant with Abraham while he was still ungodly and by continuing to contend that faith is a badge of covenant membership.¹⁰⁵ As Waters notes, “It may be, then, that Wright considers ‘ungodly’ to mean an imperfectly covenantally faithful person.”¹⁰⁶ Historically speaking, God’s covenant with Abraham came before Abraham’s justification by faith. The initial statement of the covenant came in Genesis 12, but the statement of Abraham’s justification did not come until Genesis 15. So a span of three chapters of Genesis separates Abraham’s covenant membership and his receiving of the alleged indispensable badge of covenant membership. In Romans 4:4–5 the NP runs into a hopeless quagmire from which escape is impossible, all because the system reads an ill-defined understanding of Judaism into the passage.

Romans 6:1–11

As a follow-up to his discussion of 5:12–21, Wright asks, “Do Christians find themselves now in the Adam solidarity or in the Christ solidarity?”¹⁰⁷ He answers, “Christians, he [i.e., Paul] says, have left the old solidarity, and belong to the new; they must behave accordingly. The transfer is effected by dying and rising with the Messiah. And the event in which this dying and rising is accomplished is baptism.”¹⁰⁸

Wright labors the point that water baptism, not faith, is the means by which anyone becomes a member of the covenant community. Paul, he says, “understood baptism in terms of the new exodus,” having made such a link already in 1 Corinthians 10:2 when he spoke of the wilderness generation as “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”¹⁰⁹ Wright views Christians as a “new exodus” people and that baptism was “*both* a dramatic symbol of the new exodus *and* a sign of Jesus’ death.”¹¹⁰ Faith must be based on water baptism in his view of Romans 6:11.¹¹¹ Viewing Christians as a new-exodus people does not come from Paul in the context of Romans 6; it is rather a product of Wright’s NP dream world.

In paralleling Christians with the wilderness generation under Moses, however, Wright fails to note a significant difference. The generation under Moses passed through the Red Sea bone-dry (cf. 1 Cor. 10:2); with the new-wilderness generation—as Wright calls Christians—baptism calls upon them to be drenched from head to toe. It is also notable that just after Paul dismisses one external rite—circumcision—as meaningless in relation to the covenant (Rom. 2:25–29), Wright would have him introducing another external rite as a means for becoming a covenant member. Water does not appear in the context of Romans 6, nor does water baptism play a prominent role in Paul’s writings elsewhere (cf. 1 Cor. 1:14–17).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives*, 148.

¹⁰⁷ Wright, “Romans,” 533.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 533–34.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 534.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 535.

Suggesting that water baptism is the means for becoming a covenant member is another example of reading into a context elements that are foreign to the writer's thoughts.

The Hermeneutical Upshot of the New Perspective

A review of a few of the numerous hermeneutical escapades of the NP has illustrated the utter bankruptcy of the system. It has drawn heavily upon a certain preunderstanding about first-century Judaism and has on that basis proceeded to follow an inevitable trail of wrongheaded conclusions in various portions of Paul's writings. It has fallen into the fallacious pattern of subjectivism promoted by the new evangelical hermeneutics rather than applying time-tested principles of grammatical-historical interpretation.

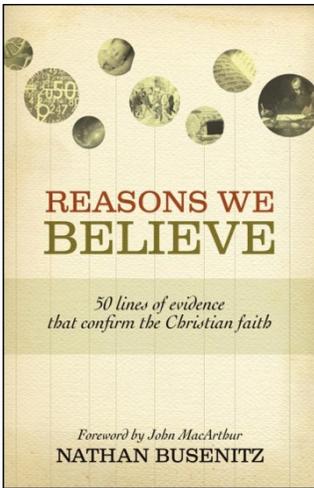
A word of caution is in order regarding those who have been somewhat swayed by the NP, those who say they see some value in it, but who have not bought into the system as a whole. Anyone who has embraced even a small aspect of the NP has endorsed the starting point of Sanders' covenantal nomism which defines the nature of first-century Judaism. That person cannot free himself from the system's degenerative hermeneutical approach, because without Sanders' covenantal nomism the NP does not exist. A person cannot embrace traditional grammatical-historical principles and take even a first step toward the NP. The two approaches to Pauline literature are utterly incompatible.

Brief Summary of New Perspective Errors

The following summary of the articles derived from the Winter 2005 Faculty Lecture Series states some of the erroneous positions advocated either explicitly or implicitly by the New Perspective on Paul. Whenever sound, grammatical-historical principles of biblical interpretation are violated, error is the inevitable result. NP proponents do not always agree with one another. In cases where they disagree among themselves, therefore, I have tried to reflect the position of N. T. Wright in the summary, because he is finding widest positive acceptance among contemporary evangelicals.

1. First-century Judaism was not a salvation-by-works religion.
2. First-century Judaism was not especially marked by hypocrisy, petty legalism, self-serving, self-deceiving casuistry, arrogance, and a lack of confidence in God.
3. God has chosen Israel and given them the law which He enables them to keep.
4. Until the death and resurrection of Christ, by virtue of God's election, any physical descendant of Abraham is a member of the covenant people and thereby justified.
5. Those who maintain the covenantal nomism relationship by obedience are the ones who will be saved.
6. First-century Judaism had a correct balance between faith, grace, and works and was not just a religion of externals.

7. Covenantal nomism provides a means of atonement if a person does break the Mosaic law.
8. Paul retained his covenantal nomism after his Damascus Road experience.
9. From that point on, his mission was to dispense with circumcision, sabbath observance, and dietary restrictions of the Mosaic law as boundaries that limited who could be a member of the covenant people.
10. Human beings do not have a sin nature because of the original sin of Adam.
11. Paul did not have an introspective conscience, i.e., no guilt because of his sinfulness
12. Guilt was not expressed in Paul's writings, but was introduced by Augustine and Luther.
13. Justification by faith and imputed righteousness was read into Paul by Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and Calvin because of their contemporary situations.
14. Paul was a Shammaite who retained covenantal nomism in his theology but added the Lordship of Christ to the system.
15. Faith is not the means of justification or of joining the covenant community; it is rather a badge of covenant membership. One joins the covenant community through water baptism.
16. Justification is a process that is completed only at the final judgment; therefore, no one has eternal security.
17. Final justification is based on works of obedience to the Mosaic law so that any justification a person enjoys at present is only preliminary and can be reversed.



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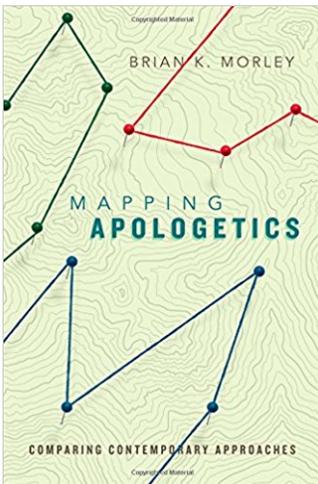
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THE HERMENEUTICS OF NONCESSATIONISM

Robert L. Thomas
(Originally published Fall 2003)

The Master's Seminary is noncessationist in regard to such gifts as teaching, helps, and administration, but is cessationist regarding revelatory and sign gifts. Recent changes in evangelical biblical hermeneutics that have accompanied comparable changes in evangelicalism as a whole have opened doors of opportunity for noncessationists to defend their position in a new way. The new hermeneutical subjectivism has given continuationists an opportunity that is nonexistent when following traditional grammatical-historical principles of interpretation. Four examples illustrate this use of revisionist hermeneutics. (1) Narrative-based interpretation takes its cue from evangelical redaction criticism and its theory that narrative literature can teach doctrine just as effectively as didactic type writings, a theory that has been successfully refuted. (2) Community-based interpretation sees a contemporary Christian community as playing an indispensable role in assigning meaning to a biblical text. This too contradicts traditional grammatical-historical principles. (3) Tradition-based interpretation allows for reading into a biblical passage an interpreter's own background and beliefs, but differences in defining how to limit that tradition reflects the extreme subjectivism to which such a principle leads. (4) Mediating-based interpretation theorizes the existence of a common ground between cessationists and noncessationists and alters traditional hermeneutical principles in a way to accommodate that preunderstanding. All four approaches illustrate the growing sophistication of noncessationist hermeneutics and their continuing violations of grammatical-historical hermeneutics.

* * * * *

To frame this discussion, the position of The Master's Seminary on cessationism is a good starting point. The institutional "Statement of Faith" on that issue reads as follows:

We teach that the Holy Spirit administers spiritual gifts to the church. The Holy Spirit glorifies neither Himself nor His gifts by ostentatious displays, but He does glorify Christ by implementing His work of redeeming the lost and building up believers in the most holy faith (John 16:13, 14; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:4–11; 2 Cor. 3:18).

We teach, in this respect, that God the Holy Spirit is sovereign in the bestowing of all His gifts for the perfecting of the saints today and that speaking in tongues and the working of sign miracles in the beginning days of the church were for the purpose of pointing to and authenticating the apostles as revealers of divine truth, and were never intended to be characteristic of the lives of believers (1 Cor. 12:4–11; 13:8–10; 2 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:7–12; Heb. 2:1–4).

Those words indicate that as an institution TMS is noncessationist in regard to some of the gifts such as teaching, helps, and administration (1 Cor. 12 :28), but is cessationist in regard to other gifts such as miracles, healing, and tongues (1 Cor 12:28–30). The gift of apostleship (1 Cor. 12:28, 29) lasted only as long as witnesses of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection remained alive. Then it ceased along with other revelatory gifts and sign gifts, whose purpose it was to confirm revelation through the revelatory gifts. The remainder of the gifts continue and contribute immeasurably to growth in the body of Christ.

Hermeneutical Changes and Their Effect on Noncessationism

In the last two or three decades, evangelicalism has undergone some dramatic changes that are not often noticed. David F. Wells has commented extensively on the changes in his “Foreword” to *The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church*,¹ as has Iain H. Murray in his work *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000*.² Along with the changes in evangelicalism have come changes in evangelical biblical hermeneutics, whether as a result of or as a cause for the changes in evangelicalism remains to be determined. Whatever the relationship between the two spheres of alteration, the two have gone hand in hand in revamping the evangelical landscape substantially.³

Noncessationism, of course, antedates the above-mentioned differences between the two stages of evangelicalism,⁴ but the continuationist perspective has been

¹ David F. Wells, “Foreword” to *The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church*, eds. Gary L. W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), xv–xvi, xvii, xix, xxviii.

² Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 51.

³ For a further description of the changes, see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 13–20.

⁴ Menzies and Horton trace the beginning of noncessationist Pentecostalism as follows:

The current Pentecostal movement traces its origin to a revival at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas that began on January 1, 1901. Students, from their studies of the Bible concluded that speaking in tongues (Acts 2:4) is the initial outward evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. One of the students, Agnes Ozman, said she felt “as though rivers of living water were proceeding from [her] innermost being.”

The revival became a Pentecostal explosion when, in 1906, W. J. Seymour secured an old two-story frame building at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California. For about three years services ran almost continually, from ten in the morning to midnight. Many of those who received the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Spirit there scattered to spread the message. Many Pentecostal churches sprang up. (William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton. *Biblical Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* [Springfield, Mo.: Logion, 1993] 10)

unaffected by the recent hermeneutical shift. In earlier days charismatics defended their alleged contemporary use of gifts like tongues and prophecy purely on the basis of experience,⁵ but today their defense in many cases has shifted to claims of biblical interpretation as the basis for their exercise of such gifts. The shift has come through implementing new evangelical principles of interpretation.

What is the hermeneutical switch that has made this possible? First and foremost, it is the incorporation of a new first step in the interpretative process, a step called preunderstanding. In a very subtle way, beginning the exegetical practice with a conscious embracing of the interpreter's preunderstanding of what to expect from the passage under investigation has transformed evangelical hermeneutics from an objective exercise of letting a passage speak for itself into a subjective exercise of allowing an interpreter to read into a passage the meaning toward which he is inclined. Obviously, this transition moves away from letting the text speak for itself toward the practice of reader-response hermeneutics.

Noncessationists and other fringe evangelical subgroups who have been uneasy with trying to defend their systems from the Bible have taken advantage of the new hermeneutical subjectivism to present for the first time a biblical defense for what they believe. That is why so many new "isms" like noncessationism are cropping up among evangelicals. The new "isms" are difficult to deal with because evangelicals have as yet to isolate the root cause of the deviations: a change in principles of interpretation.⁶

The Master's Seminary advocates traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics as evidenced in its Statement of Faith:

We teach that, whereas there may be several applications of any given passage of Scripture, there is but one true interpretation. The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one diligently applies the literal, grammatical-historical method of interpretation under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (John 7:17; 16:12–15; 1 Cor. 2:7–15; 1 John 2:20). It is the responsibility of believers to ascertain carefully the true intent and meaning of Scripture, recognizing that proper application is binding on all generations. Yet the truth of Scripture stands in judgment of men; never do men stand in judgment of it.⁷

⁵ Pentecostalist Gordon Fee has observed, "Pentecostals, in spite of some of their excesses, are frequently praised for recapturing for the church its joyful radiance, missionary enthusiasm, and life in the Spirit. But they are at the same time noted for bad hermeneutics. . . . [T]heir attitude toward Scripture regularly has included a general disregard for scientific exegesis and carefully thought-out hermeneutics. In fact, hermeneutics has simply not been a Pentecostal thing. . . . [I]t is probably fair—and important—to note that in general the Pentecostals' experience has preceded their hermeneutics" (Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991], 83, 85–86).

⁶ For a detailed discussion of how new evangelical hermeneutics have given birth to Progressive Dispensationalism, Evangelical Feminism, Evangelical Missiology, Theonomy, and Open Theism, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 351–505. Currently, the Evangelical Theological Society is trying to cope with the presence of open theists in the Society, but is having difficulty doing so because the preunderstanding of the open theists has predetermined the results of their biblical interpretation (Ibid., 479–82).

⁷ "Statement of Faith," Catalog for *The Master's Seminary 2002–2004*.

Four illustrations of noncessationism's use of the revisionist hermeneutics will help to specify the issues involved.

A Narrative-Based Interpretation and Pentecostal Awareness of a Hermeneutical Change⁸

According to an academic dean at Western Pentecostal Bible College in Clayburn, British Columbia, Pentecostal hermeneutics in earlier days since the movement began has been characterized as a "Pragmatic" hermeneutic.⁹ That charismatic dean admits that the governing principle in this approach is to interpret Scripture in light of contemporary charismatic experience, a principle established in 1901 when the father and fountainhead of Pentecostalism laid hands on one of his students and she began speaking in tongues.¹⁰ That has been the method of studying Scripture for noncessationists ever since. They have simply asserted the method, taking it to be "self-evident and self-authenticating."¹¹ Experiences in the early church as recorded in Acts are taken to be normative for the present day.

In 1992, Menzies confessed that earlier Pentecostals viewed the Bible as "a homogeneous whole and built our [Pentecostal's] theology on texts arranged together with little regard for the author's original intent."¹² That approach has in recent times become an embarrassment to noncessationists who desire to become a part of mainstream evangelicalism. Recently, in the work coauthored by William and Robert Menzies, Robert Menzies observed,

Pentecostal Scholars have seized the opportunity afforded by the new hermeneutical context and raised important questions concerning the nature of Luke's pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit) and its relationship to that of Paul. This in turn has stimulated discussions within the wider Evangelical world concerning the nature of fully-orbed biblical pneumatology and how this might impact contemporary church life.¹³

⁸ Cf. David Diez, "An Inductive Study on the Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament" (Th.M. thesis, The Master's Seminary, Sun Valley, Calif., 1998), 7–24. Pastor Diez's work was foundational to the study in preparation of the present article.

⁹ Roger Stronstad, "Trends in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *Paraclete* 22/3 (Summer 1988): 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2–5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Robert P. Menzies, ed., "The Essence of Pentecostalism: Forum Conducted at the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Chapel," *Paraclete* 26/3 (Summer 1992): 1.

¹³ William W. and Robert P. Menzies. *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 43; William Menzies wrote chapter 1, the postscript of chapter 13, and the conclusion of this work; Robert Menzies wrote the rest (*Ibid.*, 11 n. 1). In commenting on the Pentecostal shift in focus, Dempster has commented, "Hermeneutics has been a hot topic for Pentecostals in recent years. In the annual meetings of the Society for Pentecostal Studies over the last decade, no topic has been investigated with greater frequency or intensity than the topic of hermeneutics" (Murray W. Dempster, "Paradigm Shifts and Hermeneutics: Confronting Issues Old and New," *Pneuma: The Journal for Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 [Fall 1993]: 129).

Cessationists can derive profit by looking first at how mainline Pentecostalism now claims a hermeneutical base in biblical interpretation, and then from a survey of how other charismatics, including third-wavers, have responded to this hermeneutical base.

Rationale for Using Narrative as a Basis for Doctrine

Pentecostal hermeneutics has learned a redaction-critical approach to the book of Acts from evangelical redaction-critical studies of the Synoptic Gospels. Robert Menzies has emphasized the lesson learned in the following words: “The tools of redaction criticism, aided by more wide-ranging developments in literary analysis, were employed with considerable success.”¹⁴ For the most part, they credit I. Howard Marshall, a non-Pentecostal, for this discovery:

In 1970, I. Howard Marshall’s influential book *Luke: Historian and Theologian* appeared on the scene. . . . Marshall suggested that Luke wrote history, accurate and careful history; but not bare, objective, detached history. Luke-Acts represents history with a purpose—history written with a theological agenda in view. Marshall’s book signaled an important watershed in Evangelical thought. Although in 1970 many had not yet perceived the full implications of Marshall’s position, the reappraisal of the theological character of biblical narrative, particularly the Gospels and Acts, was underway.¹⁵

On the basis of Marshall’s work, he also writes, “A revolution is taking place in Evangelical hermeneutics. . . . I refer to the substantial change in Evangelical attitudes toward the theological significance of biblical narrative.”¹⁶ He describes the effect of this revolution on the study of the Gospels in the following words:

[A] new generation of Evangelical scholars and seminary instructors, many of whom had studied under Marshall, began to reappropriate and utilize the tools of redaction criticism. These scholars—e.g., Grant Osborne, Robert Stein, Joel Green, Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg—began to judiciously use the positive insights of this method of analysis while at the same time discarding some of the more radical presuppositions. This resulted in an impressive array of schol-

¹⁴ Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power* 41. William Menzies joins Robert Menzies in noting the utter dependence of Pentecostal theology on redaction criticism in Acts: “In fact, if one can demonstrate that Luke did not intend to convey a theological message by his narratives, he has at that point effectively undercut the possibility of a clear Pentecostal theology” (William W. Menzies, “The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics,” *Essays on Apostolic Themes*, ed. Paul Elbert [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985], 7). Later he adds, “Marshall, although certainly not a Pentecostal, makes a good case for the contribution of redaction criticism to an understanding of Luke as a theologian” (*Ibid.*, 8 n. 12).

¹⁵ Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 40–41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

arly studies that showed the value of the method and its compatibility—if employed properly—with a high view of Scripture. The impact upon Evangelical hermeneutics was inevitable, if not immediate. Here were Evangelical scholars highlighting the distinctive theological perspectives of the various Gospel writers.¹⁷

Menzies then transfers the redaction-critical method to the book of Acts and concludes that since Acts is narrative literature like the Gospels, one can derive doctrine from narrative literature just as well as he can from didactic literature such as the NT epistles:

These developments converged to produce what is today a clear consensus. There is now widespread recognition in the Evangelical world that biblical narratives, particularly those found in the Gospels and Acts, were shaped with theological concerns in mind and thus they convey a theological message. The crucial question is no longer whether Luke and the others were theologians; the central question now is what is the specific shape or content of their theology.¹⁸

He confirms such a conclusion by referring to two recent works on hermeneutics written by non-Pentecostals. One is by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard:

We have already stated that narrative often teaches more indirectly than didactic literature without becoming any less normative. Thus, we reject Fee and Stuart’s highlighted maxim that “unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way.”¹⁹

The other is by Grant Osborne:

Moreover, I also oppose the current tendency to deny the theological dimension on the grounds that narrative is indirect rather than direct. This ignores the results of redaction criticism, which has demonstrated that biblical narrative is indeed theological at the core and seeks to guide the reader to relive the truth encapsulated in the story. Narrative is not as direct as didactic material, but it

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41–42. Archer is of the same opinion: “Pentecostal scholarship has aided in elevating Acts from a purely historical narrative to a historical-theological narrative thus giving it the same doctrinal clout as Paul and John” (Kenneth J. Archer, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 [April 1996]: 73).

¹⁹ Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 42; see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 349–50.

does have a theological point and expects the reader to interact with that message. My argument is that biblical narrative is in some ways even better than the teaching applied to similar situations in the lives of the people.²⁰

With this encouragement from non-Pentecostal scholars, Pentecostals have plunged ahead with using historical precedent in Acts as a scriptural basis for their alleged continuing exercise of such sign gifts as tongues and prophecy.²¹ They justify this on the basis of the “quiet revolution” that has transpired in evangelical hermeneutics when writing,

Because Luke-Acts is so pivotal for Pentecostal theology and experience, the recent hermeneutical shift within the larger Evangelical world has had a special impact on Pentecostals. Pentecostals, often chided in the past for simplistic arguments from historical precedent, have entered into a new era of creative theological reflection.²²

Robert Menzies cites Stronstad as an early voice that noted the distinction between Lukan and Pauline theologies, but acknowledges that Stronstad’s experience probably played a part in his discovery.²³ He writes, “Stronstad will undoubtedly be criticized by some for reading his own Pentecostal experience into Luke-Acts. . . . [M]ight it not be that Stronstad’s Pentecostal experience has actually enabled him to read Luke-Acts more accurately?”²⁴

Evaluation of the Doctrine-Based-on-Narrative Rationale

Three observations regarding the new Pentecostal hermeneutics are in order at this point.

(1) Even with the new sophistication that characterizes Pentecostalism’s post-“revolution” hermeneutics,²⁵ the subjectivism of reading one’s experience into the

²⁰ Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 42; see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 172.

²¹ Pinnock wholeheartedly endorses such a use of narrative portions of Scripture among Pentecostals: “Other believers also read the Bible as narrative, because it is in fact a narrative, but Pentecostals are particularly strong in this. Pentecostals read the Bible not primarily as a book of concepts, but as a very dynamic narrative [*sic*] of ongoing divine activity. They inhabit the story-world of the Bible and experience God according to that pattern” (Clark H. Pinnock, “Divine Relationality: A Pentecostal Contribution to the Doctrine of God,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16 [April 2000]:9). In defending his position of open theism, Pinnock continues, “Pentecostals are in the happy position of being able to avoid categories that have long burdened classical theism, because they stick closer to biblical metaphors and biblical narrative” (*Ibid.*, 10).

²² Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

²⁵ Joseph Byrd, Senior Pastor of the Stewart Road Church of God in Monroe, Michigan, agrees with many others about the new trend among Pentecostals: “Recent publications demonstrate the transition of Pentecostalism from its oral theological origins to a new theological sophistication in the last two decades”

biblical text still prevails.²⁶ In other words, an experience-based preunderstanding of what meaning the text should yield is still the determining factor.²⁷ They are doing the same as they always have, but have gained a new respect from other evangelicals, because new evangelical hermeneutics have opened the door for them to come to the text with a preconceived interpretation.

