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SCRIPTURE ON CREATION

The battle rages today between evolutionists and creationists. A rigorous war is waged to win over your mind on the issue of origins. No doubt you’ve experienced the pain inflicted by this confrontation. Maybe you have been burdened to actually know how the universe, the world, the galaxy and all that is in them really came into being.

Where did it all come from? How long did it take? When did it begin? How did it begin? These questions could be posed to no more appropriate expert than the only One who was there at the beginning—God. He has not been silent on the subject, so our discussion begins with the Bible. For in Scripture, the Creator himself speaks on the questions of origins.

The Starting Point

Recently, an apocryphal tale appeared about some men who sought to know, “Where did the earth come from?” They compiled their data and fed it into a sophisticated computer. Then with avid anticipation, they pushed the answer button. Lights flashed! Bells rang! Buzzers sounded! The great moment brought forth this printed message, “See Genesis 1:1.”

Admittedly, the story is fictitious but it illustrates a crucial point: God’s written revelation demands primary consultation. Natural revelation rightly serves then to affirm what has first been determined from a careful, exegetical investigation of the entire Bible.

Unified Testimony

Even if we did not have the Genesis testimony, the “origins question” would not go unanswered. Specific statements about creation weave their way throughout the course of Scripture. Take a look at this pattern which emerges.

Thou alone art the Lord. Thou hast made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all
that is in them. Thou dost give life to all of them and the heavenly host
bows down before Thee (Neh 9:6).

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from
the womb, “I the Lord, am the maker of all things, stretching out the
heavens by Myself, and spreading out the earth all alone” (Isa 44:24).

Ah Lord God! Behold, Thou hast made the heavens and the earth by Thy
great power and by Thine outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for
Thee (Jer 32:17).

. . . you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the
heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them (Acts 14:15).

Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth, and
the heavens are the works of Thy hands (Heb 1:10).

Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and
power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they
existed, and were created (Rev 4:11).

For a wider survey, check out 1 Chron 16:25–26; Job 38–41; Ps 33:6;

The whole of Scripture points to a Person not a process. The parts
consistently declare that God created. The incontestable conclusion surfaces that
the writers of Scripture believed God to be the first cause of all things. However,
for many sincere Christians the question is not “Who?” but rather, “How?” The
Scripture is not silent here either.

Direct Claims

In addition to strong affirmations that God created, the Bible also makes
definitive assertions concerning the specific nature of the creation. Scripture
addresses both the amount of time and the source of material used.

When God (through Moses) wanted to illustrate how the Fourth
Commandment of Sabbath rest should be celebrated, He referred back to creation
as the model. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor
and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it
you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your
female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days
the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and the sea and all that is in them and rested
on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy”
(Exod 20:8–11).

God’s logic flowed along this line—man is to labor for six days (20:9)
because it was in six days that the Lord made the heaven and the earth and all that
is in them (20:11). Since the days of work were measured in 24-hour segments,
the time periods for creation (which served as the prototype) must also be of equal length. The same logic also applied to the day of rest (20:10–11). Unless days of equal length were intended in both passages, the illustration would have been meaningless.

Secondly, the writer of Hebrews tackles the question of what materials God used in creation. “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb 11:3).

There existed no eternal matter. God did not plant a seed that eventually grew into something more complex than itself. If that is hard to believe, then obey the Scriptures—take it by faith for there is the premiere declaration of creation ex nihilo (from nothing).

Unmistakably, Scripture asserts that the world we see today was not the result of process in which the world became what it is through lengthy stages of maturity. Rather, the visible came into being from the invisible. And if God is the first cause of special creation, we would suspect that the work bears His signature.

**God’s Nature**

God’s eternal perfection is assumed everywhere in Scripture. What’s more—the awesome majesty of creation reflects His power and glory and dominion. “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps 19:1).

No mechanistic process of evolution or maturity would form the beginning point to the infinitude and power of God. However, from the beginning, the creature has been without excuse for his ignorance of God since He is clearly revealed in the nature of creation.

You can logically have evolutionary process without God. That is why most evolutionists are atheistic, but God becomes the fly in their ointment of thought. However, you can never have sudden creationism without God. Thus, only in sudden creationism would God’s mark of power be unmistakable from the start. That is why Paul concluded, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Rom 1:20).

Next, let’s assume for a moment that the world and its inhabitants came into being through process. The more complex would develop (evolve!) out of the simple. Furthermore, most evolutionists would agree that the human race stands as the epitome of the process. If all of that is true, then whatever is the basic nature of man also is basic to the original organism from which man has developed.

This reasoning, however compelling, is rendered untrue by one basic biblical fact. Man was created in the image of God. Therefore, humans could not have evolved into the image of God because there is no time gap between man’s creation and man being made in the likeness of God. It is written, “This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God” (Gen 5:1). Whatever one believes about origins, it is
necessary to postulate that God, in a moment of time, embossed mankind with His image. Process will not account for our unique nature, nor for the fact that mankind has been infected by sin. Thus it is that God sent His Son to redeem only mankind rather than the multitudes of other life forms.

Christ’s Earthly Ministry

We could examine no more credible authority on our subject than the Creator Incarnate—Jesus Christ. If anyone can shed some convincing light on this inquiry, certainly the Savior stands as the supreme witness.

The Bible testifies about His involvement in the creation. Scripture makes strong assertions that Christ not merely identified with creation, but actually initiated all of it. “All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3).

“For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him” (Col 1:16). “In these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Heb 1:2).

Most explanations of creation require a significant time interval between the creation of matter and the origin of man. However, listen to Jesus’ own teaching, “But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female” (Mark 10:6). Christ’s word choice here leaves the interpreter with no other alternative than to understand that man was a part of the creation at the outset, not some subsequent development. Only the model of sudden creationism takes this most determinative evidence into consideration.

Christ’s words are convincing, but the significance of His forceful works (the creative miracles) persuades us even more. On one occasion, He created wine out of water (John 2:1–11). Twice He created banquets to feed thousands out of meager handfuls of food (Matt 14:13–21, 15:34–39). In each instance, the miracle occurred apart from a process and without the passing of large time periods.

God gave the disciples a glimpse of Christ’s second coming glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. So, He also gave us a look at Jesus’ creative power through His miracles. Carefully note that not only was God able to manifest creative power, but He also willed to do so.

End-Time Events

Of all the biblical evidences that point to sudden creationism, the following just might be the most convincing. As we look at how God chose to conclude human history, we will catch a glimpse of how the world most likely began.

Christians hope that their bodies will be resurrected from the grave and transformed to be glorified and incorruptible. We have every reason to expect that the Lord is able and willing to do this (Dan 12:2; John 5:29; Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:51–52; 1 Thess 4:16–17) according to the Scriptures. Every Christian’s body
will instantly be recreated from the dust of the earth. This is like the creation of Adam repeated. Only this time, not just one body is created, but literally millions who have trusted Christ as their Savior. Since multitudes will be given recreated bodies in the resurrection, how easy it would have been for God to create just Adam and Eve at the beginning. Thus, it is logically valid to conclude that the greater creative miracle of resurrection parallels the lesser miracle of initial creation. Sudden creationism then stands not only possible but even most probable as a manifestation of God’s consistency.

Just as the resurrection of man points to a sudden creation in the beginning, so does the ending of the world. In a rapid exertion of His divine power, God will cleanse and refurbish the cursed earth by fire so that it will become a new earth (2 Pet 3:10–13).

Eternity future will not evolve from the present world. Rather, God will quickly and powerfully bring an end to the present time and usher in the final age. Since God will suddenly reverse the present process, it is reasonable to believe that He initiated the world that now is in the same manner (quickly, from nothing).

Now, having looked at the end, we finally turn back to the beginning. Does Genesis give us any supporting reasons to believe that the earth was personally created by God in a short period of time?

The Genesis Record

The grammar of Genesis provides some convincing evidences. They point to “day” in context as referring to either the period of light within a 24-hour cycle or the entire period of both darkness and light (24 hours). The one exception is “day” in Gen 2:4. However, it is obvious from the context that “day” there refers to the entire period of creation.

Note first that the Hebrew word for “day,” when accompanied by a numerical adjective (e.g., fourth day), is never used figuratively. It is always understood normally.

Next, the Hebrew plural for “day” is never used figuratively in the Old Testament (Exod 20:9) outside of a creation context. We are, therefore, led to believe that it is used in the same way when referring to origins.

Further, the terms “evening” and “morning” are never used figuratively in the Old Testament. They always describe a 24-hour period.

Fourth, God actually defines “day” in Gen 1:5 by designating it as a period of light and a period of darkness. After creating light (Gen 1:3) and causing a spatial separation between the darkness and the light (Gen 1:4), with respect to the earth, God established the light/dark cycle as a principle measurement of time; i.e., one day (Gen 1:5). This light/dark cycle is best understood as one full earth rotation or a 24-hour day.

The grammatical interpretation of Scripture is primary to an accurate interpretation of Scripture. These facts are significant exegetical indicators of the time aspect manifested in creation. They point unquestionably to creation in six consecutive 24-hour days.

Now let’s turn our attention specifically to the creation of man. The human
species did not evolve from some lower life form but rather was created by divine fiat (the exertion of the divine will) from lifeless dust (Gen 2:7; 3:19; Eccl 3:20; 12:7). No other explanation of human origins accounts for this clear Scriptural declaration except sudden creationism.

Further, the female did not evolve from the male or from any other creation, but was personally fashioned by God (Gen 2:21–23; 1 Cor 11:8, 12) on the same day as man’s creation. There were not large gaps of time when woman (a mutation in any other system) came from man. Because male and female came into being in close time sequence, this demands God’s creative power as proposed by the sudden creationism model.

With these thoughts in mind, note carefully that one does not have to start with Genesis to understand what the Bible teaches about creation. Having finally arrived here, however, we do see that Genesis confirms the rest of Scripture and adds its own irresistible strength to the sudden creation position.

A Final Thought

The reasoning and conclusions reached here represent the primary biblical evidences which must be honestly faced if the biblical record is to be taken seriously. Any solution to the problem of origins shaped without thorough regard for these evidences is inadequately formed.

Maybe it doesn’t take a computer, after all, to solve complex questions surrounding creation. However, we have taken the imaginary computer’s suggestion and consulted the biblical record. That is truly the place to begin for all Christians who are seeking to know the truth.

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This is a two-part series. Part One covers the rise of three periods of activity known as “searching for the ‘historical Jesus.’” Its overarching purpose is a deliberate attempt to destroy the influence of the gospels and the church upon society. While this purpose is openly and honestly admitted by theological liberals, evangelicals who participate now in the “third” quest are far less candid as to its design. Part Two will cover this growing evangelical participation in searching. These searches started with the rise in dominance of the ideology of historical criticism over two hundred years ago and are a natural consequence of the innate historical skepticism replete in them. The first two searches ended as declared failures by those who engaged in them. Now some of the same scholars who have inspired the New Perspective on Paul have also been largely influential in stimulating the “third search for ‘the historical Jesus’” (e.g. Sanders, Wright, Dunn). When the evidence is examined, only one overall “search for the ‘historical Jesus’” actually has existed. All three are unified by sharing, to some degree, the unifying characteristics of significant degrees of suspicion regarding the gospels, similar ideological approaches in utilizing historical criticism, a refusal to accept the biblical accounts as truly depicting Jesus as He actually was in history, and a marked preference for developing a view of Jesus that is acceptable to scholarship.

Introduction: Searching for the “Historical Jesus”

For the past several hundred years, scholars have conducted what is known as “the search for the historical Jesus” or as it is also called today, “historical Jesus research.” Such a search operates under the \textit{a priori} assumption that the four canonical gospels, the only documents written concerning the life of Jesus, are in some
significant ways deficient, incorrect, or inadequate in their presentation of how Jesus actually was in history. This search posits a sharp cleavage between the gospel portraits of Jesus and His actual existence in first-century Palestine and seeks to establish a scholarly consensus view of Jesus that would be considered a more accurate representation of His life than what is contained in the gospels.

The “Historical Jesus” Research Is Searching for a Definition of the Term

The term, “historical Jesus,” cannot truly be defined with any degree of satisfaction or consensus among those who advocate such research. The irony of this state of affairs in its definition has resulted from the fact that no consensus has occurred as to what the “historical Jesus” is or was. Hagner incisively comments,

It deserves to be emphasized that in both the nineteenth-century writing on Jesus and that of today, what seems to be wanting is not so much a truer view of Jesus as an alternative view. The traditional view of Jesus, the view held by the early church, is old-fashioned, uninteresting, and thought to be unconvincing. What the world craves is a debunking of the traditional Jesus, a Jesus rescued from the dogma of the church for twenty-first century human beings. What will sell books and bring fame or notoriety and new explanations of Jesus—explanations acceptable to the proclivities and sensitivities of the modern world.

After two hundred-plus years of questing for whatever the “historical Jesus” might be, involving possibly three perceived “quests” (whether three exist is debated, as will be discussed), no general agreement exists among biblical scholars who pursue this discipline as to what the term means. Renown British theologian, N. T. Wright, himself a strategic impetus for a “third” quest of the “historical Jesus,” now known officially as the “Life of Jesus Research” laments, “The current wave of books about Jesus offers a bewildering range of competing hypotheses. There is no unifying theological agenda; no final agreement about method; certainly no common set of results.”2 An acute subjectivity reigns in every presentation of whatever the “historical Jesus” is/was.

Whatever the “Historical Jesus” Is, It Must NOT Be the Christ of the Gospels

In 1959, James M. Robinson, a leader of what is now known as the “second quest” period, did, however, stress what the term could not mean:

The term “historical Jesus” is not simply identical with “Jesus” or “Jesus of Nazareth,” as if the adjective “historical” were a meaningless addition. Rather the adjective is used in a technical sense, and makes a specific con-


2 N. T. Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” ABD, III, 800.
tribution to the total meaning of the expression. “Historical” is used in
the sense of “things in the past which have been established by objective
scholarship.” Consequently the expression “historical Jesus” comes to
mean: “What can be known of Jesus of Nazareth by means of scientific
methods of the historian.” Thus we have to do with a technical expression
which must be recognized as such, and not automatically identified with
the simple term “Jesus.”

Robinson continues regarding the first alleged quest that “[t]his was in fact the as-
sumption of the nineteenth century quest of the historical Jesus. For this quest was
initiated by the enlightenment in its effort to escape the limitations of dogma . . . .
unrestricted by the doctrinal presentations of him in the Bible, creed and Church.”
Since no perceived agreement or consensus exists as to who or what the “historical
Jesus” is or even if such a definition can even be determined, the consequence ap-
ppears to be that it is to be defined negatively since a general agreement exists
among questers that whatever the “historical Jesus” is or was, He is not, indeed
cannot be, equated fully with the Jesus who is presented in the gospels. Since histo-
riography, i.e. hypotheses of what can take place in a time-space continuum in re-
ference to historical-critical ideology, cannot encompass the supernatural, indeed,
rules it out from the very beginning, whatever the “historical Jesus” is, He cannot
be equated with the Jesus as He is presented in the gospels.

The Existential Jesus or What Does the “Historical Jesus” Mean to You?

As a result, the term “historical Jesus” is perhaps best termed the “existen-
tial Jesus,” for, as will be seen, a close examination of the questing reveals that the
“historical Jesus” is whatever the quester a priori determines Jesus to be or wants
Him as somehow significantly in distinction from the biblical documents. This sub-
jectivity is highlighted in reviewing terms used today in the “third search” to define
the “historical Jesus”: an eschatological prophet, a Galilean holy man, an occult
magician, an innovative rabbi, a trance-inducing psychotherapist, a Jewish sage, a
political revolutionary, an Essene conspirator, an itinerant exorcist, an historicized
myth, a protoliberation theologian, a peasant artisan, a Torah-observant Pharisee, a
Cynic-like philosopher, a self-conscious eschatological agent, and the list would go
on and on. No one embraces all of these images, but they are presented by their

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5 For further discussion of the operating agenda of historical criticism, see F. David Farnell,
“The Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in The Jesus Crisis, ed. Robert Thom-
as (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 85–131; Edgar Krentz, The Historical–Critical Method, ed. Gene M.
Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Ernest Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology”
(1898), in Religion in History. Essays translated by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense with an
Introduction by James Luther Adams (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32.
6 For these various portraits of what or whom the “historical Jesus” has been in the search
since its beginnings to the present day, consult Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus,
trans. W. Montgomery from the first German edition, Von Reimarus zu Wrede (1906). Introduction by
James M. Robinson (New York: MacMillan, 1968); Walter P. Weaver, The Historical Jesus in the
advocates as the most reasonable reconstruction of “the historical Jesus.” After an arbitrary a priori decision has been made on a preconceived concept of Jesus, criteria of authenticity, stemming from tradition criticism, can be applied to the gospels and that concept of Jesus affirmed. Since the criteria are subjective and conflicting, other criteria can be invented and applied to ensure the desired outcome. The critical weakness, as well as subjectivity, of these criteria lies in the fact that the same criteria can be applied or countered with different criteria to ensure whatever view has already been assumed. The current situation of widely conflicting views on who the “historical Jesus” was has prompted Jesus Seminar participant John Dominic Crossan to comment, “Historical Jesus research today is becoming something of a scholarly bad joke” and “an academic embarrassment” as well as giving the “impression of acute scholarly subjectivity in historical research.”

The Rise of Hostile, Alien Philosophies Creates a Chasm Between Gospels and the Jesus in History

One cannot overstress that the rise of modern philosophical ideologies inherent in historical criticism generates such distinctions between Jesus as He is presented in the canonical gospels and any conceptualizations of how He is alleged to have been actually in history. Hostile philosophical underpinnings of the ideology in terms of a virulent anti-supernaturalism create these hypothetical distinctions. The overarching intent in these searches is the destruction of the influence of the gospels, as well as the church, over society.

Searching Defined

The “questing” or searching for the historical Jesus may be defined as a philosophically-motivated historical-critical construct that the Jesus as presented in the gospels is not the same or not to be identified fully with the Jesus who actually lived in history. Underlying the questing is the assumption that “scientific” research showed that the Jesus of history was different from the Christ of Scripture, the creeds, orthodox theology, and Christian piety. To some degree or another, such an activity has an underlying operating assumption that the gospels cannot be

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Footnotes:

7 For discussion of these criteria of authenticity as conflicting, see F. David Farnell, “Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism,” in The Jesus Crisis, 199–207. As will be shown in this article, the “Third” quest has developed additional criteria of authenticity.


9 For a much more detailed discussion, see “The Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism, in The Jesus Crisis.

taken as wholly trustworthy in their presentation of Jesus’ life since belief or faith has mediated their presentation. In other words, faith and history are perceived as in opposition in reference to proper or legitimate historical methods, due to their standard pronouncement of a closed-continuum of cause and effect. This idea of historiography means that the phrase “historical Jesus” is oxymoronic. If Jesus is to be understood historically, according to the standards of accepted historiography replete in the ideology of historical criticism, then He cannot be the Jesus presented in the gospels. If one accepts the Jesus in the gospels, then such a Jesus is not historical. One must default to a departure from the New Testament presentation of Jesus out of perceived necessity so that the “historical Jesus” must be something other than exactly the Jesus of the gospels.\(^{11}\)

Presuppositional philosophical underpinnings of historical criticism have driven a qualitative as well as quantitative wedge between how Jesus is presented in the gospels and current hypothesizing as to how Jesus actually was alleged to be in history in ALL quests for the “historical Jesus.” This philosophical, presuppositional basis for the “historical Jesus” or the “Jesus of history” results in a Jesus removed from the supernatural as well as much of the uniqueness of Jesus as He is presented in the gospels. The degree of separation is, admittedly, somewhat one of degree, depending on the philosophical underpinnings arbitrarily accepted by the individual “searcher,” but usually, it is a very sharp separation, especially in terms of any violation of a closed-continuum of cause and effect. As a result, biblical scholars who follow this mode of thought are forced \textit{a priori} to “search” for the historical Jesus to find how He actually was in reality. Importantly, the idea of a “historical Jesus” distinct from the gospel presentations, as well as practice of “questing” or “searching” for this presumed historical Jesus, is an axiomatic consequence foundational to the tenets of historical criticism. The more one is consistent with the application of historical-critical ideology, the further the concept of a “historical Jesus” is removed from the gospel presentation of Him. To put it bluntly, the “historical Jesus” is a \textit{chimera} of historical criticism that has at its basis philosophical motivations. The great irony is that the true “myth” of historical criticism is its idea of the “historical Jesus.”

\textbf{Baruch Spinoza Stimulated the Questing}

Questing is usually traced to the Enlightenment as its stimulating force, for it was during this period that a strong “prejudice against prejudice” was developed, whereby scholars rejected previous opinions of the ancients as tenuous.\(^{12}\) Whatever the ancient early church said about the gospels in terms of their authorship or integrity was rejected in favor of more current approaches of the time. While very few ideas stem from absolute beginnings or a single root cause, the nascent beginnings of the historical-critical ideology of all these searches actually can be largely traced to the profound, albeit belated influence of the Jewish apostate Benedict Spinoza.

\(^{11}\) Hagner, “An Analysis of Recent ‘Historical Jesus’ Studies,” 83.

Spinoza, to a large degree, may truly be regarded as the progenitor or father of modern historical criticism of the Bible. Spinoza himself was a rationalist and pantheist, who for overriding personal reasons, disdained the plain meaning of the biblical text because of the implications as well as effect that it had upon him as a person as well as society as a whole.

Spinoza’s method had a simplistic genius behind it. He set in motion the modern nature of biblical criticism “as a weapon to destroy or at least discredit the traditional metaphysics of Christianity and Judaism.” Its purpose was to remove all influence of the Bible, not only in the religious sphere, but also in the economic as well as political areas of society. Commenting on the antecedent developments of historical-critical ideology, Dungan relates,

Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground. That, however, was precisely the intended effect of the first step: to create an endless “nominalist barrage” if you will, an infinitely extendable list of questions directed at the physical history of the text, to the point where the clergy and the political officials allied with them could never bring to bear their own theological interpretations of the Bible. In other words, Spinoza switched the focus from the referent of the biblical text (e.g., God’s activity, Jesus Christ) to the history of the text. In doing so, he effectively eviscerated the Bible of all traditional theological meaning and moral teaching.

Dungan goes on to comment, “In short, the net effect of what historical critics have accomplished during the past three hundred years—apart from accumulating an enormous heap of data about the physical history of the text—has been to eviscerate the Bible’s core religious beliefs and moral values, preventing the Bible from questioning the political and economic beliefs of the new bourgeois class [that arose in the modern historical-critical era].” The German philosopher, Heinrich Heine, remarked well: “All of our contemporary philosophers, perhaps often without

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15 Dungan, 199. Emphases in original.