(2) To credit I. Howard Marshall with launching this revolution raises questions about the legitimacy of the revolution's origin. Marshall's stand on the issue of biblical inerrancy is at best questionable. One whose redaction-critical studies acknowledge unhistorical elements in the text of the Gospels²⁸ can hardly furnish a suitable foundation for inerrantists to adopt new hermeneutical procedures. Neither do the disciples of Marshall listed by Robert Menzies supply suitable models of biblical inerrancy, because they all follow Marshall's example of finding unhistorical elements in the Synoptic Gospels.²⁹ If evangelical redaction-critical procedures allow for editorial embellishments leading to historical inaccuracies in the Gospels, they very well may allow that Luke embellished and altered historical accounts in Acts with a view to enhancing his own theological preferences. Evangelical redaction criticism has had detrimental effects by dehistoricizing the Synoptic Gospels, and if used in Acts, will do the same there.

(3) Using narrative literature as a basis for doctrine is precarious for a variety of reasons. For one thing, that policy fails to allow for the transitional nature of Acts. As Loder observes,

("Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory and Pentecostal Proclamation," *Pneuma: The Journal for Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 [Fall 1993]:203). Archer concurs: "Pentecostal scholarship has reached new levels of sophistication as the Fall 1993 issue of *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* demonstrates" (Kenneth J. Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect," 70).

²⁶ Noncessationists differ from one another regarding the exact role of experience with some holding that experience should not be the starting point for interpretation (Fee, *Gospel and Spirit* 85–86; Menzies, "Methodology," 12–13) and others that it is inevitably involved throughout the interpretive process (F. L. Arrington, "Hermeneutics, Historical Perspectives on Pentecostal and Charismatic," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds., Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee, and Patrick H. Alexander [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 384). Whatever position a noncessationist may take on this issue, the fact remains that contemporary experience plays a role in interpretation, as Ellington readily admits: "Beliefs are not derived from understanding, but arise from intense individual and corporate experiences of the presence and action of God in the lives of Christian believers. Doctrine is descriptive of and, as such, arises out of experience. . . . This is not to say that, for Pentecostals, doctrine is unimportant, but it is to recognize that the basic fodder of the doctrinal process within Pentecostalism is the experience of the community of faith" (Scott A. Ellington, "Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 [1996]: 18).

²⁷ Noncessationist Arrington in essence admits this influence: "[T]he Pentecostal movement's own theological presuppositions also impact the movement's interpretative principles. . . . Interpretation, indeed, the very approach to the task of interpretation, is shaped by the theological presuppositions that the interpreter brings to the process" (Arrington, "Hermeneutics, Historical Perspectives," 378).

²⁸ I. Howard Marshall, "Historical Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 136.

²⁹ Cf. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 18–27, for examples of historical inaccuracies cited by various evangelical scholars.

Acts 2—when understood in light of the unique historical setting of the event described—does not support the view that the ‘vocational’ work of the Spirit can only be experienced as one enters into a whole new realm of the Christian life through a post-conversion crisis event.³⁰

The delay between the Samaritans’ confession of faith and their reception of the Spirit is probably best understood within the context of the literary structure of Acts—which is apparently designed to reflect God’s programme of salvation-history.³¹

Many events in Acts are unrepeatable because they are unique in God’s ongoing plan from the time of His original creation to the time of His new creation. Acts describes a period of transitions such as those from the law to grace, from Israel’s history to the church’s history, from an emphasis on the kingdom of Israel to an emphasis on the body of Christ.

Furthermore, to attribute to Luke a double intent of writing history *and* theology is an unrealistic approach to narrative literature. The goal must be to determine a historian’s *primary* intent. As Fee expresses it,

it [i.e., discovering the author’s and the Holy Spirit’s intent] is of crucial importance to the hermeneutics of the historical narratives, for it is one thing for the historian to include an event because it serves the greater purpose of his work, and yet another thing for the interpreter to take that incident as having didactic value apart from the historian’s larger intent. . . . Whatever else one gleans from the story, whether it be the place of visions in Christian guidance (!) or the nature of Christian conversion, such gleanings are *incidental* to Luke’s intent.³²

By basing doctrine and Christian practice on incidental details, an interpreter commits grievous injustices against the narrative in particular and biblical doctrine in general. In so doing, he fails to allow for traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics in its recognition of history as unembellished history.

A Community-Based Interpretation Rationale for Using the Community as a Basis for Interpretation

Recently, Kenneth Archer, a professor at Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, presented another approach to Pentecostal hermeneutics.³³

³⁰ Allan Loder, “The Classical Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit-baptism: Some Exegetical Considerations,” *Διδασκαλία* 13/2 (Spring 2002): 80.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³² Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 90–91.

³³ Kenneth J. Archer, “A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community” (Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 22, 2002). The paper was a condensation of the sixth chapter of his dissertation scheduled for publication

He proposed that the community is an indispensable partner in assigning meaning to a biblical text:

The Pentecostal hermeneutic being presented embraces a dialogical interdependent relationship between Scripture, Spirit and community as a necessary process in the making of meaning. . . . This hermeneutic emphasizes the important contributions that the Pentecostal community brings to the interpretive process. . . . The primary filter for interpretation will be the Pentecostal story.³⁴

Archer continues, “The Bible, the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal community are actively engaging each other in the conversation.”³⁵

In reflecting the influence of modern linguistics upon his thinking, the Pentecostal scholar writes, “This tridactic conversational approach to ‘meaning’ is necessary because all forms of communication are underdeterminate; that is a listener or reader is needed to complete the communicative event, hence producing meaning.”³⁶ He dismisses the possibility that the individual hermeneut can arrive at a meaning through use of objective hermeneutical principles, and says that he needs the input of the community to assign meaning to a biblical text.³⁷ Archer later adds, “Pentecostals take very serious [sic] Goldingay’s warning that ‘those who pretend to be objective and critical and then find their own concerns in the texts they study need to take a dose of self-suspicion.’”³⁸ Archer continues,

The biblical passage is at the mercy of the community. However, a Pentecostal community will give the biblical passage the opportunity to interact with the readers in such a way that the passage fulfills its dialogical role in the communicative event. This is so because the Pentecostal community recognizes the Bible as the penultimate authoritative written testimony of Divine revelation—the inspired word of God. Furthermore, the community believes that the Scripture can speak clearly and creatively as word of God to the contemporary Pentecostal community’s situations and needs. Hence the Pentecostal community will read the Bible as sacred Scripture that speaks to the community’s current

in the fall of 2003 under the title *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, forthcoming) (Ibid., 1 n. 4).

³⁴ Ibid., 1–2.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ Ibid., 2; cf. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 195–240, especially 226–27, for a comparison of modern linguistics with grammatical-historical interpretation. The field of linguistics downplays precision in biblical interpretation (Ibid., 226–27).

³⁷ Archer, “A Pentecostal Hermeneutic,” 2, also 2 n. 6.

³⁸ Ibid., 3–4; cf. also Kenneth J. Archer, “Early Pentecostal Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 (2001):41, where he writes, “The Modernist attempt to to [sic] be a neutral interpreter by setting aside one’s ‘experience’ and/or presuppositions is a false illusion.”

needs thus enabling the community to live faithfully before and with the living God.³⁹

Further, he says,

Knowledge as meaningful understanding will be rooted in and related to human life because 'the only sort of (theological and theoretical) knowledge that really counts is knowledge grounded in life.' 'Meaning, therefore, is no longer seen in terms of an original "cause" or ultimate "effect" but in terms of relationship.' This meaning is arrived at through a dialectical process based upon an interdependent dialogical relationship between Scripture, Spirit and community.⁴⁰

In clarification, he states, "Meaning is negotiated through the conversation between the text, community and Spirit with the world behind the text informing not controlling the conversation."⁴¹

Evaluation of Using the Community as a Basis for Interpretation

Several brief comments will compare Archer's hermeneutic with the traditional grammatical-historical approach.

(1) Most conspicuous is this scholar's concession to reader-response hermeneutics as relates to deconstructionism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism.⁴² He indicates that the text has no meaning in and of itself, but must be assigned a meaning by the Pentecostal community. In contrast, the goal of grammatical-historical hermeneutics is to exclude preunderstanding of any contemporary person or community and let the text speak for itself.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., 3. Note Archer's reference to the Bible as "the *penultimate* authoritative written testimony of Divine revelation." If the Bible is the next to the last authority, is the community the ultimate authority? Archer is unclear on this point.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴² Robert Menzies tries to distance himself from "the extreme subjectivity of some reader-oriented methodologies (such as reader-response criticism and deconstructionism)" by calling them "disturbing" (Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 65–66). Commendably, he also insists, "[T]he distinction between the meaning of the text and the numerous applications (or significances) it may have for various situations and cultures is necessary if we are to restrain ourselves from distorting the text" (Ibid., 66). Yet his wholehearted endorsement of redaction criticism and experience-based preunderstanding cited earlier in this article clearly evidences his deconstructive leanings and his willingness to let application have its part in determining textual meaning. Archer goes so far as to say that "Pentecostalism must have a post-modern accent" and that a promising Pentecostal hermeneutic "will speak with a liberating voice accented by postmodernity" (Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect" 81). Cargal is strong in his insistence that Pentecostals must adopt multiple meanings of a single text along with endorsing post-modern methods for Pentecostal hermeneutics (Timothy B. Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 (Fall 1993): 177–78).

⁴³ Note Ramm's words: "The true philological spirit, or critical spirit, or scholarly spirit, in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is *exegesis*—

(2) Reader-response hermeneutics leads inevitably to allowing a single passage of Scripture to have multiple meanings. If the Pentecostal community controls the meaning in its community, and so does the Reformed community in its community and the dispensational community in its community and so on, that means a given passage has as many meanings as there are communities. That characteristic of community-facilitated hermeneutics directly violates the grammatical-historical principle of a single meaning for each passage of Scripture.⁴⁴

(3) Community-based interpretation stands against another grammatical-historical principle, that of keeping application separate from interpretation. When Archer speaks of the Bible speaking to “the community’s current needs,” that is not interpretation; it is application. In a traditional approach to hermeneutics, the two must be kept separate. Failure to do so will distort the meaning of the passage in its original setting.⁴⁵ To arrive at the one correct interpretation, application cannot be allowed to control interpretation.

A Tradition-Based Interpretation Using Presuppositions as a Basis for Interpretation

Gordon D. Fee fits well into the philosophical zone created by Anthony Thiselton in his 1980 work. Thiselton endorsed Smart’s statement that “[the] claim of absolute scientific objectivity in interpreting scripture involved the interpreter in an illusion about himself that inhibits objectivity.”⁴⁶ Thiselton then concluded, “The biblical scholar therefore needs the help of someone who has made it his life’s work to wrestle with the problem of how these two sides [i.e., the ideal of a “pure” description of the

to lead meaning out of the text and shuns *eisogesis*—bringing a meaning to the text . . .” (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook on Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970], 115). See also those of Terry: “The systematic expounder of Scripture doctrine . . . must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach” (Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* [1885, reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947], 583). For further discussion of preunderstanding, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 41–62.

⁴⁴ Terry speaks of single meaning this way: “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture” (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 205). Ramm expresses it thus: “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one, application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study” (Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 113). Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy concurred: “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application” (Article VII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” adopted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago, November 10–13, 1982). For further discussion of this principle, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 141–64.

⁴⁵ For more detailed information on this point, see Brian A. Shealy, “Redrawing the Line between Hermeneutics and Application,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 165–94.

⁴⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 27.

text's meaning and the inability of the interpreter to escape the confines of his finite or 'historic' existence] of the situation can be held together, without either being lost to view."⁴⁷ By insisting on an interpreter's inability to approach a text objectively, Thiselton represents an agnostic skepticism toward obtaining propositional truth from Scripture.

Fee follows in this train. He writes,

In a now famous essay, Rudolf Bultmann once asked whether it was possible to do presuppositionless exegesis, in answer to which he gave a resounding No. We bring too much of ourselves—our culture and our traditions—to make such exegesis possible. Although he was contending in particular against sterile historical positivism, his essay continues to be a byword in biblical studies.⁴⁸

Fee acknowledges his own Pentecostal upbringing and his current differences with Pentecostals in accepting the baptism of the Spirit as separate from and subsequent to conversion,⁴⁹ but clings to the use of the gifts of faith, healings, miracles, wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues in the contemporary church.⁵⁰ Because of the combination of his differences from traditional Pentecostalism and his Pentecostal lineage, it is difficult to know whether to classify him as a Pentecostal, a charismatic, or a Third-Wave noncessationist.

One of Fee's peculiarities lies in the area of definitions. The following reflects his unusual definition of hermeneutics:

Exegesis is in fact concerned with what the text meant in its historical context. *Hermeneutics* has to do with the science of interpretation in all its ramifications. But since the term has to do especially with what a text means (which includes what is meant), I will use the term to refer to what the biblical text means for us in terms of our understanding and obedience.⁵¹

Earlier he commented, "Because I am an exegete committed to the canon of Scripture as God's word, I can neither reject exegesis (what it meant then) nor neglect hermeneutics (what does it say today)."⁵² In so defining hermeneutics, he is equating

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 70.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 105–19.

⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 165, 168.

⁵¹ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 4 n. 5.

⁵² Ibid., 4.

hermeneutics with a contemporary application of the text rather than using it in its traditional sense of the rules governing exegesis or interpretation.⁵³

By this novel definition of hermeneutics, this author has put present-day application into the driver's seat in obtaining the meaning of a biblical text.⁵⁴ In essence, that puts the focus on the interpreter's subjective opinion of the meaning as viewed through the filter of his own personal circumstances. Such a step distances him from the meaning the original author intended for his immediate readers to comprehend.

That definition also goes hand-in-hand with the prominence that Fee gives to presuppositions in his interpretation of the text. After citing several examples of interpretations with which he disagrees, Fee says,

Let me finally conclude this critique of others, with the candid admission that I do not with all of these illustrations suggest that I come to the text with a clean slate. . . . But I am also illustrating in part how much easier it is to see this problem in others than in oneself. And that is precisely the great hermeneutical danger—that the biases of others are so clear!⁵⁵

But after soundly rebuffing others for allowing their presuppositions to rule, he adds,

Having set the reader up with all of this, let me now seem to reverse myself and say that coming to the text with our tradition(s) in hand is not in itself a bad thing. Indeed, it is impossible to do otherwise. But what I want to stress here is that in itself this is neither good nor bad, and that in fact, it may often serve to the good.⁵⁶

He then describes how traditions can be beneficial. Citing 2 Peter 1:20—"no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation" (NRSV)"—he con-

⁵³ For further discussion of the meanings of exegesis and hermeneutics, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 20–27. Some sources refer to application as significance and interpretation as meaning (cf. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1967], 8).

⁵⁴ Pinnock is in essential agreement with Fee in equating application with interpretation: "The Spirit is active in the life of the whole church to interpret the biblical message in languages of today. He actualizes the word of God by helping us to restate the message in contemporary terminology and apply it to fresh situations" (Clark H. Pinnock, "The Word of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 [April 1993]:16). He justifies such applications in "fresh situations" by comparing use made of the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 by Isaiah 51:1–3 and Ezekiel 33:23–29. "The original text was a dynamic one and capable of being used in new ways by subsequent interpreters in the Spirit," he writes (*Ibid.*, 13). Similarly, he notes, "Peter changes the direction of Amos 9.11–12 . . . in a speech recorded in Acts 15" (*Ibid.*). Reasoning in this manner, he concludes, "God's revelation is not a closed conceptual system. It is a word of life which becomes ever new" (*Ibid.*, 19). Pinnock fails, however, to distinguish between writers of inspired Scripture and present-day interpreters. The former received direct inspiration from God; the latter have no such direct revelation (see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 252–53).

⁵⁵ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 77–78.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

cludes, “Exegesis and hermeneutics, even when worked on or worked out in the privacy of one’s own study, must finally be the product of the Christian community at large.”⁵⁷

At this point, Fee appears to agree with Kenneth Archer regarding the involvement of the community in the interpretive process, but he guards himself against placing as much weight on the community by proposing several levels of tradition: (1) a level that has been a consensus of the church for centuries such as the Trinity and the person of Christ; (2) a level that has not been the focus of much theological reflection such as the traditional role of male leadership; (3) a level of interpretation dealing with single verses where no reflective consensus exists; (4) the level related to our personal traditions; and (5) the level related to the personal traditions of others.⁵⁸ He implies that level one can be a good thing, but that levels two through five are less beneficial.

If level one is the only helpful tradition—and sometimes there may be doubt about that—allowing tradition to govern interpretation cannot but harm rather than help interpret the Bible. By starting the interpretive process with one’s biases about what meaning a passage will yield, one violates the principles of single meaning and of not allowing application to control interpretation.

Fee criticizes Pentecostals for experience-based hermeneutics: “What I hope to show in the rest of this essay is that the Pentecostals are generally right on target biblically as to their *experience* of the Spirit. Their difficulties arose from the attempt to defend it biblically at the wrong point.”⁵⁹ Yet by his admission that preunderstanding has helped forge his own hermeneutics on the issue, he too is guilty of the very same error as they, that of not approaching the text “with a clean slate.” One other feature of Fee’s hermeneutical approach is worth mentioning.

His view of the gift of tongues is that it was not an actual earthly language.⁶⁰ Also, he is not sure whether “the speaking in tongues in contemporary Pentecostal and charismatic communities is the same in kind as that in the Pauline churches.”⁶¹ He says the issue is “probably irrelevant.”⁶² All that matters is that “[a]s an *experienced* phenomenon, it is analogous to theirs” and that “for its practitioners [it] has the value similar to that described by Paul.”⁶³ In other words, it is dynamically or functionally equivalent, but not necessarily formally equivalent.

In a similar vein, Fee thinks that the supernatural *charismata* named in 1 Cor 12:8–10 defy rational explanation. To try to explain them rationally, he says, is to

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 80–82.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁰ Fee, *Paul, the Spirit*, 169.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

impose standards of today's Western culture on activities of the Holy Spirit. In speaking against assigning the meaning "mature" τὸ τέλειον (*to teleion*) in 1 Corinthians 13:10,⁶⁴ he writes,

It is perhaps an indictment of Western Christianity that we should consider 'mature' our rather totally cerebral and domesticated—but bland—brand of faith, with the concomitant absence of the Spirit in terms of his supernatural gifts! The Spirit, not Western rationalism, marks the turning of the ages, after all; and to deny the Spirit's manifestations is to deny our present existence to be eschatological, as belonging to the beginning of the time of the End.⁶⁵

The outlook thus represented may explain why Fee has no explanation for speaking in tongues and why contemporary tongues need not match the biblical pattern. Both were and are a mysterious emotional experience that have no rational explanation. According to Fee, our Western culture misleads us into thinking that such an explanation should exist, but that is not necessarily true.

Pinnock carries irrationality a bit further than Fee when speaking of the perfections of God.

The problem of classical theism lies in the fact that it posits an ideal of the divine infinite perfection, which is often (not always) at odds with what the Bible says about God. It adopts a standard of what God must be like derived from human reason and used [*sic*, uses] it to interpret the Bible. Thus, for example, if God must (by that standard) be immutable, he cannot have changed, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God (by that standard) is all-powerful, he cannot be vulnerable or take risks, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God (by that standard) is timeless, he cannot have acted in time, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God is (by that standard) impassible, he cannot suffer, whatever the Bible says. Or, if God is

⁶⁴ In this issue of *The Master's Seminary Journal*, see Professor McDougall's presentation of the overwhelming exegetical evidence for assigning the meaning "mature" in 1 Corinthians 13:10; see also Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: A Verse-by-Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12–14*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 123–32.

⁶⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1987), 644–45 n. 23. Pinnock concurs with Fee in contrasting a rational explanation of Scripture with the Spirit's illumination of the text: "[T]here is the strong influence of rationalism in Western culture which fosters a neglect of the Spirit. There is a mystery when it comes to the Spirit which rationalism does not favour. It does not feel comfortable talking about God's invisible wind. It prefers to draw up rules for interpretation which will deliver the meaning of any text by human effort. It does not want to drag mysticism into hermeneutics. Therefore, the only thing we leave for the Spirit to do in interpretation is to rubber-stamp what our scholarly exegesis concludes. This is an obstruction to effective biblical interpretation which grieves the Spirit of God" (Clark H. Pinnock, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," 8). Archer makes the same point: "This concern [i.e., that focus upon what the original inspired author meant and/or intended first readers to understand is inadequate as a Pentecostal hermeneutic] has led some scholars to articulate a hermeneutic that is more representative of the early tradition and ethos of Pentecostalism. These scholars desire to move away from a hermeneutical system that is heavily slanted toward rationalism which tends to downplay experience and/or the role of the Holy Spirit" (Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect" 75).

(by that standard) omniscient, he cannot be surprised, whatever the Bible says. In effect, non-Christian philosophy trumps what the Bible may say; and this, ironically, what we usually call liberal theology.⁶⁶

Interestingly, Pinnock credits the Bible with speaking of “an ideal of the divine infinite perfection” sometimes, but not always. He blames non-Christian philosophy for attributing such to God throughout the pages of Scripture. Is that the fault of non-Christian philosophy or of rational thinking? According to Pinnock, the mystery is so great that no one can ever know who God is. Sometimes He is who rational thinking says He is, but at other times He fits into an irrational pattern. If that is true, what good is the Bible in helping people to know God?

Evaluation of Tradition-Based Interpretation

Three observations regarding tradition-based interpretation are appropriate.

(1) Fee's agreement with Bultmann regarding the impossibility of presuppositionless exegesis repeats the same error as many evangelicals of recent years have committed. That position focuses its attention on the inability of humans to receive communication and turns aside from emphasizing God's ability to communicate successfully.⁶⁷ Human inability to attain absolute objectivity is no excuse for not striving to achieve the goal of objectivity. The Lord Jesus left as a goal that His followers love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Failure to attain that absolute standard is inescapable, but is no excuse for not trying. Similarly, the interpreter's goal should ever be objectivity in letting the biblical text speak for itself. Settling for his own biases as a starting point in studying Scripture has huge ramifications in distorting the meaning that God put there. Expecting the Bible to correct those biases is quite different from starting with a clean slate. If an interpreter approaches a text with noncessationist expectations, the chances are very great that he will arrive at noncessationist conclusions regarding the meaning.⁶⁸ Fee criticizes other Pentecostals for their experienced-based hermeneutics, yet admits that preunderstanding has helped forge his own position on the noncessationist issue.

(2) Fee's equation of hermeneutics with contemporary applications of the text reflects his inclination to allow current significances of a passage to have their part in interpretation. He cites 2 Peter 1:20 as support for allowing the Christian community at large to determine meaning—in itself a highly suspect interpretation of Peter's words—demonstrating his opinion that the text has no meaning all its own, but depends on contemporary interpreters to assign a meaning. He proposes that tradition of a certain type can be a good thing for interpretation and assigns five levels of tradition, one of which is good, others bad. He fails to answer the question of how one

⁶⁶ Pinnock, “Divine Relationality,” 18.

⁶⁷ Cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 49–57, for further discussion of this point.

⁶⁸ The only bias that is inevitable relates to biblical inspiration. An interpreter must approach the text with either a favorable or an unfavorable disposition toward biblical inerrancy. Neutrality on that issue is impossible.

distinguishes where one level ends and another begins. He honors the church's longstanding tradition regarding the Trinity and the person of Christ by putting it at level one, but disparages the church's longstanding tradition regarding male leadership in the church by putting it at level two.⁶⁹ Subjectivism prevails in his placement of what belongs in each category.