16 Ibid., 172.

17 Ibid., 174 cf. 171. Dungan goes so far as to say that “modern biblical hermeneutics [i.e. historical criticism] was an essential part of the main attack on the traditional institutions of Throne and Altar.”
knowing it, see through the lenses ground by Baruch Spinoza.”

This helped create deist Lessing’s “ugly ditch” of a large, unknowable gap between the Jesus as He was in history and the Christ of faith (miracles of Jesus and especially His resurrection): “That, then, is the ugly ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.”

**How Many Searches Have Been Conducted for the “Historical Jesus”?**

New Testament scholarship today predominantly identifies at least three major periods in questing for the “historical Jesus.” Debate, however, still surrounds how many searches have been conducted or whether all searches conducted have been really one unified search operating from these common philosophical roots. Reumann’s scheme is widely followed:

I. The Old Quest (from 1778, according to Schweitzer, with its four either/or decisions: Purely historical or supernatural? Synoptics or John? Eschatological Jesus or not? Mark as a whole the basis for a “life” or Christology as post-Easter?)

II. The No-Quest Period (Bultmann and the form critics: all gospel accounts are colored by the church; or, the “no biography is possible” view)

III. Now, the New Quest and its fragmentation (Reumann 1974)

To this prevalent scheme must be added what has now become entitled “The Third Quest” for the historical Jesus, widely popularized at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This Third Quest has received its major impetus and name from British theologian Tom Wright, proposing this new term “Third Quest” in a 1982 article and also in his update of Stephen Neill’s work on a historical sweep of New Testament study, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1961–1986.* It has become an all-inclusive term to designate all historical Jesus research since the late 1970s and early 1980s. Wright comments,

Stephen Neill was correct to write in 1962 that ‘the historical reconstruction of the life and history of Jesus has yet hardly begun,’ but he could not have written those words today. For, while the so-called ‘New Quest’ was

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22 Beilby and Eddy, *The Historical Jesus Five Views,* 29.
still cautiously arguing about presuppositions and methods, producing lengthy histories of tradition out of which could be squeezed one or two more drops of authentic Jesus-material [Schillebeeckx], a quite different movement was beginning in a variety of places and with no unified background or programme. Fortified by Jewish materials now more readily available, these scholars worked as historians, under no doubt that it is quite possible to know quite a lot about Jesus of Nazareth and that it is worth-while to do so—the two things which the orthodox Bultmann school had denied. This movement of scholarship has become so pronounced that it is not fanciful to talk in terms of a ‘Third Quest.’

For Wright, this Third Quest could be separated from the other quests for three essential reasons:

First, much of the last century (from Schweitzer to Käsemann, if you like) has not been trying to find Jesus—in fact, it has been spent by theologians actually trying not to find him, lest they base their faith on history and so corrupt it. Secondly, this non-quest of the first half of the century was undertaken (if one may so speak) for... the desire to preserve orthodoxy and to protect ordinary Christians from the ravages of historical criticism. Conversely, where the Quest has been and is undertaken, the pious and orthodox are not noticeably welcoming it with open arms. One does not see copies of Vermes’s *Jesus the Jew* or Sander’s *Jesus and Judaism* on too many church bookstalls. Thirdly, actual historical enquiry after Jesus has not reached an impasse: it could not have, since until a few years ago it had hardly started, and in fact shows every sign of healthy young growth, needing pruning sooner or later no doubt, but at the moment to be encouraged.

Wright’s profound influence today among theologians has been a major factor in what is now seen as another attempt at searching for the historical Jesus. Importantly, he claims that this “Third Quest” displays “a real attempt to do history seriously” [in contrast to the other periods where historiography was so negative]. It also stands in contrast to other quests in that it displays a holistic approach to Jesus that attempts to place Him within a large-scale, fleshed-out hypothesis within His Jewish context rather than the atomistic approach of other searches that surrounds bits of Jesus’ words as exemplified in the Jesus Seminar activities.

25 *Christianity Today* in 1999 declared N. T. Wright one of the “top scholars” in the church at the end of the Twentieth century. His influence has been profound. See Tim Stafford, “The New Theologians,” *Christianity Today* (February 8, 1999), 30–49.
The First or Old Quest (1778–1906)

This first quest or “old quest” is marked from the work of Deist Reimarus (1694–1768—promoted by Librarian Lessing) to Wrede (1859–1906). Although this quest was largely influenced by German theologians, English Deistic influence was well-known to them as seen with Reimarus. However, the real roots of this quest go back to the rationalist Spinoza (d. 1677). This first search for the historical Jesus was well-documented in Schweitzer’s famous work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (German title *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*), whose incisive conclusion was that these questers only succeeded in making a Jesus in their own image, noting: “He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.” In other words, they reflected in a mirror how they wanted Jesus to appear existentially, “a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” Schweitzer was also guilty of the same rationalistic and existentialist interpretations that he recognized in others, and wanted to perceive Jesus eschatologically. His view, however, on the purpose of the “search” for “historical Jesus” was frank and honest, “The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma. Afterwards when it was freed from this πάθος it sought to present the historical Jesus in a form intelligible to its own time.” This statement confirms that the first search was solidly anchored with the Spinozan purpose of removing the influence of Christianity as a governing influence in society. It also did not seek Jesus as presented in Scripture but a Jesus that was compatible with modernism and anti-supernaturalism. Martin Kähler called “the entire Life-of-Jesus movement” during this time as “a blind alley” as well as “[t]he impossibility of [writing] a biography of Jesus.” All paths, even Schweitzer’s, were “dead ends” due to their presuppositions that affected their virulently negative concept of historiography.


29 *Das Messiahgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, 1901.

30 Brown notes that this tracing of the first search back to Reimarus is due to the influence of Schweitzer’s *Quest* in 1906. See Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought 1778–1860*, 1.

31 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 398.


33 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 4.

The So-called No Quest Period (1906–1953)

The demise of the “First” or “Old Quest” and entrance into the “No Quest” period is largely attributed to the work of Schweitzer as well as later in the period to Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). Wrede’s impact in his “Messianic Secret” of Mark expressing theology through the vehicle of a pseudo-historical framework had a significant impact during this period. The term “No Quest” is largely a misnomer, however, since Jesus research continued—it never stopped. Due to this influence of the presuppositions of the First Quest, this period’s historiography was still decidedly negative, especially in German circles.

The New or Second Quest (1953–1988)

The minimalistic, negative state of affairs regarding historical Jesus studies was not substantially changed by the inauguration of the “New” or “Second” Quest. Moreover, the advent of redaction criticism after World War 2 created emphasis on another layer of tradition that prevented investigators from discovering Jesus’ personal teaching, i.e., that of the unknown evangelists or composers of the gospel who conveyed not only the church’s theology but also their own particular theological biases. Ironically, Bultmann’s own students reacted against some of his negative historical assessments. Yet, their reassessment did not really change the state of affairs in the search for the historical Jesus to any significant degree in terms of historiography. The “New Quest” was dominated by the same negative presuppositions and methods as the Old Quest with some slight changes in emphasis and approach. This movement was sparked by Ernst Käsemann in his “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” which was a lecture given at the reunion of former Marburg students on October 20, 1953. A former student of Bultmann, Käsemann stated: “I now find myself at variance with my own past, with the school of theology in which I grew up and particularly with my teacher, Bultmann.”

He reacted to two of his teacher’s basic propositions that Bultmann had maintained for a long time: (1) nothing could be known about the historical Jesus and (2) no continuity exists between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the church. Instead, Käsemann argued that “there are still pieces of the Synoptic tradition which the historian has to acknowledge as authentic if he wishes to remain an historian at all.” That is, something had to be acknowledged as able to be known about the “historical Jesus” for the searching to have any substantive material to continue investigating and, as a result, one must allow that some continuity existed.


37 In later life, Robinson noted that Bultmann had eventually come to acknowledge that something could be known. Robinson commented, “Bultmann himself has conceded in a letter to me the possibility and legitimacy of the [new] quest.” See James M. Robinson, “The Historical Question,” The Christian Century 76 (October 21, 1959): 1210.

between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the church. This minimalistic material acknowledged could keep the search on-going. Hence, Käsemann proposed that with the “utmost caution and reserve” something may be reconstructed “like a life of Jesus.”

Käsemann also continued to place great stress on the work of form criticism, noting that “the obligation now laid upon us is to investigate and make credible not the possible unauthenticity of the individual unit of material but, on the contrary, its genuineness.” He continued,

We can only sketch in a few bold strokes the embarrassment of critical research. It lies in this: while the historical credibility of the Synoptic tradition has become doubtful all along the line, yet at the same time we are still short of one essential requisite for the identification of the authentic Jesus material, namely, a conspectus of the very earliest stage of primitive Christian history; and also there is an almost complete lack of satisfactory and water-tight criteria for this material. In only one case do we have more or less safe ground under our feet; when there are no grounds either for deriving a tradition from Judaism or for ascribing it to primitive Christianity, and especially when Jewish Christianity has mitigated or modified the received tradition, as having been too bold for its taste.

This statement’s intent is clearly pessimistic about the possibility of questing for the “historical Jesus” and rests heavily upon the criterion of dissimilarity. This latter criterion was first formulated by his mentor, Bultmann, as part of the development of form criticism during its period of highest skepticism in Jesus research or the “no quest” period. Dahl, recognizing the implications, related that such a criterion resulted in a minimalistic Jesus or what is euphemistically termed “a critically assured minimum” [italics in original] of Jesus tradition. Other prominent German scholars who participated in the New or Second Quest were Günther Bornkamm and Hans Conzelmann.

In the English speaking world, two leading proponents of the second quest stand out, James M. Robinson and Norman Perrin. In 1959, Robinson’s work, A New Quest for the Historical Jesus, was both a history and defense for this Second Quest that had been taking place among pupils of Bultmann. Robinson declared the first quest impossible and illegitimate. Instead, the gospels were to be understood as “kerygmatic” products, reflecting the faith of the early church. The Old Quest’s objectifying historiography must be replaced by an existentialist histo-

39 Ibid., 45.
40 Ibid., 34.
41 Ibid., 36–37.
43 James M. Robinson, A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and other Essays (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983 [1959]).
44 Ibid., 44–47
riography. His historiography remains quite negative, for he maintains “modern historiography mediates an existential encounter with Jesus.”

Central to his quest is that the “modern historical methodology” should be the basis of that quest, i.e. historical criticism, and that one must “recognize its limitations” for identifying “historical material.”

One can only wonder if such differences between the first and second quests were that qualitatively distinctive. Both quests remained overwhelmingly negative historiographically and both quests sought a Jesus that was acceptable only to them, so long as it was decidedly not the same as the portrayal of Jesus in the gospels with any of its supernatural content. Once again, Robinson’s frank statement that the “historical Jesus” cannot be the same as the Jesus portrayed in the New Testament demonstrates firmly that the second quest allied itself with the Spinozan purpose of removing the influence of the gospels and Christianity from society. This second quest was increasingly characterized as at a “dead-end.”

Here Come the British: The Most Recent Third Quest (1988–)

The beginnings of what is now being termed the “Third Quest” are not easily marked by a particular year but seem to have been gradually implemented through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Some choose 1985 with the publication of E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, which continued a similar line of thinking of placing Jesus within Judaism as Sanders’ approach had done with Paul in his Paul and Palestinian Judaism (1977). Others mark 1988 with Neill and Wright’s History of Interpretation who coined the phrase, “the Third Search” in his 1982 article cited in the discussion above. Wright himself cites twenty scholars as particularly important to developing the third quest from the year 1965 to the present. What can be said, therefore, is that somewhere in the latter third of the twentieth century, another attempt was brewing to search for the historical Jesus. The place of the Jesus Seminar (1995), though within this period of time, receives debate also. For Wright, the Jesus Seminar is really a continuation of the old “new quest,” although this work received great prominence after the publication of books that Wright assigned to the Third Quest. However, Johnson, in his Real Jesus (1996) declared that “The Jesus Seminar likes to think of itself as the vanguard of the ‘Third Quest.’”

While the first two quests for the historical Jesus were largely German inspired, this “third” quest has been stimulated, although not exclusively, by British

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45 Ibid., 90.
46 Ibid., 100.
47 See above, p. 5 as well as James M. Robinson, A New Quest, 26–27.
50 N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 84.
51 See Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” 799, where he places the Jesus Seminar under the New or Second Quest.
Three Searches for the “Historical Jesus” but No Biblical Christ

and British-trained theologians like N. T. Wright and James D. G. Dunn, although both have been also stimulated by Sanders’ thinking regarding Judaism as a key factor of their theological research. Braaten observed, “now at the end of this century [twentieth] a ‘Third Quest’ is underway. Its headquarters are no longer in Germany, but in the English speaking realm of theology.” Among terms used today to define the “historical Jesus” in the Third Quest are an eschatological prophet, a Galilean holy man, an occult magician, an innovative rabbi, a trance-inducing psychotherapist, a Jewish sage, a political revolutionary, an Essene conspirator, an itinerant exorcist, an historicized myth, a protoliberation theologian, a peasant artisan, a Torah-observant Pharisee, a Cynic-like philosopher, a self-conscious eschatological agent, and the list would go on. No one embraces all of these images but they are presented by their advocates as the most reasonable reconstruction of “the historical Jesus.” These diverse and often conflicting images of Jesus in the Third Quest bear a “striking resemblance” to the First Quest in the “sheer fantastic variety of images of Jesus,” all claiming to be based on documentary evidence and soberly sketched by using the most scientific methods of historical-critical scholarship,” with a similar goal to that of the First Quest of presenting a Jesus that is acceptable to the searcher in marked distinction to that of the gospels.

Some of the same theologians who have been largely influential in stimulating the “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) have also been influential in giving new stimulus to this “New Perspectives [PLURAL] on Jesus” (NPJ) known in the Third Quest: N. T. Wright, E. P. Sanders and James Dunn. These two theological movements seem to share a similar motivation at times. As the New Perspective on Paul sought to bring Paul in more correlation with his Semitic roots in contrast to a perceived German Lutheran distortion of him at the Reformation, so also this new search for the historical Jesus seeks to reconcile Jesus with His Jewish roots. This hints at one prominent theme in the Third Quest, to rescue any concept of Jesus from liberal German Protestantism of the previous two quests and root him in first century context of Judaism, with its particular religious, political, economic and social condition. This third search for Jesus is also marked by some unanimity in approach but much more divergence, while at the same time expressing an even larger degree of complexity and diversity among participants. This situation makes characterization even more difficult. Wright remarked, “The current wave of books about Jesus offers a bewildering range of competing hypotheses. There is no unifying theological agenda; no final agreement on method; certainly no common set of results.”

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53 Braaten, “Jesus and the Church,” 61.
54 Ibid., 62.
57 Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” 800.
The Third Quest has a striking resemblance to the First and Second Quests, all being expressions of the results of historical-critical ideology that are used to make a Jesus acceptable to the interpreter who conducts the “search.” This difficulty is born out in a survey of the various pictures that have been produced concerning the “historical Jesus” in this third period. Pelikan, in his book, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, depicts the many ways Jesus has been imaged: from the Rabbi of first-century Judaism, to the Cosmic Christ of Christianized Platonic Philosophy, through to the Teacher of Common Sense in the first quest, the Poet of the Spirit of Romanticism and the Liberator in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Importantly, these images arose as a consequence of interpreters departing from the gospels as the sole, credible source of who Jesus truly was by the eyewitnesses who wrote of His ministry. One is reminded of Schweitzer’s words regarding the acute subjectivity of the First Search, “But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of the life of Jesus.”

The results of this Third Quest so far are no different, no less acutely subjective. Wright, in citing the twenty scholars as “particularly important within the Third Quest,” made a tell-tale remark, “Anyone familiar with these books will at once see how very different many of them are from each other, and yet how similar are the questions being addressed.” This period, therefore, would include not only the radical results of The Jesus Seminar (1995), but also now evangelical questors who have come on board. In the most recent work, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (2009), the spectrum of “who is Jesus” ranges from Robert Price (The vanishing or non-existent Jesus), to John Dominic Crossan’s nominalistic Jesus as Galilean Jew within Judaism within the Roman Empire, to Luke Timothy Johnson’s the literary-portrayed or narrative Jesus as a character in the gospels, to Dunn’s Jewish Jesus, to one evangelical’s Jesus of the gospels in the historical Jesus who was Jewish messiah. Telling also is that when the latter attempts to identify Jesus more fully with the gospels, he is criticized for his subjective “‘evangelical’ reading . . . from the pages of the gospels, no criticism necessary.”

Is There Truly, Really, Honestly a “Third” Quest?

With the resultant failure of the first two “quests” for the historical Jesus based upon historical-critical ideological lines, the Third-Quest for the historical

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60 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 84.
61 Luke Timothy Johnson, “Response to Darrell Bock,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* 294; Dunn also similarly criticizes Bock for his evangelical imposition (i.e. resembling the canonical gospels too closely) on his search for Jesus. See Dunn, “Response to Darrell Bock,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 299–300.
Jesus has now been declared at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. As has been related, this label of the “Third Quest” has come from Tom Wright in a 1982 article “Towards a Third ‘Quest’?” as the earliest marker that would distinguish the “new” or “second” quest from what is now taking place and later was placed in his update of *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*. In protesting this “Third” search designation, Porter’s observation about one unified search is quite telling:

> There is a great deal of evidence that there has always been just one multifaceted quest for the historical Jesus. This quest has undergone development in a number of ways and in different circles, though not all in the same way or to the same degree . . . . this quest is also unified by a fundamental underlying attempt to discover the proper means to be able to speak of the historical Jesus. This unbroken line of scholarly investigation reveals more than a century of ongoing research, one that cannot be easily dismissed.  

Porter goes so far as to say that “Wright has engaged in what appears to be his own form of historical revisionism, reading his ‘third quest’ back even much earlier.” What would appear to buttress Porter’s contention is that “there is little in this ‘third quest’ that cannot be seen in continuity with previous questing after the historical Jesus.” All searches share the same ideological basis in historical criticism, in spite of recent protests or denials.

Although there are differences in emphasis and a wide-variety of conclusions regarding the “life of Jesus research” in this Third Quest, as with the Second Quest, a broad continuity exists in that (1) both agree that the historical Jesus can be reached to some greater extent (relative to the historiography of the searcher) than was thought in Bultmann’s day and (2) both operate under the assumption that historical-critical ideology is the operating hermeneutic as well as background materials supplied by other sources. Keck insightfully notes, “THE MARKED [caps in original] differences among the three Quests should not obscure the continuity that results from the shared reliance on key aspects of historical-critical method and its judgments about the Gospels and early Christianity. Basic for all three Quests is the view that Matthew and Luke used both Mark and Q, and that between Jesus and all written sources stands oral tradition which shaped and expanded the Jesus materials, so that recovering the Jesus of history entails differentiating what the texts report from what Jesus really said and did.” Yet, great diversity has earned it the tag of a “consensusless consensus.”

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63 Ibid., 53.
64 Ibid., 53 n. 58.
65 Telford, “Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 34, 49–51.
67 Eddy and Beilby, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 49.
Some Distinctives that Stand Out in the Third Quest

Several ideas stand out especially in the Third Quest: Firstly, a desire to place Jesus within the confines of first-century Judaism as received impetus in Sanders’ work (noted above) and James Charlesworth’s, _Jesus Within Judaism_ (1988), where a growing interest in the relationship that Second Temple Jewish literature (e.g. OT Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi Codices, Josephus) can shed light on Him. Charlesworth comments, “Jesus Research has become captivatingly rewarding. Today we can peruse some Jewish documents roughly contemporaneous with him, hearing terms, concepts, and dreams that were once considered unique to, or at least typical of, Jesus.” As will be seen, this also expresses itself in what is known as a “holistic” approach to studying Jesus, perhaps the term “big picture” of Jesus within Judaism could be used rather than “atomistic approach” of previous quests that concentrated on individual sayings of Jesus. This emphasis on Judaism and Jesus is perhaps the most salient endeavor in the Third Quest. Secondly, an emphasis on Jesus message as predominantly eschatological. Thirdly, some perceive a degree of greater optimism than in past searches regarding the historical reliability of traditions concern Jesus in the canonical gospels. Wright remarks about the Third Quest, “There is now a real attempt to do history seriously . . . . Serious historical method, as opposed to the pseudo-historical use of home-made ‘criteria,’ is making a come-back in the Third Quest.” Thus, a perceived shift in historiography in terms of burden of proof have shifted away from the negativity of previous searches. The supernatural elements of the gospels, as will be seen, however, still remain problematic in the Third Quest among a large portion of the questers and as evidenced in their application of historical-critical ideologies (e.g. source, form/tradition and redaction). Moreover, as will be demonstrated in the following, while some in the third quest allow a modicum of history to the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life, this third quest is still strongly allied to the Spinozan purpose of removing the influence of orthodox Christianity from impacting the modern world.

**Σημαντικοί Προσωπικότητες της Τρίτης Πορείας**

Although a multiplicity of scholars have contributed to this new trend, the following individuals have played a very significant role in its development and are its important representatives today.

Ed Parish Sanders (1937–)

Strategic stimuli to this Third Quest helped solidify this current undertaking. The work of E. P. Sanders in his _Jesus and Judaism_ (1985) must be given a

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69 Wright, _Jesus and the Victory of God_, 19.
very prominent position. Besides his work in the “Third Quest,” Sanders is also sometimes characterized as the most influential scholar on Paul in the last quarter-century. He was also the catalyst who brought the New Perspective thinking in regard to the apostle Paul to the forefront of NT theology. His book, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (1977) and its impact upon Pauline studies, led to a perceived collapse of the Reformational consensus regarding the Pauline view of the law. In this latter work, Sanders reveals an a priori among his “chief aims” that he is “trying to accomplish” as “to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which is still prevalent in much, perhaps most, New Testament scholarship.” Although he denies that this purpose is polemically biased in dealing with anti-Semitism, he less than subtly reveals that his thinking is embued with the a priori motivation of improving Judaism and Christian relations coupled with holocaustic hermeneutical pre-understanding so prevalent in NPP. It also reveals here that Sanders’ portrayal is intentionally designed to refute notions that Judaism in Jesus’ as well as Paul’s day was a religion of “legalistic rightousness.”

Sanders, in his writing, The Historical Figure of Jesus (1993), denies the apostolic origin of the canonical gospels, asserting that “[w]e do not know who wrote the gospels . . . These men—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—really lived, but we do not that they wrote gospels.” Sanders strongly differentiates between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. He argues that the gospels are limited in their information about Jesus as a historical Jesus: “Nothing survives that was written by Jesus himself . . . The main sources for our knowledge of Jesus himself, the gospels in the New Testament, are, from the viewpoint of the historian, tainted by the fact that they were written by people who intended to glorify their hero” and “the gospels report Jesus’ sayings and actions in a language that was not his own (he taught in Aramaic, the gospels are in Greek) . . . Even if we knew that we have his own words, we would still have to fear that he was quoted out of context.” Again, he argues that the authors of the NT “may have revised their accounts to support their theology. The historian must also suspect that the ethical teaching that has so impressed the world has been enhanced by homiletical use and editorial improvements between the time of Jesus and the publication of the gospels.” He also strongly affirms historical-critical ideologies centering in form and redaction-

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70 E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).
71 Stephen Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xiii.
73 Ibid., xii.
74 Ibid., xiii.
75 Ibid., 33.
76 E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Penguin, 1993), 63.
77 Ibid., 3.
78 Ibid., 4.
79 Ibid., 8.
critical principles, stating that “The earliest Christians did not write a narrative of Jesus’ life, but rather made use of, and thus preserved, individual units—short passages about his words and deeds. These units were later moved and arranged by editors and authors. This means that we can never be sure of the immediate context of Jesus’ sayings and actions” and “Some material [in the gospels] has been revised and some created by early Christians.”

Sanders denies the orthodox concept of the deity of Jesus, arguing “While it is conceivable that, in the one verse in the synoptic gospels that says that Jesus’ miracles provoked the acclamation ‘Son of God,’ the phrase means ‘more than human’, I doubt that this was Matthew’s meaning. In any case there is no reason whatsoever to attribute such an idea to the sympathizers and supports of Jesus. If Jesus’ followers in Galilee, or those who saw his miracles, ever said that he was Son of God, they would have meant what Matthew probably meant: he could rely on his heavenly Father to answer his prayers . . . . This title . . . . would not make Jesus absolutely unique.” And, “Jesus’ miracles as such proved nothing to most Galileans beyond the fact that he was on intimate terms with God . . . . there appear to be two explanations of the relative lack of support for Jesus among the general populace. One is that the Gospels exaggerate Jesus’ miracles; the other is that miracles in any case did not lead most people to make an important commitment to the miracle-worker. Probably most Galileans heard of a few miracles—exorcisms and other healings—and regarded Jesus as a holy man, on intimate terms with God.”

He also denies the virgin birth when he argues about Rom 8:14–17 in discussing the term “Son of God, “This is another passage that shows the definition of sonship as adoption . . . and he [Jesus] had been declared Son, not literally sired by God . . . Nor does the title require a story of a miraculous conception . . . . The early Christians . . . used ‘Son of God’ of Jesus . . . . They regarded ‘Son of God’ as a high designation, but we cannot go much beyond that.”

What Sanders did for his thinking regarding Paul he also applied to Jesus in His relationship to Judaism in Jesus and Judaism. In the work, he describes himself in the following terms: “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 religious tradition stands for.” Sanders takes as his starting point his idea, shared by a large portion of third questers, that previous quests failed to find Jesus for they relied upon an atomistic rather than holistic approach, that is, the other quests pursued an agenda surrounding Jesus’s speech or alleged authentic words rather than a holistic approach of placing Him within the context of first-century Judaism, as well as His deeds and activities. To Sanders, such an atomistic approach will never lead to a proper picture of Jesus: “[t]here are a few sayings on which there is wide consensus, but hardly enough to allow a full depiction of Je-

80 Ibid., 57.
81 Ibid., 162.
82 Ibid., 164.
83 Ibid., 244.
84 Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 334.
While the Jesus Seminar took the atomistic approach by voting on words, Sanders proposed the holistic approach of what can be known of Jesus’ life. Sanders maintained that “one should begin with what is relatively secure and work out to more uncertain points.” His study “is based primarily on the facts about Jesus and only secondarily on a study of some of the sayings material.” Sanders lists as “almost indisputable facts” about Jesus the following:

1. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.
2. Jesus was a Galilean who preached and healed.
3. Jesus called disciples and spoke of there being twelve.
4. Jesus confined His activity to Israel.
5. Jesus engaged in a controversy about the temple.
6. Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem by Roman authorities.
7. After His death, Jesus’ followers continued as an identifiable movement.
8. At least some Jews persecuted at least parts of the new movement (Gal. 1.13, 22; Phil. 3.6, and it appears that this persecution endured at least to a time near the end of Paul’s career (II Cor. 11.24; Gal. 5.11; 6.12; cf. Matt. 23.34; 10.17).

What is immediately revealed in such a list is that Sanders has entertained no supernatural events in his list of indisputable facts, revealing the still very negative underpinnings of the Third Quest. He established these events through the same historical-critical ideologies that have always been used, including criteria of authenticity. What Sanders has done is a priori arbitrarily by his own choice, shifted the burden of proof toward a modicum of reliability of the historical traditions about Jesus in the gospels due to prevalent scholarly emphases on placing Jesus within Judaism, “The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.”

His basic confidence in these events centers in the use of historical-critical ideology, especially the use of criteria of authenticity. His first and salient criterion is that of Jesus believably within the confines of Judaism. Sanders notes, “[a] good hypothesis with regard to Jesus’ intention and his relationship to Judaism should meet . . . [this] test: it should situate Jesus believably in Judaism and yet explain why the movement initiated by him eventually broke with Judaism.” Such a criterion becomes a two-edged sword on credibility with Sanders, for he also uses it to discredit the gospel at points, especially when Judaism is portrayed in what he perceives as a bad light. For instance, in Matt 9:9–13 // Mark 2:13–17 // Luke 5:27–32 where the Pharisees appear censorious and critical, Sanders argues, “The story as such is ob-

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85 Ibid., 4.
86 Ibid., 3.
87 Ibid., 5.
88 Ibid., 11.
89 Ibid., 2.
90 Ibid., 18.
viously unrealistic. We can hardly imagine Pharisees as policing Galilee to see whether or not an otherwise upright man ate with sinners.” At another place, using this criterion, he relates that John 7:49 and Luke 18:9–14, where the Pharisees are portrayed negatively, deny their historicity, arguing “[n]either passage can be regarded as actually indicating the views of Pharisaism before 70, and the second may reflect nothing other than Luke’s anti-Pharisaism.”

Sanders dismisses Matthew 5:17–20 (and related material) because of its making Jesus contrary to Judaism, “the evidence from the early church counts strongly against accepting the Jesus of Matt. 5:17–20 (and related material) as the historical Jesus.” Again, regarding the Sermon on the Mount, due to its anti-law and anti-pharisaical language, he says, “I am inclined to reject the entire section, Matt. 5:17–6:18, except for the prayer (6:9–13).” For Sanders, “the Jesus of Matt. 23:5–7, 23–26 is not the historical Jesus” and dismisses the substance of it. For Sanders, these are later creations of the church and the evangelists revealing “anti-Judaism” existing in the church when they were written. To Sanders, only those events are credible that situate them within his own ideas of a believable description of Judaism. One might get the impression from Sanders that he is more interested in creating an apologetic for first century Judaism than he is in “finding” Jesus—at least the Jesus presented in entirety in the gospel presentation.

Two other interrelated criteria proposed by Sanders for an acceptable viewpoint of Jesus’ life are (1) that which offers a reasonable and well-grounded connection between Jesus’ activity and his death and (2) that which explains the continuation of the movement initiated by Jesus, which subsequently broke from Judaism. Sanders writes, “It is conceivable that Jesus taught one thing, that he was killed for something else, and that the disciples, after the resurrection, made of his life and death something else, so that there is no thread between his life, his death and the Christian movement. This is possible, but it is not satisfying historically.”

James D. G. Dunn

Another strategic figure in the “third search” is Dunn, who operates his historiographical assertions totally apart from any consideration of inspiration, whether orthodox or aberrant. Dunn, like Sanders, has been heavily influenced by historical-critical ideology, although he gives his own particular interpretations of it. Dunn asserts that the canonical gospels cannot produce a secure starting point to formulate Jesus’ theology, i.e., an accurate theology of Jesus from the gospels is not possible: “though a theology of Jesus would be more fascinating [than one of Paul], we have nothing firsthand from Jesus which can provide such a secure starting point. The theologies of the Evangelists are almost equally problematic, since their

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91 Ibid., 178.
92 Ibid., 180.
93 Ibid., 261.
94 Ibid., 263.
95 Ibid., 263, 276–77.
96 Ibid., 22.
focus on the ministry and teaching of Jesus makes their own theologies that much more allusive.”97 In Dunn’s work, *Jesus Remembered* (2003), he states that third questers consider the neglect of the “Jewishness of Jesus” as “the most blatant disregard of history in the quest.”98

For Dunn, questers at best can hope for “probability not certainty” in their approach to the gospels. He makes his own critical distinction between event, data, and fact in the formulation of historical events,

All the historian has available are the “data” which have come down through history—personal diaries, reminiscences of eyewitnesses, reports constructed from people who were present, perhaps some archaeological artefacts, as well as circumstantial data about climate, commercial practice, and laws of the time . . . . From these the historian attempts to reconstruct “facts.” The facts are not to be identified as data; they are always an *interpretation* [italics in original] of the data. Nor should the fact be identified with the event itself, though it will always be in some degree of approximation to the event. Where the data are abundant and consistent, the responsible historian may be confident of achieving a reasonably close approximation. Where they are much more fragmentary and often inconsistent, confidence in achieving a close approximation is bound to be much less. It is for this reason that the critical scholar learns to make carefully graded judgments which reflect the quality of the data—almost certain (never simply “certain”), very probable, probable, likely, possible, and so on. In historical scholarship the judgment “probable” is a very positive verdict. And given that more data always emerge—in ancient history, a new inscription or, prize of prizes, a new cache of scrolls or documents—any judgment will have to be provisional, always subject to the revision necessitated by new evidence or by new ways of evaluating the old evidence.99

For Dunn, “‘facts’ properly speaking are always and never more than interpretations of the data. . . . The Gospel accounts are themselves such data or, if you like hard facts. But the events to which the gospels refer are not themselves ‘hard facts’; they are facts only in the sense that we interpret the text, together with such other data as we have, to reach a conclusion regarding the events as best we are able.”100 The gospel “facts” are “interpretations of the data” regarding the events to which they refer. They do not have certainty since they are mediated through someone’s interpretation—the gospels are mediated through the evangelists’ interpretation of those events (“The possibility that later faith has in some degree covered over the historical actuality cannot be dismissed as out of the question.”). The consequence of his thinking is that “historical methodology can only

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99 Ibid.,102–3.
produce probabilities, the probability that some event took place in such circumstances being greater or smaller, depending on the quality of the data and the perspective of the historical enquirer.”

At best, to Dunn, the gospels may give probabilities, but certainty they are not factors in historiography. In references to miracles, Dunn relates,

> It was the Enlightenment assumption that necessary truths of reason are like mathematical axioms, and that what is in view is the certain QED of mathematical proof that has skewed the whole question. But faith moves in a totally different realm from mathematics. The language of faith uses words like “confidence” and “assurance” rather than “certainty.” Faith deals in trust, not in mathematical calculations, nor in a “science” which methodologically doubts everything which can be doubted. Nor is it to be defined simply as “assent to propositions as true” (Newman). Walking “by faith” is different from walking ‘by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7). Faith is commitment, not just conviction.

To Dunn, “it is the ‘lust for certainty’ which leads to fundamentalism’s absolutising of its own faith claims and dismissal of others.” In chastising evangelicals for their greater certainty regarding the gospel and its supernatural elements, he relates that only probability—not certainty—is the stinging “nettle” that evangelical Christians must grasp, qualifying his remark by noting that “genuinely critical historical inquiry is necessary if we are to get as close to the historical as possible. Critical [italics in original] here, and this is the point, should not be taken to mean negatively critical, hermeneutical suspicion, dismissal of any material that has overtones of Easter faith. It means, more straightforwardly, a careful scrutiny of all the relevant data to gain as accurate or as historically responsible a picture as possible.” Dunn notes, “[i]n a day when evangelical, and even Christian [italics in original], is often identified with a strongly right-wing, conservative and even fundamentalist attitude toward the Bible, it is important that responsible evangelical scholars defend and advocate such critical historical inquiry.” In this way, for Dunn, the term “evangelical (not to mention Christian) can again become a label that men and women of integrity and good will can respect and hope to learn from more than most seem to do today.”

Apparently, if one holds to certainty regarding such miracles as the resurrection, one moves into this criticism by Dunn. As to the greatest event in the gospels, the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:3), Dunn, comparing the passion accounts in the gospels to that of Second Temple Judaism’s literature, relates that Jesus’ hope for resurrection reflected more of the ideas of Second Temple Judaism’s concept of

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101 Ibid., 299–300.
102 Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 104.
103 Ibid., 105.
104 Dunn, “Response to Darrell Bock,” The Historical Jesus Five Views, 300.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
vindication hope of a general and final resurrection: “The probability remains, however, that any hope of resurrection entertained by Jesus himself was hope to share in the final resurrection.”

For Dunn, Jesus had in mind that “His death would introduce the final climactic period, to be followed shortly (‘after three days’?) by the general resurrection, the implementation of the new covenant, and the coming of the kingdom.”

Yet, even to speculate this much on the resurrection, he turns negative: “To be even able to say as much is to say more than historical questers have usually allowed.”

For Dunn, any proof of Jesus resurrection centers in the “impact made by Jesus as it impressed itself into the tradition.” This “impact summarized in the word ‘resurrection’ . . . requires us to concede that there was a something which happened ‘on the third day’ which could only be apprehended/conceptualized as ‘resurrection.’”

Dunn summarizes his thinking on data and facts regarding the resurrection:

[T]he resurrection certainly cannot be numbered among the data which have come down to us. Nor can we speak of empty tomb and resurrection appearances as data. The data are reports [italics in original] of empty tomb and of seeing/visions of Jesus. If historical facts are interpretations [italics in original] of the data, then the historical facts in this case, properly speaking, are at best the fact of the empty tomb, and the fact that disciples saw Jesus. The conclusion, “Jesus has been raised from the dead,” is further interpretation, an interpretation of interpreted data, an interpretation of the facts. The resurrection of Jesus, in other words, is at best a second order “fact,” not a first order “fact”—an interpretation of an interpretation.

Dunn’s thinking here reflects the skepticism of Hume as well as Kant. Since Dunn praised Hume earlier, stating “As David Hume had earlier pointed out, it is more probable that the account of a miracle is an untrue account than the miracle recounted actually took place.” So that Jesus was raised from the dead was an interpretation by the first disciples. For Dunn, this is why the resurrection of Jesus is so “problematic” for the twenty-first-century quester:

The conclusion that “God has raised Jesus from the dead,” as a conclusion of the quest, is a further act of interpretation—again, an interpretation (evaluation) of the first-century interpretation (evaluation) of the first-century interpretation . . . . that departure from this life (death) can be described as a historical event, whereas entry on to some further existence.

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107 Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 821–24 (824).
108 Ibid., 824.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 876.
111 Ibid., 877.
112 Ibid., 103–4.
can hardly be so described—it can be seen just how problematic it is to speak of the resurrection of Jesus as historical.\footnote{Ibid., 877.}

Dunn also describes the term “resurrection” as a “metaphor” wherein he says that “the power of a metaphor is the power ‘to describe a reality inaccessible to direct description’ (Ricoeur), ‘reality depicting without pretending to be directly descriptive’ (Martin Soskice).” Thus, in Dunn’s thinking it defines an undefinable something—“something which could not otherwise be said” [italics in original]. Furthermore, “to translate ‘resurrection’ into something more ‘literal’ is not to translate it but to abandon it.” Finally, he notes,

Christians have continued to affirm the resurrection of Jesus, as I do, not because they know what it means. Rather, they do so because, like the affirmation of Jesus as God’s Son, “the resurrection of Jesus” has proved the most satisfying and enduring of a variety of options, all of them inadequate in one degree or other as human speech, to sum up the impact made by Jesus, the Christian perception of his significance . . . In short, the “resurrection of Jesus” is not so much a criterion of faith as a paradigm for hope.\footnote{Ibid., 878–79.}

So Dunn offers us, as he did with Paul, “a new perspective on the Jesus tradition.”\footnote{Ibid., 881.}

James H. Charlesworth

As with Sanders and Dunn, Charlesworth has been instrumental in placing Jesus within the Judaism of His day.\footnote{Ibid., 881.} He has advocated that a much greater importance be placed on Jewish Second Temple literature, “Work is progressing throughout the world in an attempt to ascertain how and in what ways Jewish writings help us understand the historical Jesus.”\footnote{James H. Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” in Images of Jesus Today. Eds. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 5, 9.} For him, previous pessimism regarding historiography is largely a thing of past quests, not the third. However, Charlesworth does allow that “the Gospels are from a later generation than Jesus’ own; but while the evangelists were not eyewitnesses, they were informed by eyewitnesses;” “the Gospels and other New Testament documents reflect the needs of the Church . . . dedication to historical tradition does not imply or demand perfection in transmission;” “the Gospels do contain legendary and mythical elements, such as Jesus’ walking on the water . . . . While the presence of nonhistorical and nonverifiable legends and myths in the Gospels should be admitted, the basic story about Jesus derives from authentic and very early traditions.” And in the search for
authentic Jesus material, we must acknowledge . . . that inauthentic Jesus words may accurately preserve Jesus’ actual intentions.”

His *The Historical Jesus An Essential Guide* (2008) has defended the Jew-

ishness of Jesus and that the starting place in understanding Him must consider the increasing knowledge of Second Temple Judaism. It expresses much of the standard approach to studying Jesus in this Third Search period. Charlesworth, in his *Jesus Within Judaism*, encapsulates his new approach:

I once stood in admiration of New Testament scholars who are cau-

tiously reticent until they can defend virtually infallible positions. Now I have grown impatient with those who feign perfection, failing to perceive that knowledge is conditioned by the observer . . . and missing the point that all data, including meaningful traditions, are categorically selected and interpreted phenomena. Moreover, such scholars have severely compromised the axiom that historians do not have the luxury of certainty; they work, at best with relative probabili-

ties.

It is wise and prudent to be cautious; but, pushed to extremes, even a virtue can become a vice. As the rabbis stated,timidity is not a virtue in pursuing truth. The search for uninterpreted data, like Jesus’ own acts (bruta facta Jesu) and His very own words (_ipsissima verba Jesu), erroneously implies that the historian can approximate certainty, miscasts the complex structure of the gospels, and be-

trays the fact that New Testament interpretation is an adventure.

To Charlesworth, the gospels, however, cannot serve as a totally reliable guide to understanding Jesus in first-century Judaism. He relates that, due to recent discoveries today, someone may portray a more accurate historical knowledge of Jesus than even the gospels present: “Jesus’ story was told by writers that we called the Evangelists in the first century C. E., less than one hundred years after his death. Two thousand years later, in some significant ways, we may more accurately retell the story of Jesus.” Why is this necessary? “Intensive examination” of the “widely held assumption” that Matthew and John were apostles who were in Jesus’ inner circle “have ended with sadness and failure.” He relates that “The Evangelists were not eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and thought . . . . If Matthew depends on Mark as a source, as most scholars think, and if Mark is either someone unknown or Peter’s scribe who never met Jesus, then Matthew cannot be the ‘Matthew’ of the Twelve. The Evangelists worked on traditions they received. Most of these came to

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120 Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, 17–18.
122 Ibid.
them in oral form and had taken share over three decades (from the 30s through the 50s at least).”

Charlesworth supports modern scholarship in the idea that “the Evangelists composed their Gospels shortly before or long after 70 C.E. This year was a significant divide in Jewish history. In September of 70 C.E. . . . the Roman legions conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple, bringing an end to the history of ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. However, Jesus lived when the Temple defined Judaism . . . . Mark, Matthew, Luke and the author of the Gospel of Thomas forgot, or never knew, the vibrant, exciting, and diverse Jewish culture that shaped and framed Jesus’ brilliantly poetic insights . . . . John may be intermittently better informed of Jesus’ time than the first three evangelists” and “[John] must not be jettisoned from consideration in seeking to find the historical Jesus.” Therefore, he contends that “[i]n terms of the recovery of a Jewish library containing scrolls once held by Jesus’ contemporaries—The Dead Sea Scrolls—we can read about the hopes of some of his fellow Jews and discern how they interpreted God’s word, Scripture.” Studying these and other Jewish documents from Jesus’ time allow us to learn more about the terms and concepts presupposed by Jesus and his audience.” To Charlesworth, “It seems obvious now, given the date of the gospels and the struggle of the Evangelists to establish a claim that was unpopular to many Jews and Gentiles, that the evangelists missed much of the dynamism of the pre-70 world of Jesus and the Jewish context of his life and thought. These are now clearer to us because of the terms, concepts, and dreams preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that is, these documents that represent many aspects of Second Temple Judaism predate 70 C.E. and are not edited by later Jews or Christians.”

To Charlesworth the gospels present a problem in determining who the historical Jesus was because: “First, the evangelists sometimes significantly and deliberately edited Jesus’ sayings. Second, we have learned that it is imperative to distinguish between the Evangelists’ theology and Jesus’ thought.” This process is compounded by the fact that “the Evangelists were not eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and thought.” His solution to finding an accurate portrayal of Jesus as He truly was is to “[i]nclude all Gospels and extracanonical sources” and that “all relevant sources, literary and nonliterary (e.g. archaeology), should be collected for examination if we are to obtain a clearer and more representative picture of the man from Nazareth.” Charlesworth does shift the burden of proof, noting that “we should also assume a tradition is authentic until evidence appears that undermines its authenticity. Only this position is faithful to the intention of our Evangelists. Within a few decades of Jesus’ death his followers handed on many reliable traditions . . . . I stress that some of those who had been with Jesus remained alive to preserve the

123 Ibid., xiv.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid., 15.
127 Ibid., 16.
128 Ibid., 17.
authenticity of many traditions. Most, but not all, of these traditions were shaped by oral teaching and preaching.”

Recent research has placed “a new, and promising, emphasis on the early nature, and reliability, of the traditions about Jesus. His original meaning is now widely seen as preserved in the Gospels, even though his exact words may be altered.”

Since “traditions about Jesus often are shaped by the belief about his resurrection and the needs of the post-Easter Palestinian Jesus Movement,” their works involve interpretation, i.e., “All canonical and extracanonical gospels are edited versions of Jesus traditions.” To get behind their interpretation and discern “reliable and meaningful information about Jesus’ action and message,” criteria of authenticity need to be applied to this tradition.