(3) Fee's characterization of Western Christianity as a "cerebral and domesticated—but bland—brand of faith" reflects a basic inconsistency. Here is an authority in Western Christianity writing about and using hermeneutical principles based on logic and reasoning, but issuing a pronouncement that no rationality exists in the biblical text. Western culture in its rational approach to Scripture is dead wrong; the interpreter must throw reason out the window and proceed purely on the basis of emotion. That position flies in the face of God's rationality and His ability to communicate rational truth. It denies fallen man's opportunity to receive illumination by the Holy Spirit in receiving God's reasoned revelation.⁷⁰ The ability to think logically in Western culture derives from the impact of Christianity and the Bible—a very rational book—upon that culture. In instances where logical reasoning does not prevail, the Bible has not yet had its full effect.

The position of Max Turner—another noncessationist—regarding rationality closely resembles that of Fee. Turner criticizes B. B. Warfield's stand for cessationism as being based on Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, which he labels as a product of the Enlightenment because it shifted the focus of knowledge away from revealed truth to the knowing subject, the inquiring critical mind.⁷¹ According to Turner, Scottish Common Sense Philosophy contended that "God had set in the intellectual constitution of humankind a set of self-evident principles and logical abilities that enabled objective knowledge and true understanding of the real world."⁷²

⁶⁹ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 81.

⁷⁰ Cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 50–53. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (*Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979], 75–76) observes the contemporary tendency to set in contrast the cognitive and preconceptual sides of man as a reaction against a secularized use of reason. Yet he concludes that as bad as the dehumanizing use of reason is, it does not warrant an overreaction against reason in biblical interpretation. He acknowledges that characteristics of an infinite God are beyond human logic, but an allegedly deeper aspect of personality than the mind (with its language capacities) is not where man copes with them. He observes, "Man is more than his mind; he is not an intellectualistic machine. But this 'more' is not inevitably in tension with the mind, nor does language necessarily distort or obscure the wholeness of experience" (76). Gaffin's answer to the proposal that the gift of tongues consisted of some type of ecstatic utterances rather than foreign languages closely parallels an effective response to the proposal that logical consistency should not be required in interpreting the Bible.

⁷¹ Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament Church and Today*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 287.

⁷² Ibid. Ellington joins Turner and Fee in objecting to a rationalistic approach to knowing God and explaining His Word: "The rationalist paradigm in which we have been so successfully indoctrinated has made it all but impossible for us to avoid 'demythologizing' and rejecting everything which does not fit the structure of reality in which we are immersed. We are robbed of our ability to imagine any reality outside the physical, verifiable, predictable, domesticable world which we have created for ourselves.

... Because most formal doctrine is expressed through and bound up in a rationalist paradigm, the community of faith in a dynamic, experiential relationship with God, and not the academic community, is the proper setting for the discovery and exploration of a Pentecostal understanding of biblical authority"

Warfield reasoned that “[t]he divine origin and nature of the miracles of Christ and the apostles are transparent to ‘common sense’ by their great quantity and utter perfection” in contrast to occasional miracles that may have occurred at other times.⁷³

In attributing Warfield’s position to Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Enlightenment, however, Turner forfeits his own position, because he admits that “the prototypical gifts gradually became marginalized” in the *subapostolic era*.⁷⁴ In essence, the early church fathers, who could not have been affected by Scottish Common Sense Realism and the Enlightenment, agreed with Warfield’s cessationist position.⁷⁵ Turner’s proposal that cessationists read modern rationalism back into the NT is without merit.

A Mediating-Based Interpretation

The principal theme of this article has been preunderstanding and how incorporating that in the first step of exegesis skews other grammatical-historical principles. Preunderstandings vary from interpreter to interpreter, ranging from narrative-based interpretation to community-based interpretation to tradition-based interpretation to any one of many other possible beginning points for studying a text. One preunderstanding that appears to characterize most if not all noncessationist writers is what may be called a mediating-based interpretation. Such an approach is searching for common ground acceptable to both cessationists and noncessationists.

Pentecostalist Turner furnishes an example of this when he writes,

[A]s a member of the Evangelical Alliance’s Committee on Unity and Truth . . ., I would wish to support any attempt to find unity between the Pentecostal/Charismatic and the more traditional forms of Evangelicalism. In that respect, Part 2 of this work is intended to be bridge-building, not polemical; many of its assertions should be heard as tentative questions rather than as dogmatic statements.⁷⁶

In the same vein, Pentecostalist Robert Menzies speaks:

My vision of the future . . . [sees] the assimilation of the modern Pentecostal movement into the broader Evangelical world as an exciting and positive event.

(Ellington, *Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture* 26, 29). It is true that we as finite beings cannot know everything about God and understand every facet of His Word from a rationalistic standpoint, but when His Word does fall within our skills for comprehension, it behooves us to apply the rational abilities He has given us. The nature and use of spiritual gifts as described in the NT are areas we can understand by using our reasoning capacities.

⁷³ Ibid., 288.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 301.

⁷⁵ Regarding the alleged radical break between ancient Christianity and modern evangelicalism’s insistence on a rational approach to biblical interpretation, cf. F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 200–02.

⁷⁶ Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, x–xi.

. . . Twenty years ago, who would have thought that today we would find such openness concerning gifts of the Spirit? Looking forward, I see the potential for additional theological contributions to the larger body. . . [T]he hermeneutical climate within Evangelicalism is more conducive now than ever before to our theological contributions.⁷⁷

Wayne Grudem, who is not a lifelong Pentecostal, reflects the same preunderstanding as he has approached the biblical text. In discussing the NT gift of prophecy, after alluding to the charismatic and noncharismatic positions, he writes, “Can a fresh examination of the New Testament give us a resolution of these views? Does the text of Scripture itself indicate a ‘middle ground’ or a ‘third position’ which preserves what is really important to both sides and yet is faithful to the teaching of the New Testament? I think the answer to these questions is yes.”⁷⁸ At another point he adds, “I wonder if there may be room for more *joint* theological reflection on this area.”⁷⁹ Grudem sought to present a concept of prophecy that is not so restrictive (i.e., authoritative) as to exclude charismatically inclined people or so loose (i.e., nonrevelatory) as to repel the noncharismatic. His presupposition that a mediating position exists and the presupposition’s consequences for other hermeneutical principles warrant further investigation.

Grudem’s presupposition forces him into some strange hermeneutical problems. For example, to curry favor with noncharismatics and cessationists, he acknowledges that the gift of apostleship ceased at the end of the apostolic era, at about the end of the first century A.D.⁸⁰ But to curry favor with the charismatics and noncessationists, he must hypothesize two gifts of prophecy—an apostolic-prophetic gift and a local-church prophetic gift—with the local-church prophetic gift continuing until Christ’s second coming.⁸¹ His case leans heavily on his questionable treatment of “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (τῶ θεμελίῳ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν, *tō themeliō tōn apostolōn kai prophētōn*) in Ephesians 2:20. One of his main arguments for distinguishing apostle-prophets from local-church prophets is a grammatical one in this passage, the single article governing two nouns connected by *kai* (“and”).⁸² He commits two hermeneutical errors in interpreting Paul’s language here. One is a grammatical error. The construction article-noun-*kai*-noun does not combine the two nouns into a single entity unless both nouns are singular, which they are not in Ephesians

⁷⁷ Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 67.

⁷⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 249 [emphasis added]. In an earlier work he expressed his goal differently: “But even though I do not agree fully with either group, I hope that in my somewhat new definition of the nature of Christian prophecy both pro-charismatics and anti-charismatics may be able to find a ‘middle ground’ with a considerable potential for reconciling their current differences” (*The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* [Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982], xv).

⁸⁰ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament* 275–76; for other hermeneutical consequences, see Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, 133–42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 63–64, 160, 251–52, 331 n. 143.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 49–51.

2:20.⁸³ To disregard a basic grammatical principle on an important point like this is a serious breach of grammatical-historical hermeneutics.

A second area where Grudem has skewed traditional hermeneutical principles in deference to his preunderstanding of what he presumes Ephesians 2:20 should teach is his disregard for the double occurrence of a term in a given context. Evidence contradicting his treatment of the verse goes unnoticed when he fails to acknowledge the clear distinguishing of prophets from apostles in Ephesians 4:11. Grudem's later rebuttal of the evidence in Ephesians 4:11 acknowledges that prophets are separate from apostles, but he says these prophets were different from the ones in 2:20.⁸⁴ That conclusion is arbitrary and exegetically invalid, for nothing in the intervening verses reflects a shift in meaning to a second kind of prophets.⁸⁵ The revelatory foundation of the church was laid by two groups, not one—apostles *and* prophets, not apostle-prophets.⁸⁶ If the revelatory gift of apostleship ceased around A.D. 100, so did the revelatory gift of prophecy.

In regard to this second area of skewing, Grudem has violated another principle, that of *usus loquendi* or current usage of a word as employed by a particular writer. As Terry describes the principle, "It often happens . . . that a writer uses a common word in some special and peculiar sense, and then his own definitions must be taken, or the context and scope must be consulted, in order to determine the precise meaning intended."⁸⁷ Since Paul clearly distinguishes prophets from apostles in Ephesians 4:11, it is irresponsible for an interpreter to identify prophets with apostles in Ephesians 2:20.

That is Grudem's way of erecting a concept of prophecy that is not so restrictive (i.e., authoritative) as to exclude charismatically inclined people or so loose (i.e., non-revelatory) as to repel the noncharismatic, but his hermeneutics in so doing clearly violate grammatical-historical standards. His violation is the product of a preunderstanding of what he thinks Scripture should teach, a preunderstanding that reads back into Scripture a contemporary application he wants to make. As noted above, allowing application to influence interpretation crosses over the line between interpretation and application.

⁸³ For a refutation of Grudem's interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 from a grammatical perspective, see F. David Farnell's excellent discussion in "Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets?," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 2 (Fall 1991):162–69, and that in Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 76–79. As his dissertation supervisor on this subject, Grudem had the advantage of expert guidance by a widely recognized grammatical authority, C. F. D. Moule (referred to in *Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*, xvi), but apparently he chose to disregard Moule's counsel on this grammatical point (cf. C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1960], 110).

⁸⁴ *Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 59.

⁸⁵ Cf. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy*, 2nd ed. (Memphis, Tenn.: Footstool, 1989), 30–31.

⁸⁶ John R. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 107; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "A Cessationist View," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 43–44; Robert L. Saucy, "Open But Cautious," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, 111–12.

⁸⁷ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 181.

Ephesians 2:20 has been the “thorn in the flesh” for all noncessationists. No one has successfully countered the verse’s support for cessationism. Since the gift of prophecy is paired with the gift of apostleship as the foundation for the “holy temple”— the church— and since apostleship is a temporary gift, prophecy is obviously a temporary revelatory gift just like apostleship. Noncessationist Jon Ruthven acknowledges that “Pentecostal or charismatic scholars generally have failed to treat this cessationist argument [i.e., the support for cessationism from Eph. 2:20] to any significant or adequate degree.”⁸⁸ He agrees with cessationists that Grudem’s explanation is unconvincing,⁸⁹ and offers his own rebuttal to the verse’s proof of cessationism. He rejects the idea that apostles and prophets were repositories for Scriptural revelation⁹⁰ and contends that apostleship, along with prophecy, continues functioning until the second coming of Christ.⁹¹ Ruthven’s case falters, however, in light of the clearly delineated NT teaching about apostolic authority in the NT and early church and how that authority played a part in delivering and preserving the body of truth that is contained in the NT books.⁹²

Practical Results of Noncessationism

Without question, noncessationism’s influence among evangelicals is spreading rapidly. Literature supporting the position is multiplying almost faster than can be imagined.⁹³ A noncessationist estimate places the number of Pentecostals and charismatics combined as second only to Roman Catholicism throughout the world.⁹⁴ That may be an exaggeration, but major Christian publishers’ attention to noncessationists and their scholars who have veered toward the new evangelical hermeneutics have strongly influenced the evangelical church, resulting in the probability that the majority of evangelicals are in the “Open But Cautious” category regarding the issue of

⁸⁸ John Ruthven, “The ‘Foundational Gifts’ of Ephesians 2:30,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10/2 (2002):30. Ruthven is Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at Regent University School of Divinity, Virginia Beach, Va.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 31–33.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 41–43. Deere joins Ruthven in holding to the possibility that apostles continue to be appointed throughout the church age (Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 248), but he hedges a bit in offering another suggestion, i.e., that apostleship was not a spiritual gift (*Ibid.*, 242). Neither proposal fulfils the biblical criteria of apostleship.

⁹² Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, 58–59, 174–76.

⁹³ To illustrate, the “Introduction” to a recent work by Craig S. Keener (*Gift and Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001]) includes the following: “I have been miraculously healed, experienced supernatural gifts such as prophecy, followed by the Spirit’s leading in witnessing, and had deep experiences in the Spirit during prayer (including, regularly, prayer in tongues). I consider such experiences (and others mentioned later in the book) an advantage in writing a book on the Holy Spirit that includes controversial questions. . . . I could not deny that such works happen today any more than I could deny the existence of someone I know personally, because I have witnessed their reality firsthand.” Without examining Keener’s work further, it is not difficult to predict where that preunderstanding leads him in his handling Scripture, regardless of the hermeneutical distortions he must resort to.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

cessationism.⁹⁵ This is the group that is unconvinced by the cessationist arguments, but are also cautious about the emphasis given to spiritual gifts by noncessationists.

I will not venture to estimate the size of the “Open But Cautious” category as have the noncessationist writers, but I do wish to issue a warning about the dangers of a “charismatic sympathy” position that remains open to the possibility of noncessationism. All it takes for a local church or a Christian college or seminary to become totally noncessationist is for the leadership to become “charismatic sympathizers.” Recent evangelical history has taught that. An institution does not have to be pro-noncessationist to move in that direction. All it has to do is to have “Open But Cautious” leaders, members, or students, and over time, noncessationism will leave its mark on that body.

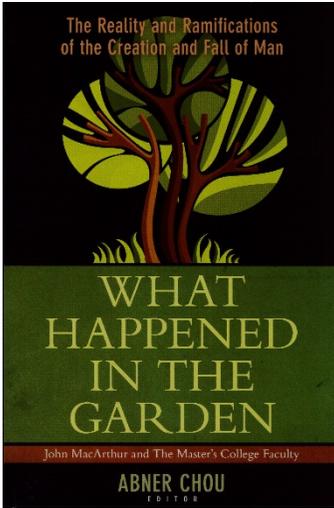
A Last Word

This article has been a study of the growing sophistication of noncessationist hermeneutics in recent years. The noncessationist movement has changed from a simplistic approach of basing doctrine on experience to an appropriation of new hermeneutical principles that now characterize evangelical hermeneutics in general, principles ruled by preunderstanding that, in the examples cited, leads to subjectivism, dehistoricizing tendencies, using narrative literature as a basis for theology, meanings assigned by readers, multiple meanings for a single passage, application that controls interpretation, and an intolerance for Spirit-led common sense. At the beginning of a new century cessationists face a different challenge, the challenge of responding to noncessationism's principles of biblical interpretation.

Cessationists must meet the challenge by returning to traditional grammatical-historical rules and elaborating on those principles in areas where they have become obscured by advocates of a strong subjective element in understanding the Bible. Let the Bible speak for itself without forcing it into patterns molded by human opinions. Approach the text with a “clean slate,” a *tabula rasa*,⁹⁶ and do away with preunderstanding as a starting point in exegesis. That is the only way to counter the noncessationist error and deliver evangelicalism from its impending hermeneutical emergency.

⁹⁵ This is the opinion of Grudem (*Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* 12–13) and Keener (*Ibid.*, 91).

⁹⁶ Cf. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977), 105.



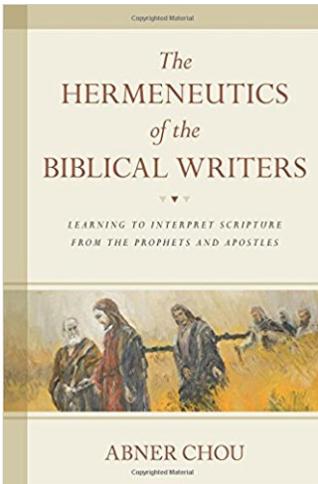
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IMMINENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, ESPECIALLY IN PAUL’S THESSALONIAN EPISTLES

Robert L. Thomas
(Originally published Fall 2002)

Fathers in the ancient church dealt frequently with the doctrine of imminence, sometimes viewing God’s future wrath against rebels as imminent and sometimes viewing the future coming of Christ as imminent. The NT furnishes good reason for the fathers to view both aspects of the future as imminent, beginning with the teachings of Christ, who laid the foundation for the teaching of imminency though His use of parabolic expressions of a master standing at the door and knocking and of an unexpected coming of a thief and His use of the futuristic tense of erchōmai. In company with other NT writers, Paul emphasized the imminence of both future wrath and the return of Christ in His two epistles to the Thessalonians. He did this in several parts of the epistles—in discussing the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5, in describing the “catching away” in 1 Thessalonians 4, in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 and 2:16, and in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 and 2:1–3. A study of the two epistles and a survey the rest of the NT indicates that the church fathers were right: the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord could come at any moment.

* * * * *

The testimony of the ancient fathers is mixed, sometimes speaking of the imminence of Christ’s return and other times of the imminence of the future time of wrath. Clement speaks of the former as imminent:

Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, “Speedily will He come, and will not tarry;” and, “The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.”¹

Ignatius speaks of the latter as imminent:

¹ *The First Epistle of Clement*, 23.

The last times are come upon us. Let us therefore be of a reverent spirit, and fear the long-suffering of God, that it tend not to our condemnation. For let us either stand in awe of the wrath to come, or show regard for the grace which is at present displayed—one of two things.²

Irenaeus speaks of both as imminent:

And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, “There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.”³

Why this apparent ambivalence among early Christian leaders who were following the teachings of the same NT as present-day Bible students? The following discussion proposes that there is good reason for their teachings that both the return of Christ for His church and the return of Christ to inflict wrath and tribulation on the world are imminent.

An earlier article on the book of Revelation substantiates this dual imminence.⁴ The present essay will focus attention on Paul’s two epistles to the Thessalonian church, but it first must probe the question of who originated the NT teaching on imminence. Imminence of these two future happenings interweaves itself into NT teaching from beginning to end, raising the strong probability that the origin of the teaching was none other than Jesus Himself. Thus, the first area to explore briefly will be some of Jesus’ teachings on the subject. Then the study can concentrate its attention on Paul’s Thessalonian epistles.

Jesus’ Emphasis on Imminence: The Olivet Discourse and Earlier

In Luke 12:35–48, as part of His Later Judean ministry just over three months before delivering His Olivet Discourse, Jesus instructed His disciples about the need of being ready for His return:

Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning. And be like men awaiting their master when he departs from the wedding feast, that when he comes and knocks, they may immediately open for him. . . . And know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. And you too, be prepared, because at the hour when you do not expect, the Son of Man is coming. . . . Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom the lord will appoint over his service, for a measuring of rations in season. Blessed is that slave whom, when he comes, his master will find doing thus. I say truly to you that he will appoint him over all his possessions.

² Ignatius *Ephesians* 11, shorter version.

³ Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 5.29.1.

⁴ Robert L. Thomas, “The ‘Comings’ of Christ in Revelation 2–3,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 7/2 (Fall 1996): 153–81.

But if that slave says in his heart, "My Lord delays to come," and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the Lord of that slave will come in a day when he does not expect and in an hour which he does not know and cut him in pieces and assign him a place with unbelievers.⁵

These two parables contain two pictorial expressions that became a vital part of Christian thinking throughout the first-century church.⁶ The first is that of the master standing at the door and knocking (Luke 12:36), and the second is that of the unexpected coming of a thief (Luke 12:39). The design of both figures is to teach the imminence of Christ's return. In both parables of Luke 12:35–48, the unexpected coming brings blessing to the followers who are prepared, but in the latter parable that coming brings punishment to those who are unprepared.

Jesus also laid groundwork for His Olivet Discourse less than three months before that sermon when He used the coming of the flood in Noah's day and the destruction of Sodom in Lot's day as examples of His imminent return (Luke 17:22–37). This lesson came during the period of His ministry in and around Perea.

Then on Tuesday of His last week on earth, Jesus taught similar lessons regarding His return. The signs given in Matthew 24:4–28 are within Daniel's seventieth week and indicate the nearness of Jesus' return to earth as described in Matthew 24:29–31.⁷ These signals of nearness differ from the parables of Luke 12:35–48, which contained no signs of nearness. If signs must occur before His coming, His coming is not imminent. Neither are there signs given in Luke 17:26–37, where Jesus with several similar comparisons predicted the imminent coming of the kingdom of God.

But in Matthew 24:36 Jesus turns the page to speak of the absence of any sign that might signal the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week.⁸ His words were, "But

⁵ Translations in this essay are those of the author.

⁶ Marshall notes the recurrence of the picture of the master standing outside the door and knocking in Revelation 3:20, and the recurrence of the metaphor of the thief in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15 (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 536, 538; with regard to the thief metaphor, cf. also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Moisés Silva. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 1171, and Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 of NAC [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 360).

⁷ Davies and Allison correctly see "all these things" in vv. 33 and 34 as embracing "all the signs and events leading up to the parousia" (W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997], 366, cf. also 367). Hagner agrees that the expression covers "everything spoken of in vv. 4–28" (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B of Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker [Dallas: Word, 1995], 715). Cf. also D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:507.

⁸ Davies and Allison take 24:36 as the heading for the section on "eschatological vigilance" (24:36–25:30) rather than linking it with material that has gone before in the Discourse, and see the entire section as teaching that "one must be ever prepared for what may come at any time" (*Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 374, cf. also 374 n. 1). The *ὅτι* that begins v. 36 must be transitional, because the thirty-sixth verse changes from the discussion of signs preceding the coming to emphasize that no signs will precede the *parousia*. *Πεὶ δὲ ὅτι* (*Peri de*, 24:36) is a frequent NT device for introducing a change from one phase of a

concerning that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.” His use of “day and hour” encompass a broader span than just a 24-hour day or a 60-minute hour.⁹ As is true throughout Matthew (cf. Matt. 7:22; 10:19; 24:42, 44, 50; 25:13; 26:45), the two time-designations cover a broad period of time. Jesus is saying that no one has the faintest idea about when—in the broadest sense of the term “when”—the Son of Man will return. Here He indicates the complete unexpectedness of what will overtake the world at the time of His second advent.¹⁰ He changes the subject from the signs that indicate the nearness of His coming to establish the kingdom in 24:32–35 to speak of events which will have no signals to indicate that the advent is “at the door.”¹¹ In other words, 24:36 speaks of a different arrival from the arrival signaled by “all these things,” twice referred to in connection with the parable of the fig tree in 24:32–34.¹² After 24:36 Jesus looks at the events of Daniel’s seventieth week as a whole and how the beginning of that week will catch everyone by surprise, with no indication that it is “at the door.”¹³ Jesus illustrated the complete unexpectedness of the series of events of that week by noting the parallel of His coming to inflict wrath on the world with the way God caught the world by surprise with the flood in Noah’s day (24:37–39). The victims did not know about it until the flood happened. That will be the case when the Son of Man returns. The world will not know until the period is under way. They will have no warnings such as those alluded to in the parable of the fig tree.

subject to another phase of the same subject or from one subject to another subject (cf. Matt. 22:31; Mark 12:26; 13:32; Acts 21:25; 1 Cor. 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12 :1; 16:1, 1 2; 1 Thess. 4 :9, 13; 5:1). The verse introduces an aspect of the coming different from the one pointed to in Matthew 24:29–31. The verb depicting the coming in 24:30 is *erchomenon*, but the noun designating the “coming” in 24:37 is *parousia*, a term that easily covers a wider span.

⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 22:365.

¹⁰ Hagner correctly understands “that day and hour” to mean that setting a time for the *parousia* is “beyond human determination altogether, and not just partially, e.g., so that, say, the month or year *could be known . . .*” (*Matthew 14–28*, 716).

¹¹ Davies and Allison illustrate the unity of the section begun at v. 36 by citing the repetition of key phrases (e.g., “you do not know” [24:42], “you do not expect” [24:44], “he does not know” [24:50], “you know neither the day nor the hour” [25:13]) and key words (e.g., “know,” “day[s],” “hour,” “come[s],” “Son of man,” “watch”) that are repeated throughout (Davies and Allison, *Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 377).

¹² As A. B. Bruce puts it, “[i]t looks like Jesus correcting Himself . . .” in v. 36 (“The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark and Luke,” *EGT*, W. Robertson Nicoll [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.], 1:296).

¹³ Davies and Allison understand “that day” in 24:36 to refer to the OT day of the Lord, spoken of in the NT as the *parousia*, and, because of a difference in perspective, explain the timing uncertainty of v. 36 not as contradicting the certainty of v. 34 but as interpreting it (Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 378; cf. also Blomberg, *Matthew* 22:365, who cites Matthew 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36 in support of this being a reference to the day of the Lord). They understand “this generation” of v. 34 to refer to Jesus’ contemporaries rather than seeing it as a qualitative expression as this writer takes it to be (cf. Robert L. Thomas, “The Place of Imminence in Recent Eschatological Systems,” in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 201–4). For further delineation of the qualitative view of “this generation,” see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 491.

He continued His emphasis on the imminence of that return by describing two workers in the field and two female grinders at the mill (24:40–41). In each case, one will be taken in judgment as were those outside of Noah's family, and the other will be left as were the members of Noah's family. The picture is that of complete surprise. No one in Noah's day had the faintest idea that a series of cataclysms was about to begin. On that basis, Jesus commanded the disciples to watch, because neither they nor anyone else knew at what period of history their Lord would come to inflict judgment on disobedient Israel (24:42).

At that point Jesus gave the men five parables to enforce His teaching of imminence. The first is in the Gospel of Mark and the last four in the Gospel of Matthew. The Markan parable tells of a man who left home for a journey and gave his slaves tasks to accomplish while he was gone. He gave special instructions to the doorkeeper—note the implication that the master would return to the door—to remain on the alert, because they had no idea when the master of the house would return (Mark 13 :33–37). This parable contains nothing to indicate the master would return within a given time-span as the parable of the fig tree would require, so the slaves were to remain on the alert into the indefinite future.

Matthew's first parable, the second in this series by the Lord, tells of the master of a house who did not know during what watch of the night the thief would come (Matt. 24:43–44). Though not stated explicitly, it is implicit that the master did not know on what given night the thief would come or whether he would come at all. As a result, the thief broke into his house because he was not watching. In light of that comparison, the Lord tells His disciples to be prepared because the Son of Man will come at an hour they do not expect. This marks the Lord's second use of the figure of the unexpected coming of a thief. The parable places no limit on the time frame during which the thief had to come, and so again the pattern of the parable of the fig tree is not applicable.

Matthew's second parable in this series describes the faithful and wise slave and the wicked slave (24:45–51). Their master will richly reward the slave whom he finds fulfilling his responsibilities when he returns, but will punish severely that wicked slave who uses the delay in his master's return to abuse the authority given to him. "The master of that slave will come on a day when he [the slave] does not expect and at an hour that he does not know" (24:50). That slave can anticipate an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The parable fixes no maximum amount of time for the master's absence as would be implied if this were speaking of the same coming as the parable of the fig tree.

The fourth parable in the series, the third in Matthew's Gospel, speaks of ten virgins, five of whom were foolish and five wise (25:1–13). When the bridegroom came unexpectedly in the middle of the night, the foolish virgins had no oil for their lamps. By the time they purchased oil, it was too late, and they found themselves locked out of the wedding feast where the wise virgins had been admitted. Neither group knew a fixed period within which the groom would return, but one group was ready, the other was not. The lesson: "Watch therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour" (25:13).

The fifth and last parable in the series comes in Matthew 25:14–30, the parable of the talents. Prior to leaving on a journey, the master gave one slave five talents, another two talents, and a third slave one talent. The one with five talents gained five

more, and the one with two gained two more. Upon the master’s return, they received his commendation with a promise of being given more responsibility. The slave with one talent buried his talent and received the master’s rebuke for not investing it to gain more. That slave’s destiny was outer darkness. The lesson of this parable is that of serving the Lord responsibly while awaiting His return. Readiness for His return also entails responsible action while He is away, not for a limited time, but for a time of unstipulated length.

In the two illustrations of Noah’s day and the sowers and grinders and in the first four parables, the incontrovertible lesson Jesus teaches is that of the imminence of His return to judge, and therefore, the need for watchfulness and readiness for that return whenever it should occur. It is no wonder that the early church and the church throughout the ages has considered events surrounding the Lord’s return as imminent. He will return to begin the series of events that will mark Daniel’s seventieth week, with no prior signals to herald His return. Since nothing remains to occur before His *parousia*, that *parousia* is imminent.

Chart 1 below summarizes the above discussion:

Chart 1—Imminence Versus Nonimminence

<p style="text-align: center;">Nonimminent</p> <p>Coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of the sky (Mt 24:29-31; Mk 13:24-27; Lk 21:25- 27) [a single judgment]</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Imminent</p> <p>Parousia of the Son of Man to impose wrath (Mt 24:37, 44) [beginning of a series of judgments]</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Signs of Nearness: “These things” and “all these things” (Mt 24:33-34; Mk 13:29-30; Lk 21:31- 32)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Signs of Nearness: “No one knows about that day and hour” (Mt 24:36, 42; 25:13; Mk 13:32)</p>
<p>“Beginning of Sorrows” Signs (Mt 24:4-14; Mk 13:5-13; Lk 21:8-19) Many coming in Christ’s name (Mt 24:5; Mk 13:6; Lk 21:8) Wars and rumors of wars (Mt 24:6; Mk 13:7; Lk 21:9) Nation against nation (Mt 24:7a; Mk 13:8a; Lk 21:10) Famines and earthquakes (Mt 24:7b; Mk 13:8b; Lk 21:11a) Persecution and martyrdom (Mt 24:9; Mk 13:9; Lk 21:12) Apostasy and dissension (Mt 24:10; Mk 13:12; Lk 21:16) False prophets (Mt 24:11) Increase of lawlessness (Mt 24:12)</p> <p>“Great Tribulation” Signs (Mt 24:15- 28; Mk 13:14-23) Abomination of desolation (Mt 24:15; Mk 13:14)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">[No signs]</p>

Flight to the mountains (Mt 24:16-18; Mk 13:14b-16) Great tribulation (Mt 24:21; Mk 13:19) False christs and false prophets (Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22)	
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The Upper Room Discourse

On the Mount of Olives the dominant theme on Tuesday of Passion Week was Jesus' return to judge the nation Israel, as He spoke to the disciples. On Thursday of that week His Discourse in the Upper Room spoke to them in an entirely different role. On Tuesday they represented national Israel. On Thursday, however, He addressed them as representatives of a new body to be formed about fifty days later, that body being the church. Here He injected His imminent return in a more subtle fashion, but He nevertheless made the point. In John 14:3 He said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, you may be also." Imminence is part of the verb form "I will come," the Greek word *ἐρχομαι* (*erchomai*). Used in 14:3 in parallel with the *εἰσπομαι*, which means "I will receive," the present tense *erchomai* is clearly a futuristic use of the present tense, a use of that tense that strongly implies imminence.¹⁴ The sense is, "I am on my way and may arrive at any moment."

This is a coming for deliverance of the faithful, however, not a coming for judgment. He will retrieve the faithful and take them back to the Father's house with Himself (John 14:2-3).¹⁵ There they will remain with Him until He returns to the earth to establish His earthly kingdom for a thousand years.

The conclusion must be therefore that Jesus was the one who initiated the teaching of the imminence of His return both to judge the world and to deliver the faithful. As we proceed, we will see how that teaching caught on with the first-century NT church. Subsequent books of the NT indicate that two figures used by Him to portray that imminence caught the attention and remained in the memories of early Christians. One figure was the surprise arrival of a thief and the other was the picture of a master standing at the door ready to enter at any moment.

Summary of Jesus' Teaching on Imminence

Jesus' emphasis on imminence carries at least four connotations for living individuals of each generation:

¹⁴ Wayne A. Brindle, "Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture," *Bib Sac* 158 (April-June 2001): 139-42.

¹⁵ Brown's words regarding John 14:2-3 are, "These verses are best understood as a reference to a *parousia* in which Jesus would return soon after his death to lead his disciples triumphantly to heaven" (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John [xiii-xxi]*, vol. 29A of AB [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970], 626). Yet Brown concludes that the verses had to be reinterpreted when the early church realized that the *parousia* had not occurred soon after the death of Jesus and when the disciples began to die.

- People cannot reckon that a certain amount of time will pass before a predicted event will occur, and therefore must be prepared at all times for that occurrence.¹⁶
- No other prophecy in the Bible remains to be fulfilled before the imminent event occurs. Therefore, if two prophesied events are imminent, neither can precede the other.
- Setting a date when an imminent event will occur is impossible. Date-setting directly contradicts the concept of imminency because it posits a certain amount of time before the event, thereby nullifying its imminence.¹⁷
- Imminence means that the date of a predicted event may not be limited to a certain period of time, such as approximately forty years between Christ's crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem or approximately seven years of Daniel's seventieth week. The time span within which an imminent event will occur is completely undefined and unlimited.

Chart 2 on page 77 summarizes Jesus' emphasis on His imminent coming both to judge the unrepentant and to deliver the faithful.

Emphasis on Imminence by NT Writers Other Than Paul

Other NT writers show the effect of Jesus' teachings on imminence. In the late forties of the first century A.D., James, in his epistle, wrote to Jewish believers in the Diaspora (i.e., the dispersion) about dual imminence. The imminence of coming judgment on oppressors of the poor (James 5:1–6) and the imminence of Christ's coming as an incentive for longsuffering of the faithful (James 5:7–11). He has Christ standing at the door, ready to enter and rectify past injustices (5:9). That was one of the figures introduced by Jesus in Luke 12:36 and in His Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:34).

In the late sixties Peter wrote to believers in what is now north-central Asia Minor about the imminent arrival of the day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10). Using a later part of that day to represent the day as a whole, he spoke of the day's coming as a thief, both to encourage mockers to repent and to help the faithful to persevere. That was the second figure used by Jesus in Luke 12:39 and on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:43).

In the last decade of the first century, John wrote to seven churches in first-century Asia to persuade the unrepentant to repent and the faithful to hold fast (Revelation 2–3).¹⁸ One of the figures he used to exhort the churches to watchfulness in light of Christ's coming was that of a thief (Rev. 3:3; 16:15; cf. Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39). Another was the figure of His standing at the door and knocking (Rev. 3:20;

¹⁶ Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 201.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Thomas, "Comings' of Christ," 153–81, for a fuller discussion of dual imminence in that portion of John's writings.

cf. Mark 13:34; Luke 12:36). See Chart 3 on page 78 for a chronological summary of these passages on imminence.

Chart 2—An Imminent Coming with Two Purposes

Coming For Judgment	Direct Statement: No one knows when	Mt 24:36	Mt 24:44	Mt 25:13	
	Parable: Master at the Door	Lk 12:36	Mk 13:34		
	Parable: House- breaking Thief	Lk 12:39	Mt 24:43		
	Other Parables	Household Slave: Lk 12:42-48	Faithful vs. Wicked Slave: Mt 24:45-51	Ten Virgins: Mt 25:1-13	Talents: Mt 25:14- 30
	Days of Noah	Lk 17:26-27	Mt 24:38-39		
	Days of Lot	Lk 17:28-29			
	Example: Two Men in One Bed	Lk 17:34			
	Example: Two Women Grinding	Lk 17:35	Mt 24:41		
	Example: Two Men in the Field	Mt 24:40			
Coming For Deliver- ance	Direct Statement: Futuristic Present Tense of <i>erchōmai</i> , “I will come,” Jn 14:2-3				

Chart 3—NT Teachers of Imminence

	Coming Wrath	Coming Deliverance
Jesus, A.D. 29-30	As a Thief, The Master at the Door: Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 12	Jn 14:2-3
James, late A.D. 40s	Jas 5:1-6	The Judge at the Door: Jas 5:7-11
Paul, A.D. 51	As a Thief: 1 Thess 5:1-11; also 2 Thess 1:7-9	1 Thess 1:10; 4:13-18; 2 Thess 1:10; 2:1-3
Peter, A.D. 67	As a Thief: 2 Pet 3:10	2 Pet 3:3-9, 11-15
John, A.D. 95	As a Thief: Rev 3:3; 16:15; also Rev 2:5, 16	The Judge at the Door: Rev 3:20; also Rev 2:25; 3:11

The task of this present essay is to examine the writings of a fourth NT writer, Paul, and to see what he taught about the imminence of Christ’s return and the day of the Lord, especially in his Thessalonian epistles.

**Paul’s Emphasis on Imminence in 1 Thessalonians:
The Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5**

Paul clearly teaches the imminence of the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3: “For you yourselves (i.e., the Thessalonian readers) know with exactness that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. When they say, ‘Peace and safety,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as birth pains to a woman with child, and they shall in no way escape.” The apostle offers further evidence of the widespread impact of Jesus’ use of the thief figure to express imminence. He reflects the negative impact of the day of the Lord in speaking of the destruction that will beset earth’s inhabitants when it arrives. By comparing the period to the birth pains of a pregnant woman, he shows his awareness that the OT and Jesus Himself used that comparison to depict the period just before Jesus’ personal reappearance on earth (Isa. 13:8; 26:17–19; 66:7ff.; Jer. 30:7–8; Mic. 4:9–10; Matt. 24:8).

Later in the same paragraph, in discussing the exemption of believers from the horrors of this period, Paul gives indication that the day is a period of wrath: “Because God has not appointed us to wrath, but to the possession of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9).¹⁹ This first phase of the day of the Lord will witness the outpouring of God’s wrath against a rebellious world. Believers will be delivered from that period.

Regarding 1 Thessalonians 5:2 Hiebert writes, “As a prophetic period, the Day of the Lord is inaugurated with the rapture of the church as described in 4:13–18, covers the time of the Great Tribulation, and involves His return to earth and the es-

¹⁹ Brindle, “Imminence of the Rapture,” 144–46.

tablissement of His messianic reign. In this passage Paul is dealing only with the judgment aspect of that day.”²⁰ As for the figure of the coming of a thief, Hiebert continues, “The comparison lies in the suddenness and unexpectedness of both events. The thief comes suddenly and at a time that cannot be predetermined; so the Day of the Lord will come suddenly when people are not expecting it.”²¹ Such is the imminence which Jesus described when He taught His disciples that no one knows the day or the hour when God will begin to vent His wrath against the world. The apostle reminds his readers of what they know with exactness: that specific information regarding the date for the beginning of the day of the Lord is unavailable to human beings. No prior signal will occur to alert people to the proximity of the day just as no warning comes before a house-breaking thief enters. Unexpectedness of the event forces people to remain in a constant state of readiness.

The Catching Away in 1 Thessalonians 4

The imminence of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 is obvious, but what is the nature of expectation related to the coming of the Lord to catch away His saints in 1 Thessalonians 4. The *Περὶ δὲ* (*peri de*, “now concerning”) that begins chapter 5 turns to a new aspect of the same subject discussed at the end of chapter 4.²² The connective phrase marks a shift in thought, but a shift that is not without a connection to the foregoing. First Thessalonians 5:1 speaks of “the times and the seasons.” What other times and seasons could these be but the ones pertaining to the catching away of those in Christ about which Paul has just written (cf. Acts 1:7).²³ Obviously, both the previous and the following contexts relate to the *parousia* (“coming”) of Christ.

The Thessalonian readers had an accurate awareness of the unexpectedness of the arrival of the day of the Lord (5:1–2), having received prior instruction from the apostle based on the teachings of Jesus, but they were ignorant of and therefore perplexed about what would happen to the dead in Christ at the time of Christ’s return. Before beginning his review of the imminence of the day of the Lord in 5:1–11, Paul has already, in 4:13–18, clarified for them that the dead in Christ will have an equal and even a prior part in the events surrounding Christ’s return. That the catching away of those in Christ is temporally connected with the day of the Lord is the natural understanding of the sequence from 1 Thessalonians 4 to 1 Thessalonians 5, a connection that receives verification in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10, as will be pointed out below in this essay.

²⁰ Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 227.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, vol. 32B of AB, eds. William Foxwell Albright, and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 288; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 177; Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:280.

²³ Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 288–89.

Is that coming for those in Christ imminent also? The answer to that question is yes and is based on several indicators. One is the writer's use of the first-person plural in 4:15, 17: "we who live and who remain until the coming of the Lord" are the ones who will be caught away. Paul uses the first-person plural, because he was personally looking for the Lord's return during his lifetime. This was not a "pious pretense perpetrated for the good of the church. He sincerely lived and labored in anticipation of the day, but he did not know when it would come."²⁴ He was setting an example of expectancy for the church of all ages.²⁵

Proper Christian anticipation includes the imminent return of Christ. His coming will be sudden and unexpected, at any moment possibility. This means that no divinely revealed prophecies remain to be fulfilled before that event. Without setting a deadline, Paul hoped that it would transpire in his own life time. Entertaining the possibility of his own death (2 Tim. 4:6–8) and not desiring to contravene Christ's teaching about delay (Matt. 24:48; 25:5; Luke 19:11–27), Paul, along with all primitive Christianity, reckoned on the prospect of remaining alive till Christ returned (Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 7:26, 29; 10:11; 15:51–52; 16:22; Phil. 4:5). A personal hope of this type characterized him throughout his days (2 Cor. 5:1–4; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:8; Tit. 2:11–13).²⁶

Had Paul thought that the beginning of the day of the Lord would precede the return of Christ for His church, he could not have expected Christ's return at any moment. He would have known that the imminent beginning of the day of the Lord had not yet occurred, and hence that the catching up of those in Christ was not an any-moment possibility. On the contrary, he knew that both happenings could occur at any moment.

Another indicator of the imminence of Christ's coming for those in Christ lies in the nature of Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. The dead in Christ will be the main participants in the first act of the Lord's return as they are resurrected before anything else happens. Then living Christians will suddenly be snatched away, presumably taking on their resurrection bodies without experiencing death. Since other evidence points to "the word of the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15) as a special revelation through which Paul learned these new details regarding the event, and since 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 calls similar information a "mystery," also language for a special revelation, Paul spoke of the same event about four years later in the Corinthian passage: "Behold, I speak a mystery to you: all of us will not sleep, but we all will be changed, in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on imperishability and this mortal must put on immortality." That additional detail reveals that the whole process will be a momentary happening,

²⁴ Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 210.

²⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (reprint of 1895 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 67.

²⁶ Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," 278.

not an extended process. Before anyone knows what is happening, it will be over. That again speaks of imminence because Paul again uses the first-person plural in Corinthians. He anticipated the possibility that the *parousia* would come during his lifetime.²⁷ Something that comes and goes that quickly is surely beyond human ability to pinpoint.

How have various systems with no room for imminence handled this biblical teaching? One approach to explaining this teaching is that of Gundry who defines imminence as follows: "By common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will *necessarily* precede the coming of Christ."²⁸ His definition would be correct if he had omitted "so far as we know" and "*necessarily*" from that sentence. The statement would then correctly read, "By common consent imminence means that no predicted event will precede the coming of Christ." Gundry's additions render his definition of imminence totally inaccurate. He continues, "The concept [of imminence] incorporates three essential elements: suddenness, unexpectedness or incalculability, and a possibility of occurrence at any moment. . . . Imminence would only raise the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism."²⁹ "Suddenness," "unexpectedness," and "incalculability" are accurate as is "a possibility of occurrence at any moment," but raising "the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism" is unfortunately distorted. If Christ's coming is only a *possibility* before the tribulation, the tribulation could begin before the rapture and the biblical teaching of an imminent coming has disappeared. If only a possibility, a person who does not prepare for Christ's return has an incentive to be prepared radically reduced or even eliminated. He still has a calculated chance of coming through unscathed after God's wrath begins. Jesus and the other NT writers offered no such prospect for the unrepentant, however.

Another attempt at explaining away imminence is that of Carson, who writes the following regarding imminence, ". . . [T]he imminent return of Christ' then means Christ may return at any time. But the evangelical writers who use the word divide on whether 'imminent' in the sense of 'at any time' should be pressed to mean 'at any second' or something looser such as 'at any period' or 'in any generation.'"³⁰ Carson's suggestion of a "looser" meaning of imminence removes the primary force of the word. Trying to understand what he and other representatives of this "not imminent but imminent" group mean by imminence or expectation is extremely difficult. It is almost like trying to adjudicate a "doublespeak" contest. Carson says, "Yet the terms 'imminent' and imminency' retain theological usefulness if they focus attention on the eager expectancy of the Lord's return characteristic of many NT passages, a return that could take place soon, i.e., within a fairly brief period of time, without specifying that the period must be one second or less."³¹ Like Gundry, Carson wavers on the

²⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 800.

²⁸ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 29 [emphasis in the original].

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," 490.

³¹ Ibid. Carson's reference to "one second or less" vividly recalls 1 Corinthians 15:52 where Paul prophesies that Christ's coming will be "in a moment [or flash], in the twinkling of an eye."

meaning of imminent. If imminence means only that Jesus may return at any period or in any generation, it does not match up with the NT teaching on the subject. Such a looser connotation of the word “imminent” loses contact with what Christ taught and what the rest of the NT writers insisted was the proper Christian outlook.

Erickson approaches imminence in another evasive way: “It is one thing to say we do not know when an event will occur; it is another thing to say that we know of no times when it will not occur. If on a time scale we have points 1 to 1,000, we may know that Christ will not come at points 46 and 79, but not know at just what point He will come. The instructions about watchfulness do not mean that Christ may come at any time.”³² Erickson’s reasoning is difficult to follow. Christ never designated points at which He would not return. He could have come at points 46 and 79, contrary to Erickson’s assertion. He could come at any point between 1 and 1,000. The fact that He has not yet come does not erase the ongoing possibility that He can come at any moment.

Witherington’s wording for questioning imminence is different: “In short, one cannot conclude that 1 Thessalonians 4:15 clearly means that Paul thought the Lord would definitely return during his lifetime. Possible imminence had to be conjured with, but certain imminence is not affirmed here.”³³ From a practical standpoint, possible imminence is tantamount to certain imminence. How Witherington can distinguish between the two defies explanation. Certain imminence means Christ could come at any moment; possible imminence, unless one offers an alternative of impossible imminence to go with it, also means that Christ could return at any moment. The “impossible-imminence” alternative directly contradicts the possible-imminence teaching and is therefore impossible.

Beker represents an unbiased approach to the text when he clarifies Paul’s attitude more accurately than those who cannot fit imminence into their eschatological systems:

Thus delay of the parousia is not a theological concern for Paul. It is not an embarrassment for him; it does not compel him to shift the center of his attention from apocalyptic imminence to a form of “realized eschatology,” that is to a conviction of the full presence of the kingdom of God in our present history. It is of the essence of his faith in Christ that adjustments in his expectations can occur without a surrender of these expectations (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:15–51; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 2:21–24). Indeed, the hope in God’s imminent rule through Christ remains the constant in his letters from beginning to end.³⁴

All the “nonimminence” advocates, who must place Christ’s coming for those in Christ at the end of Daniel’s seventieth week, must speak of the unexpectedness of His advent within a limited period of time, because all would agree that events of the tribulation period will be recognizable. Once that period has begun, His coming has

³² Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 181.

³³ Ben Witherington III, “Transcending Imminence: The Gordian Knot of Pauline Eschatology,” *Eschatology in the Bible & Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 174.

³⁴ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 49.

to occur within a specified number of years. If that is their meaning, Christ's warnings to watch for His coming are meaningless until Daniel's seventieth week arrives. The church need not watch as He commanded. And when that prophetic week arrives, imminence will no longer prevail because His coming will not be totally unexpected. It will have specified events to signal at least approximately, if not exactly, how far away it is.

Saying the NT teaching of imminence has become garbled in the systems of pre-wrath rapturism and posttribulationism is not an overstatement. According to different advocates, it may mean at any moment within the last half of the seventieth week, at any moment after the seventieth week, during any period rather than at any moment, at an unexpected moment with some exceptions, possibly at any moment but not certainly at any moment, or as many other meanings as nonimminence advocates may conjure up.

Other Indications of Imminence in 1 Thessalonians

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 Paul speaks of his readers' turning to God from idols for two purposes: to serve the living and true God and to await His Son from heaven. The second purpose strikes a note that he continually sounded through his preaching in the city—the kingship of Christ (Acts 17:7)—and throughout both Thessalonian epistles—the return of Christ (1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:2, 23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8). Primitive Christianity believed that the resurrected and ascended Christ would return to establish His kingdom (cf. 1 Thess. 2:12) and that His return was near.³⁵ In 1:10 Paul speaks of Jesus as delivering *us* from the coming wrath when He returns from heaven, thereby including himself and his first-century readers among those to be rescued from that future wrath. In this subtle way he again included himself, modeling the proper Christian outlook in expecting the return of Jesus at any moment.

In 1:10 he also speaks of the wrath as “coming” and uses the present participle ἐρχομένης (*erchomenēs*) to qualify the wrath. Though the kind of action—*aktionsart* or aspect—of articular participles is not necessarily stressed in NT Greek, the frequent use of the present tense of this verb in a futuristic sense to speak of the imminence of end events probably portrays the imminence of the wrath which is already on its way and hence could arrive at any moment.³⁶

Another statement of Paul in 1 Thessalonians that is best explained through imminence is 1 Thessalonians 2:16b: “Now the wrath has come upon them fully.” These words climax a paragraph in which Paul is uncharacteristically condemning his fellow-Jews for their part in the crucifixion of Christ and persecuting the prophets and Paul along with his fellow missionaries. Earlier in v. 16 he speaks of their forbidding the evangelizing of the Gentiles as an aspect of reaching the limit in sinning against God (2:16a).

The wrath for which the Jewish people as well as the rest of the world are destined is the eschatological wrath spoken of in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9, a well-

³⁵ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 83; and Brindle, “Imminence of the Rapture,” 142–44.

³⁶ James Everett Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 89. In this connection, see the present tense *erchetai* in 1 Thessalonians 5:2.

known and expected period just before the Messiah inaugurates His Kingdom. This pronouncement of the arrival of the wrath brings Paul's excursus against the Jews to its logical climax.

Surprisingly, however, Paul does not use a future tense, "will come," to speak of the wrath. He uses a past tense, "has come." The Greek expression is ἐφθασεν ἐπι (*ephthasen epi*, "has come upon"), the same combination used by Jesus in Matthew 12:28 and Luke 11:20 to speak of the arrival of the kingdom. "The kingdom of God has come upon you" were the Lord's words to His listeners. The unique force of the verb and preposition in that situation connoted "arrival upon the threshold of fulfillment and accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience."³⁷ The connotation in 1 Thessalonians 2:16 is the same with regard to the wrath. Just as the kingdom reached the covenant people at Christ's first advent without their enjoying "the experience ensuing upon the initial contact,"³⁸ so the wrath that will precede that kingdom has already come without the Jews' full experience of it. It is at the threshold. All prerequisites for unleashing this future torrent have been met. God has set conditions in readiness through the first coming and the rejection of the Messiah by His people. A time of trouble awaits Israel just as it does the rest of the world, and the breaking forth of this time is portrayed as an "imminent condemnation" by the combination *ephthasen epi*.³⁹ Such a potential presence of the wrath accords with the epistle's emphasis on an imminent breaking forth of end-time events, one of which is the time of Israel's trouble just before the Messiah's return.⁴⁰ Dual imminence prevails elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians, not just in chapters 4 and 5. Paul allowed no time between Christ's coming to catch away the church to Himself and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth prophetic week, which coincides with the opening phase of the day of the Lord.

The dual-imminence teaching results from exegetical evidence found in a number of NT passages. Various theological objections may be and have been lodged against such a position. Some may question how the signing of the treaty between "the prince who is to come" and Israel to begin Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:26–27) can coincide with the rapture of the church. Such a theological question has several possible answers. That prince may arise to power before the rapture of the church, setting the stage for the signing, or the signing of the covenant with Israel may not occur at the very first moment the seventieth week begins. Daniel 9 does not seem to require that precise timing. One could propose various scenarios to answer the theological difficulty that dual imminence allegedly poses. Exegetical evidence must take precedence over theological considerations, however, even though specific answers to theological questions that exegetical decisions raise may not be immediately obvious.⁴¹

³⁷ K. W. Clark, "Realized Eschatology," *JBL* 59 (September 1940): 379.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁴⁰ Best, *First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 120–21.

⁴¹ Walvoord proposes a period between the rapture of the church and the seventieth week, during which ten nations must unite. He writes, "The ten-nation kingdom must be formed in the final seven years

Paul's Continuing Support of Imminence in 2 Thessalonians

A major objection to Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians has been the epistle's eschatological perspective that is supposedly different from what 1 Thessalonians teaches. The theory advanced is that 2 Thessalonians upholds a Christian approach to the doctrine of last things that arose after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁴² The principal difference cited is the signs that 2 Thessalonians locates before the arrival of the day of the Lord. That contrasts with the indication in 1 Thessalonians that the day could come at any moment, without any prophesied event(s) to precede it. This proposed difference in teaching offered as a challenge of the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians calls to mind 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3.

Imminence of Our Gathering Together and the Day of the Lord (2:1–3)

Since Paul's first epistle, the persecuted Thessalonian church had been beset with false teaching that the day of the Lord had already begun and the persecutions and afflictions the church was experiencing (1:4) were the initial phase of that day, coinciding with the pains of a "woman with child" spoken of in the first epistle (5:3). They should not have had such an impression if Paul had taught them that Christ's return for those in Christ would be a single event, an event at the beginning of the day of the Lord.

Posttribulationists are at a loss to explain how the first-century readers could have thought themselves to be already in the day of the Lord if that day occurred

before the Second Coming" (John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990] 485; cf. *Ibid.*, 487). His diagram of the day of the Lord on 485 clarifies what he apparently intends by this statement: the day of the Lord begins simultaneously with the rapture, but includes an undefined period after the rapture and before Daniel's seventieth week during which the forming of the ten-nation kingdom will occur. See also his statement, "The time period [i.e., the day of the Lord] begins at the rapture, but major events do not come immediately. However, if the DOL has progressed very far, there will be unmistakable signs that they are in the DOL" (*Ibid.*, 492).

Showers also proposes such an interval between the rapture and the beginning of the seventieth week, during which will occur the regathering of Israel, the emergence of a great world ruler, rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and a covenant of peace with Israel (Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha, Our Lord Come!* [Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel, 1995], 61). But he differs from Walvoord when he sees the day of the Lord and the seventieth week beginning simultaneously (*Ibid.*, 63), but he has the rapture occurring at an earlier time because he does not see it as part of the day of the Lord (*Ibid.*, 59).

Ryrie's opinion is that the Scriptures are noncommittal regarding the issue of whether or not there is a time gap between the rapture and the seventieth week: "Though I believe that the Rapture precedes the beginning of the Tribulation, actually no thing is said in the Scriptures as to whether or not some time (or how much time) may elapse between the Rapture and the beginning of the Tribulation" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1986], 465).

In his comments on Revelation 3:10, Jeffrey L. Townsend concurs with the position of this essay regarding the imminence of the rapture and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week when he writes, "Both the coming of the hour [of testing] and the coming of the Lord are imminent. . . . There will be preservation outside the imminent hour of testing for the Philadelphian church when the Lord comes" ("The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995], 377).

⁴² Willi Marxen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. G. Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 42; Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1966), 57; Norman Perrin, *The New Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 120.

simultaneously with the coming of Christ for the church. That leaves no time for persecution during the day of the Lord. In the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians (1:5–10), Paul had just spoken of how God would afflict the unrighteous and reward the faithful in the day of the Lord. The readers knew that the opening period of that day would be tribulation to the ungodly and also a day of persecution for the saints, so the false teaching had led them to believe that they were already in that period.

To correct this error, Paul pointed first to “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2:1). “Our gathering together to Him” defines which aspect of Jesus’ coming the writer has in mind and reminds readers of the great event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17, the gathering of those in Christ to meet Him in the air *en route* to be with the Father in heaven. He wanted to emphasize that the day of the Lord cannot begin on earth before the saints are in heaven with the Father. Since Christ’s reappearance to take the saints to heaven had not yet occurred, the day of the Lord could not yet have begun. Therefore, the apostle asks them not to be shaken or troubled by the false message they had received (2:2a). The gathering together had not yet occurred; hence the day of the Lord had not yet begun.

Paul even specifies what the false teaching consists of. It was proposing that “the day of the Lord is present” (2:2b). The rendering of the verb ἐνέστηκεν in 2:2b as “is present” rather than as “has come” or “will come” is very important, because that is the key to interpreting the difficult verse immediately following. English versions have, for the most part, consistently mistranslated this verb. Those with erroneous renderings include the KJV, the RSV, the NASB, the NASBU, the ESV, the NIV, the ASV, the ICB, and the NKJV. Only three versions consulted render the verb correctly. Darby renders, “the day of the Lord is present,” Weymouth has, “the day of the Lord is now here,” and the NRSV gives, “the day of the Lord is already here.” Either of these captures the intensive force of the perfect tense ἐνίστημι (*enistēmi*) means “is present” cannot be doubted seriously in light of its usage elsewhere in the NT (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 3:22; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 9:9).⁴³

With the nature of the false teaching clearly in mind, as the next step Paul urges, “Do not let anyone deceive you in any way” (2:3a), and then furnishes a reason for knowing that the day of the Lord is not present. The difficulty is Paul’s assumption of an apodosis to accompany the protasis, “unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2:3b). As is customary in language usage, Paul chose not to repeat the verb that constitutes the apodosis of the conditional sentence, thus requiring readers to substitute the parallel antecedent verb to fill in the blank.⁴⁴ That verb in this instance is, of course, the *enestēken* from verse 2. The sense of 2:3b thus becomes, “The day of the Lord is not present unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed.” Unfortunately, no English versions consulted render the suppressed apodosis correctly in this verse. Most give the supplied verb a future sense, such as, “The day of the Lord will not come,” a change that detracts from the

⁴³ F. F. Bruce, “1 & 2 Thessalonians,” in vol. 45 of Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1982), 165; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, in vol. 33 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 227–28.

⁴⁴ Cf. Peter Cotterell & Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 24, for this principle as practiced in all languages. For another Pauline example of such an insertion, see Ephesians 5:21–22.

point Paul makes. The issue involved in his correction of the false information to which the readers had been exposed is not the future coming of the day of the Lord; it is rather the current presence or non-presence of that day at the time he writes and they read his words.

Another vital issue to settle in 2:3 relates to the adverb *πρῶτον* (*prōton*, “first”) in the first half of the protasis. Two meanings are possible. It can mean that the coming of the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness precede the day of the Lord, or it can mean that the coming of the apostasy precedes the revelation of the man of lawlessness, both being within the day of the Lord.⁴⁵ Posed in grammatical terms, does the “first” compare the total protasis with the apodosis or does it compare the first half of the protasis with the last half of the protasis?

Typically, pre-wrath rapturists and posttribulational rapturists opt for the former possibility, i.e., that the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness precede the day of the Lord. They base this on the mistranslation of the text in various English versions. Robert Gundry illustrates this mistake and has entitled one of his recent books *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won't Come Before the Antichrist Does*.⁴⁶ He writes, “. . . Paul says not only that ‘the Day of the Lord’ won’t arrive unless that evil figure ‘is revealed’ but also that ‘the rebellion’ which he will lead against all divinity except his own (claimed falsely, of course) ‘comes first’ (2 Thess. 2:1–4).”⁴⁷ Erickson joins Gundry in using this support for his posttribulational stance when he writes, “Paul also stated about A.D. 50 that the day of the Lord could not come (II Thess. 2:2) until the Antichrist and a major apostasy had come (v. 3).”⁴⁸ That interpretation is oblivious to the lexical and syntactical requirements of the Greek text, however, and a brief survey of grammatically parallel passages shows its inadequacy also.

A close parallel to the set of criteria in 2 Thessalonians 2:3b occurs in John 7:51 where there occur (1) present action in the apodosis, (2) a compound protasis introduced by *ἐὰν μὴ* (*ean mē*, “unless”) with the action of both aorist subjunctive verbs included in the action of the apodosis, and (3) *πρῶτον* in the former member of the compound protasis. John 7:51 reads thus: “Our law does not judge the man unless it hears from him first and knows what he is doing, does it?” The judicial process (present indicative of *κρίνει* *krinei*, “it judges”) is not carried out without two parts, hearing from the defendant first and gaining a knowledge of what he is doing. Clearly in this instance, hearing from the defendant does not precede the judicial process; it is part of it. But it does precede a knowledge of what the man does. Here the *πρῶτον* indicates that the first half of the compound protasis is prior to the last half.

Another verse relevant to this set of criteria is Mark 3:27: “No one can enter the house of the strong man to plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man and then he will plunder his house.” Here the apodosis is present indicative followed by

⁴⁵ Martin (*1, 2 Thessalonians*, 232) notes, “Its [i.e., the adverb *πρῶτον*] placement in the sentence slightly favors the understanding that the apostasy comes ‘first’ and then the lawless one is revealed.” For unstated reasons, he chooses the other option, however.

⁴⁶ (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). See also Erickson, *Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 175.

⁴⁷ Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, 20.

⁴⁸ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 175.

ean mē and a compound apodosis with verbs in the aorist subjunctive and future indicative—the future indicative being somewhat interchangeable with the aorist subjunctive. Because of the *τότε* (*tote*, “then”) in the last half of the protasis, the *prōton* clearly evidences the occurrence of the first half of the protasis before the last half, i.e., the binding of the strong man prior to the plundering of his house. It does not indicate that the whole protasis is prior to the apodosis, i.e., the binding of the strong man and the plundering of his house prior to entering the house. In other words, it indicates that the binding precedes the plundering, but not the entering, and the entering includes both the binding and the plundering.

Application of these data to 2 Thessalonians 2:3 results in the following: “The day of the Lord is not present unless first in sequence within that day the apostasy comes, and following the apostasy’s beginning, the revealing of the man of lawlessness occurs.” Rather than the two events preceding the day of the Lord as has so often been suggested, these are happenings that comprise conspicuous stages within that day after it has begun. By observing the non-occurrence of these, the Thessalonian readers could rest assured that the day whose leading events will be so characterized was not yet present.

Assigning these criteria to 2 Thessalonians 2:3 frees Paul from the accusation of contradicting himself. In 1 Thessalonians 5:2 he wrote that the day of the Lord will come as a thief. If that day has precursors as 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is often alleged to teach, it could hardly come as a thief. Thieves come without advance notice or precursors. Neither does the day of the Lord have any prior signals before it arrives.⁴⁹ Paul does not contradict that meaning in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. He still clings to the imminence of the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord.

Alienation Coinciding with Glorification (2 Thess. 1:9–10)

In 2 Thessalonians 1:3–5a Paul offers thanks to God for the perseverance of his Thessalonian readers as they face severe persecution because of their stand for Christ. He considers this a sign of their healthy spiritual development. Then in vv. 5b–10 he turns to discuss the righteous judgment of God that will include a payback to their persecutors and a reward for faithful believers. That judgment by God will impose “tribulation on those who afflict you” (1:6)—an extended period—and “rest to you who are afflicted” (1:7a)—a momentary happening. Both the tribulation’s beginning and the rest will come in conjunction with “the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven” (1:7b).

Further description of the judgment includes the payment of the penalty of eternal separation from the presence of God (1:9) “when He comes to be glorified in [the midst of] His saints and to be marveled at among all those who believe” (1:10a). The penalty’s beginning and the reward phases of His return are simultaneous as indicated

⁴⁹ To this effect J. Christiaan Beker writes, “Paul emphasizes the unexpected, the suddenness and surprising character of the final theophany (1 Thess. 5:2–10)” (*Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel*, 48).

by the ὅταν (*hotan*, “when”) that begins 1:10.⁵⁰ The last four words of v. 10 fix both as occurring “in that day” (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ, *en tē hēmera ekeinē*). “That day” is a frequent technical designation for the day of the Lord in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Isa. 2:11, 17, 20; 4:2; Joel 3:18; Mark 13:32; 14:25; Luke 21:34; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8). Paul has referred to the penalty phase of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3, 9 as a period of wrath, a period whose beginning will come as a thief in the night. He will refer to the day of the Lord again in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. Thus when he uses “that day” in the eschatological framework of 2 Thessalonians 1:10, the context indicates conclusively that the expression refers to the day of the Lord. “That day” is a period that will be climaxed with the personal return of Christ to judge the offenders (2 Thess. 1:7–8). But 2 Thessalonians 1:10 also connects Christ’s return to be glorified among believers with “that day,” i.e., the day of the Lord. This is an event that will occur at the very beginning of the day of wrath. It is the same event referred to in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as a “catching away,” in 2 Thessalonians 1:7a as “rest,” and in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 as “our gathering together to Him.” Here is a specific tie-in between the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord. They are simultaneous. Both are imminent. This is the moment of reward for those who have faithfully persevered in all their trials and persecutions (cf. 2 Thess. 1:4).

The connection between the rapture and the day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 reinforces the conclusion that the same connection exists between 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 5:1–11. The rapture and the beginning of that day will be simultaneous, and both could come at any moment.

Summary of Paul’s Teaching on Imminence

See Chart 4 on page 90 for a summary of Paul’s emphasis on imminence in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

The Pervasiveness of Imminence Teaching

The ancient fathers were right. The teaching of imminence pervades the NT in connection both with Christ’s return for the church and with His return to initiate the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord. Jesus Himself initiated the NT teaching on imminence with such parabolic figures as the coming of a thief and the master at the door. Various NT writers picked up on these figures and used them to teach imminence also. Paul was one of them, particularly in his Thessalonian epistles where he continued Jesus’ emphasis on the imminence of His return to deliver the saints and to begin the earthly phase of God’s wrath against a disobedient world.

If both the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord are occurrences that could come at any moment, the timing of the rapture is not open for

⁵⁰ The only way that both the beginning of the penalty phase and the reward phase of the revelation can be imminent and still parts of the day of the Lord is for them to be simultaneous. If the reward phase were to come later in the day of the Lord, prophesied events would precede it, thereby removing it from the category of imminency. If it were to precede the day of the Lord, the beginning of the day of the Lord would no longer be imminent as Paul so specifically writes that it will be in 1 Thessalonians 5:2.

debate. The only way that both events could be imminent is for them to be simultaneous. If one preceded the other even by a brief moment, the other would not be imminent because of the sign provided by the earlier happening. This fact constitutes strong biblical support for the pretribulational rapture.

Imminence serves as an encouragement for the saints to persevere in godly living and as a warning to others to repent before becoming victims of the wrath of a righteous God. May we shape our lives and our teaching to perpetuate these strong biblical emphases.

Chart 4—Paul’s Teaching of Imminence in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

	Coming Wrath	Coming Deliverance
1 Thess 1:10	“the coming wrath” (a hint of imminence in the present participle <i>erchomenēs</i>)	“to await His Son from heaven, . . . Jesus who delivers us” (a hint of imminence in the concept of awaiting)
1 Thess 2:16	“the wrath has come upon them fully” (wrath is imminent, at the threshold)	
1 Thess 4:13–5:11	“the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night” (5:2; imminence of the wrath spoken of in 5:9)	“We who live and remain will be caught up with them in the clouds for a meeting with the Lord in the air” (4:17; expectation associated with imminence of deliverance from imminent wrath, promised in 5:9)
2 Thess 1:6-10	“tribulation” (1:6), “vengeance” (1:8), “eternal destruction” (1:9; imminence of “that day” in 1:10)	“rest” (1:7), “when He comes to be glorified at among His saints and marveled at among those who believe . . . in that day” (1:10; imminence of “that day” in 1 Thess 5:2)
2 Thess 2:1-3		“the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2:1; “the day of the Lord is not present” unless the apostasy occurs as a part of that day, followed by the revelation of the man of lawlessness, 2:3)

PROMISES TO ISRAEL IN THE APOCALYPSE

Robert L. Thomas
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Recent opinions that Israel's covenants and promises are missing in Revelation 20:1–10 have rested on poor hermeneutical foundations. Three major OT covenants with Israel are prominent throughout the Apocalypse and therefore are foundational to what John writes in chapter 20. God promised Abraham a people who are quite visible in Revelation 7, 12, and 14, and in 2:9 and 3:9, where physical descendants of Abraham are in view. The geographical territory promised to Abraham comes into view in 11:1–13 as well as in 16:16 and 20:9. Close attention is given to the Davidic Covenant in 1:5 and 22:16 and many places between, such as 3:7, 5:5, and 11:15. The New Covenant comes into focus whenever the Lamb and His blood are mentioned in the book, and particularly in 21:3 which speaks of a new relationship with God. Obvious references to God's covenants with Israel are often ignored because of deviations from sound principles of interpretation by those who practice what has been called eclectic hermeneutics. According to Revelation, God will in the future be faithful in fulfilling His promises to Israel.