He cites five criteria as most important: (1) Embarrassment. Some deeds and sayings of Jesus were an embarrassment to the Evangelists, i.e., that which was embarrassing to the Evangelists would not have been invented by them; (2) Dissimilarity. This is only appropriate regarding Jesus’ sayings, especially in reference to the Christology and theology of the members of the Palestinian Jesus Movement, i.e., “if a saying is embarrassing or dissimilar to his followers’ way of thinking, then it most likely did not arise with them. Since it is attributed to Jesus by the Evangelists, it may well have originated with him.” These first two criteria of authenticity are the two most important; (3) Multiple Attestation, i.e., “a saying or action attributed to Jesus preserved in two or more independent primary sources is more probably original to Jesus than if it were found in only one source.” He includes the following hypothesized sources: Q, S—a possible sayings source used by John, Pl—Paul’s references to Jesus, Mark, J₁John (first edition of John), M—traditions inherited by Matthew, L—traditions inherited by Luke, A—preservation of Jesus traditions in Acts, J₂ (second edition of John) and T—Gospel of Thomas. Charlesworth admits, however, that this principle has its limits and that “it should be used only to include traditions that may ultimately originate with Jesus” and “It should not be used to reject as inauthentic a tradition that appears in only one source;” (4) Coherence. “When a deed or saying of Jesus is virtually identical with what has already been shown to be most likely authentic to Jesus, the deed or saying under scrutiny may also with some reliability be attributed to Jesus;” and (5) Palestinian Jewish setting, which “suggests that a tradition of Jesus may be authentic if it reflects his specific culture and time and not the world defined by the loss of Land and temple after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C. E.”

Charlesworth also contends that an objective biography of Jesus is not possible. Basing this argument in the Documentary Hypothesis, Charlesworth argues:

As we search the sources for reliable traditions that may originate with Jesus, we should always remember that our first Evangelist, Mark, whoever he was, never was with Jesus in Capernaum or Jerusalem. That means he

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129 Ibid., 18.
130 Ibid., 19.
131 Ibid., 20–25.
could not appeal to his own memory for clarifying when and where Jesus said or did something. The earliest evangelist was forced to create an order for Jesus’ life. Mark’s task may be compared to the attempts of someone who had broken a woman’s pearl necklace and was forced to put the pearls back in their original order. That is as impossible as it was for Mark to re-create accurately the order of Jesus traditions.\textsuperscript{132}

N. T. Wright

N.T. Wright has been a profound influence on this “Third Search for the historical Jesus” as he has been for the New Perspective on Paul. In his \textit{Jesus and the Victory of God}, he contends, “I still believe that the future of serious Jesus research lies with what I have called the ‘Third Quest’, within a broadly post-Schweitzerian frame.”\textsuperscript{133} As noted, this questing period, even its name, largely received its impetus from Wright’s efforts. Although it is labeled as the least skeptical of the quests, this assertion about “least” is only relative in comparison to the other two quests, since it still remains heavily skeptical and continues the “search” for the “historical Jesus.” Moreover, the question still remains as to whether a “Third” Quest actually should be distinguished from the “Second” Quest. Wright, who is largely responsible for promulgating this distinction, admits,

Does this flurry of activity belong with the older ‘New Quest’ [a.k.a. what Wright now labels the “Second Quest”], or with what I have called the ‘Third Quest’ . . . . From one point of view this is a mere matter of labels. It does not much matter whether we think of the “Jesus Seminar,” and its key players such as Mack and Crossan, as being on the radical wing of the “Third Quest,” or whether we recognize the major differences between them” [and others involved in this most recent questing].\textsuperscript{134}

Wright makes the distinction because of his personal demarcations that have become accepted now by others. He would have us believe that the New Quest is old (the Second Quest) and the “Third Quest” is new due to its emphasis on Jewish studies. It well could be just a matter of emphasis rather than distinction.\textsuperscript{135} This statement reveals, nonetheless, that the so-called “Third Quest” may not be easily separated from the previous ones because it is still rooted in historical-critical ideologies and significant skepticism. Wright goes on to insist, “It would not . . .

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 31.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Wright, \textit{Jesus and the Victory of God}, 78.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 34.
\item \textsuperscript{135} A demonstration that much subjectivity is involved in this distinction is found in John Reumann who sees Wright’s so-called “Third Quest” as a part of the Second (or “New Quest”). John Reumann, “Jesus and Christology,” in \textit{The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters}, 501–64. Wright’s response is to contend that the majority support the idea of a “New Quest” and the paradigm needed time to become fully established. See Wright, \textit{Jesus and the Victory of God}, 83–84. Nonetheless, great subjectivity is involved in determining the “Third Quest” from the “Second” or “New Quest” as well as both quests demonstrating significant skepticism.
\end{itemize}
much of a caricature to say that orthodoxy . . . has had no clear idea of the purpose of Jesus’ ministry.”

Adding more caution to Wright’s typical British-modifying approach are the following samplings of his ideological approach: Firstly, he affirms use of tradition criticism to the texts of the gospels (“criterion of dissimilarity”) but with “great caution,” which principle still assumes the burden of proof upon the gospels for authenticity no matter how much Wright tries to make it palatable to evangelicals; secondly, Wright asserts, “The critics of form-criticism have not, to my knowledge, offered a serious alternative model to how the early church told its stories;” thirdly, he refers to the gospel stories in terms of his own modified version of “myth”: “The gospels, then, are myth in the sense that they are foundational for the early Christian worldview. They contain ‘mythological’ language which we can learn, as historians, to decode in the light of ‘other apocalyptic’ writings of the time.” For Wright, “Jesus and his contemporaries” did not take apocalyptic language “literally, as referring to the actual end of the time-space universe.” Instead, “the language of myth, and eschatological myths in particular . . . are used in the biblical literature as complex metaphor systems to denote historical events and to invest them with their theological significance;” Wright is also very unclear as to his viewpoint regarding the authorship of the gospels, for he asserts, “I make no assumptions about the actual identity of the evangelists, and use the traditional names for simplicity only.”

Paraphrasing Acts 25:12, where Festus used Paul’s own words to sentence Paul to a hearing before Caesar, “You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go” to send him to Rome, Wright rephrases this conversation as a guiding principle in the Third Search in regards to Christianity’s appeal to historical claims, “Christianity appeals to history; to history it must go.” He argues that the Third Quest expresses a “real attempt to do history seriously” as opposed to the other quests. As with Sanders, Dunn and Charlesworth, he lauds “a real willingness to be guided by first-century sources, and to see how Judaism of that period in all its complex pluriformity, with the help now available from modern studies of the history and literature of the period.” As with the others, he prefers a holistic approach rather than an atomistic one, “We do not need to detach Jesus’ sayings from the rest of the evidence, and examine them in isolation.” Wright notes that Sanders’ holistic ap-

137 Ibid., 86.
139 Ibid., 426.
140 Ibid., 425.
141 Ibid.
142 Ibid., 372 n. 4.
143 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 11.
144 Ibid., 84.
145 Ibid., 85.
proach “is right.” As with the others, he stresses that “Jesus must be understood as . . . a first-century Jew.”

Wright concurs with Charlesworth when the latter “tells of how he abandoned his previous admiration for New Testament scholars who were ‘cautiously reticent until they [could] defend virtually infallible positions.’” For Wright, “the pursuit of truth—historical truth—is what the Third Quest is all about. Serious historical method, as opposed to the pseudo-historical use of home-made ‘criteria’, is making a comeback in the Third Quest. How much vaunted ‘normal critical tools’, particularly form-criticism, are being tacitly (and in my view rightly) bypassed in the search for Jesus; enquiry is proceeding by means of a proper, and often clearly articulated, method of hypothesis and verification.”

Wright goes on to note that “much of the impetus for form-critical and redaction-critical study came from the presuppositions that this or that piece of synoptic material about Jesus could not be historical . . . that an historical hypothesis about Jesus could already be presupposed which demanded a further tradition-historical hypothesis to explain the evidence.” Instead, he prefers “a viable alternative historical hypothesis” about Jesus or the early church where “the need for tradition-criticism within the search for Jesus . . . could in principle be substantially reduced and altered in shape.” Wright cites the work of Sanders and Meyer as supporting his claim: “This is exactly what happens in the hypotheses of (say) Sanders and Meyer: all sorts of things in the gospels, which on the Bultmannian paradigm, needed to be explained by complex epicycles of Traditionsgeschichte turn out . . . to fit comfortably within the ministry of Jesus.” As regards the synoptic gospels, he argues, “It is becoming apparent that the authors of at least the synoptic gospels, which still provide the bulk of relevant source material, intended to write about Jesus, not just their own churches and theology, and they substantially succeeded in this intention.”

To Wright, this third quest has “certain solid advantages.” He lists three: (1) “it takes the total Jewish background seriously”; (2) “its practitioners have no united theological or political agenda, unlike the monochrome New Quest and its fairly monochrome renewal”; (3) “there has increasingly been a sense of homing in on the key questions which have to be asked to make progress.” He lists five key questions: Firstly, How does Jesus fit into Judaism? Secondly, What were Jesus’ aims? Thirdly, Why did Jesus die? Fourthly, How and why did the early church begin? And fifthly, Why are the gospels what they are?

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid., 86
148 Ibid., 87; cp. Charlesworth, Jesus Within Judaism, 17.
149 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 87.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid., 89.
154 Ibid., 89–113.
In dealing with understanding Jesus’ miracles, for Wright it involves a “suspension of judgment.” He relates, “It is prudent, methodologically, to hold back from too hasty a judgment on what is actually possible and what is not within the space-time universe.”\(^{155}\) He rejects extremes found in Hume, Lessing and Troeltsch as well as post-Enlightenment philosophy. He also rejects the views of “conservative apologists”: “The appeal for suspension of judgment . . . cannot be used as a Trojan horse for smuggling in an old-fashioned ‘supernaturalist’ worldview under the pretense of neutrality; this is sometimes done by conservative apologists, who are often interested at this point, not in Jesus himself, but in miracles as test cases for whether the Bible is believed to be ‘true’ or not—a position that brings its own nemesis.”\(^ {156}\) Instead, he argues that words used in the gospels for Jesus actions such as “paradoxa” (things one would not normally expect), “dunameis” (displays of power and authority) “terata,” or “semeia” (signs or portents) as well as “thaumasia” (marvels—Matt 21:15):

\[ \text{D]o not carry, as the English word “miracle” has sometimes done, overtones of invasion from another world, or from outer space. They indicate, rather, that something has happened, \textit{within} what we would call the “natural” world, which is not what would have been anticipated, and which seems to provide evidence for the active presence of an authority, a power, at work, not invading the created order as an alien force, but rather enabling it to be more truly itself. And that describes equally as well the impression that other aspects of Jesus’ ministry made on people: here was an unexpected phenomenon, a prophet apparently questioning the nationalistic hope.}\(^ {157}\)

Jesus’ mighty works are to be understood best in terms of Jesus’ proclamation as “signs that the kingdom of Israel’s god was indeed coming to birth.”\(^ {158}\) In terms of Jesus’ resurrection, after long discourse and many pages of equivocation, Wright argues that the early church believed “that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead. This belief was held by virtually all early Christians for whom we have evidence.”\(^ {159}\) For Wright, the two factors that are “historically secure” about Easter are the emptiness of the tomb and the meetings with the risen Jesus.”\(^ {160}\) Wright then argues for factors that caused this belief regarding Jesus’ resurrection. He distinguishes differences between necessary and sufficient conditions: \textit{a necessary condition is something that has to be the case for the conclusion to follow . . . . A sufficient condition is something that will certainly and without fail bring about the conclusion.}”\(^ {161}\) While the empty tomb and appearances of Christ to the disciples are

\(^{155}\) Ibid., 187.
\(^{156}\) Ibid.
\(^{157}\) Ibid., 188.
\(^{158}\) Ibid., 191.
\(^{159}\) N. T. Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 685.
\(^{160}\) Ibid., 686.
\(^{161}\) Ibid., 687.
individually “insufficient to generate early Christian belief . . . . they form, in combination, a sufficient condition.”\textsuperscript{162} The matter of the resurrection does, however, lie “beyond strict historical proof” since “[i]t will always be possible for ingenious historians to propose yet more variations on the theme of how early Christian belief could have arisen, and taken the shape that it did, without either an empty tomb or appearances of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{163}

Yet, Wright himself believes that both the empty tomb and the appearances both constitute necessary conditions for belief in Jesus’ resurrection: “We are left with the conclusion that the combination of the empty tomb and appearances of the living Jesus forms a set of circumstances which is itself both necessary and sufficient for the rise of early Christian belief.”\textsuperscript{164} Such a belief “remains, of course, unprovable in logical or mathematical terms.”\textsuperscript{165} Wright concludes that “the historian, of whatever has no option but to affirm both the empty tomb and ‘meetings’ with Jesus as ‘historical events’ ‘. . . they took place as real events; they were significant events . . . they are . . . provable events.’”\textsuperscript{166} His claim is: “that the bodily resurrection of Jesus provides a necessary condition for these things; in other words, that no other explanation could or would do. All the other efforts to find alternative explanations fail.”\textsuperscript{167} Wright admits that this does not constitute “‘proof’ of the resurrection in terms of some neutral standpoint. It is, rather, a historical challenge to other explanations, other worldviews.”\textsuperscript{168} So with Wright, the resurrection cannot be proven with ideas of certainty, but perhaps that the evidence points to that conclusion as the most likely or probable conclusion.

\textbf{Τὸν Βασικὸν Οπερατορικὸν Ἡμευροζομονὸν Τρίτον Τεύχον\textsuperscript{169}}

The basic operating procedures of the Third Quest share much in common with the first two searches: historical criticism. To be sure, some criteria have been modified as well as newly proposed (e.g. criteria of embarrassment, rejection and execution, and historical plausibility).\textsuperscript{170} However, all three searches share much in common in spite of apparent diversity.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 692.
  \item \textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 694.
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 696.
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 706.
  \item \textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 709.
  \item \textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 717.
  \item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{169} For a thorough vetting of these approaches as well as their validity, once again consult Thomas and Farnell, \textit{The Jesus Crisis}.
  \item \textsuperscript{170} See Porter, “Table 2—‘The Rise of the Criteria and the Development of Form and Redaction Criticism in ‘Quests’ for the Historical Jesus,’” in \textit{The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical–Jesus Research}, 102.
\end{itemize}
Three Searches for the “Historical Jesus” but No Biblical Christ | 39

Criteria of Authenticity

The purpose of the criteria in the first two searches for the historical Jesus had design or intent behind them: to result in a critically assured *minimum* of gospel material to find a Jesus acceptable to the subjective biases of the searcher. Importantly, philosophical presuppositions were deliberately applied in the formulation of these criteria to guarantee a minimalistic Jesus to those who applied these criteria. An *a priori* operating bias resulted in criteria that guaranteed the result desired by the searcher. This is hardly a scientific approach. The apparent shift in burden of proof in the Third Search, however, has really happened by arbitrary, fiat decree. The consensus was that the previous two quests as well as the pause during Bultmann were too skeptical, so that third questers now have decided, largely on consensus, to allow for more historicity in broad or holistic terms. As seen with the writings of Charlesworth and Porter, the Third Quest has suggested different criteria and modifications of existing ones. Much of a similar negative bias is seen in the criteria of many of the Third Search, although perhaps, depending on the quester, not to the same degree of dehistoricization (e.g. Sanders).

While the pessimism of Bultmann may be a thing of the past, *pessimism is still replete in the Third Quest*. Even if third questers desire to move the burden of proof away from the replete skepticism of the first two questers, the application of such criteria immediately casts doubt on the substantive portion of the gospel material, requiring it to prove itself to the biases of the interpreter. Importantly, in this so-called “Third Quest,” instead of desiring a critically assured *minimum,* the third questers have desired to have a credibly assured *modicum* (slightly more historicity in broad outlines of Jesus’ life) and designed new criteria and modified old ones to ensure *a priori* that *modicum.*

In the above review of Sanders, Dunn, Charlesworth and Wright, the present writer has noted their desire to find a more holistic approach that allows for more historicity in the gospels. This goal is laudable. However, the same subjective bias is found in that the criteria of authenticity designed for this search have been *a priori* designed to ensure that very same desired outcome. Their criteria allow them to find a *modicum* of more historicity in broad outlines of Jesus’ life. The outcome is guaranteed based on their already perceived subjective bias as well as intent. These criteria, however, cut both ways, revealing their subjectivity in application.

Significantly, the criterion of Palestinian Judaism almost has as its unstated operating procedure something much like the criterion of embarrassment in Sanders’ application. Sanders is embarrassed by Jesus’ anti-Judaistic attitude many

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171 The present writer has already discussed much of the usage of criteria of authenticity in the first two searches in *The Jesus Crisis* and the reader is referred there for a more lengthy discussion. See F. David Farnell, “Form and Tradition Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, 203–7.


174 Brown, “Christology and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*, 75.
The criterion in all three searches are heavily weighted for their operational procedure (e.g. multiple attestation in Mark, Q and M, L) to affirm tradition as “authentic.” 176 Increasing doubts about the 2DH and 4DH at the end of the twentieth century suggest that the criteria revolving around this hypothesis are dubious at best. If this 2DH/4DH synoptic hypothesis is wrong, then working within its confines proves absolutely nothing about historicity.

Form and Redaction Criticism as Operating Assumptions

As with the other two searches, a large number of the third questers presume a distortion or bias in the early church as well as with the gospel writers. Simply put, a strategic layering between what Jesus actually said and did is often a priori assumed in both form (reflects theology of the church) and redaction (reflects theology of the evangelist). The question of if and how much of Jesus’ theology can be derived from the gospels is always a problem for the three quests and the non-quest period, for large portions of the gospels are seen as products of the church or some unknown evangelist who composed the gospels with their own distinctive biases.

The Trojan Horse of the Third Search: Jesus within the Confines of Judaism

The emphasis of the Third Search on placing Jesus within the confines of Judaism is not only tenuous, but complete nonsense. It is actually a Trojan horse that destroys the canonical gospels portrait of how Jesus really was in history as He walked the confines of Palestine in His day. The canonical gospel, as well as other portions of the New Testament, presents Jesus consistently as walking in complete conformity, NOT with the corrupt Judaism of His day, but with the OT Law. In His birth He was circumcised on the eight day as the Mosaic Law prescribed (Luke 2:21–24 cp. Lev 12:1–8); He told the Jews that He did not come to abolish the Old

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Testament but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17–19). Paul reminds Christians in Gal 4:4 that “when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” Jesus told the Jews of His day to search the OT Scriptures in John 5:39–40: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” After His physical resurrection, in Luke 24:13, He told the disciples on the road to Emmaus how the OT Scriptures testified to Him: “And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” The gospels portray Him in complete conformity to the Old Testament. Jesus loved His Jewish people, especially the common Jew (Matt 9:36–38; Mark 6:34; Luke 2:29–30; 14:14). The cleansing of the temple in all four gospels drives home the fact that Jesus perceived the Judaism of His day as corrupt (Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–47; John 2:13–16).¹⁷⁷ As a result, to place Jesus within the confines of the Judaism of His day is to destroy the true Jesus in history and create a false Jesus who, once again, appeals to the predilections and whims of many of today’s scholars.

Three searches for the “historical Jesus” are really one overarching endeavor. What makes the Third Search qualitatively different is that evangelicals are now finding virtue in participating in it, while having rejected the first two searches. The second part will cover evangelical participation in this third search. This searching is rapidly becoming a “watershed” issue. Evangelical, Darrell Bock, who diligently searches for the “‘historical’ Jesus,” attributes disagreement with his searching as due to evangelical ignorance: “this book [Key Events] will likely not be understood by some. What we have done is to play by the rules of Historical Jesus study and made the case for 12 key events in Jesus’ life in the process.”¹⁷⁸ To him (and perhaps other evangelicals who participate in it), any other approach than the historical searching that they are involved in is not “serious historical engagement” in terms of the gospels.¹⁷⁹ Evangelical, Norman Geisler, counters such an assertion by noting the word historical “bristles” with hostile “philosophical presuppositions” whose “premises and procedures undermine the very divinely authoritative Scripture they confess.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ The present writer sees the depth of corruption in Judaism in the fact that Jesus had to cleanse the temple twice: Once in the beginning of His ministry (John) and another time at the end (synoptics).


A decisive question remains—Would any true skeptics of the Jesus tradition accept or be persuaded by any positive conclusions (“key events”) of these evangelical searchers who, while using post-modernistic historiography and the ideology of historical criticism, attempt to impose \textit{a priori} evangelical prepositions on the Gospels, i.e. assuming what they are trying to prove? Or, is it more likely that these evangelicals will further erode the gospels trustworthiness by surrendering the gospels to such replete skepticism?

WHAT DOES CHRIST AS “TRUE ISRAEL” MEAN FOR THE NATION ISRAEL?: A CRITIQUE OF THE NON-DISPENSATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

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Non-dispensationalists often claim that Jesus’ identity as “true Israel” means there is no longer any future significance for Israel as a national entity. For them, if Christ is “true Israel,” this means that all who believe in Christ whether they are Jew or Gentile are now part of Israel by relation of their identification with Jesus, the true Israelite. Thus, national Israel’s place in the plan of God no longer exists. This approach, though, draws incorrect conclusions concerning how Jesus relates to Israel. Jesus is identified with Israel and He is the true and ultimate Israelite. But this identification serves as the basis for national Israel’s restoration, not Israel’s non-significance in God’s plans.

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Introduction

Israel continues to be a major point of disagreement between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists. Dispensationalists maintain that the nation Israel will be saved and restored to a place of service to the nations when Jesus returns and reigns over the nations (see Isa 19:24–25; Zech 14; Matt 25:31). Thus, Israel, as a nation, has a role to play in God’s future plans, including leading the nations in example and worship (see Isa 2:2–4). Non-dispensationalists, on the other hand, often argue that the church is now the fulfillment or replacement of Israel with the implication that Israel will not be restored as a nation.¹ For them, since Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel, there is no need for a restored national Israel.

¹ Some non-dispensationalists affirm a future salvation of many Jews, but this salvation of Israel is not viewed as a restoration of Israel in which Israel as a nation has a role to play that is unique to the nation.
Important to the evangelical non-dispensational understanding of Israel is Christ’s role as “true Israel.” In sum, the non-dispensational argument often goes like this—*Jesus is the complete fulfillment of Israel. He is the “true Israel.” As a result, all those who are “in Christ” whether Jew or Gentile are now Israel based on their identification with Christ. Thus, there is no future restoration for the nation Israel.* Or in other words, since Jesus is true Israel, those who belong to Him are now “Israel,” so there will be no restoration of national Israel.

The problem with this view is that it is not found in Scripture. In fact, it is refuted by explicit texts in both testaments that indicate otherwise. *Our purpose here is to show that this non-dispensational understanding of what Christ as “true Israel” means for the nation Israel is not biblical.* Instead, Christ’s identification with Israel is the basis for national Israel’s restoration not the revocation of the nation’s significance. Because Christ identifies himself with Israel and is Israel’s corporate Head, He is able to restore the nation that currently is undergoing a temporary hardening and rejection. So instead of leading to the end of national Israel’s significance in the plan of God, Christ’s identity as Israel guarantees the nation Israel’s significance. I will argue that the non-dispensational view is correct in identifying Jesus Christ with Israel but is incorrect on the implications of this truth.

### The Non-dispensational View of Christ as “True Israel”

To demonstrate the non-dispensational perspective, I will reference the writing of four non-dispensational scholars—Robert B. Strimple, Kim Riddlebarger, Russell D. Moore and Vern Poythress. All four have explicitly addressed the implications of Christ as “Israel” in a way that supposedly refutes the dispensational understanding of Israel. These four men have argued that Christ’s identity as “Israel” means that the dispensational understanding of a future restoration of the nation Israel is in error. Before looking at their statements, though, I want to make a point of clarification. I agree with these men when they link Jesus with Israel. The cluster of OT passages that Matthew uses to link Israel’s experiences with Jesus in Matthew 1 and 2 indicates that Jesus has an important connection with Israel (compare Matt 1:22–23/Isa 7:14; Matt 2:15/Hos 11:1; Matt 2:17–18/Jer 31:15). Jesus is the head of Israel and He represents everything God intended for Israel to be. There is no problem with this understanding. What I am disputing, though, is the implications some give in regard to Jesus being identified with Israel. These critics of dispensationalism are claiming that Jesus’ identification with Israel rules out a restoration of the nation Israel. My understanding, though, is that Jesus’ representation of Israel is the basis for the restoration of the nation. This is explicitly stated in Isa 49:3–6, a passage that will be looked at later. But now our attention is on the four critics of dispensationalism.

In addressing his view on Israel, the amillennialist, Strimple, states, “The true Israel is Christ. He is the suffering Servant of the Lord.” He then says, “Since Christ is the true Israel. The true seed of Abraham, we who are in Christ by faith

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and the working of his Spirit are the true Israel, the Israel of faith, not of mere
descent." For Strimple, since Christ is "Israel" all who believe in Him by faith are
Israel. This means that there is no future restoration of the nation Israel as
dispensationalists understand since Christ and all who believe in Him are now
"Israel." Strimple argues that Matt 2:15’s use of Hos 11:1, in which Christ’s
departure from Egypt is declared a fulfillment of Israel’s exodus from Egypt
centuries earlier, is support for this view. Strimple uses Matt 2:15 to declare:
“Christ is the true Israel of God, the one in whom Israel’s history is recapitulated
and God’s purposes for Israel come to fulfillment.”

Riddlebarger, too, argues against a literal fulfillment of Old Testament
promises to the nation Israel based on his understanding of Christ as the “true
Israel.” In his book, *A Case for Amillennialism*, Riddlebarger chides
dispensationalists who take passages like Isa 41:8–9 and Isa 42:1–7 to refer to a
future restoration of the nation Israel to her land:

Dispensationalists, who interpret such passages literally, assign the
fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies to a future earthly millennium in which
Israel will coexist with Gentiles under the reign of the Davidic king.

He then challenges the dispensational understanding by stating: “Is this how the
New Testament interpreted these messianic prophecies regarding the servant of the
Lord? Who is this servant of the Lord—the nation of Israel, or Jesus, Israel’s
Messiah?” For Riddlebarger the prophecies of Isaiah are “fulfilled in the messianic
mission of Jesus.” He then appeals to several passages that link Jesus with the
servant of Israel spoken of in Isaiah—Matt 8:17; Luke 1:54, 69; Acts 3:13; 8:34–
35. He also refers to the Matt 2:15/Hos 11:1 connection in which Matthew links
Jesus with Israel’s exodus experience and Galatians 3 and Paul’s discussion of how
Gentiles are now related to the seed of Abraham. Riddlebarger declares:

The ramifications for this on one’s millennial view should now be
obvious. The New Testament writers claimed that Jesus was the true Israel
of God and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. So what remains

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3 Ibid., 88–89.
4 Matt 2:15 declares: “He [Jesus] remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill
what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.’” Here
Matthew quotes Hos 11:1 to link Jesus coming out of Egypt as a child with the nation Israel’s exodus
from Egypt. Hosea 11:1 is referring to the historical fact of the exodus, while Matt 2:15 is applying that
exodus to an event in Jesus’ life.
5 Ibid., 88.
6 Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand
Rapids: Baker, 2003), 69.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 69–70.
of the dispensationalists’ case that these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in a future millennium? They vanish in Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled them.10

Note that for Riddlebarger, the coming of Jesus as “the true Israel of God” means prophecies related to a future kingdom involving Israel “vanish.” Thus a literal fulfillment of OT promises to the nation Israel vanished away into thin air. Riddlebarger’s logic can be summarized in my words as follows:

In the OT the nation Israel was identified as the “servant of the Lord.”
The servant, the nation Israel, was promised a future restoration.
The New Testament indicates that Jesus is the fulfillment of the servant of the Lord.
Because Jesus is the true servant of the Lord, He is the true Israel.
Therefore, do not expect a literal restoration of the nation Israel since Jesus is the true Israel.

I will argue that this logic does not work. But now on to another critic of the dispensational understanding.

Moore argues that dispensationalists are part of those who “miss the radically Christ-centered focus of the New Testament argument”11 when it comes to the kingdom and Israel. For Moore, dispensationalists are mistaken when they speak of “millennial Israel as having a ‘mediatorial’ role in dispensing the blessings of God to the nations.”12 This is because dispensationalists do not understand that Jesus is now the true Israel and that He now possesses the mediatorial role (see 1 Tim 2:5).13 For Moore, Christ as Mediator means that the nation Israel no longer is a mediator of God’s blessings. As Moore states, “Thus, when dispensationalists speak of the ‘future’ of Israel, they should speak of it in terms of the ‘future’ of Jesus—a future He promises to share with His ‘friends.’”14

Also, Poythress, who wrote a book evaluating dispensational theology, links his non-dispensational understanding of Christ as true Israel with the New Covenant:

Because Christ is an Israelite and Christians are in union with Christ, Christians partake of the benefits promised to Israel and Judah in Jeremiah. With whom is the new covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite. Thus one might say that Israel and Judah themselves undergo a

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10 Ibid., 70.
12 Moore points out that “the New Testament applies to Jesus language previously applied to the nation—the ‘firstborn’ or the ‘son of God (Ex. 4:22–23; Matt. 2:15),” 118.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 119.
transformation at the first coming of Christ, because Christ is the final, supremely faithful Israelite. Around him all true Israel gathers.\textsuperscript{15}

For Poythress the concept of Israel undergoes “transformation” because of Christ who is the “supremely faithful Israelite.” All those who are in Christ are now Israel. Since this transformation of Israel has taken place there is no need for a literal fulfillment of OT promises with the nation Israel.

In sum, the non-dispensationalist argument asserts that since Christ is the true Israel all who are in Christ are Israel; thus, there is no need for a future restoration of the nation Israel with any type of mediatorial role. Or to put it in the form of an argument:

- **Premise 1**: Israel was God’s chosen nation and servant in the Old Testament.
- **Premise 2**: Jesus now fulfills Israel and is the true Israel.
- **Premise 3**: As the true Israel, Jesus assumes and fulfills the nation Israel’s mediatorial role.
- **Premise 4**: All who are in the true Israel—Jesus Christ, are also Israel.
- **Conclusion**: There is no future role for the nation Israel in the plan of God.\textsuperscript{16}

**A Critique of the Non-dispensational View**

There are problems with the non-dispensational argument both at the premise and conclusion levels. Before looking at these problems, though, it should be noted again that dispensationalists often agree with Premises 1 and 2. Dispensationalists affirm that Israel was a nation in the Old Testament. No surprise here. But what may be surprising to some is that many dispensationalists also accept Premise 2 that Jesus is identified with Israel. For instance, Craig Blaising states, “I agree with Strimple that the New Testament presents Christ as Israel.”\textsuperscript{17} This author, too, believes that Christ is identified with Israel and that Matthew 1 and 2 indicates a strong connection between the nation Israel and Jesus. Jesus is the corporate Head of Israel who represents Israel.

Some clarification is necessary, though, in regard to identifying Jesus as the “true Israel.” This combination of terms is not found in the Bible. Jesus does not call himself “true Israel” and neither do the other NT writers. This does not mean the concept has no validity, but the reader should understand that this is not the language of the NT. Another potential problem is that in calling Jesus “true Israel,” the impression could be given that the nation Israel is not truly Israel anymore. But


\textsuperscript{16} We are not using the exact language of any one theologian but we believe that the wording of this argument represents the traditional non-dispensational understanding of Christ as true Israel. We understand that some may word things differently.

\textsuperscript{17} Craig A. Blaising, “A Premillennial Response,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 145.
such thinking should be rejected. This is not a case of “true Israel” vs. “false Israel” or “non-Israel.” To make a comparison, most theologians would agree that Jesus is “true” or “ultimate” Man (see Rom 5:12–21), but this does not mean that the rest of us are “false man” or “not really man.” A proper understanding of Jesus as “true Israel” (if we use that title) should be in the context of understanding Jesus as the corporate Head of Israel. He embodies perfectly everything God intended for Israel to be. In this sense we can say Jesus is “true Israel” because He embodies Israel perfectly. Plus, it should be understood that with the corporate solidarity concept, the “one” represents the “many”—the one does not substitute the many.

It is with Premises 3 and 4 and the Conclusion that dispensationalists disagree with non-dispensationalists. As will be shown, dispensationalists agree with non-dispensationalists on the identity of Jesus as “Israel” (Premise 2). However, they disagree with non-dispensationalists on the implications of Jesus being the true Israel (Premises 3, 4 and Conclusion).

Concerning Premise 3—“As the true Israel, Jesus assumes and fulfills the nation Israel’s mediatorial role”—this position is not supported by Scripture if by it one means that the nation Israel has no future mediatorial purpose in God’s plans. This understanding is assumed more than proven. In fact, we do not see one verse in Scripture that indicates that Jesus’ identity as “Israel” means the end of national Israel’s significance in the plan of God. Matthew 2:15 is often put forth as support for the non-dispensational understanding but in reality it is not support for their view. Matthew 2:15 identifies Jesus with Israel, but as will be shown, the NT on multiple occasions affirms the importance of national Israel in God’s future plans. Plus, as mentioned, dispensationalists like myself and Blaising believe Matt 2:15 teaches Christ as “Israel” but we do not see how this passage brings to an end national Israel’s identity and function in the plan of God.

Moore mentions 1 Tim 2:5 which states, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” This supposedly is evidence that since Christ is the Mediator, there is no role for the nation Israel as a mediator. But does this verse rule out a mediatorial function for Israel or anyone other than Christ in the kingdom of God? The answer is no. The context of 1 Tim 2:1–6 is salvation. This passage mentions “God our Savior who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (3–4). Certainly, when it comes to salvation and being in a right relationship with God, Jesus is the only mediator. But does this passage mean that no one else has a functional role in Christ’s kingdom as mediators? Certainly not. Jesus promised the church that those who overcome will have “authority over the nations” (Rev 2:26). Thus, Christians will have mediatorial roles to play in the future kingdom of Christ. Revelation 5:10 promises that the saints will “reign upon the earth.” Again, Jesus appears to share His reign with others, and in that sense, they are mediators. Also, Jesus promised the apostles mediatorial positions of authority over the tribes of Israel in Matt 19:28 when He said they would be on thrones “judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Thus, we do not see how Christ’s role as Mediator in salvation rules out a functional mediatorial rule for others, including the nation Israel, in His kingdom. Both Old and New Testament passages are filled with examples of people other than Christ

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18 Moore, 118.
What Does Christ as “True Israel” Mean for the Nation of Israel?

being involved with His mediatorial rule over the earth. In fact, the original mandate given to God’s image bearers was to rule and subdue the earth and all of God’s creation for God’s glory (see Gen 1:26–28). This is completed perfectly in the Eternal State when the nations (including Israel) are reigning forever and ever over the New Earth (see Rev 22:3–5). It simply does not follow that because Jesus is ‘The Mediator’ that God will not use ‘other mediators’ for His purposes.

As part of his argument, Moore asserts that language applied to Israel in the Old Testament such as “firstborn” and “son of God” are now applied to Christ. But how does the fact that Jesus is identified with Israel by those terms now show that there is no future significance for the nation Israel in the plan of God? Why would it not be the case that titles such as “firstborn” and “son of God” can be fulfilled in Christ, but also apply to others as well? We see this with other concepts. Christ is the singular true seed of Abraham according to Gal 3:16, but this does not rule out others being the seed of Abraham as well (see Gal 3:29). “Temple” terminology is used of Christ (John 2:21), the Christian (1 Cor 6:19), the church (Eph 2:21) and a last days temple in Jerusalem (2 Thess 2:4), but no one sense of this term cancels out the others. Strimple appeals to Gal 3:7–9, 29 to show that since believing Gentiles are sons of Abraham they must be part of Israel. But Paul does not identify believing Gentiles as part of Israel. He quotes Gen 12:3 to show that Gentiles are related to that part of the Abrahamic Covenant that predicted blessings to the Gentiles in the first place. In Rom 4:11–12 Paul indicates that Abraham is the father of both believing Gentiles and believing Jews, but he never says that being related to Abraham makes a Gentile part of Israel.

Isa 49:3–6, Jesus as the Servant, and the Restoration of the Nation Israel

Isaiah 49:3–6 is important because it explicitly states that the coming Servant of the Lord (i.e. Jesus) is going to restore the nation Israel:

He said to Me, “You are My Servant, Israel,
In Whom I will show My glory.”
But I said, “I have toiled in vain,
I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity;
Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD,
And My reward with My God.”
And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant,
To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him
(For I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
And My God is My strength),
He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

19 Ibid.
According to verse 3, the LORD is speaking to “My Servant Israel.” Strimple is right when he states that Christ “is the suffering Servant of the Lord.” Thus, one thing both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists affirm is that the Servant is referring to Jesus Christ. Verse 5 then states one of the purposes of this “Servant.” The Servant’s role is “to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him.” Verse 6 also states that the role of the Servant is “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel.” God will also “make” the Servant be “a light to the nations” (v. 6).

What is significant here is that the Servant is clearly linked with Israel (v. 3), yet He is also distinct in some way since He is the one who will “restore” Israel. The nation Israel cannot restore itself, for it is sinful. But the Servant—who is Jesus Christ, the true Servant of Israel—can restore the nation Israel and bring blessings for the nations. Thus, this passage teaches that Jesus will restore the nation Israel and bring light to the nations. He will also restore Israel to her land (Isa 49:8). The presence of the true Israelite, Jesus, does not mean that the people of Israel lose their significance. On the contrary, the people of Israel are restored and made what they were supposed to be because of Jesus Christ. As Blaising observes, “Isaiah 49 shows that the servant ‘Israel’ will bring national Israel back to God and also extend Yahweh’s salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:5–6). Robert Saucy rightly concludes that Isaiah 49 refutes the non-dispensational position on Israel:

This use of “Israel” for the coming Messiah, however, cannot be made the basis of teaching that all who finally are “in Christ” are therefore equal to Israel. Isaiah is applying the honorific title of “Israel” to the Messiah because he is the true servant who will finally accomplish the task of Israel. But this does not indicate a change in the meaning of Israel or the rejection of the nation as the servant.

Saucy also makes the valid point that Israel is viewed as “a corporate personality” in which the head ministers to the body so that the body may accomplish its mission. This means that Israel, who was given a mission to the nations, will be able to accomplish its mission because of the Servant—Jesus Christ. Thus, Isa 49:5–6 explicitly contradicts the argument of some non-dispensationalists. Not only does Christ as true Israel not mean the end of the nation Israel in the plan of God, but the presence of Christ means the restoration of the nation Israel. As Robert Thomas explains, “Through the Servant’s redemptive work on behalf of the nation

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20 Strimple, 87.
22 Ibid.
The fourth premise of the non-dispersional view that “All who are in the true Israel—Jesus Christ, are also Israel,” is also challenged by dispensationalists. This issue of whether believing Gentiles become Jews and thus part of Israel involves a discussion of several passages and goes beyond what can be fully covered here. But a few points should be observed. There are seventy-three references to Israel in the New Testament. Of these, seventy clearly refer to ethnic Jews. Three references—Rom 9:6; 11:25–26; and Gal 6:16—have sometimes been understood by non-dispersionalists to broaden the concept of “Israel” to include believing Gentiles. But there are no strong reasons to depart from the regular ethnic understanding in those passages. In Rom 9:6 Paul states, “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” Paul’s point is that the true “Israel” is comprised of those who are Jews by lineage and believers in Jesus Christ. John Murray has noted that Rom 9:6 is teaching that “there is an ‘Israel’ within ethnic Israel.” Gentiles are not in view here.

With Rom 11:25b–26a, Paul declared, “a partial hardening has come to Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved.” Some see a reference to the church with Paul’s reference to “Israel” here. But this is highly unlikely. The other ten references to “Israel” in Romans 9–11 clearly refer to ethnic Israel. It is thus difficult to view “Israel” in verse 26 as meaning anything other than ethnic Israel. As Murray pointed out, “It is exegetically impossible to give to ‘Israel’ in this verse any other denotation than that which belongs to the term throughout this chapter. . . . It is of ethnic Israel Paul is speaking and Israel could not possibly include Gentiles.”

Some have interpreted Gal 6:16 to mean that Paul broadened the concept of Israel to include believing Gentiles. This verse states, “May peace be on all those who follow this standard, and mercy also be on the Israel of God.” But this, too, is a reference to ethnic Jews who have believed in Christ. After launching a blistering critique of the Judaizers who wanted to add circumcision and the Mosaic Law to the gospel, Paul reached out to those ethnic Jews who had not fallen for the error of the Judaizers and recognized them as the true “Israel of God.” As S. Lewis Johnson stated:

What more fitting thing could Paul write, it is said, in a work so strongly attacking Jewish professing believers, the Judaizers, than to make it most
plain that he was not attacking the true believing Jews. Judaizers are anathematized, but the remnant according to the election of grace are “the Israel of God.”

Paul’s use of “Israel” is similar to that used by the other biblical authors. It always refers to ethnic Jews. In the case of Rom 9:6 and Gal 6:16 it is used even more narrowly to describe ethnic Jews who have believed. Never, though, does Paul use “Israel” to describe Gentile believers. As Ernest DeWitt Burton declares, “There is, in fact, no instance of his [Paul] using Ἰσραήλ [Israel] except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof.”

Finally, dispensationalists disagree with the conclusion of the non-dispensationalist that “There is no future identity or mediatorial role for the nation Israel in the plan of God.” This claim is refuted by multiple passages in the New Testament that explicitly affirm the importance of Israel in God’s plan even after the arrival of Jesus. Gabriel told Mary that her coming Son, Jesus, would “reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:33), which is a reference to Jesus’ future reign over Israel. Matthew 19:28 states:

And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Here a prophecy of Jesus indicates the presence and significance of the “twelve tribes of Israel.” Jesus, the Son of Man, will be sitting on “His glorious throne” while his disciples will be in positions of authority over Israel. Thus, in the eschaton Jesus, the true Israel, exists alongside “the twelve tribes of Israel,” which refers to the nation Israel. Jesus does not indicate that His identity as “true Israel” extinguishes national Israel’s identity and significance.

After forty days of kingdom instruction from the risen Lord (Acts 1:3), the disciples asked Jesus the question, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). The disciples do not believe that Jesus’ identity rules out a restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Jesus’ answer to their question is significant: “He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority’” (Acts 1:7). Jesus does not correct them or say, “Don’t you get it. I am the true Israel. There is no future restoration of the nation Israel.” Instead, Jesus assumes the correctness of their question but informs them that the timing of Israel’s restoration is not for them to know, but is only in possession of the Father. They are to be concerned with the proclamation of the gospel to the world.

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27 Ernest DeWitt Burton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, in International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921), 358.
Does the pouring out of the Spirit and the inauguration of the church with the events of Acts 2 change the concept of Israel? The answer is, No. With Acts 3:19–21, Peter addressed the leaders of Israel (3:12) and told them to “repent” and “return” so that their sins could be wiped away and “times of refreshing” would come. He then reminds the men of Israel that “It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED’” (Acts 3:25). So even with the beginning of the church era, these unbelieving representatives of Israel are still viewed as “sons of the prophets and of the covenant” God made with their fathers. Peter also said that “God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (3:26). This parallels the truth of Isaiah 49 that the “Servant” would bring blessing to the nation Israel. There is no indication here that Jesus’ role as “Israel” brought an end to national Israel’s identity as “Israel.”

With Rom 9:4 Paul declared that the “Israelites” belong to “the covenants” and “the promises.” Paul linked the salvation of “all Israel” with Old Testament promises in Rom 11:26–27. Paul also drew upon the Old Testament hope when he announced that “Christ became a servant to the circumcision . . . and for the Gentiles” (Rom 15:8, 9). With the Book of Revelation, John the apostle pointed to future significance for the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4–8) who are distinguished from a “great multitude” from “every nation and all tribes” (7:9). Again, the ministry of Jesus has significance for both the nation Israel and the Gentiles.

There simply is no scriptural evidence for the non-dispensational view that Christ’s identity as “Israel” means the non-significance of the nation Israel in the future. The Scripture actually teaches the opposite—Christ’s role as true Israel means the restoration of the nation Israel. Some, like Strimple, have tried to link the identity of Israel to typology claiming that the nation Israel functioned as a type that has given way to the superior anti-type—Christ. But this argument is based on a faulty understanding of typology in which all things that are physical or national are assumed to be shadows or types that must be transcended by greater spiritual New Testament realities. If the nation Israel is a type that gives way to the greater New Testament antitype, why then does the New Testament address the future significance of the nation Israel (see Matt 19:28; 23:39; Acts 1:6; Rom 9:4; 11:26; Rev 7:4–8)? If Christ is the fulfillment of Israel in such a way that there is no significance for the nation Israel, why is the future of the nation Israel still addressed as much as it is? Instead, the conclusion we should draw is that New Testament reaffirmations of Israel’s place in the plan of God are evidence that Israel is not a type that is transcended.

**Conclusion**

In sum, the non-dispensational argument that Christ as “true Israel” means there is no longer any significance for Israel as a nation is refuted by the following reasons:

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28 See Strimple, 84–100.
1. No writer in the Bible states that Jesus’ identification with Israel means the end of national Israel’s significance.
2. Isaiah 49 specifically predicts that the Servant and ultimate “Israel,” Jesus Christ, would restore the nation Israel and bring light to the nations.
3. Jesus did not view His identity and ministry as the end of national Israel’s existence; instead, He affirmed national Israel’s place in the eschaton.
4. Even after the church started the apostles affirmed a future for the nation Israel.