* * * * *

Bruce Waltke finds no textual linkage in Revelation 20 to Israel's OT promises regarding a kingdom. He writes, "In the former essay I argued among other things that if there is any tension in one's interpretation between the Old Testament and the New, priority must be given to the New; that Rev 20:1–10 cannot be linked textually with Israel's covenants and promises; that no New Testament passage clearly teaches a future Jewish millennium; and that the New Testament interprets the imagery of the Old Testament with reference to the present spiritual reign of Christ from his heavenly throne."¹ In supporting this claim, Waltke professes allegiance to the grammatical-historical approach, but adds certain rules of interpretation that "go beyond"

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, "A Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 353. Waltke is referring to his earlier works "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*,

that approach, rules such as the “priority of the Bible over other data,” “the priority of New Testament interpretation over the interpretation of theologians,” “the priority of clear texts over obscure ones,” and “the priority of spiritual illumination over scientific exegesis.”² He fails to notice, however, that in applying his rules beyond the grammatical-historical method, he violates time-honored principles of that method, such as interpreting a passage in its historical context³ and the principle of single meaning.⁴ Like others of a covenant theology persuasion, he interprets OT passages without adequate attention to their historical context, and in so doing, assigns them an additional meaning, one meaning being what the original author intended and the other being a meaning assigned by a NT writer.⁵ He fails to grant NT writers the prerogative of assigning additional meanings through use of their revelatory gifts of apostleship and prophecy.⁶

Waltke deserves a response in light of his inability to find any reference to Israel’s covenants and promises in Revelation in general and in Revelation 20:1–10 in particular. Since Revelation 20:1–10 cannot be divorced from the remainder of the Apocalypse, that passage will be viewed through the eyes of the whole book.

The OT describes four covenants that are most relevant to “perspectives on Israel and the church”: the Abrahamic, the Palestinian or Land, the Davidic, and the New Covenants. Some consider the Land Covenant to be a part of the Abrahamic, so

ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 263–88; and “Theonomy in Relation to Dispensational and Covenant Theologies,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Academic Books, 1990), 59–88.

² Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual” 263–65.

³ M. S. Terry writes, “The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present and to transport himself into the historical position of an author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term *grammatico-historical* interpretation” (*Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* [1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947], 231, emphasis in the original), and “Subject and predicate and subordinate clauses must be closely analyzed, and the whole document, book, or epistle, should be viewed, as far as possible from the *author’s historical* standpoint” (*Ibid.*, 205, emphasis added). B. Ramm adds, “Some interaction with the culture and history of a book of Holy Scripture is mandatory” (B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3d. rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970], 150), and “The interpreter must know *Biblical history*. . . . Every event has its historical referent in that all Biblical events occur in a stream of history” (*Ibid.*, 154, emphasis in the original).

⁴ “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture” (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 205); “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one; application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study” (Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 113). Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy concurred with this principle: “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application” (Article VII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” adopted by the International Council in Biblical Inerrancy, 10–13 November 1982). For further discussion of the principle of single meaning, see Chapter Six in my *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The Old Versus the New* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 141–64.

⁵ For an explanation of the NT use of the OT that does not violate either of these principles, see my discussion in Chapter Nine of *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 241–69.

⁶ *Ibid.*

that covenant will be considered as part of the Abrahamic. The three major covenants of God with Israel are the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the New Covenants.

This study will examine the Book of Revelation to see what kind of fulfillments of these covenants it records. Results yielded by differing hermeneutical approaches to the book will also come under scrutiny. The treatments selected for comparison will be three recent evangelical commentaries on Revelation by Greg Beale, David Aune, and Grant Osborne.

The Abrahamic Covenant

God promised Abraham a people, the land, and an ability to be a source of blessing to all families of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3, 7).

A People

Revelation depicts a number of times and a number of ways that God will fulfill His promises to Abraham. The people descended from Abram are in view several times in the book. Perhaps the most conspicuous instances are in chapter 7:1–8 and chapter 14:1–5 in which the 144,000 descended from the twelve sons of Abram's grandson Jacob are mentioned. These are not the total number of Abraham's descendants, but are a select group from among that number who will in later times have a special mission to fulfill.⁷

Of course, covenantalists do not accept the literal meaning of the words about the 144,000. Beale, in line with his eclectic approach to hermeneutics in the Apocalypse, concludes that “the group of 7:4–8 represents a remnant from the visible church, which professes to be true Israel”⁸ or, in other words, “the totality of God's people throughout the ages, viewed as true Israelites.”⁹ He describes his eclecticism as a combination of the idealist and the futurist approaches to the book.¹⁰ Eclectic hermeneutics allow a person to switch from literal to allegorical and from allegorical to literal in any given passage in order to support a preferred theological persuasion. In Revelation this most often happens under the cover of assuming that the book's apocalyptic genre allows for such vacillation. Eclecticism allows Beale to interpret idealistically in some places, such as in chapters 7 and 14, and futuristically in others such as in chapter 19.

Aune identifies the 144,000 as representing “*that particular group of Christians (including all ages and both genders) who have been specially protected by God from*

⁷ Others who interpret the book literally may see a different role for the 144,000 (e.g., John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* [Chicago: Moody, 1966], 140), but they all agree that the 144,000 are descendants of Abraham.

⁸ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 423.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 733.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

both divine plagues and human persecution just before the final eschatological tribulation begins and who consequently survive that tribulation and the great eschatological battle that is the culmination of that tribulation.”¹¹ In contrast with Beale, Aune sees the 144,000 as future Christians, not believers of all ages.¹² He also differs from Beale when he differentiates the 144,000 from the innumerable multitude of 7:9–17.¹³ A comparison of these two allegorists in their comments on this passage illustrates how interpretations of Revelation are uncontrolled and varied when exegetes forsake the use of grammatical-historical principles. Aune reaches his conclusions after laboring hard to find a consensus definition of apocalyptic genre.¹⁴ He eventually has to set down his own definitions of genre and apocalypse,¹⁵ while admitting that some authorities disagree with his definitions.¹⁶

Hermeneutically, Osborne falls into the eclectic camp with Beale, but instead of combining just idealist and futurist, he combines futurist with preterist and idealist.¹⁷ He too can vacillate from one approach to another to suit his own theological leanings. Yet he pleads for “hermeneutical humility” and caution, whatever principles of interpretation one adopts.¹⁸

He understands the 144,000 to be the church because of emphasis on the church throughout Revelation.¹⁹ He goes on to say, “[T]here is no mention of Jewish believers apart from the Gentile church elsewhere in Revelation,”²⁰ a statement that will be shown below to be fallacious. Osborne’s other reasons for his conclusion draw upon other NT passages, but in his cited passages, alleged references to the church as Israel are also debated.²¹

As I have pointed out in another place,²² valid exegetical arguments for taking the designations in 7:4–8 in other than their literal meaning are nonexistent. The only reasons adduced for understanding them otherwise are theologically motivated. Without citing every weakness of Osborne’s conclusion, suffice it to say that “no clear-cut example of the church being called ‘Israel’ exists in the NT or in ancient church writings until A.D. 160.”²³ Walvoord’s point is also quite valid: “It would be

¹¹ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B of *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Word, 1998), 443 (emphasis in the original).

¹² *Ibid.*, 443–44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 440.

¹⁴ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, vol. 52A of *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Word, 1997), lxxi–xc.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, lxxxi–lxxxii, lxxxii–lxxxviii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, lxxxviii–lxxxix.

¹⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 21–22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 311–12.

²² Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 473–78.

²³ Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1969), 74–84, 206.

rather ridiculous to carry the typology of Israel representing the church to the extent of dividing them up into twelve tribes as was done here, if it was the intent of the writer to describe the church."²⁴ Add to these the difference in number and ethnicity between the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude of Revelation 7:9–17, and identification of the 144,000 as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob becomes quite evident.

Another reference to the descendants of Abraham comes in Revelation 12 when the text tells of a great sign in heaven that includes a woman with child. The term σημεῖον (12:1) is the contextual signal to understanding a figurative interpretation of the woman. The connection of the woman's description with Genesis 37:9 helps in identifying the woman as national Israel. God will in the future provide a place of refuge for the nation from the animosity of the dragon.

As part of a lengthy acknowledgment that the woman represents Israel, Beale makes the following exegetically unsubstantiated statements: "This then is another example of the church being equated with the twelve tribes of Israel (see on 7:4–8). Ch. 12 presents the woman as incorporating the people of God living both before and after Christ's coming."²⁵ As part of his discussion, he sees references to the OT community of faith that brought forth the Messiah.²⁶ Yet he notes, "It is too limiting to view the woman as representing only a remnant of Israelites living in trial at the last stage of history,"²⁷ and adds the conclusion that "the woman in 12:1–2 represents the community of faith in both the Old and New Testament ages."²⁸ Through some unexplained interpretive transition, he moves from a recognition that the woman is a symbol for Israel to making her a symbol for both believing Israel and the believing church.

Aune analyzes the words about the woman as probably derived from the Greek Leto-Apollo-Python myth. With only one passing mention of Genesis 37:9–11,²⁹ he allows that the myth about the woman can be read as a reference to Mary and her child from a Christian perspective, or as a reference to Israel, the persecuted people of God, from a Jewish perspective.³⁰ Aune seems to pursue a reader-response type of hermeneutic in this instance. He sees the catching up of the child to God and His throne as referring to the exaltation of the risen Jesus to the right hand of God, but rather than assigning an OT background to the story, he sees its source in Greek mythology.

Osborne correctly identifies the woman as Israel by referring to Genesis 37:1–9 with the sun and the moon referring to Joseph's parents and the stars his brothers, but inexplicably, he says that she represents the church in Revelation 12:17.³¹ He

²⁴ Walvoord, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 143.

²⁵ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 627.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 629.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 631.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 680.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 712.

³¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 456.

fails to explain how the church has the same parents as Joseph— i.e., Jacob and Leah,³² but in Revelation 12:6, he opts for a futurist explanation, identifying those persecuted during the “final terrible persecution” as the church.³³ How Israel, the people of God, suddenly becomes the church, the people of God, he does not explain. The transition appears to be quite arbitrary.

Again, the radical disagreement of allegorists in their handling of Revelation 12 illustrates the subjective nature of interpretation once the interpreter has forsaken grammatical-historical principles. A point that Beale and Aune have in common, however, is their failure to recognize the futurity of what chapter 12 reveals. This is the portion of the book that discloses “things that must happen after these things,” according to Revelation 4:1. Osborne recognizes the futurity, but changes boats in the middle of the stream, beginning the chapter with the woman being Israel and ending the chapter with her representing the church.

The woman represents the faithful remnant of Israel of the future and the attempt of the devil to get rid of her.³⁴ Clearly, the sun and the moon in Genesis 37:9–10 refer to Jacob and Rachel, the parents of Joseph. National Israel is the mother who begat the Messiah, a feat that cannot with any justification be attributed to the church. To claim that Revelation makes no distinction between the people of God in the OT and the church in the NT is without merit. Such a distinction has already been noted in comparing 7:1–8 with 7:9–17. Whatever the composition of the innumerable multitude in 7:9–17, they are explicitly distinct from the 144,000 in 7:1–8. This account in Revelation 12 furnishes another instance of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His promise to Abraham in raising up from him and preserving a people that become a nation.

Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 also furnish a recognition of the existence of national Israel, descendants of Abraham. Of course, not all of Abraham’s physical seed belonged to his spiritual seed. These two passages, coming from the epistolary portion of the Apocalypse, describe cases where Abraham’s physical seed were not among the faithful remnant of Israel, but the latter case (3:9) promises the future repentance of national Israel when it records, “Behold, I will cause [those] of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie— behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you.” The verse refers either to the exaltation of the Philadelphian church, without implying salvation of those who are forced to come and worship, or to an eschatological salvation of the Jews. The latter alternative has more in its favor because it aligns with biblical predictions of the future repentance of Israel (cf. Rom. 9:26a) and is in line with the prediction of Christ’s return in 3:10–11 when that national repentance will occur.³⁵ Here is another indication of God’s fulfilling His promise of a people to Abraham.

³² Osborne seemingly identifies Joseph’s mother as Leah, but actually Joseph’s mother was Rachel (Gen. 30:22–24).

³³ *Ibid.*, 464.

³⁴ For additional support for this decision, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 117–21.

³⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 281–83.

Beale, Aune, and Osborne concur that these are references to national Israel, but reject any teaching of future national repentance, saying that the verse simply refers to vindication of the Philadelphian believers.³⁶ Yet vindication of the Philadelphian church is extremely difficult to separate from a future repentance of national Israel. Submission and homage depicted in the language of 3:9 can hardly be rendered by anyone who has not become Christ's follower.³⁷

The Land

God also promised Abraham possession of the land to which He was to lead him. This, of course, is the land that came to be known as Israel, "the promised land." Revelation 11:1–13 tells of the measuring of the temple and two witnesses active in Jerusalem, a city in the heart of that promised land, and a revival that will take place in that city following a great earthquake.

The following chart summarizes the differences between hermeneutical approaches to Revelation 11:1–13. As noted earlier, Beale follows a double-eclectic philosophy of hermeneutics, varying between idealist and futurist. In his commentary on Revelation, Osborne follows a triple-eclectic approach when he switches between futurism, idealism, and preterism. The following chart reflects the results of their eclecticism compared with a literal or consistent grammatical-historical approach to the book:

Three Views on Revelation 11:1ff.

(Note: page numbers in parentheses refer to Beale's commentary, Osborne's commentary, and Thomas' commentary. On the chart, note the shaded blocks where Beale and Osborne essentially agree with each other. In the rest of the blocks they are in substantial disagreement with one another. They disagree with a literal understanding in every one of the fourteen areas.)

Three Views Chart

Term or Expression	Beale	Osborne	Thomas
"measure" (11:1)	"the infallible promise of God's future presence"; "the protection of God's eschatological community" (559) "until the parousia" (566)	"preservation of the saints spiritually in the coming great persecution" (410; cf. 411); "a 'prophetic anticipation' of the final victory of the church" (412)	"a mark of God's favor" (80–81)

³⁶ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 240–41, 286–88; Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 162–65, 237–38; Osborne, *Revelation*, 190–91.

³⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 282.

“the temple (<i>naon</i>)” (11:1)	“the temple of the church” (561); “Christians” (562); “the whole covenant community” (562); “the community of believers undergoing persecution yet protected by God” (566)	heavenly temple depicting “the church, primarily the saints of this final period but secondarily the church of all ages” (410)	“a future temple in Jerusalem during the period just before Christ returns” (81–82)
“the altar” (11:1)	“the suffering covenant community” (563)	“the [heavenly] altar of incense” (410)	“the brazen altar of sacrifice in the court outside the sanctuary” (82)
“the worshipers” (11:1)	“believers worshipping together in the temple community” (564)	“individual believers” (411)	“a future godly remnant in Israel” (82)
“in it” (11:1)	“it” referring to the temple or the altar (571)	“in the church” (411)	“in the rebuilt temple” (82)
“the court that is outside the temple (<i>naou</i>)” (11:2)	“God’s true people,” including Gentiles (560)	“the saints who are persecuted” (412)	“the wicked without God” (83)
“cast outside” (11:2)	“not protected from various forms of earthly harm (physical, economic, social, etc.)” (569)	not protected from the Gentiles/nations (412); God delivers his followers into the hands of sinners (413)	“exclusion from God’s favor” (83)
“the Gentiles” (11:2)	“unbelieving Gentiles and Jews” (569)	“the church handed over to the Gentiles/nations for a time” (412)	“a group [of non-Jews] in rebellion against God who will oppress the Jewish remnant” (83–84)
“the holy city” (11:2)	“the initial form of the heavenly city, part of which is identified with believers living on earth” (568)	“the people of God” (413)	“the literal city of Jerusalem on earth” (84)
“forty-two months” (11:2)	“figurative for the eschatological period of tribulation” (565); “attack on the community of faith throughout the church age” (566)	“a limited period that is strictly under God’s control”; “a time of martyrdom but also a time of preservation and witness” (415)	“the last half of Daniel’s seventieth week” (85)

“they will trample on” (11:2)	persecution of the church from Christ’s resurrection until His final coming (567)	“the saints will suffer incredibly” in a physical sense (413)	“future defilement and domination of Jerusalem” (86)
“the two witnesses” (11:3)	the church; “the whole community of faith” (573)	“two major eschatological figures . . . [and a symbol for] the witnessing church” (418)	two future prophets, probably Moses and Elijah (87- 89)
“the great city” (11:8)	“Babylon” = “Rome” = “the ungodly world” (591-92)	Jerusalem and Rome; secondarily, all cities that oppose God (426-27)	Jerusalem (93-94)
the resurrection and ascension of the two witnesses (11:11-12)	“divine legitimation of a prophetic call” (599)	“A proleptic anticipation of the ‘rapture’ of the church” (432)	the resurrection of the two witnesses (97)

Of special interest for this study are rows 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11, and 13. All pertain to a geographical location within the land that God promised to Abraham. Following a futurist, literal approach to the book, one learns that these are part of the future fulfillment of His promise to Abraham.

Turning attention to Aune, one sees that he agrees with Osborne that the temple refers to the heavenly temple, not the earthly one, but he does so under the assumption that the earthly temple will not be rebuilt.³⁸ Yet he later acknowledges that the temple described in 11:1–2 is most definitely the earthly temple in Jerusalem.³⁹ He also believes that “the holy city” is a clear reference to the earthly city Jerusalem that is referred to again in 11:8.⁴⁰ On the other hand, he agrees with Osborne that the worshipers are a divinely protected remnant of Christians who will survive until the arrival of the eschaton.⁴¹ Through a combination of source and form critical explanations of the passage, Aune is able to combine literal-futuristic interpretations of the passage with allegorical-idealistic explanations.

For those whose hermeneutical principles accord with literal interpretation, however, the land promises to Abraham keep resounding through the Apocalypse. Other references in Revelation to the land promised to Abraham include Revelation 16:16 and 20:9. The former refers to a place called Harmagedon or Armageddon, where a future battle will be fought. The “Har” prefix probably refers to the hill country around a town called Megiddo. Megiddo was a city on the Great Road linking Gaza and Damascus, connecting the coastal plain and the Plain of Esdraelon or Megiddo. That the kings from the east must cross the Euphrates River to get to the land

³⁸ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 596–97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 605.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 608, 619.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 630.

of Israel and Megiddo is another indication of the geographical connotation of Armageddon and of the fulfillment of the land promise to Abraham (Rev. 16:12).⁴² The reference in 20:9 speaks of “the camp of the saints and the beloved city,” most clearly a reference to the city of Jerusalem.

In Beale’s system “Armageddon” is a figurative way of referring to the place where the final battle against the saints and Christ will be fought. He sees that place as being the whole world.⁴³ Similarly, he opts for another allegorical interpretation when he sees “the camp of the saints and the beloved city” as the church.⁴⁴

Aune calls Armageddon “the mythical apocalyptic-world mountain where the forces hostile to God, assembled by demonic spirits, will gather for a final battle against God and his people.”⁴⁵ Regarding “the beloved city” he comments, “Since the heavenly Jerusalem does not make its appearance until 21:10 (aside from 3:12), ‘the beloved city’ cannot be the New Jerusalem but must be the earthly Jerusalem.”⁴⁶ Yet one should not conclude that Aune handles Revelation’s prophecies as a futurist. Because of his source and redaction critical assumptions, he simply assumes that the final editor of the Apocalypse incorporated earlier traditions and/or myths into the passage.

After briefly examining eight possible meanings, Osborne understands Armageddon to speak of a broadening of apostate Israel to depict all nations in their final war against God.⁴⁷ This too is an obvious allegorical interpretation of the term. After acknowledging the geographical connotation of the term,⁴⁸ he opts for a symbolic rather than geographical meaning. From OT times, the plain and the hill country around Megiddo were a well-known battleground, and is a suitable location for Christ’s final victory over His enemies. The plains of Megiddo are not large enough to contain armies from all over the world, but furnish an assembly area for a larger deployment that covers two hundred miles from north to south and the width of Palestine from east to west (cf. Rev. 14:20).⁴⁹

In agreement with literal interpretation, Osborne reverts to his literal-futurist mode in identifying “the beloved city” of Revelation 20:9 with Jerusalem, which will have been reinstated as the capital of Christ’s kingdom during the millennium.⁵⁰ That refreshing conclusion adds fuel to the case for the fulfillment of the land promise to Abraham by locating activities of the millennium geographically within the boundaries of territory promised to Abraham. This will be the location of Israel’s Messiah in ruling the world kingdom on earth.⁵¹

⁴² Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 261–62.

⁴³ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 838–39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1027.

⁴⁵ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 898.

⁴⁶ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas, 1998), 1098–99.

⁴⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 596.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 594.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 270–71.

⁵⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 714.

⁵¹ Cf. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 425.

Among Abraham's descendants will be the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16). His conquest will free the righteous of the earth from the deceptions, tyranny, and injustice of the beast and the false prophet (19:20). This great battle will eventuate in the imprisonment of the deceiver of the nations (20:3), a great blessing to all the families of the earth.

The Davidic Covenant

God's promises to David included the following: "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and *I will establish his kingdom. . . . I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever . . . and your house and your kingdom shall endure before me forever; your throne shall be established forever*" (1 Sam. 7:12, 13, 16; emphasis added).

Fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant is a major theme of Revelation, from beginning to end. In Revelation 1:5 the titles chosen for Christ come from Psalm 89, an inspired commentary on the Davidic Covenant. Those titles are "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." The source of all three is Psalm 89. "The firstborn of the dead" comes from "My firstborn" in verse 27 of the psalm. "The highest of the kings of the earth" refers again to verse 27 where the psalmist wrote "the highest of the kings of the earth." "The faithful witness" derives from "the witness in the sky is faithful" in verse 37 of the psalm.

David is prominent at the book's end too. Revelation 22:16 reads, "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star." Jesus is both the ancestor (the root) and the descendant (the offspring) of David. He is the beginning and end of the economy associated with David's family. In the words of 2 Samuel 7:12, He is the descendant whom God promised to raise up after David. He will inaugurate the kingdom promised to David. Just as David founded the first Jerusalem, Jesus will found the new Jerusalem. Paul refers to Jesus in a similar way in Romans 15:12, calling Him "the root of Jesse."

In Revelation 5:5 one of the twenty-four elders assures John that "the lion who is of the tribe of Judah, the root of David" has conquered and will open the seven-sealed book. "Root" has the sense of "offspring" here and points to Christ's headship in the final Davidic kingdom. The title alludes to the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11:1, 10.

Beale agrees in connecting these titles of 1:5 with Psalm 89, but concludes that John views David as "the ideal Davidic king on an escalated eschatological level."⁵² In other words, he sees an allegorical fulfillment of the promise to David, not a literal understanding as the promise would have been understood by David. He takes Christ's death and resurrection to be the time when He assumed His sovereign position over the cosmos, a reign being fulfilled during the present age, not in the future in a literal sense.

⁵² Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 190–91.

As for 22:16, Beale does the same. Here he sees David's kingdom as both already inaugurated and future.⁵³ A literal understanding of the Davidic Covenant, however, would limit that kingdom to the future only. Note Beale's combination of idealist and futurist hermeneutics in this instance, allegorical in seeing a present fulfillment and literal in seeing a future fulfillment. He violates the principle of single meaning once again.

At 5:5, Beale has little to say about Jesus' connection to David. Regarding the two titles, he notes that "both concern the prophecy of a messianic figure who will overcome his enemy through judgment."⁵⁴ Those words fall into an idealist mold, which theoretically can be fulfilled at any time.

Aune notes the connection of Revelation 1:5 with Psalm 89:27, 37,⁵⁵ but fails to connect the psalm with the Davidic Covenant on which the psalm furnishes a commentary. In 22:16 he notes the Messianic connotation of the title, but again does not mention the Davidic Covenant and its fulfillment in Revelation.