As Christians we should acknowledge and celebrate Jesus Christ’s identification with “Israel,” but we must also draw correct implications from this truth. Jesus, the true Israelite, will restore national Israel and bring light and blessings to the Gentiles. Thus, the non-dispensational view that the nation Israel no longer has a place in God’s future plans because Christ is “true Israel” is not consistent with what the Bible teaches and should be rejected.
DID GOD FULFILL EVERY GOOD PROMISE?:
TOWARD A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF
JOSHUA 21:43–45

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Some Bible students believe that God’s promises concerning land to Abraham’s physical descendants have already been completely fulfilled. Those who hold to a ‘fulfillment of the land promises’ position often consider Josh 21:43–45 as proof that God already fulfilled the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant to the Jewish people. Consequently, one should expect no future fulfillment for either the land or the nation of Israel because of this passage. However, a proper understanding of Josh 21:43–45 and the broader context of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants shows that it is incorrect to claim that a statement concerning God’s faithfulness in Joshua means that God no longer is concerned with Israel and Israel’s relationship to the land of promise.

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Introduction, Purpose, and Format

In a recent article on Replacement Theology, Mike Vlach summarizes what many who study Scripture know to be the case:

Few theological issues are as hotly debated as the Israel/church issue. It is a constant topic of debate between covenant theologians and dispensationalists . . . At issue is whether the New Testament church replaces, fulfills, and/or displaces national Israel as the people of God. And if so, to what extent does this affect national Israel?¹

¹ Michael J. Vlach, “Various Forms of Replacement Theology,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 20, No. 1 (Spring 2009): 57. Vlach presents three divisions of replacement theology: (1) “punitive supersessionism,” where God punished Israel for rejecting Jesus as Messiah; (2) “economic supersessionism,” where it was God’s intention all along to replace the promises made to Israel with the church; and (3) “structural supersessionism,” which in varying degrees minimizes the Old Testament scriptures (57–69).
Narrowing down the primary divisive issue between the two theological camps ultimately comes down to one key issue:

The land-promise aspect of God’s promise to Abraham, a promise repeated frequently throughout the OT, is the crux of the issue for both critics: to whom does the land of Israel belong? Covenant theologians, in line with their view that the church has replaced Israel in the ongoing program of God, deny that the land-promise to Israel is still valid.  

The interpretational significance of this land debate must be dealt with carefully, if for no other reason, based on the high frequency of the land passages that occurs in Scripture. Kaiser observes:

In the Old Testament few issues are as important as that of the promise of the land to the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. In fact, אֶרֶץ, “land” is the fourth most frequent substantive in the Hebrew Bible. Were it not for the larger and more comprehensive theme of the total promise with all its multifaceted provisions, the theme of Israel and her land could well serve as the central idea or the organizing rubric for the entire canon.  

In a sense this is a by-product of the core question of what hermeneutic should be employed in reference to these promises given by God and will be examined in this article. However, who owns the land and whether it has any eschatological significance is much more than some “coffee table debate” among theologians. This issue has far-reaching implications even in national and worldwide political policy, let alone the interpretational significance for the remainder of all Scripture.

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Many readers of the Bible who hold the fulfillment of the land promises position consider Josh 21:43–45 to be their proof text clearly showing that God has already fulfilled the land promises given the Jewish people in the Abrahamic Covenant, and consequently one should expect no future fulfillment for either the land or the nation of Israel:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.5

While at first glance these verses do indeed seem to give credence to such a conclusion that God has already fulfilled all the land promises to Israel, such an interpretation seems to be surprisingly relatively new and growing in popularity, often appearing in Internet chatrooms6 or blogs and in some rather recently published books.7

While by no means limited to them, one of the most vocal groups claiming that God fulfilled the Abrahamic Covenant land promises is New Covenant Theology which “is a relatively new system which, though not yet well defined, attempts to combine strengths of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology and to eliminate the weak points between the two.”8 With their understanding that the land promises have been fulfilled by the time of Joshua, it would not be surprising that

5 All Scripture references used are from the NASB 1971 edition unless otherwise stipulated.
6 An example of a posted website referring Joshua and the land promises is Michael D. Marlowe, editor, The Bible Researcher web site. The first part of affirmation #9 of their doctrinal statements says this: “The entitlement of any one ethnic or religious group to territory in the Middle East called the ‘Holy Land’ cannot be supported by Scripture. In fact, the land promises specific to Israel in the Old Testament were fulfilled under Joshua” http://www.bible–researcher.com/openletter.html (accessed 11/15/2011). A list of signatories for this open letter is at the bottom of the page.
Josh 21:43–45 would play a vital role in their taking this position. Thus it is concluded by New Covenant theologians that Josh 21:43–45 is their irrefutable “trump card” concerning God’s total fulfillment of Abrahamic Covenant obligations, at least as far the land is concerned. Lehrer writes as a representative of New Covenant Theology:

The book of Joshua tells us that when the Israelites had finally taken most of the land, all of the promises given to Abraham had been fulfilled (Joshua 21:43–45). Nothing else needed to happen for God to make good on His word to Abraham. His promises of rest and possession of the land had been fulfilled, just like his promises of many descendants and a special relationship with God. It was all fulfilled by the time of the conquest of the Land of Canaan under Joshua.

Adams argues along the same lines: “So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there . . . Not one of the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled. Joshua 21:43–45, emphasis added. ”

However, it should be noted that seeing a fulfillment of the land promises is by no means limited to New Covenant Theology. Cox presents the same conclusion written decades earlier:

Did God keep the promise to Joshua? The futurist cannot allow it . . . We could summarize these promises concerning the land of Canaan being inherited by Israel as follows: The land was promised through Abraham; the promise was renewed to Isaac, Jacob and Moses. It was fulfilled literally through Joshua . . . How sad it is then that some theologians are still arguing that they are yet future! Much of the futurist belief rests on the assumption that God has never given Israel all the land promised through Abraham.

Mathison summarizes the fulfillment view and sites the importance Josh 21:43–45 plays in proving this: “There are numerous other passages in the Old Testament that

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9 See Thomas, “Dispensationalism’s Role in the Public Square,” 26–29, and Barrick’s “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” 171–75 for a critique of how New Covenant Theology proponents understand the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant having been fulfilled.

10 Steven Lehrer, New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered (n.p. 2006), 32. Lehrer’s reasoning “when the Israelites had finally taken most of the land, all of the promises given to Abraham had been fulfilled” (emphasis mine) is contradictory in and of itself, but this will be developed in more detail elsewhere in this article.


tell us that God has already fulfilled the land promises given to Israel (Josh 11:23; 21:21–45; Neh 9:25). Joshua 21:43–45 explicitly declares that all the land promised Israel was given to them.”13 DeMar shows how interpreting Josh 21:43–45 as being already fulfilled affects the interpretation of other important prophetic passages. As part of the support that there is no time gap between Daniel’s sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks, DeMar presents his second point of argumentation as a known and an indisputable fact: “In addition, the text [Dan. 9:26] says nothing about the restoration of Israel to her land as a fulfillment of some covenant obligation. All the land promises that God made to Israel were fulfilled (Joshua 21:43–45).”14

Obviously the importance of this is noteworthy: if Josh 21:43–45 can be shown to have already been fulfilled, then the point supporting the fulfillment of Daniel 9 is valid; however, if it can be shown that these promises have not been fulfilled, then his second point of his support for interpreting Dan 9:26 has no basis in one’s eschatological interpretation elsewhere.

The purpose of this article is to examine the validity of the claims that Josh 21:43–45 inarguably proves that all the land promises given by God to Israel have already been fulfilled and consequently have no future eschatological significance. This will be done by (1) a brief overview of the covenants of God up to Joshua 21, (2) an examination of the original geographic boundaries of the Abrahamic Covenant, with special note of the importance of the Euphrates River, (3) a survey of the eschatological significance of Lev 26:40–45, (4) examining strategic passages from the Book of Joshua, (5) critiquing a popular proponent who argues for the complete fulfillment of the Josh 21:43–45, and finally (6), a proposed interpretation.

**An Overview of the Covenants of God Pertaining to Joshua 21**

Although Joshua 21 is often the beginning place of the study for many who cite these verses as proof that God has already fulfilled the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, this is not an appropriate place to begin; there are many other crucial matters to consider. For instance, the Abrahamic Covenant, to which they refer, is the second covenant recorded in Scripture. The first covenant in Scripture, the Noahic Covenant, is important since although often not the case in a consistent manner, the hermeneutic in how one approaches a covenant of God should be noted.15 Before summarizing the six covenants of God found in the Bible (the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Priestly, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant), Busenitz rightly reasons: “Let no one underestimate the importance and significance of a correct understanding of the divine covenants. It is much more than an intellectual pursuit. They provide a most foundational theological anchor

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13 Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 27. [emphasis in the original]
15 For an excellent article depicting the component parts of the covenants of God, see Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenant: the Noahic and the Priestly Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, No. 2 (Fall 1999): 173–89.
for understanding God’s working in human history.”\textsuperscript{16} Further, “Understanding these six covenants will shape a person’s understanding of Scripture. It will reflect a hermeneutical course \textit{which will determine the pitch of one’s eschatological sails}.\textsuperscript{17} This is important: while most people do not realize it, how one interprets the covenants of God will ultimately and immensely factor into one’s eschatology; there is no way to avoid this.

The Noahic Covenant

While we are not able to go into detail of the covenants of God within this article, it is necessary to at least examine the component parts of the covenants under which Joshua would be familiar since they affect the interpretation of Josh 21:41–43.\textsuperscript{18} God’s promises in the Noahic Covenant are plainly seen in Scripture. In fact, it is within the framework of the Noahic Covenant in Gen 6:18 that the word “covenant” first occurs in Scripture where, before sending the flood, God promises, “I will establish My covenant with you . . .”\textsuperscript{19} It is significant that God refers to it as His covenant because He alone makes it; it is a unilateral, not a bilateral, covenant. From the text one would expect (1) that the enduring seasons are an aspect of this covenant (Gen 8:22); (2) God’s own emphatic self-identification that “Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you” (Gen 9:9); (3) His solemn promise that never again will all flesh be destroyed by means of the flood (9:11); (4) the rainbow will be the sign for the covenant as long as the covenant is valid (9:12–17), and (5) significantly, the covenant is presented as an “everlasting covenant” between God and all flesh that is on the earth (9:16).\textsuperscript{20} The Noahic Covenant is the broadest of God’s covenant promises because it includes not only all of humanity from that point forward, but it also includes “every living creature” (9:15).

Also, for those who accept the Scripture as the true Word of God, the Noahic Covenant should factor into understanding other portions of the Bible since the Noahic Covenant is not an isolated covenant with some special hermeneutic employed to understand it, when compared to other covenants—especially the unilateral ones—that God would make. Nothing within the text nor in the literal fulfillment of God’s subsequent judgment on the earth would give any indication that God intended some allegorical method of interpretation in both what He accomplished in Genesis 6–9 nor for what He promised for the future. Busenitz properly warns:

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. [emphasis added].
\textsuperscript{18} This article does not include the Priestly Covenant since it does not directly relate to the argumentation of Josh 21:43–45. However, see Busenitz, ibid., 186–89 for matters related to this, especially its eschatological significance beyond the Book of Joshua.
\textsuperscript{19} See ibid., 175–76 for the OT etymology of the word “covenant.”
\textsuperscript{20} For matters related to the use of \textit{olam} (“everlasting”) see Allan A. MacRae, “\textit{עֹלָם}, \textit{olam},” \textit{Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament} [\textit{TWOT}], edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:379–80.
When God enters into a unilateral covenant guaranteed only by His own faithfulness; when God enters into a covenant void of any human requirements to keep it in force; when God establishes a covenant that will continue as long as there is day and night and summer and then, then great care must be taken not to erect any man–made limitations that would bankrupt the heart and soul of these covenants and annul the glorious full realization of all that He promised through them. Their significance cannot be over-estimated.  

Or stated differently, nothing inherently exists within the text indicates that Yahweh had no intention of fulfilling His covenant in a literal way. Nothing within the text gives the reader any indication that at some time in the future (such as Joshua 21), God would consider destroying His earth again by means of worldwide flood, reasoning that since He had already fulfilled every good promise contained within the Noahic Covenant by Josh 21:43–45—especially by having not destroyed His world—so consequently He was now free to do so again at any time in the future if He so desired. If one consistently follows this line of reasoning, no one should expect Yahweh to keep His Word about anything, for if one applied this same hermeneutic to the Noahic Covenant as many do for Josh 21:45, there would be no way of knowing whether any of the good covenantal promises of God still existed or at what point He ended them. People who hold the Bible to be true would ridicule this approach to Scripture (and rightly so) because it would so weaken God’s promises within the Noahic Covenant, but even more so, it would cast disparaging insults at the person and faithfulness of God because He cannot be trusted to keep His Word. However, it is foundational to note that how one interprets the Noahic Covenant establishes hermeneutical grounds for how the other of God’s covenants should be interpreted unless sufficient grounds for changing the hermeneutic can be established.

The Abrahamic Covenant

As stated before, it is not the nature of this article to point out all the theological elements and proponents of the different views related to the Abrahamic Covenant. But certain crucial elements of the Abrahamic Covenant should be noted to see if they do in fact show that they have been fulfilled by the time of Josh 21:43–45 as some claim. A brief survey of what God promised in this eternally important covenant is warranted.

In Gen 12:1–3 Yahweh instructed and promised Abram (1) to go forth from his country and relatives to the land Yahweh would show him (Gen 12:1); (2)
that God would make him a great name (Gen 12:2); (3) that Yahweh will bless those who bless him and will curse the one who curses him (Gen 12:3a); and (4) “in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3b). Genesis 12:7 adds, “And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.” In that He did not ratify the covenant at that time, Yahweh spoke of what He would accomplish in the future.

The next reference to what would eventually become the Abrahamic Covenant occurs in Gen 13:14–17: “And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, ‘Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.’”

It should be noted that with Gen 13:15 the land promises are given forever (永遠, olam). This is the first reference to everlasting since the everlasting Noahic Covenant and the exact word used in Gen 9:12 and 9:16. While this in and of itself does not prove the eternality of the covenant, at least the same consideration should be given to this usage as in Genesis 9, which is often not the case. At the very least one should expect that “everlasting” should go beyond the not too distant future of Joshua 21. Yet even beyond this, Kaiser argues against those who want to reduce or remove the eternal significance of what God has promised in the Abrahamic Covenant by dividing it into separate parts:

There is an important point that is to be made in the fact that all three parts of the covenant (i.e., the seed, the land, and the gospel [blessing]) were bound together as one promise with a promise that this one promise was eternal. Most Christians will grant that the seed and gospel aspects of this promise are eternal, but somehow they think it is possible to dissect the eternal promise of the land from the other two eternal aspects! But to use a theological scalpel to cut out one part is to expose the rest of this same covenant to diminution and a time limitation.

Subsequently, the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant that occurred in Genesis 15 has perpetual consequences that God has placed squarely upon Himself and no else for its fulfillment:

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23 For support that the term “eternal” should not automatically be diminished in importance, see Townsend, “Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament,” 323–24.

So solemn was this covenant with its gift of the land that Genesis 15:7–21 depicted God alone moving between the halves of the sacrificial animals after sunset as “a smoking furnace and a flaming torch” (v. 17). Thus, He obligated Himself and only Himself to fulfill the terms of this oath. Abraham was not asked or required likewise to oblige himself. The total burden for the delivery of the gift of the land fell on the divine Provider but not on the devotion of the patriarch. As if to underscore the permanence of this arrangement, Genesis 17:7, 13, 19 stress that this was to be a "an everlasting covenant.”

One essential point should be noted: Gen 15:8 gives the specific land boundaries of the Abrahamic Covenant: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.’” It is crucial to note that no future tense occurs at this point as Yahweh previously employed; on the day He alone ratified His covenant He declared, “I have given this land.” Hailing from Ur of the Chaldeans, Abram would be quite familiar with the Euphrates River. There is no indication that one who grew up close to this enormously long river would hold any mystical or allegorical interpretation as to what Yahweh promised:

How was Abram to understand God’s words? They were plain enough. Historically, the geographical location was quite specific in this and later wordings of the land promise. Dispensationalism interprets the words as God intended them and as Abram understood them. No typology. No spiritualizing. No symbolism. No preunderstanding of how the words must fit into a system of theology. No reading back into the words a later special revelation. To take the words in a sense other than what God intended and Abram understood is a distortion. Though Abram’s environment was no longer sinless [as when God first communicated with Adam and Eve], God was still perfectly capable to communicating clearly. He cannot lie and must be taken at His word. Abram understood God correctly, and so Israel became a nation chosen by God in possession of a particular plot of land on the present earth’s surface.

It is likewise essential to observe that the territory described is quite large with a landmass of approximately “300,000 square miles or twelve and one-half times the

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25 Kaiser, “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View,” 303. Although other Scripture passages are important for a fuller study of the Abrahamic Covenant, this article will limit itself to this point. For additional matters such as Genesis 22 and how the New Testament relates to the Abrahamic Covenant, see Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” 205–12.

26 For a study of these specific boundaries given in Scripture as well as argumentation for where the Euphrates serves as a northern border, see Kaiser, “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View,” 303–05. See also Townsend, “Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament,” 324–28 for an examination of the specific land boundaries given and a proposed map of all the land thus mentioned.

27 Thomas, “Dispensationalism’s Role in the Public Square,” 36.
The size of Great Britain and Ireland. This stands in stark contrast to the surprisingly small traditional borders that include a territory that extends only “about 150 miles north to south (going from Dan to Beersheba) and an average of thirty miles east to west from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River Valley” and stands in sharp contrast with only a landmass of about 10,000 square miles. The significance of this specific landmass will later be explored in this article and must factor into interpreting the land promises given by God referred to in Josh 21:43–45, but it should suffice for the time being that the difference between the land promised by God and that actually gained by the Jewish people comes to approximately only one-thirtieth of the designated landmass.

As previously noted with the Noahic Covenant, nothing within the text offers any reason that to believe that Yahweh would disregard His promises within the Abrahamic Covenant at some future date. For those who quote from the Noahic Covenant and use the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic in doing so would have to explain why they would switch hermeneutics within the same book by the same author recording words spoken by the same God. How would one know that God did not intend the same allegorical interpretation of the promises within the Noahic Covenant? Furthermore, Thomas’ point is worthy of consideration:

One wonders whether those who think the land promises to Abraham will go unfulfilled because of Israel’s faithlessness would say the same thing about God’s promise of making Abraham a blessing to all nations. Genesis 12:3c records, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Would they say that this promise has also been abrogated by Israel’s lack of faithfulness? This promise of spiritual blessing to Abraham of being a special blessing to all the nations is still in effect and will be fulfilled to the letter just like another aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the land promise.

Along this same line of reasoning, it would have to be answered by those who would decide what parts of the covenant could be forfeited, and on what grounds hermeneutically could it be shown that this did in fact transpire by Joshua 21.

The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant was ratified in Joshua’s lifetime (Exod 24:1–8), and he and the Jewish nation lived under its mandates. Time does not permit a full

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treatment of all the elements of this next covenant of Yahweh. However, among other things, one tremendously relevant point of importance should be marked, namely, that on three different occasions within the Mosaic Covenant Yahweh Himself once more referred to the Euphrates River as part of the land boundaries for the Abrahamic Covenant after He ratified it in Gen 15:18: (1) Exod 23:31: “And I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you”; (2) to the nation Joshua would soon lead into the Promised Land, Yahweh instructed in Deut 1:7, “Turn and set your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites, and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, in the hill country and in the lowland and in the Negev and by the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates;” and (3) Deut 11:24: “Every place on which the sole of your foot shall tread shall be yours; your border shall be from the wilderness to Lebanon, and from the river, the river Euphrates, as far as the western sea.” This is significant because the Book of Joshua opens with Yahweh once more instructing the new leader that the land He had given them was “from the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, will be your territory” (Josh 1:4). More about this will be seen later in this article, but suffice it to say that if Yahweh intended some other meaning than the physical Euphrates River, then the burden of proof is on those to determine what indeed Yahweh intended to mean by specifically and repeatedly naming this river if He did not mean this. And even beyond this, it must further be explained how Joshua would understand God’s intended meaning in attempting to be obedient to Yahweh’s commands and instructions so that Yahweh would grant the opportunity for success set before Him (Josh 1:8).

The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26

Another pertinent feature of the Mosaic Covenant that must factor in when interpreting Josh 21:43–45 is Leviticus 26. In this section of the Mosaic Covenant, Yahweh promised His blessings on the nation of Israel if they obeyed Him (Lev 26:1–13), followed by certain judgments on the Jewish people if they lived in covenant violation against Him (Lev 26:14–39). “While the blessings were relevant to the Abrahamic Covenant’s promises regarding land and blessing, the cursings represented a five-stage process of Mosaic Covenant vengeance.” As repeatedly seen throughout this section, all the curses inflicted by Yahweh were intended to bring the Jewish nation back into covenant obedience to Him (e.g. Lev 26:18, 21


32 William D. Barrick, “Inter-covenantal Truth and Relevance: Leviticus 26 and the Biblical Covenants,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 21, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 82. The five stages are (1) debilitation and defeat (Lev 26:16–17), (2) drought (vv. 18–20), (3) devastation by wild beasts (vv. 21–22), (4) deprivation by siege (vv. 23–26) and (5) deportation (vv. 27–38) [Ibid. n. 2].
etc.). Included in the penalties for blatant and on-going covenant violation, Yahweh pronounced the following judgment regarding the promised land of Israel in Lev 26:31–35:

“I will lay waste your cities as well, and will make your sanctuaries desolate; and I will not smell your soothing aromas. And I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled over it. You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste.

“Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths all the days of the desolation, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it will observe the rest which it did not observe on your sabbaths, while you were living on it.”

Significantly, Leviticus 26 is given to the nation while they were still at Mount Sinai (Lev 26:45) and before even the spies had been sent out to scout the land (Numbers 13–14). So decades before the nation entered the land that Yahweh had promised them, their existence in the land—or lack thereof—had already been decreed by Yahweh, based on either their covenant obedience or disobedience to Him, especially as prescribed in the Mosaic Covenant. As Kaiser writes, “The ownership of the land (as a gift from God) is certain and eternal, but the occupation of it by any given generation is conditioned on obedience.”33 It should be noted in the previous chapter how Yahweh viewed the land: He claimed it is as His own: “The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me” (Lev 25:23). For those who think too much is made about the land promises in the Bible, this verse should not be taken lightly: to this day the land remains Yahweh’s.

However, in spite of the covenant violations and even when the promised exile would eventually occur, Leviticus 26 concludes this section of divinely promised blessing and cursing of the nation of Israel as Yahweh revealed His future intention regarding both His land and His people:

“If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me—I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land. For the land shall be abandoned by them, and shall make up for its sabbaths while it is made desolate without them. They, meanwhile,  

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shall be making amends for their iniquity, because they rejected My ordinances and their soul abhorred My statutes. Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD” (Lev 26:40–45).

Leviticus 26:40–45 is a tremendously important portion of Scripture in understanding God’s future intention regarding both the Jewish people and the land He had promised them in the Abrahamic Covenant. But this is far from the case with many theologians since “Leviticus is not normally the first source students of Scripture consult when discussing eschatology.”34 Barrick rightly summarizes the importance of Leviticus 26 in understanding that the “failure of theologians and expositors to give as much attention to Leviticus 26 as they have given to Deuteronomy 27–28 has impoverished the church’s doctrinal corpus.”35 Nor is this “19th century Darbyism” that concludes, “The theory of futurism concerning Israel is a recent teaching, having originated about 1830.”36 This is the inspired Word of God the moment Yahweh first issued it. To claim the promises of Lev 26:40–45 as a 19th century teaching would make “the just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17), or “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1) restricted to the “relatively new” teaching originating at the Protestant Reformation rather than the first century when Paul wrote this.

Again, whether one includes or dismisses Leviticus 26 in one’s eschatology has extremely far-reaching interpretational implications in later biblical passages. Barrick summarizes the eschatological significance of Leviticus 26:

Leviticus 26 contains revelation referring to Israel’s future repentance and restoration, which are confirmed by both OT and NT. Since their repentance and restoration have not yet occurred, their fulfillment is eschatological. Leviticus 26’s relationship to the Abrahamic Covenant ties fulfillment to the land God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham. The fulfillment of the land promises awaits Israel’s repentance. When Israel turns to God and confesses her sins, God will restore her to the promised land. Chronologically, Leviticus 26 is the first detailed description of Israel’s eschatological repentance and restoration. It provides significant evidence that disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant results in the removal of the blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. The chapter is at the heart of the OT prophets’ announcements concerning the future messianic kingdom. A proper

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35 Ibid., 125.
36 Contra Cox, The New Covenant Israel, 73.
understanding of the prophetic program of the OT fully integrates the revelation of Leviticus 26.

As was done previously in this article with other promises to which Yahweh bound Himself, one should take the same approach to what He promised in Lev 26:40–45, and in this case, how it relates to Josh 21:43–45. In order for the promise Yahweh made in Lev 26:40–45 to have been fulfilled by the time Josh 21:45 occurred, the following elements must have transpired historically and must be shown that they did indeed occur: (1) a national confession of the nation’s sin and the iniquity of their forefathers (26:40), (2) Yahweh acted with hostility to exile the Jewish nation into the land of their enemies (26:41), (3) after the national confession of their sin in the exile, Yahweh would remember His covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (26:42), (4) the land must be abandoned until all its sabbaths be made up (26:43a), (5) the Jewish nation must have made amends for iniquity once in exile (26:43b), (6) Yahweh must not abhor them nor break His covenant even when the people are in the land of their enemies (26:44), and (7) He must remember His covenant He made with the Jewish people (26:45). These are just as much “the good promises of Yahweh” as is anything else promised elsewhere by Yahweh from Gen 3:15 onward. Even more fitting is that these good promises of Yahweh follow the context of Leviticus 26 that contains multiple references to the land promises:

Leviticus 26 depicts the promised land as the setting for the fulfillment of both blessings (vv. 4–12) and curses (vv. 14–38). It is noteworthy that Ps. 72:16–17 describes the worldwide extension of the Davidic kingdom in terms reminiscent of the blessings in Leviticus 26. That is one of the indications of the eschatological significance of this chapter.

By no stretch of imagination can any of these elements have transpired historically, especially since the people were in the land in Joshua 21 and had not yet been exiled. Consequently, the burden of proof is on those who make sweeping claims that Yahweh had indeed fulfilled “all His good promises.” Also, as before, one would have to determine what Yahweh in fact did attempt to communicate by these promises of the future if He did not mean to exile and to regather the Jewish nation.

Just before the transition in leadership from Moses to Joshua, God warned that the nation of Israel was already leaning away from Him toward rebellion. After “The Song of Moses” (Deuteronomy 32), which God intended as “a witness for Me against the sons of Israel” (31:19), Moses concluded this section stressing the utter necessity of obedience to Yahweh, particularly how it related to the longevity of the

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37 Ibid., 125–26 [emphasis added]. For other eschatological promises within the Pentateuch, such as the four uses of “the latter days” in the Pentateuch (Gen 49:1, Num 24:14–24; Deut 4:30 and 31:29) and their importance, see John H. Sailhamer, Genesis, in Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:132. For the Messianic implications of Gen 49:1 and “the last days,” see John H. Sailhamer, “The Messiah of the Hebrew Bible,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 44, No. 1 (March 2001): 12–22.

38 Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” 117.
people dwelling in the land that the LORD was about to give them. Deuteronomy 32:44–47 states:

Then Moses came and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he, with Joshua the son of Nun. When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, “Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. And by this word you shall prolong your days in the land, which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.”

Based on the biblical text Essex concisely summarizes matters related to the nation of Israel in both the near and distant future of what to expect:

The Torah closes with an anticipation of a fulfillment of this promise to Abraham in the conquest of the land under Joshua in the near future (Deut. 31:1–8). However, the Torah predicts that Israel would forfeit the land because of disobedience and be scattered among the nations (Deut. 29:22–28). In the distant future, after the scattering (Deut. 4:30–31), the LORD will return repentant Israel to the land in accordance with His covenant with Abraham (Lev. 26:40–45).39

In regard to which Jewish generations would enjoy the promise of Yahweh to live in the land versus the utter veracity of the eternal covenant God bound Himself to, Kaiser observes: “The conditionality was not attached to the promise but only to the participants who would benefit from these abiding promises . . . The promise remained permanent, but the participation in the blessings depended on the individual’s spiritual condition.”40

A fuller summary from the promises God stated within this article one would expect: (1) for Yahweh to go before the nation as He lead them to bring them into the land (Deut 31:3), (2) but in spite of Yahweh’s faithfulness, Israel would fall away and serve other gods (Deut 31:16) because (3) even when Moses was alive the intents of their hearts were already away from God (Deut 31:21b). Because of this (4) Yahweh would ultimately disperse the disobedient people into the nations (Deut 30:1), (5) the land would enjoy its sabbaths (Lev 26:43), but (6) He would not reject or abhor His people (Lev 26:44–45). Eventually, (7) after the blessing and the curse had come upon the people in all the nations where Yahweh had dispersed them (Deut 30:1), (8) the nation collectively would repent and return to the LORD (Deut 30:2). Then (9) Yahweh would regather them into the land from their

captivity (Deut 30:3–5). Yet even beyond these blessings, (10) Yahweh Himself will one day circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants “to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deut 30:6). Furthermore (11) God Himself would inflict strong judgments on the nations who afflicted Israel (Deut 30: 7), because, after all, in being utterly true to His word, Yahweh had previously promised, (12) “I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse” (Gen 12:3), which is most assuredly “a good promise of the Lord.” Finally, after Yahweh has brought every bit of these elements about, (13) the nation will again obey Him, living in total covenant obedience (Deut 30:8) and then receive once more God’s covenant blessings on them (30:9–10). These verses require God’s strong judgment for disobedience on the Jewish nation yet contain His promise for the same people whom He judged to again obey Him after they had once been disobedient and thus afflicted by Him, including even exile into pagan nations. If anyone claimed such blessings for the New Testament church, according to context of Deuteronomy 30, they can occur only after “the blessing and the curse” has come upon them, and they are banished to all the different nations where God had banished them (Deut 30:1).

**Significant Factors from the Book of Joshua**

Three pertinent items within the Book of Joshua help to gain the proper interpretation of Josh 21:43–45, namely, (1) God’s opening charge to Joshua in 1:1–4, (2) that Joshua 13–21 is one unit within the book that presents the dividing the land among the Jewish people, and (3) the opening summary statement God made in Josh 13:1–7.

God’s opening charge to Joshua in Josh 1:1–4 began with specific boundaries, markers that would have been quite familiar to Joshua:

Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ servant, saying, “Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, will be your territory.

The mention of the Euphrates River in Josh 1:4 is extremely significant in that, first, as already shown, God had previously included it as part of the boundaries of the land promise on four different occasions, beginning with the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15:18), occurring at Sinai in the chapter before the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 23:41), and twice in Deuteronomy (Deut 1:7; 11:24). Second, Josh 1:4 is the only time the Euphrates River occurs in the entire Book of Joshua; not one reference exists that shows that even any exploratory excursion was ever made to the Euphrates, such as decades earlier when Joshua had
been a part of the spies sent out to survey the land in Numbers 13, let alone any verses that show it was portioned out as part of the land divisions in the book and gained as its rightful promised land possession. It should also be noted that Joshua would have been quite familiar with the promises and warning of the recently given Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–30, as well as the ultimate future hope for both the land and the Jewish nation revealed in Lev 26:40–45.41

Another important item that is often neglected by those who quote Josh 21:43–45 as a proof text that God has already fulfilled the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant is the division of the land given in Joshua 13–21. Joshua 13–21 is one segment within the book, and individual chapters must be viewed within this context. Actually, within Josh 21:43–45 are the last three verses in this section and offer “a glorious summary” of the land division.42 The opening verse of the this section, Josh 13:1, is extremely important in that God Himself evaluated what He had accomplished thus far as well as what remained yet to be accomplished: “Now Joshua was old and advanced in years when the LORD said to him, 'You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land remains to be possessed.’” Yahweh then delineated groups within the land that were part of the “very much of the land that remains to be possessed” in Josh 13:2–7:

“This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and all those of the Geshurites; from the Shihor which is east of Egypt, even as far as the border of Ekron to the north (it is counted as Canaanite); the five lords of the Philistines: the Gazite, the Ashdodite, the Ashkelonite, the Gittite, the Ekronite; and the Avvite to the south, all the land of the Canaanite, and Mearah that belongs to the Sidonians, as far as Aphek, to the border of the Amorite; and the land of the Gebalite, and all of Lebanon, toward the east, from Baal–gad below Mount Hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. All the inhabitants of the hill country from Lebanon as far as Misrephoth-maim, all the Sidonians, I will drive them out from before the sons of Israel; only allot it to Israel for an inheritance as I have commanded you. Now therefore, apportion this land for an inheritance to the nine tribes, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.”

Because of Josh 13:1–7, which deals with particulars related to the land of Canaan, let alone the added reference in Joshua 1:4 to the territory associated with the Euphrates that exists outside of the land that they currently occupied, it is beyond argument that Israel never possessed the land as stipulated in the Abrahamic Covenant during the days of Joshua. This obvious lack of gaining all the land that God promised is a significant point marked by both non-dispensational and dispensational camps. Regarding the land promises given to Israel, several

41 Barrick notes, “Interestingly, the land itself is treated as a separate participant in the covenant. It can be the recipient of the restitution of the sabbaths that it had been denied (vv. 33–34, 43)” (Barrick, “Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” 117).
acknowledge the clear teaching that “the Israelites never came into undisputed possession of the whole promised land, to the full extent of the boundaries laid down in Num 34:1–12, never conquering Tyre and Sidon, for example . . .”43 Bright writes that the promise only “began to find fulfillment—though never a complete fulfillment—in the giving of the Promised Land.”44 Noting the contrast between God’s faithfulness and Israel’s incomplete obedience, Hess adds, “Thus the tendency has been to understand here a process of dispossession. Israel had begun it under God but the nation’s failure to complete it was a failure in its obedience to complete the process.”45 Mabie offers this fuller explanation of how incomplete the conquest of the land of Canaan was during Joshua’s life:

Although it is commonly misconstrued that only the book of Judges reflects the incomplete aspects of the conquest, both Joshua and Judges reflect the reality of unconquered peoples, cities and territories. Indeed, the chapter following the list of defeated kings [Josh. 12] articulates a daunting list of unconquered areas spanning from the far south to the far north, particularly on the Coastal Plain and in the Jezreel and Beth Shean Valleys (Josh 13:1–6, 13). Similarly, during the dividing of the land, other unconquered areas are noted (cf. Josh 15:63; 16:10; 17:11–16). Likewise, at the tent of meeting in Shiloh the Israelites are rebuked for “neglecting to possess” the land, since there are still seven tribes that have not received their inheritance (Josh 18:1–3).46

Davis adds a good summary statement of what Josh 13:1 teaches: “All this land was, in one sense, on the edges of Israel’s land. If such was the land that remained, it implies that Israel had achieved a significant measure of the dominance in the main part of Canaan. Not that such dominance was total, but it was substantial.”47

Joshua 21:43–45, which concludes the land division chapters (Joshua 13–21), plays a strategic role in understanding the entire book:

The passage is a theological conclusion of the entire book up to this point . . . The editor emphasizes here the completeness of God’s action . . . No matter what the political situation of Israel in a later generation, be it the division of the kingdom, the fall of the northern kingdom, or the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile, Israel could not blame God. God had faithfully done for Israel

43 Keil and Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 157.
47 Davis, No Falling Words: Expositions of the Book of Joshua, 110–11.
what he promised. Blame belonged on Israel’s shoulders, not God’s.48

After noting the failure of Israel to take full possession of the land, Davis eloquently adds the following and laments the neglect by some of the true importance of Josh 21:43–45:

Lastly, we must look at the grand testimony of Yahweh’s fidelity. This passage is the theological heart of the Book of Joshua; it deliberately echoes the concerns of 1:1–9 (cf. especially 1:2–3, 5–6) and structurally draws a line across everything that has preceded. Here is the jugular vein of the book. Yet two major commentaries published within the last twenty years allot nine and five lines respectively to this section: an inexcusable blunder.49

However, several who study the Book of Joshua over the centuries have wrestled with how to harmonize the statement of incomplete conquest in Josh 13:1 with the statement of what seems to be total conquest in Josh 21:43–45, John Calvin being among them:

In order to remove this appearance of contradiction, it is necessary to distinguish between the certain, clear and steadfast faithfulness of God in keeping his promises, and between the effeminacy and sluggishness of the people, in consequence of which the benefit of the divine goodness in a manner slipped through their hands . . . Wherefore, although they did not rout them all so as to make their possession clear, yet the truth of God came visibly forth, and was realized, inasmuch as they might have obtained what was remaining without any difficulty, had they been pleased to avail themselves of the victories offered to them.50

Davis acknowledges the apparent conflict between the two texts, and offers this assessment:

. . . namely, that there remained much land to be possessed (13:1) and there were enemies that Israel was not driving out (e.g.16:10;

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50 Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Joshua* 248. Donald H. Madvig’s, *Joshua*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1992), 353, wording is a little confusing: “The statement ‘the LORD gave Israel’ emphasizes God’s sovereign action . . . The land was God’s to give Israel. All of Canaan was not yet in Israel’s possession, nor were all the enemies destroyed. Nevertheless Israel was in control of ‘all the land.’” Then, “Yet God’s oath to Abraham had now been fulfilled” (ibid). If the land was not in Israel’s possession, then it does not reason that God’s oath to Abraham had been fulfilled.
17:12–13). But we must remember that the biblical writer . . .

directly contradictory to 21:43–45, he would sure have noticed it
and, presumably addressed the matter. Apparently the biblical
writer felt no unbearable rub here . . . Yahweh had given Israel all
the land (v. 43a)—witness the fact that they possessed and lived
in it (v. 43b). The fact that they might possess still more of it (cf.
Exod. 23:30) does not negate this.51

Mabie offers his harmonization of the apparent contradiction between
Josh 13:1 and 21:43–45:

Despite the reality of unconquered areas, the entire land is divided
among the tribes by lot at the command of Yahweh (Josh 13:6);
thus all the land is given as Yahweh promised (cf. Josh 21:43–45).
This interplay between given and unconquered land is nicely
reflected in Joshua’s exhortation to the leadership of Israel in
Joshua 23, which is situated “a long time after Yahweh had given
rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies.” While this
speech notes Israel’s victories in the land and stresses that
everything Yahweh promised had “come to pass,” it also clarifies
that some allotted land is still inhabited by unconquered nations
(Josh. 23:4, 9–10, 14).52

Mabie further emphasizes “the parallel realities” of Josh 13:1 and 21:43–45, just
as God had specifically promised in “the blessing and the curse” of Leviticus
26/Deuteronomy 28:

In addition, Joshua stresses that Yahweh will continue to drive out these
remaining nations in line with Israel’s faith and obedience (Josh 23:6),
but that unfaithfulness and disobedience will put this in jeopardy” (Josh
23:12–13, 15–16). In short, this speech helps to clarify the theological
nuances surrounding the parallel realities of completely given land and
incomplete conquest (cf. Num. 33:53; Deut. 8:1, 11:22–23).53

Others understand Josh 21:43–45 as highlighting different aspects of
God’s character. Woudstra thus writes on God’s faithfulness as seen in this passage:

51 Davis, No Failing Words 158. While in agreement to what is written above, this author
differs changing the “might possess still more land” to “will posses still more land,” since the land
boundaries of the Abrahamic Covenant had not remotely come close be being possessed by Israel as an
everlasting possession plus the eschatological promises of Lev 26:40–45.
52 Mabie, “Geographical Extent of Israel,” 318 [emphasis in the original]. See also T. A.
Clarke “Complete v. Incomplete Conquest: A Re-examination of Three Passages in Joshua,” Tyndale
Bulletin 61, No. 1 (2010) 89–104, who argues that the tension between the two texts within Joshua is not
as strong as it first appears.
53 Mabie, “Geographical Extent of Israel,” 318. [emphasis in the original]
This passage constitutes one of the key sections of the entire book, for one may learn from it the revelational purpose that the Holy Spirit had in inspiring the human author to compose the book. This purpose is to let the full light of revelation fall upon the faithfulness of the covenant God who keeps his word once given to the forefathers. As such, this passage summarizes the first part of the book and points out its basic message. Verse 43 refers primarily to the distribution of the land described in chs. 13–21; v. 44 reflects the actual stories of the Conquest as told in chs. 1–12; and v. 45 places the entire book under the perspective of God’s faithfulness.

The book of Joshua views the conquest of Canaan as both complete and incomplete. In 23:4–5 these two lines run side by side, an indication that the author means them to be equally valid, although the emphasis on the completeness of the Conquest is predominant.54

Further commenting on Josh 21:45, Woudstra reasons that God’s faithfulness should result in thanksgiving: “No wonder, then, that the final word of this passage is one of thankful recognition to the faithfulness of God. Instead of failing to come to pass (Heb. “fall to the ground”), the good words of the Lord, spoken to the house of Israel (viewing the people as a unity, another leading motif) have all come out (cf. 23:14). This note of thanksgiving reverberates in the NT as well (cf. Rev. 11:16–18).”55

Hank Hanegraaff’s The Apocalypse Code and Joshua 21:43–45

An appropriate case study on how one’s interpretation of Josh 21:43–45 affects one’s eschatology can be seen in Hank Hanegraaff’s The Apocalypse Code because he (1) presents a hermeneutical and exegetical system of interpretation in a book devoted entirely to eschatology, (2) strongly denounces any futurist’s interpretation of the land of Israel’s eschatological role, (3) presents himself as “The Bible Answer Man” on his radio program, and (4) is one of the leading and most vocal proponents that Josh 21:43–45 clearly shows that God’s complete fulfillment of His promises to the Jewish nation regarding the land:

First, the land promises were fulfilled in the fore future when Joshua led the physical descendants of Abraham into Palestine. As the book of Joshua records, “The LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled

54 Woudstra, Joshua, 314. So also Ziese; “An understanding of 21:43–45 begins with the observation previously offered, namely, that this is an assessment specifically directed toward Yahweh. Here is an affirmation of the belief that the leadership of Yahweh has not failed” (Mark Ziese, Joshua in The College Press NIV Commentary, eds. Terry Briley and Paul Kinsling (Joplin: MO: College Press, 2008), 351. [emphasis in the original])

55 Woudstra, Joshua, 315. [emphasis in the original]
there.” Indeed says Joshua, “Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; everyone was fulfilled” (Joshua 21:34, 45). Even as the life ebbed from his body, Joshua reminded the children of Israel that the Lord had been faithful to his promises. ‘You know with all your heart that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled, not one has failed’ (Joshua 23:14).56

One can already see the effects on Hanegraaff’s eschatology in that even in writing about Joshua, he cannot bring himself to refer to the land as the land of Israel but rather instead refers to Joshua leading “the physical descendants of Abraham into Palestine.” Joshua would have been totally unaware of this unbiblical designation because not once does God ever refer to the land He promised in the Abrahamic Covenant as “Palestine”—and this is significant—as Kaiser has previously shown that the word “land” is the fourth most frequent substantive in the Hebrew Bible.57 The designation Palestine does not occur in the Pentateuch—or elsewhere in Scripture—to describe the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, the name only coming into use many centuries later during “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24).58 The repeated use throughout the Bible, particularly the Pentateuch, is to “the land of Canaan,” such as Gen 17:8: “And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”59 Psalm 105:8–12 likewise gives reference to God and the Abrahamic Covenant and His giving of the land of Canaan as the portion of their inheritance:

He has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac. Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, “To you I

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56 Hank Hanegraaff, The Apocalypse Code (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 178. [emphasis in the original]
58 NASB has no occurrences of the word “Palestine” in all of Scripture while the KJV has one occurrence in Joel 3:4, which NASB translates as “Philistia.” See J. H. Paterson, “Palestine,” in The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, eds. Merrill C. Tenney and Steven Barabas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 4:564, for the origin of the word “Palestine,” its connection with ancient Philistia, and for a survey of the use of the word beginning with the Roman occupation and its increased political usage during the twentieth century. Paterson sites the KJV as having the name Palestine four times but has three of the four uses translated as “Philistia” (Exod 15:14; Isa 14:29, 21) and only Joel 3:4 as “Palestine.” The ASV and RSV, acknowledging the origins of the name, have preferred Philistia in each case, for its primary application was to the Philistine homeland, i.e. the coastlands of E. Mediterranean from Gaza N to Joppa. Application of the name to the wider region lying inland from the coastline was the work of classical writers, so that by the time of the Rom. occupation it could be understood in its modern sense, embodied in the Rom. province of Palestina” (ibid.).
59 Accordance Bible Software lists 65 hits for “the land of Canaan.” Of these hits, 53 occur in the Pentateuch, and 8 occur in the Book of Joshua. Other than the Ps 105:11 passage cited above, the other occurrences are Judg 21:12, 1 Chron 16:18, and Acts 13:19.
Did God Fulfill Every Good Promise?

will give the land of Canaan as the portion of your inheritance, when they were only a few men in number, very few, and strangers in it.”

After the conquest led by Joshua, “the land of Israel” became the common designation (1 Sam 13:19, 2 Kings 5:2, 1 Chron 13:3, etc.). Ezekiel 11:17 has God Himself defining the land by this same designation and never as Palestine: “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.”’