Regarding Revelation 5:5 Aune writes,

The emphases on the tribe of Judah and on Davidic descent together underline one of the crucial qualifications of the Jewish royal Messiah: he must be a descendant of the royal house of David (Pss Sol 17:21; Mark 12:35–37; John 7:42), sometimes conceived as David *redividus* (Jer 23:5; 30:9). Descent from the tribe of Judah (Heb 7:14) and more specifically the Davidic descent of Jesus, is frequently mentioned in the NT and early Christian literature (Matt 1:1, 6; Luke 1:32, 69; 2:4; 3:31; Acts 2:30–32; 13:22–23; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8; Ignatius *Eph.* 18:2; 20:2; *Rom.* 17:3; *Smyrn.* 1:1), and he is frequently called "son of David (Matt 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30; Mark 10:47–48; 12:35; Luke 18:38–39; *Barn.* 12:10).⁵⁶

Aune correctly ties the titles of 5:5 with OT prophecies of the Messiah who was coming to reign, but he does not take the next step and tie them specifically to fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. He does refer to the reign of David's house in the 2 Samuel passage in connection with Revelation 11:15, "He shall reign forever and ever," but that is the only place in his three volumes that he does so.

Osborne prefers not to connect "the faithful witness" of 1:5 with Psalm 89:27, but he does connect the other two titles of 1:5 with Psalm 89.⁵⁷ Yet he makes no direct connection with Israel's fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.⁵⁸ At 22:16, he relates "the Root and Offspring of David" to "the fulfillment of the Davidic messianic

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1146–47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁵⁵ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, vol. 52A of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1997), 37–40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 62–63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

hope,” and calls Jesus “the Davidic Messiah.”⁵⁹ Still he refrains from noting how such a fulfillment contributes to the hope of national Israel.

In 5:5, Osborne notes the connection of “the root of David” with Isaiah 11:1, a military passage, and admits that the military side of the Davidic imagery predominates in Revelation.⁶⁰ Yet he backs off from seeing Him as the returning Christ to accomplish His victory. Rather he identifies the cross as Jesus’ major weapon in warfare with God’s enemies.⁶¹ That hardly does justice to a literal interpretation of Revelation and to fulfillment of Israel’s Davidic Covenant in the future.

In Revelation 3:7, in addressing the church at Philadelphia, Jesus refers to Himself as the one who holds “the key of David.” Possession of that key means that He has the right to admit to or exclude from the city of David, Jerusalem both old and new. That key pertains to the prerogative of determining who will have a part in the kingdom of David over which He as the Messiah will rule. Again, this remark would be impossible without His fulfillment of the promise made to David.

Regarding “the key of David” (3:7), Aune concludes, “The phrase refers to the key to the Davidic or messianic kingdom, i.e., to the true Israel,”⁶² but Aune erroneously equates “the true Israel with the church,” not with a future kingdom promised to David and Israel in 2 Samuel 7.

For Beale, “the key of David” is an amplification of a similar phrase in 1:18 and equates to Jesus’ power over salvation and judgment.⁶³ He correctly notes the stress of the Lord’s sovereignty over those entering the kingdom, but he defines the kingdom as the church in the present era. He justifies this conclusion in part by noting allusions to prophetic “servant” passages (Isa. 43:4; 45:14; 49:23) in Revelation 3:9. Then he writes, “But there the allusions are applied to the church, though the rationale for the application lies in an understanding of the church’s corporate identification with Jesus as God’s servant and true Israel (e.g., Isa. 49:3–6 and the use of 49:6 in Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23; note how Christ and the church fulfill what is prophesied of Israel in the OT).”⁶⁴ Beale has consistently spiritualized references to Israel in the OT, and he does the same in Revelation, a book which so clearly points to a kingdom in the future, not in the present.⁶⁵

Osborne equates “the key of David” in 3:7 with “the keys of the kingdom” in Matthew 16:18–19, keys which Christ holds and passes on to His followers.⁶⁶ In the Revelation context, he sees a reference to Jesus as the Davidic Messiah “who controls entrance to God’s kingdom, the ‘New Jerusalem’ (3:12).”⁶⁷ Christ “alone can ‘open’

⁵⁹ Ibid., 792–93 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 254.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 235 (emphasis in the original).

⁶³ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 284.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 284–85.

⁶⁵ See my article, “The Kingdom of Christ in the Apocalypse,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 3.2 (Fall 1992): 117–40.

⁶⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 187.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

and ‘shut’ the gates to heaven,” says Osborne.⁶⁸ Why Osborne speaks of access to the eternal kingdom rather than the millennial kingdom remains a mystery. The millennial kingdom pertains most specifically to the present earth where Israel’s hopes will be fulfilled. The “keys” promise to the Philadelphian church shows that the resurrected church will share in the blessings of the future kingdom in which mortal Israelites will be most prominent.

In addition to specific references to David in the Apocalypse are a number of references to David’s kingdom. In fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, Revelation speaks often of a future kingdom on earth, prophecies that correspond to OT prophecies of that kingdom. Revelation 11:15 records, “And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become [the kingdom] of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.’” What other kingdom could that be than the Messiah’s future kingdom? The language of this proleptic song by the heavenly voices echoes Psalm 2:2, a psalm that speaks of the transference of power from heathen nations to God and His Messiah. Incidentally, Revelation alludes to Psalm 2 at least seven other times in addition to this reference in 11:15. That psalm will receive its final fulfillment when the Davidic King reigns over all the earth.

Elsewhere in instances too numerous to discuss here, I have pointed out the dominant focus of Revelation on the futurity of the kingdom.⁶⁹ Discussion about the kingdom in the book should not be limited to Revelation 19:11–20:10. The teaching of the book as a whole needs to be considered. Anticipation of the future kingdom is an integral part of motivation for present Christian experience.⁷⁰ Whatever meaning “kingdom” may have for the corporate Christian church of today, that meaning does not eradicate the fact that a future kingdom on earth is still ahead, and Revelation connects that future kingdom with God’s covenants with David and Abraham.⁷¹ Proleptic songs about the initiation of the kingdom also occur in Revelation 12:10 and 19:6.

Beale in commenting on 11:15 says, “God now takes to himself the rule that formerly he permitted Satan to have over the world.”⁷² Yet two paragraphs later he comments,

Vv. 16–17 show that it is the Lord whose eternal reign is focused on here. . . . The consummated fulfillment of the long-awaited messianic kingdom prophesied in the OT finally has come to pass. . . . It is difficult to say how Christ’s delivering up the kingdom to the Father and subjecting himself to the Father at the consummation in 1 Cor. 15:24–28 relates to the present text. Perhaps Christ gives up the redemptive historical phase of his rule and then assumes an eternal rule alongside but in subjection to his Father.⁷³

⁶⁸ Ibid., 187–88.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 546–50.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 546.

⁷¹ Ibid., 550–58.

⁷² Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 611.

⁷³ Ibid.

Beale has at least two difficulties with 11:15. (1) At one point he says the verse looks forward to a change of rulership over *the world*, but a little later he contradicts himself by referring to a change of rule from that over *this world* to a rule over the new heavens and the new earth in the eternal state. (2) His second difficulty, which he admits, is in understanding how Christ could at the time of the consummation deliver up the kingdom to the Father as 1 Corinthians 15 requires, since Christ will only be starting His rule over the kingdoms of this world at that time.

The response to both of Beale's dilemmas is an acknowledgment that the future kingdom will have a temporal phase relating to the present earth, followed by an eternal kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. From its own statement, 11:15 speaks of a future temporal kingdom on this earth, a transference of power from heathen nations to God and His Messiah. At the end of that future temporal kingdom the Messiah will deliver up that kingdom to the Father as 1 Corinthians 15 requires.

Aune creates for himself the same dilemma as Beale in first defining "the kingdom of the world" of 11:15b as either the totality of creation or the human world in opposition to God and in conflict with His purposes, and then identifying the eternal reign of 11:15c as the eternal reign of God.⁷⁴ In so doing, he anticipates a future kingdom *on this earth* that will be eternal in duration, leaving no room for a new heaven and a new earth that he allows for elsewhere.

Osborne locates the replacement of the kingdom of the world with the kingdom of our Lord and His Messiah at the second coming of Christ, and sees it as the fulfillment of Jewish and NT expectations.⁷⁵ He has the same dilemma as Beale and Aune, however, because he sees this as the beginning of Christ's eternal kingdom,⁷⁶ even though 11:15 specifically locates this kingdom in *this world*, not in the new creation. He makes no allowance for the millennial kingdom, whose location will be the present earth.⁷⁷

Of course, at this point neither Beale, Aune, nor Osborne say anything about a fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. That is because Revelation 11:15 creates an impossible situation for those who interpret the book nonliterally, but for those who interpret it literally, it marks the fulfillment by God of the promises He made to David, and ultimately to Abraham too. The Apocalypse has much more to say about the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant and the prominent role of Israel in the kingdom, but it has much to say about the New Covenant also.

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31–34 records God's New Covenant with Israel. Among its other provisions are two that relate to the present discussion. When God says, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more," that was partly how Abraham would be a source of blessing to all people, and when He said, "I will be their

⁷⁴ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 638–39.

⁷⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 440–41.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁷⁷ For further verification on the location of the millennial kingdom, cf. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 550–52.

God, and they shall be My people,” He provided for Israel and all other peoples a new relationship with Himself, another source of universal blessing.

Forgiveness of Sins

Much in Revelation deals with the forgiveness of sins. A heavenly voice sings about the following in Revelation 12:11: “They [referring to the martyrs among the Israelites] overcame him [referring to the devil] through the blood of the Lamb.” Anywhere the book refers to the blood of the Lamb or simply to the Lamb, it alludes to His death at Calvary to provide forgiveness of sins (cf. 5:6; 7:14; 13:8). Revelation refers to the Lamb twenty-five times. The Lamb did not die sacrificially for Israel alone, of course—redemption is among benefits extended to the body of Christ⁷⁸—but His death happened for Israel’s sins especially as the Servant Song of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 emphasizes. The 144,000 special servants from among Israel were “redeemed from the earth” according to Revelation 14:3. They are seen on Mount Zion standing with the Lamb in 14:1. Their redemption must be the redemption provided by the suffering Messiah. According to 5:9 the redemption came through the blood of the Lamb.

Since Beale, Aune, and Osborne do not connect the woman of chapter 12 with Israel specifically, that they do not connect the blood of the Lamb in 12:11 with God’s New Covenant promise to Israel is no surprise. Beale identifies the woman as “all believers, past, present and future.”⁷⁹ Aune says, “The passage deals with the prophetic victory of Christian martyrs.”⁸⁰ Osborne identifies the overcomers in 12:11 with overcomers in the seven churches in Revelation 2–3.⁸¹

Part of God’s promise to Abraham was that he would be a source of worldwide blessing. Obviously, forgiveness of sins was part of a fulfillment of that promise, but the New Covenant spoke of more than that. Jeremiah 31:33b–34a promises, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” Such a condition as this can exist only after the binding of Satan spoken of in Revelation 20:1–3. Satan will no longer have freedom to deceive the nations (20:3). Until that time, he will continue his leadership as “the prince of the power of the air, or the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2b) and as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). He has been judged already in a potential sense through the crucifixion of Christ, but the implementation of that judgment awaits the future kingdom on earth and the complete fulfillment of the covenant that God made with Abraham.

⁷⁸ Because of Israel’s rejection of her Messiah at His first advent, Jesus extended the benefit of forgiveness of sins beyond the boundaries of Israel (Matt. 26:28; cf. Mark 14:24). That is why Revelation also speaks of forgiveness when the objects are not limited to Israel (cf. Rev. 1:5; 7:9, 14, 17).

⁷⁹ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 663.

⁸⁰ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 702–3.

⁸¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 475–76.

Control of the world in that future day will be in the hands of the descendant of David, the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16), and those who rule with Him (Rev. 20:4). He will raise the dead, including those who have been martyred during Daniel's seventieth week immediately before the millennial kingdom, and they will rule with Him. It will be a rule of righteousness and equity, and thus Abraham and his descendants will be a source of blessing to all people.

A New Relationship with God

Clearly, in the New Jerusalem phase of David's future kingdom, Israel and all others who have received the forgiveness benefit of the New Covenant will enjoy a relationship with God that will be unparalleled. John writes in Revelation 21:3, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them." This promise comes in conjunction with the descent of the holy city, the New Jerusalem, from heaven (21:2). It recalls God's New Covenant promise to Israel, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33d; cf. 32:38; Ezek. 37:27).

Aune recognizes the covenant formula, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33[LXX 38:33]), in 21:3c, but sees it here as referring to all people. He recognizes that it is limited to the righteous in Israel throughout the OT.⁸² He, of course, would not recognize God's dealings with Israel in particular in Revelation 7, 12, and 14 in order to bring them to this point.

Beale sees fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:33 by all people who trust in Jesus, "the true seed of Abraham and the only authentic Israelite, who died and rose for both Jew and Gentile."⁸³ He writes, "Everyone represented by Jesus, the ideal king and Israelite, is considered part of true Israel and therefore shares in the blessings that he receives. . . ."⁸⁴ Thereby, he shuns the literal fulfillment of the New Covenant with Israel in the future kingdom.

Osborne connects 21:3 with the promise of Ezekiel 37:27 as well as Jeremiah 31:33b, but interprets the verses as pointing to a fulfillment spiritually by Christians today, but by all people in the new heaven and new earth.⁸⁵ He omits any reference to the original recipients of the promises in Ezekiel and Jeremiah and their unique role. Ethnic Israel is the reason for this previously non-existent, close relationship between God and not only Israel but all peoples. All the families of the earth will be blessed through God's promise to Abraham.

The promise of Revelation 21:3 does extend beyond the boundaries of Israel, but to deny its special relevance to Israel and her New Covenant is to ignore the clearly distinctive role of national Israel through earlier portions of the book of Revelation and even in producing this new closeness to God. Revelation 21:12, 14 shows that Israel will have a role distinct from the church even in the new Jerusalem, the eternal state. As the special object of God's choice, she will ever be distinctive.

⁸² Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1123.

⁸³ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1047. Cf. *Ibid.*, 1048 where Jeremiah 31:33 appears.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 734–35.

Summary of Promises to Israel in the Apocalypse

The book of Revelation is full of references to God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to national Israel, specifically the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the New Covenants. For Him to turn away from Israel to fulfil them with other peoples, as those who interpret the book in an eclectic, nonliteral, or allegorical manner suggest, would violate His faithfulness to His promises.

The means used by Beale, Aune, and Osborne to avoid finding references to Israel in the Apocalypse vary. Beale and Osborne generally resort to an eclectic hermeneutic, choosing an idealist or allegorical meaning whenever the text refers to Israel. Any reference to Israel for them becomes a reference to the church, which they call the "New Israel." Aune does not describe his hermeneutics as "eclectic," but his method of interpreting the Apocalypse easily falls into that category. He labors to find definitions for "apocalyptic" and for "genre," ending with his own definition that he admits will not be acceptable to some others. He then uses apocalyptic genre as justification for combining a literal-futuristic-mystical method in some passages with an allegorical-idealist-historical method in others. He and Osborne nibble at literal fulfillment here and there, but explain it away by a species of genre principles used to override normal grammatical-historical principles, by reader-response hermeneutics, or by historical criticism.

All three men take negative references to Jewish people literally in 2:9 and 3:9, but revert to figurative meanings for Israel and the sons of Israel in chapters 7 and 14. The frequent disagreements between the three graphically portray how uncontrolled interpretation can be when one forsakes a literal method of understanding Revelation. With a literal approach to the book, references to Israel are plentiful.

With this characteristic of the book as a whole in mind, for someone to say "that Revelation 20:1–10 cannot be linked textually with Israel's covenants and promises; that no New Testament passage clearly teaches a future Jewish millennium; and that the New Testament interprets the imagery of the Old Testament with reference to the present spiritual reign of Christ from his heavenly throne" is a denial of what is obvious because of adopting meanings other than what words have in their normal usage. It is to view those verses as completely divorced from their context, an exegetically unacceptable decision. God will fulfill in a literal manner all the promises He has made to national Israel and will retain His eternal attribute of faithfulness. The Apocalypse interpreted literally verifies His compliance with His promises to the nation.

REVIEWS

Matt Waymeyer. *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two-Age Model*. The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2016. 325 pp. (paper); n.p.

Reviewed by Gregory H. Harris, Professor of Bible Exposition.

Matt Waymeyer, previous professor at the Master’s Seminary, has written a superb book based on his Ph.D. dissertation: *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two-Age Model*. While obviously addressing very important matters regarding eschatology, Waymeyer does not limit himself only to that one area. Instead, he so clearly shows that what this study addresses is so vital in understanding—or misunderstanding—virtually all of Scripture.

Never before in any book review have I used so many block quotes, but Waymeyer does such a superior job in laying what he is doing through the book and why, I thought I would “let the book speak for itself,” and set forth its value. All of the following block quotes are taken from the initial chapter entitled, “Introduction to the Two-Age Model,” such as his opening paragraph:

In the debate between premillennialism and amillennialism, the most fundamental disagreement concerns the thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation 20. Premillennialists believe the thousand years refers to a future reign of Jesus on earth, an intermediate kingdom between His Second Coming and the final consummation. But amillennialists believe it describes the current reign of Christ throughout the present age. For this reason, while premillennialism affirms an earthly kingdom between the present age and the eternal state, amillennialism denies this intermediate kingdom, arguing instead that the present age will be followed immediately by the new heavens and new earth (1).

From the section “The Two-Age Model of Amillennialism”:

One of the strongest arguments for the amillennial view involves what is known as the “two-age model,” an eschatological framework first highlighted by Geerhardus Vos in the early twentieth century. According to Vos, whose contributions are considered “nothing less than epochal in their significance for the history of eschatological thought,” the fundamental structure of biblical eschatology is presented in two successive ages, “this age” and “the age to come.” Vos

believed that these two ages cover biblical history and thereby constitute the basic framework of New Testament eschatology.

Although several amillennialists built upon the foundation laid by Vos, this model was not fully developed as a key argument in the millennial debate until the 2003 publication of *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger. In this landmark work, which was revised and expanded in 2013, Riddlebarger argued that the two-age model “enables us to make sense of eschatological language in the New Testament, specifically as it relates to the future and the millennial age.” Riddlebarger popularized this model as a polemic against premillennialism and placed it at the center of the case for amillennialism. Since then, the two-age model has become the primary argument for the amillennial view (NOTE: 2–3; footnotes from the text removed throughout this book review for easier readability).

Further:

Because it serves as the overall framework of the New Testament, Riddlebarger argues that the two-age model also functions as “the interpretive grid through which amillennialists should understand the biblical concept of future history.” Riddlebarger laments that “the two ages have not been properly considered as a major interpretive grid,” but amillennialists have increasingly regarded this model as the hermeneutical lens through which the rest of Scripture, including Revelation 20, should be viewed (4).

From the section entitled “The Two-Age Model as an Interpretive Grid”:

Because amillennialists consider Revelation 20 to be “unclear,” “difficult,” and “obscure,” they insist it must be interpreted in light of the clear two-age passages in the gospels and epistles [for any of the verses that use “the age to come”]. According to this approach, “any exposition of Revelation 20 should take place with the broader eschatology of the New Testament firmly in mind.” This means using the two-age model as the interpretive key to understanding John’s vision of the millennial reign of Christ.

With this model as the hermeneutical grid for the rest of Scripture, amillennialists come to Revelation 20 with the assumption that it does not—and indeed *cannot*—teach the existence of an intermediate kingdom between the present age and the eternal state (4–5).

Regarding the purpose of *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two-Age Model*:

Despite the growing popularity and influence of the two-age model, none of the major premillennial works in recent years has directly and substantially addressed this amillennial argument. Because any compelling defense of premillennialism must respond to the strongest and most recent argumentation of its

theological opponents, a premillennial critique of the two-age model is long overdue. The purpose of this book is to provide such a critique (7).

From a section entitled “Revisiting the Hermeneutical Foundation”:

Such a critique must begin in the realm of hermeneutics. At the outset, two hermeneutical problems plague the two-age argument for amillennialism. The first problem concerns identifying Revelation 20 as an unclear passage which needs to be interpreted by clearer passages in the gospels and epistles. Even though Revelation is indeed the most symbolic book in the New Testament—and even though some passages in the Apocalypse are difficult to understand—no other biblical passage contains nearly the amount of clarity and chronological detail regarding the sequence of events that will take place after the Second Coming. This clarity is often obscured by the intricate interpretations of Revelation 20 offered by amillennialists, but a straightforward reading of the events described in Revelation 19–21 is neither confusing nor difficult to follow. For this reason, to use passages containing far less detail (and therefore far less clarity) to interpret Revelation 20 is an unsound hermeneutical approach. Part of the difficulty with using “clear” passages to interpret “unclear” passages is the subjectivity involved in deciding which passages belong in which category (8–9).

Further, Waymeyer writes:

The second [hermeneutical] problem concerns the use of the two-age model as an interpretive grid. To use any passage or theological system as the lens through which the rest of Scripture is viewed tends to reinforce what the interpreter already believes while shielding him from theological correction and refinement. Therefore, when the interpreter comes to a passage which challenges (or perhaps even contradicts) his beliefs, his interpretive grid often silences the contribution of those passages by forcing them to conform to his theological system. In this way, systematic theology is used to determine exegesis rather than vice versa. No interpreter is immune to this temptation, but the problem is magnified when the use of an interpretive lens is considered a valid methodology to be enthusiastically embraced rather than a dangerous pitfall to be carefully avoided. It is one thing to guard against the tendency to view Scripture through the lens of one’s theological system; it is quite another to defend it as a constructive hermeneutical approach (9).

From the section entitled “Reconsidering the Starting Point,” and the biblical hazards that come with this shows the vast differentiation of the two approaches:

This raises the more fundamental question of the appropriate starting point in formulating a biblical theology of the coming kingdom. Rather than beginning in the Old Testament and tracing the development of the kingdom through the progress of revelation, the amillennialist parachutes into the middle of the New Testament and insists that the two-age passages serve as “the starting point” and

“interpretive grid” for the rest of Scripture. From there, whether looking backward at prophetic predictions in the Old Testament or forward to John’s prophetic visions in Revelation 20, the amillennialist views every other passage through an interpretive lens which appears to have been chosen arbitrarily (10).

From the section “The Clarifying Role of Revelation 20,” Waymeyer reasons:

With this approach, Revelation 20 is not to function as an interpretive lens for the rest of Scripture, and yet—as the fullest and most comprehensive presentation of the eschatological events surrounding the Second Coming—it should be allowed to clarify previous revelation about the coming kingdom. In doing so, Revelation 20 should not be used to reinterpret and distort the meaning of earlier passages, but rather it should be carefully harmonized with them so that the divine authority and progressive nature of biblical revelation are appropriately honored (12).

From “The Approach to This Critique,” Waymeyer sets forth the broad sections and its contents that he will follow:

In addressing the question of whether the two-age model precludes an intermediate kingdom, this critique moves progressively through Scripture. The first section (chapters 2–5) focuses on the Old Testament, with an exegesis of several prophetic passages which predict a period of time that is distinct from both the present age and the eternal state (Ps 72:1–20; Isa 2:1–3//Mic 4:2–4; Isa 11:1–9; Isa 65:17–25; Zech 8:4–5; 14:16–19; Isa 24:21–23). A careful examination of these passages will demonstrate not only that the two-age model of amillennialism has difficulty accommodating these prophetic predictions, but also that they are best understood as providing evidence for an intermediate kingdom between the present age and the eternal state (14–15).

Next:

The second section (chapters 6–10) transitions to the New Testament and responds directly to the three ways that the two-age model is used as an argument against premillennialism. This section focuses on specific eschatological events which amillennialists cite as forming the dividing line between the two ages: the resurrection and judgment of all mankind (Dan 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; Matt 25:31–46; 2 Thess 1:6–10), the destruction and renewal of the cosmos (2 Pet 3:10–13; Rom 8:18–23), and the final victory over sin and death (1 Cor 15:20–28, 50–57; Rom 8:17–23). This examination will demonstrate that none of those arguments or New Testament passages preclude the possibility of an intermediate kingdom, and at least one of these passages refers to a messianic reign of Christ between the present age and the eternal state (1 Cor 15:20–28).

Lastly:

The final section of this critique (chapters 11–14) focuses on Revelation 20:1–6, commonly considered a *crux interpretum* in the debate over the millennium. This passage is critical because Revelation 20 appears to present the most obvious and formidable challenge of the two-age model by describing an intermediate reign of Christ between the Second Coming (Rev 19) and the eternal state (Rev 21). This section will evaluate the various arguments for the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1–6, giving particular attention to four key exegetical issues in this passage—the timing of Satan’s binding, the nature of the first resurrection, the duration of the thousand years, and the chronology of John’s visions.

If Revelation 20 clearly teaches an earthly reign of Christ between the present age and the eternal state, there must be some way to harmonize this intermediate kingdom with the two ages in the New Testament. This critique will demonstrate not only that the messianic kingdom of premillennialism is unmistakably clear in Revelation 20, but also that this kingdom is perfectly compatible with all the passages cited by amillennialists as disproving it. In the end, harmonizing the entirety of biblical revelation leads to the conclusion that the thousand years in Revelation 20 describes a millennial kingdom that will take place between the present age and the eternal state, just as premillennialism teaches [15; italics in the original text].

I highly recommend Matt Waymeyer’s *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two-Age Model*. This book is a wonderfully researched and biblically reasoned book, with copious footnotes showing the depth of his research, and yet written in such a way, that those who desire to learn of this incredibly important dividing point of biblical understanding can do so. Any Christian who desires to know the Bible better should read this book, not just because it so clearly sets forth two diametrically opposed biblical interpretation approaches, but as Waymeyer reasons in the concluding paragraph of his preface:

This book presents an invitation to those who may find themselves caught up in either one of these trends. Whether an eschatological agnostic who has never studied the millennial debate, or an amillennialist who has failed to give this issue the careful attention it deserves, the reader is challenged to consider this premillennial response to the most compelling arguments for amillennialism. The goal of this book is not only to clarify the key differences between these two competing millennial views, but also to provide an exegetical critique of the two-age model of amillennialism. In considering this response, the reader is encouraged to be diligent in his own study of Scripture, weighing carefully the arguments on both sides of the debate. Just as importantly, he is also encouraged to let that study spur him on to greater holiness as he eagerly awaits the blessed hope and appearing of our great God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (viii).

Scott Christensen. *What About Free Will?* Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016. 284 pp. \$17.99 paper.

Reviewed by Jonathan Moorhead, Instructor, Czech Bible Institute, Czech Republic.

Scott Christensen is pastor of Summit Lake Community Church in Mancos, Colorado and is a graduate of The Master's Seminary (M.Div). In this work, he examines the biblical tension of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. In particular, he defends compatibilism ("divine sovereignty is compatible with human freedom and responsibility" [6]) against libertarianism ("free will is incompatible with divine determinism" [ibid.]).

From the Introduction the reader understands that this book is immensely practical, accessible, and personal. The philosophical jargon that often muddles the conversation and intimidates the uninitiated is absent. Rather, Christensen provokes the reader's curiosity with a convincing litany of questions that display the practicality of the debate concerning daily decisions, prayer, responsibility, evil in the world, etc. Setting the tone for the pastoral nature of the book, the author writes, "When we enhance our understanding of God's role and our own roles as his plan unfolds for history and our personal lives, it gives us confidence and hope that God is good and wise and powerful and that our choices have meaning and purpose" (8). Additionally, the reader will immediately notice the quality of good resources from various perspectives, and that each chapter concludes with a glossary of important terms, chapter summaries, as well as study questions and an annotated bibliography.

The first few chapters of the book lay the foundation for understanding the nature of compatibilism and libertarianism. Following the pattern of Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will* (Yale, Volume 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1957), the author presents a devastating critique of libertarianism. Not only are practical and philosophical arguments given, but also the biblical text is examined in order to establish the untenable nature of libertarianism. Considering the popular belief in Molinism, a more detailed treatment of this view would have strengthened the book (see 49, fn. 43).

Having applied *reductio ad absurdum* to libertarianism, Christensen proceeds to discuss the most common questions related to compatibilism. Namely, he explains God's sovereignty and human responsibility in sanctification, fatalism, the problem of evil, the wills of God, prayer, the nature of freedom, the anatomy of decision-making within the confines of one's nature, evangelism, the work of regeneration, and more. Significantly, celebrating the theocentric nature of the tension is critical: "Without both polarizing elements, we never have the opportunity to appreciate the grandeur of the Creator's masterful and wise purposes in which the full panorama of his glory is put on display" (83). While the discussion of these themes is excellent, a more thorough exposition of exactly how God is glorified by the existence of evil and the damnation of sinners would have buttressed the compatibilist position considering the perennial nature of these questions (see chapter 6 and page 204).

In addition to the main body of the book, the author adds two helpful appendices. Appendix one presents a two-paned chart that compares libertarian and compatibilist beliefs on free agency. This provides an easy reference and refresher for the

reader. Appendix two is a review of Randy Alcorn's, *Hand in Hand: The Beauty of God's Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice* (Multnomah, 2014). Although Alcorn identifies himself as a compatibilist, Christensen shows how Alcorn's description of "free agency" aligns him more accurately with libertarianism. This analysis is strategically placed so that the reader may apply knowledge gleaned from the book in order to critically evaluate Alcorn's position.

As D. A. Carson notes in the Foreword, "This is a serious book for serious Christians" (x). Following in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, Scott Christensen has produced a treatment of this topic that is unparalleled in contemporary evangelicalism. The combination of devotion to the text of Scripture, theological rigor, concern for clarity and simplicity, charity, and pastoral concern makes this volume an indispensable resource.

Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews. *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism Between the Wars*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2017. 216 pp. (cloth) \$49.95.

Reviewed by Jesse Johnson, Pastor, Immanuel Bible Church, Springfield, VA.

The 2008 presidential election in California mystified many political observers. The state voted overwhelmingly to elect President Obama while also passing Prop 8, a ballot measure that opposed the practice of same-sex marriage. Exit polls and field research indicated that African-American Christians were the most significant bloc of voters that voted both for Prop 8 and Obama, and the conventional wisdom of the political class was that this was an inherent contradiction in the African-American world-view.

Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, a professor of religion at the University of Mary Washington, wrote *Doctrine and Race* to demonstrate that the contradiction is only perceived, but not real. Church-going African Americans have a long history in the United States of being politically progressive while socially and theologically conservative. The subtitle of her book, *African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism Between the Wars*, reveals that Mathews sees this world-view as being formed by the political and cultural shifts in African American churches between 1920 and 1940.

In white churches, this was the era of fundamentalism vs. liberalism. Evolution was making inroads in the culture, Prohibition was in the voting booth, and teenagers were dancing at socials. In many ways the African American churches were spectators to this, rather than participants. Liberalism was perceived as a problem for white churches, not black ones, and thus the fundamentalists would be predominately white, not black. Mathews shows that this was by design.

The most substantial contribution Mathews makes to the understanding of the composition of fundamentalism is that the movement was among white churches because white evangelical leaders saw no need to partner with African American leaders. Their divide was not theological—black church leaders in the United States generally believed in the virgin birth, the inerrancy of scripture, and the truth of the resurrection. Rather the divide was cultural and political.

The dynamics of the 1928 presidential election between Herbert Hoover and Al Smith embody this tension. The Republican candidate, Herbert Hoover, was overtly racist. He favored the criminalization of interracial marriages, and vowed to keep African Americans out of political power. Meanwhile the Democrat, Al Smith, was often photographed with African Americans, and even appointed some to positions of political importance in New York (where he was governor).

Yet Hoover was in favor of Prohibition, while Al Smith was opposed. Hoover was Protestant; Smith was Catholic. So the election presented a choice for Christians—a racist Protestant opposed to alcohol, or a progressive and wet Catholic. African American Christians preached against alcohol and against Catholicism, but were fractured in the voting booth. Meanwhile fundamentalist leaders encouraged their congregants to view inter-racial marriage as sinful, and to be a one-issue voter; namely, Prohibition.

The fallout of this is still felt today. The fundamentalists went on to be primarily white, while African American churches went on to be theologically conservative but socially progressive. African Americans showed a willingness to separate their politics from their preaching in a way that fundamentalists still struggle to comprehend.

This was the era of lynching, of a massive migration of blacks from South to North, and of extreme racism in the South. African American Christians preached a gospel that condemned racism, and had hope to offer a country in massive demographic flux. But this was also the era of Prohibition, evolution, and liberalism. Fundamentalists preached in a gospel that condemned those, and offered hope to people caught in the despairs of modernism. Both groups (the black church and fundamentalists) saw the other side's problems as secondary to the pressing issues of the day, and thus both largely preached a gospel that was silent on the other's issues.

Mathews' work is separated into five chapters. Chapter 1 shows how fundamentalism developed around a fairly racist world-view; the leaders had segregated meetings, taught that marrying across racial lines was sinful, and to the extent that blacks were ever allowed on stage at any of their gatherings, it was to sing but never to preach.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how African American church leaders viewed fundamentalists. They shared concerns about evolution and the immorality among the youth, but in many ways they viewed the theological liberalism making inroads into the white churches as a white problem. "African American evangelicals racialized the term modernism just as fundamentalists had racialized fundamentalism; ironically both terms described white Protestants, while African Americans tended to argue that neither described black Protestants" (48).

Chapter 3 argues that as African Americans began to realize new freedoms in the United States, they began to view fundamentalism as an obstacle to progress. Fundamentalists (and, Mathews points out, dispensationalists too) preached about a brave new world without wars, starvation, and human pride. But they seldom (if ever) included an end to racism and lynching in their vision of the future. While they may not have believed in a segregated heaven, they surely lived like it on earth. Interestingly, Mathews notes that African Americans by and large did not become dispensationalists because they viewed any new theology as suspect, while also hearing in

dispensationalists' focus on a future kingdom a way of justifying inaction on the lynching so common in this kingdom.

Chapter 4 goes deeper into cultural changes that appeared in the US in the 1930's. While fundamentalists longed for the morality of a by-gone era, African Americans interpreted that longing as romanticizing the era of slavery. Modernism began to be linked to immorality, hyper-sexuality, and rock-and-roll music, all of which were becoming stereotypes of African Americans. Thus as fundamentalists preached against those things, it had the further effect of creating a rift between the two camps. This is particularly sad because Mathews points out that their theology was actually not that far apart. Blacks struggled to understand how fundamentalists could long for Victorian morals without the racism that accompanied Victorian society.

The book concludes with a chapter that explains how African American churches and fundamentalists both developed concepts of the church that excluded one another. "African American Baptists and Methodists qualified the definition of true believers in such a way that it omitted fundamentalists... from inclusion" (p. 139). For the black church, if a person believed in a gospel that was compatible with racism, then it was not a true gospel at all. On the other side, the fundamentalist's focus on evangelism excluded African Americans. Because African Americans were considered "reached" with the gospel, they were not evangelized. Because they were considered "outside" of fundamentalism (for largely political reasons) they were not partnered with. Because the church's goal was to advance the gospel without reference to social change in terms of race relations, African Americans found themselves excluded from the fundamentalist movement

To develop these observations, Mathews poured through newsletters and sermons from the denominational leaders of the African American churches. She traced denominational splits, leadership jockeying, and political maneuvering. She quotes extensively from leaders, and this gives the reader a real understanding of how they perceived the issues of their day.

This approach relies on some assumptions—namely that the denominational editors reflected the worldview of their readers, and that the leaders gave an accurate representation of the beliefs of the people in the pew. Mathews is aware of these assumptions though, and deals with them head on.

A weakness of her approach is that Pentecostals are mostly overlooked. The Pentecostal churches invested much effort in racially integrating their churches while promising to bring about a form of heaven on earth. I'd be interested in how Mathew's research would pair with the findings of a book like *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* by Grant Wacker (Harvard University Press, 2001), which remains the must-read resource on early fundamentalism. Regardless, *Doctrine and Race* should be mandatory reading for any study of American Christianity between the wars.

Doctrine and Race is an important book, and it teaches us that "for African Americans, the question was not conservative or liberal, fundamentalist or modernist, traditionalist or progressive" (127). Instead, the churches developed generally conservative theology, progressive politics, and a hope that modernism might end the racism of the by-gone era that fundamentalists longed for. The black denominations would not associate with a movement that did not see the equality of all people before

God as a “fundamental” of the faith, which is just as well, as the fundamentalists wouldn’t associate with other Christians outside their camp to begin with.

Arthur Herman. *1917: Lenin, Wilson, and the Birth of the New World Disorder*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017. 480 pp. (hardcover) \$29.95.

Reviewed by Gregory H. Harris, Professor of Bible Exposition.

Arthur Herman, Ph.D. in history and author of nine books, writes regularly for *The Wall Street Journal* and for *National Review*. I have no idea of Arthur Herman’s religious beliefs (if any). *1917: Lenin, Wilson, and the Birth of the New World Disorder* is a secular historical book that reveals amazing developments, and most people who look at the present situations of today would most likely not see this book about the events of 1917 as having any present relevance—but the book clearly sets forth and proves its case. I will present pertinent quotes from the book first and then give my Christian input at the conclusion of this article. The book is well-researched, explicitly written, and is easily readable. I believe that you will see many of the same words and ideas in this book as those currently being expressed on a daily basis in politics and perhaps now with a better grasp of their significance.

Using “The Great War”—later more commonly called World War I—as its backdrop to show the meteoric rise of Vladimir Lenin and Woodrow Wilson, in two different parts of the world, both attempting to bring the world under one banner, so to speak. Herman writes:

Ultimately, Lenin’s and Wilson’s creations would collide head on in the Cold War. Yet this book is about far more than the origins of the Cold War: it is about not only what Wilson and Lenin created that year, but also was lost in the scramble as both men set out to make the world a better and more perfect place through the power of politics—including lost opportunities which still pay a heavy price. That is why 1917 marks such a watershed (12).

Additionally, Woodrow Wilson was the first U.S. president who looked for a worldwide, collective, powerful government, with his worldview greatly influenced by philosophy:

What was it that [the early nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel saying [through his writings] that so powerfully appealed to Wilson? Above all, Hegel saw government, or the state, as the direct reflections of a society’s historical evolution. The higher the level of that evolution, the more active and interventionist that government must necessarily become. In that sense, government, including American government, can have no legitimate limits placed on its power, since that power is actually the expression of the objective will of the people. Otherwise, it would not exist at all (84).

As part of government’s ideal formation:

Indeed, the state is itself the embodiment of human progress. "The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on earth," Hegel wrote. Even in a democratic society such as the United States, those who exercise its functions have the responsibility to wield its influence in keeping with that faith in progress.

Hegel's vision of the power of government to shape a society for a better future, and the need to reform or strip away those institutions that stand in the way of the forward march of history would be the foundation for Wilson's presidential ideal (84–85).

Further:

It [Wilson's concept of a one-world government] was a heady worldview—at least as potent as Lenin's at about the same time: the power of government to do only good, a power that had no legitimate limits, a power that would lead a great people to their irresistible destiny. . .

These were also, it has to be said, a far cry from the ideals that had animated the America's Founding Fathers: the necessity of limited government and strict formal limits on its powers as the fundamental foundation of freedom (85).

The massive logistics of mobilizing America for "The Great War" was one of the reasons that brought about changes:

In many ways, the intrusion of national governments into their nations' economies was necessary; there was no way private initiative or industry, no matter how large or organized, could have built the mighty land, sea, and now air forces needed to fight a war on this mammoth scale. At the same time, government's ability to intervene in, and even run, the lives of private citizens had expanded beyond anyone's imagining. This, too, marked the start of something new then but all too familiar now. Emerging from the forge of war in 1917 was the active role of government in every aspect of daily life, and the rising expectation that government can fix any problem, and deal with every crisis from economic depression to childcare and climate change (236).

Herman writes regarding President Wilson's pending visit to Europe, as the Great War was in its final stages, where he would be the major peace broker and where he planned to implement the League of Nations, which would later become the forerunner to the United Nations: "To Frenchmen and millions of Europeans, Wilson was more than their savior in the war. He was the messiah who would give them and the rest of the world a new peaceful order" (262). Additionally, interesting word choices were used for the formation of Wilson's League of Nations: "And the Holy of Holies of the League would be its Covenant, the document that dictated the basic principles that the gathering of all nations would commit itself to observing in future deliberations" (374).

1917: Lenin, Wilson, and the Birth of the New World Disorder shows that both Lenin and Wilson had conceived correlating concepts, but they chose entirely different methods by which worldwide order would be achieved:

... Wilson's vision [of a one-world government] and Lenin's startlingly agreed. Both conceived of a new international order that transcended the boundaries of traditional politics and of history. One was founded on a universal commitment for freedom for all peoples everywhere; the other on a proletarian revolution that would eliminate all injustice forever.

But both new orders, they believed, would be inevitably imposed on others by the forces of history, whether people wanted their lives transformed or not (397).

In summarizing the impact of both Lenin and Wilson on world history, Herman states:

Both men were visionaries, certainly; utopians, clearly. Both foresaw the need for change by sweeping away everything that seemed to root the present in a corrupt and irredeemable past. Each set his eyes on a bright future of mankind—two very different futures in many ways, but futures that shared many characteristics (422).

The following is another striking summary statement as well:

They were also in their own ways both secular millennialists. They saw the world and mankind around them as fallen, but believed there was a final, golden age of redemption coming—not through a Second Coming of Christ, as conventional Christian millennialists have believed, but through a Final Coming of History, a great convergence of global fire into a single, coherent whole (422).

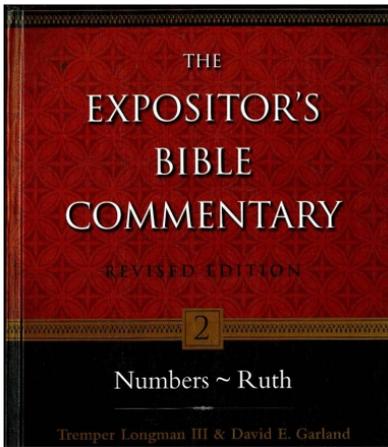
Herman demonstrates that while both Lenin and Wilson failed at their efforts to establish a one-world government, the ideal and yearning for it by many has not only remained, but has become increasingly more intensified, although different names are now used from those at that time. For instance, “Wilsonism” was the term used by many in 1917 for liberal international globalism, but that usage has now virtually passed from the scene. New names are now expressing the exact concepts that were expressed previously, names such as Secular Progressives, Progressives, Globalists, One-Worlders, Internationalists, Deep State—and many other words being used now or that will be used in the future. The author underscores and explains much of the increasingly hostile reactions of the proponents of globalism against anyone who opposes it: “the curious self-righteousness of the American Progressive mind, and the belief among Progressives that their views once arrived at were beyond criticism; as with Wilson, opposition itself became a sign of disloyalty, even of evil” (251).

I as a Christian and a Biblicalist write my review and my assessment with two initial comments. First, many conservative commentators of today on the news who are unsaved can see only the symptoms of the one-world government forces without knowing—or believing—the biblical basis for what is currently happening and what will happen in the future—perhaps very soon. Second, some of these commentators talk about bringing America “back to the days of Reagan,” but we are now a much

more sinful generation (see among other places Romans 1), and regressing does not seem to be where God will take the nation or the world. If these are “the last of the last days,” hostilities towards true Christians—and true Christianity—should become even more intense than they already are.

1917: Lenin, Wilson, and the Birth of the New World Disorder reads like a dress rehearsal for the real events that will take place in the future—yet what is to come is unspeakably worse than what took place in 1917 and in the following years. To answer the question, Is there a global conspiracy for a one-world government?, the answer is that there most certainly is a conspiracy. However, what the unsaved secular conservatives do not see are these biblical truths: (1) 1 John 4:3 “the spirit of the antichrist”—not yet the Antichrist, but the spirit which helps him rise to his power—“is now already in the world.” (2) 2 Thessalonians 2:7 reveals that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (literally “working”), and this is done with an effort to amass the one-world forces. (3) However, 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7 promises that as long as “the Blessed Restrainer” restrains, there can be no one-world order, which is why neither Lenin nor Wilson nor anyone else can bring in the one-world government until God allows. Accordingly, God currently allows evil to reach only a certain level—but not beyond that. (4) 2 Thessalonians 2:8 is the first verse in the Bible that links the Antichrist with Satan (“that is, the one who is coming in accord with the activity of Satan”), with much more information revealed about this in the book of Revelation. (5) It is only after the Rapture of the church that Jesus will break the first seal during the Tribulation (Rev. 6:1–2), that will send forth the one-world forces who will go out “conquering and to conquer.” (6) The nations will most certainly be brought under “the Covenant” (Dan. 9:24–27). And finally (7) 1 Thessalonians 5:3 reveals that at the beginning, when the one-world government starts, “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape,” as soon the Antichrist—and Satan—will ultimately arise to worldwide power and worship (Revelation 13)—unlike any other time in history past, present or future, but *always* under the sovereign restraints of the Holy Trinity.

The one-world government is most certainly to come, but so too, is the Second Coming of Jesus with His eternal kingdom.



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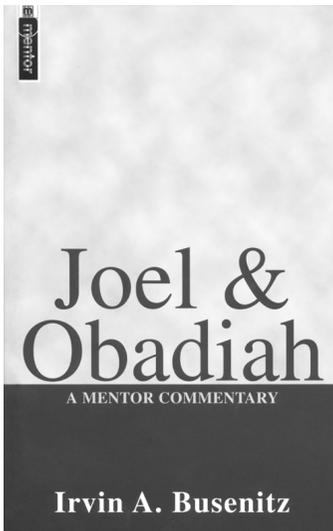
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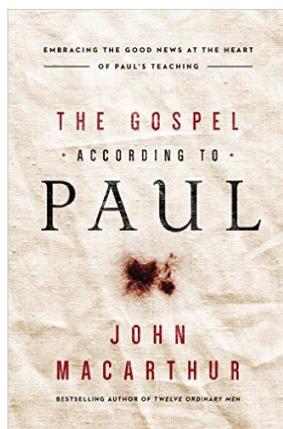
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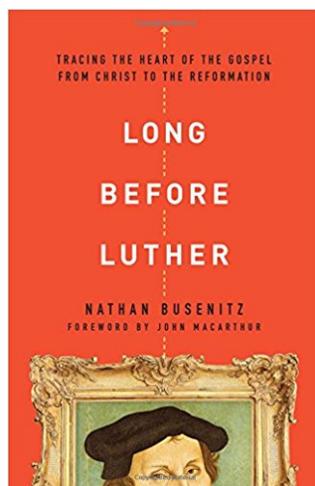


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