Hanegraaff’s statements are highly significant in that in The Apocalypse Code he makes sweeping claims that by reading his book and employing his “Exegetical Eschatology,” “you will not only be equipped to interpret the Bible for all it’s worth” (xxvii) but also learn a methodology one should employ in any legitimate Bible study, warning against eisegesis as reading into the biblical text something that simply isn’t there. Further Hanegraaff explains that he is not committed “to any particular method of eschatology” but rather argues for “the plain and proper meaning” of a text. He further instructs that the “plain and proper meaning of a biblical passage must always take precedence over a particular eschatological presupposition or paradigm” (2). Using an acronym “LIGHTS” for his hermeneutical system for studying eschatology, the “L” stands for a “literal understanding” of the biblical text. While this sounds very similar to a premillennial understanding of the text, it is the outworking or application of the hermeneutics that cause the interpretational paths to diverge. Hanegraaff often does indeed take “the plain and proper meaning of a biblical passage” (2), which in reality is calling for a literal, grammatical, historical interpretation of the text. In two of his other works, quoting out of Genesis 9—the section of Scripture dealing with the eternal promises that God made in the Noahic Covenant—Hanegraaff cites Gen 9:6 to show that even after the fall of man, the Bible still refers to man being created in the image of God.

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60 Hanegraaff, The Apocalypse Code 1 [emphasis in the original]. In the discussion that follows, page numbers from this work will be cited at the conclusion of each quote.

61 Borderline farcical is Hanegraaff’s claim, “In the final analysis, my purpose is not to entice you to embrace a particular model of eschatology but to employ a proper model of biblical interpretation” (3). This being written after Hanegraaff excoriates in his prologue anyone who would hold to a future for the nation of Israel, i.e. Zionism, and strongly rebukes those who hold “such unbiblical notions” (p. xxii) calling it “inflammatory rhetoric” (p. xxvii). He further warns: “In the pages that follow, you will answer these and a host of other questions by internalizing and applying the principles of a methodology called Exegetical Eschatology . . . In the process you will not only be equipped to interpret the Bible for all it’s worth but you may well discover that you hold the key to the problem of terrorism in one hand and the fuse of Armageddon in the other” (xxvii).

62 For instance, the “T” section of his acronym “LIGHTS” is chapter six “Typology Principle: The Golden Key” (161–203). From these previous statements, in reality what Hanegraaff does is employ an allegorized hermeneutic whenever any text does not meet his preterist theology. This allegorizing of different texts basically undermines a great deal of what he would argue against as a literal approach to the text (his “L” section in the LIGHTS acronym). Hanegraaff does not explain what to do if the “L” (literal principle) and the “T” (typology principle) stand at odds with each other.

God found in Gen 9:6 should be interpreted literally and likewise has ramifications up to the present day.

Hanegraaff presents a scriptural synergy principle as means of safeguard in Bible study, and of course, with the thrust of his book, this would especially relate to eschatological studies:

Finally, the $ in LIGHTS represents the principle of *scriptural synergy*. Simply stated, this means that the whole of Scripture is greater than the sum of its individual passages. You cannot comprehend the Bible as a whole without comprehending its individual parts, and you cannot comprehend its individual parts without comprehending the Bible as a whole. Individual passages of Scripture are synergistic rather than deflective to with respect to the whole of Scripture.

Scriptural synergy demands that individual Bible passages may never be interpreted in such a way as to conflict with the whole of Scripture. Nor may we assign arbitrary meanings to words or phrases that have their referent in biblical history. The biblical interpreter must keep in mind that all Scripture, though communicated through various human instruments, has one single Author. And that Author does not contradict himself, nor does he confuse his servants (9–10).

A good case text for Hanegraaff’s eschatological scriptural synergy would be to see how he would handle the divine promises God gave regarding both the land and the Jewish people in Lev 26:40–45, since it is “the first detailed description of Israel’s eschatological repentance and restoration.” Further, these verses were written before the Book of Joshua so that Josh 21:43–45 must be read in light of these previously revealed promises since “and you cannot comprehend its individual parts without comprehending the Bible as a whole” (9). However, Lev 26:40–45 plays no role in the eschatology of *The Apocalypse Code* because its Scripture index has no references within his text to these important eschatological promises that God had made. *The Apocalypse Code* contains three footnotes that cite Lev 26:18, 21, 24, 28, and 33 but makes no comment on these. So the last verse Hanegraaff cites in Leviticus (either in just listing the references or quoting others) is Lev 26:33 (“You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste”) but omits Lev 26:34–35 that begins with the connective “then:” “Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths all the days of the desolation, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it will observe the rest which it did not observe on your sabbaths, while

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64 Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” 126.
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you were living on it.” Hanegraaff further omits the severe treatment of the Jewish nation during exile (Lev 26:36–39), but even more to the point, Hanegraaff finds no place in his theology for Lev 26:40–45 for the future regathering to the land that Yahweh repeatedly promised. It would be enlightening to see how Hanegraaff would handle Lev 26:40–45 since, to quote him again, he reminds us, “The plain and proper meaning of a biblical passage must always take precedence over a particular eschatological presupposition or paradigm” (2), and “Scriptural synergy demands that individual Bible passages may never be interpreted in such a way as to conflict with the whole of Scripture” (9). Again this is significant because Hanegraaff presents Josh 21:43–45 as empirical proof that all the land promises made by God—which should include the multiple land references of Lev 26:40–45—have already been fulfilled by Joshua’s time and thus have no relevance in eschatological studies.

In writing against “Christian Zionists who see the fact that Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews as validation for the Bible,” Hanegraaff refers to matters related to Deuteronomy 28–30 to support his case:

Modern Israel fails to meet the biblical requirement for return to the land. As Moses unambiguously warned [emphasis added] the children of Israel, disobedience against the Lord would result in dispersion (Deuteronomy 28:58–64, 29:23–28), while return to the land requires repentance: “When you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart . . . then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from the nations where he scattered you (Deuteronomy 30:2–3).” (196–97; emphasis in the original)

Since Hanegraaff cites Deut 30:2–3 as part of his support, the context of what God promises will occur in Deut 30:1–8 at some undisclosed future time should be considered:

“So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

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66 It is the position of this article that the nation of Israel collectively lives in covenant disobedience to Yahweh, and consequently the verses do not apply to them at this time since they as a collective people have not yet repented. Any covenant obedient Jew is presently part of the Body of Christ (Eph. 3). If these are in fact “the last of the last days,” Jerusalem and Israel will indeed play a pivotal role in eschatological events, but that is for another study.
“If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.

“Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

“And the LORD your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments which I command you today.”

The blessing of and curse of Deuteronomy 27–28 forms the immediate context related to Deut 30:1 “So it shall become when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you.” Specifically pertinent to this section is Yahweh’s plainly-stated promise of exile for the disobedient nation found in the curse section of Deut 28:63–65:

“And it shall come about that as the LORD delighted over you to prosper you, and multiply you, so the LORD will delight over you to make you perish and destroy you; and you shall be torn from the land where you are entering to possess it. Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known. And among those nations you shall find no rest, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul.”

Since Hanegraaff duly writes “Moses unambiguously warned” (196) in matters related to Deuteronomy 28–30, especially Deut 30:2–3, one would expect the same unambiguous writing by Moses to continue in Deut 30:4–8, especially since this is one section of Scripture and not random verses thrown together. Yet again in the Scripture references of *The Apocalypse Code*, Deut 30:1–5 is quoted in only two footnote citations (265 n. 44 and 266 n. 46) and thus does not factor into Hanegraaff’s eschatology. Deuteronomy 30:2–3 was quoted in the previously cited passage. This is very important because these are the only references out of Deuteronomy 30; or put differently, Hanegraaff quotes Deut 30:2–3 but totally disregards the immediate verses before or those that follow in Deut 30:1–10. This also is important because Deuteronomy 30 harmonizes with what God had previously promised in Lev 26:40–45. As before, Hanegraaff has already acknowledged that Moses wrote unambiguously in this section (196). One would expect the following verses to be written in the same manner. Simply put, Hanegraaff leaves out very pertinent revelation that Yahweh has given regarding the future of both the nation of Israel and the land.
God knew that Israel would fall away from Him, as we have already seen, revealing this before they entered the land: “for I know their intent which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land which I swore” (Deut 31:21). As Sailhamer described this section, “One can already hear in these words the distant voice of the prophets. Exile is on the way. The future is at risk. There is at this time little room for hope among God’s people.” So while Yahweh will remain faithful, He realized even that day the nation’s heart was already turning away from Him. However, it must be emphasized that God had already revealed what would transpire in Deut 30:1–10 when the nation would eventually be brought into exile among the nations because of their blatant covenant disobedience as well as His promise to regather them and give them a new heart. Obviously Yahweh saw far past the immediate context of Joshua 21 where Israel, for the most part, was living in covenant obedience to Him and thus received the covenant blessings of dwelling in the land and peace from its enemies, as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27–28 stipulated.

From an interpretational standpoint, taking these verses as unambiguous and not omitting connected verses from the context, the unambiguous writing of Moses/the Word of the Lord is that when the Jewish nation repents, then Yahweh will indeed restore them both to Himself and then to the land (Deut 30:2–3), is precisely the point. When this does occur, Yahweh will fulfill His promise to return the exiled nation to their land as part of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Lev 26:40–45; Deut 30:4–5). To make certain that this will happen, Yahweh Himself will give the nation a circumcised heart to love the LORD their God with all their heart (Deut 30:6), with ultimate New Covenant blessing overtones evident within this verse that God would further delineate in upcoming portions of Scripture. Further Yahweh will inflict the nations with the same curses that He had inflicted on the Jewish people (Deut 30:7), concluding this section with a repeated statement—to the same Jewish people on whom He had inflicted the curse: “And you shall again obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments which I command you today” (30:8). This follows with another connective “then,” as Hanegraaff previously noted was required in Deut 30:2–3 (197): “Then the LORD your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand . . .” (Deut 30:8a).

Specifically in regard to the Book of Joshua, not one of the items of Deut 30:1–8 had transpired by the time of Joshua 21. As was true for Leviticus 26, Deut 30:1 specifically requires that Israel be banished “in all the nations where the LORD your God has banished you.” The banishment of Israel had not occurred in Joshua 21; obviously the nation had not repented by that time (30:2), and Yahweh had not yet restored them from captivity (30:3). Collective Israel was not yet “outcasts to the ends of the earth” (30:4); consequently Yahweh had not yet brought them again “into the land which your fathers possessed” (30:5). Even beyond these, another good promise of Yahweh was that He would indeed circumcise the heart of the nation so they could obey Him (30:6). In like manner, by Josh 21:43–45,

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Yahweh had not yet “inflicted all these curses” on their enemies (30:7). Nor had God again “prospered them abundantly” after first cursing them, as the nation would receive the promised benefits of covenant obedience to Yahweh (30:9–10). Simply put, by no means can it be shown that all the good promises of Yahweh had been fulfilled by Josh 21:43–45; nor can it be shown even at the present time that this has yet transpired. However, regardless of his imploring people not to allow one’s eschatology to affect the understanding of certain passages but rather let the plain meaning of the text speak for itself (29), Hanegraaff’s predetermined theology has no room for the good promises of Lev 26:40–45 or Deut 30:4–10, omitting and ignoring them and deeming them as having no eschatological relevance, and as stated before, the church’s doctrinal corpus has indeed become impoverished.69

Along the same lines of using selective verses and omitting essential other verses, Hanegraaff does so with the Book of Joshua as well. For instance, in the Scripture reference page for The Apocalypse Code (289), the only verses cited in the entire Book of Joshua are Josh 21:43, 45, and 23:14, all occurring on one page (178). Hanegraaff’s entire argument is devoid of any reference to God’s charge to Joshua to take the land, which includes a reference to the Euphrates (Josh 1:1–4). Nor is there a reference to God’s beginning statement in the land division section (Josh 13–21), whose opening verses have God Himself declaring that much of the land remained yet to be conquered (Josh 13:1–7).

**Conclusion and Significance**

At first glance Josh 21:45 does seem all-encompassing: “Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.” But as has been shown, these verses do not sit isolated away from the previous revelation from God. Those who cite Josh 21:43–45 as having fulfilled God’s promises for the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant70 is not so much taking verses out of context (such as John 8:32 “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” without including the first provisional part of John 8:31: “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine,’” followed by the connective “‘and you shall know the truth . . .’”), since Joshua 21 does indeed refer to portions of the land promised Israel by God. Those who cite Josh 21:43–45 as proof texts are taking verses in isolation and exclusion from previous revelation given by God regarding the specific land boundaries, eschatological promises from the Pentateuch, and even passages within the Book of Joshua from which they make their claim, namely Josh 1:1–4 and 13:1–7. Simply put, those who cite Josh 21:43–45 as proof that God fulfilled all His land promises to Israel do so by excluding and isolating from some very significant problem passages. It is no wonder that Calvin and many others avoided the claim that all of God’s land promises had been fulfilled by God by the time of Josh 21:43–45; this interpretation is inherently weak.

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69 Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” 29.
70 E.g. Hanegraaff, The Apocalypse Code 178; DeMar, Last Day’s Madness, 332.
and laden with massive—and ultimately unexplainable—theological problems for those who accept the Bible as God’s divine revelation.

It seems better to understand Josh 21:43–45 in a much more restricted manner: Yahweh did indeed fulfill all His good promises up to that time, but Josh 21:45 is just a historical marker in God’s faithfulness and not the pinnacle or completion of His covenant faithfulness:

These verses emphasize the totality of Israel’s success, the overarching picture of complete victory, and the all-encompassing nature of God’s faithfulness to his promises and his people. It is of a piece with similar passages, such as 10:40–42; 11:16–23; and 23:1. It does not echo the passages that stand in tension with it, which speaks of unfinished business, of land that remained to be captured. Yet on its own terms, it does present an accurate picture of the prevailing situation at the time.⁷¹

Such an understanding is found elsewhere in Scripture. For instance, Paul’s benediction in Rom 16:25–27 makes a far-reaching statement regarding how far the gospel had gone forth by the time of its composition:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Likewise in Col 1:23 Paul wrote regarding that gospel that the Colossians should not be “moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven.” One would be hard pressed to argue that the Lord intended that the gospel had indeed “been made to all the nations” (Rom 16:26) or “proclaimed under all creation under heaven” (Col 1:23) by the time Paul wrote these verses, or even almost two thousand years later at the time of this writing, that no unreached people groups remain. One day all nations under heaven will be reached, as Jesus Himself declared, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come” (Matt 24:14). God will one day fulfill every good promise He has made down to the last jot and title, culminating with the Messiah, whose first advent had not arrived by Joshua 21 and whose second advent yet awaits us.

⁷¹ Howard, Joshua 397–98. [emphasis added]
Surrounded by more success, opulence, and pleasure than most people could ever imagine, Solomon hits rock bottom in his miserable existence. Then he begins a spiritual odyssey to return from the quagmire of nothingness in which he flounders—a search for meaning in life. He concedes that his view of life has been bleak and dismal. He looks more closely at God, man, salvation, and future judgment. He learns that from an earthly perspective life appears like nothing but trouble and he finds that life is a gift to be enjoyed from the divine Creator whom people should obey.

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The proliferation of artificial means for birth control offers significant challenges for Christians who need to think through this issue from a biblical perspective. As they consider what the Bible says about birth control, Christians need to understand the role it has played in the moral decline in society. This moral decline of society connected to the availability of contraceptives does not determine the morality of birth control, but it does challenge evangelicals to maintain a biblical view of marriage and sex within marriage. A “contraceptive mindset” must not dominate our thinking about how the Bible views marriage and children.

Evidence for the use of various artificial means of birth control or contraception reaches back in history at least 4,000 years. Although some scholars advocated the use of contraception for the purposes of population control in the 1830s, the federal Comstock Law of 1873 made illegal the mailing or importation of contraceptives, and most states prohibited both their sale and advertisement. The diaphragm was developed in 1880 and by 1935 over two hundred different kinds of artificial contraceptive devices were in use in Western nations. In the 1920s birth control clinics began to open (only for married or soon-to-be married

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2 Ibid., 30.

3 Ibid.
women, with documentation required) and in 1936 the courts overturned the Comstock Law. The introduction of the birth control pill in the 1950s had a major impact in the worlds of medicine and society. In two separate cases (1965 and 1972), the Supreme Court struck down Connecticut’s law prohibiting the use of contraceptives and a Massachusetts law prohibiting the sale of contraceptive devices to the unmarried. By 1970 contraceptives were being funded domestically through the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act. Soon afterwards, that funding reached the international level through the Foreign Assistance Act of 1971. In less than a century, contraceptives moved from being illegal to being officially sponsored by the federal government.

This openness to contraception has made a significant impact on society throughout the world. As Mohler has pointed out, “The effective separation of sex from procreation may be one of the most important defining marks of our age—and one of the most ominous. This awareness is spreading among American evangelicals, and it threatens to set loose a firestorm.” Because of the widespread availability of various kinds of contraceptives, people can engage in regular sexual activity with little concern that pregnancy will result. Beyond this, developments with in vitro fertilization enable people to have children without sexual intimacy. Both of these developments seem to be changing sex to something purely recreational and unnecessary for procreation, rather than having procreation as at least one of the important functions for marriage and sex. There is no doubt that the availability of contraceptives, often provided by government agencies and public schools, has impacted our society in another way as well. In her consideration of the collapse of the moral fabric of the West, Himmelfarb presents some sobering statistics from England and the United States. In England, prior to 1960 the illegitimacy ratio (i.e., proportion of out-of-wedlock to total births) hovered around 5 percent. It then rose to 8 percent in 1970, 12 percent in 1980, and jumped to over 32 percent by the end of 1992 (a sixfold increase in three decades). In the United States the figures are no less dramatic. After hovering around 5 percent before 1960, it rose to almost 11 percent by 1970, 19 percent by 1980, and just under 22 percent in 1991.

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5 Davis, 30.
6 Ibid.
As we consider what the Bible says about birth control, we must understand the role birth control has played in the moral decline in society throughout the world. This moral decline of society that is related to the availability of contraceptives does not determine the morality of birth control, but it does challenge us as evangelicals to maintain a biblical view of marriage and sex within marriage. We must be careful that a “contraceptive mindset” does not dominate our thinking about how the Bible views marriage and children.

**Overview of Debate**

A consideration of this important issue can be structured in various ways. Although we could focus on the various approaches to birth control, this article briefly considers the “no birth control” view and then focuses on the methods themselves. After it considers the methods that are morally acceptable and those that are clearly immoral, it surveys the methods about which there is considerable debate. This article concludes with some attention given to suggestions for how couples might approach the issue from a biblical perspective, driven by biblical values.

An important definitional point deserves attention. Birth control or contraception has been customarily defined as something that prevented fertilization or conception (i.e., contradicted conception). Historically, fertilization, conception, and the beginning of a pregnancy have been regarded as virtually synonymous. Prior to 1976, a “contraceptive” was understood as an agent that prevented the union of sperm and ovum. However, in 1976 the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) changed the definition of contraception. In one of their fact sheets (copyright 2009) ACOG affirms that “pregnancy occurs when the fertilized egg is implanted.” This is connected to the way that numerous medical dictionaries define “conception”. As one example, *Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* (21st ed.) defines “conception” as: “The onset of pregnancy marked by implantation of a fertilized ovum in the uterine
Consequently, these definition changes blur the distinction between those birth control methods that exclusively prevent fertilization and those that prevent or hinder the implantation of the week-old embryo. So when various medical resources and professionals affirm that a given birth control method is not abortifacient, one must discern whether they are referring to the moment of fertilization or implantation.

People who advocate a “no birth control” view fall into three categories. First, some view artificial birth control methods as undesirable and unwise and believe that some version of natural family planning best honors the biblical teaching of God’s intentions for marriage and sex. Second, there are those who believe that all artificial birth control methods are morally wrong. They embrace some form of natural family planning. Third, a small but growing group of couples, often associated in some way with the “Quiverfull” movement, reject any attempts to adjust the timing of their sexual intimacy as a way of avoiding pregnancy. They gladly embrace as many children as God might give them.

“Quiverfull” is a movement among conservative evangelical Christian couples chiefly in the United States, but with some adherents in other countries. Mary Pride’s book, The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality, is generally viewed as the spark that triggered this movement. The name is based on Psalm 127:5a: “Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.” The following supportive arguments are representative of those who reject birth control, but are not shared by all proponents of this approach.

15 Besides the volumes cited below, here are some other resources that share the Quiverfull perspective: Rick Hess and Jan Hess, A Full Quiver: Family Planning and the Lordship of Christ (N.p.: Hess family, 1989); Craig Houghton, Family UNplanning (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2006); http://www.quiverfull.com (accessed 11/12/09); http://www.familyunplanning.com (accessed 11/12/09). A strong critique of this movement can be found in Kathryn Joyce, Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).
16 Unfortunately, some proponents of the Quiverfull approach to birth control make extreme statements. Campbell links abortion with contraception and sterilization and describes all three as “masterminded in hell.” Nancy Campbell, Be Fruitful and Multiply: What the Bible Says about Having Children (San Antonio, TX: Vision Forum Ministries, 2003), 154. DeMoss regards birth control as part of Satan’s agenda. Nancy Leigh DeMoss, Lies Women Believe and the Truth That Sets Them Free (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 169–70. Mary Pride (The Way Home, 77) affirms that “Family planning is the mother of abortion.”
Supporting Arguments

Birth Control Only Recently Accepted

They refer to the Lambeth Conference of 1930 as the decision that opened the door for contraception to be acceptable for Christians. In Resolution 15 of that Anglican conference, a strong majority of bishops allowed for the use of contraceptives as long as it was not motivated by “selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.” They conclude that this acceptance of birth control clearly paved the way for the later acceptance of abortion. They also affirm that contraception “was not entertained by the Christian church—Protestant or Catholic—until as late as 1930.

The Mandate in Gen 1:26–28 (cf. 9:1, 7)

As part of the climax of the creative week, we read: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen 1:28). One proponent wrote that the Hebrew verb “to fill” (alm) means “fill up the world to overflowing.” God’s blessing is not zero population, but maximum population. They also point out that there is no place in Scripture where God rescinds this command. Birth control clearly represents disobedience to this command to fill the earth. They grant that God does not require unmarried people to have children, but contend that all married couples must regularly pursue having children. A key assumption is that procreation is the primary purpose of marriage.

Birth Control Represents a Denial of God’s Sovereignty

All who reject birth control regard it as rebellion against God’s legitimate authority over reproduction. The fact that the Bible presents God as the one who

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19 Campbell, Be Fruitful and Multiply, 157–58.
20 Ibid., 154.
21 Ibid., 25.
22 Ibid., 59.
23 Ibid., 22.
opens and closes a woman’s womb prohibits couples from taking the matter of the
timing and number of children into their own hands. As stated above, some couples
reject all means of artificial birth control, but are willing to embrace natural
methods and believe that this does not represent a denial of God’s sovereignty.

Response

Birth Control—Recent or Ancient?

According to the Babylonian Talmud, rabbinic teaching allowed for
various kinds of birth control without censure.26 The practice of contraception was
also prevalent during the Middle Ages in parts of the Roman Catholic Church.27
From the time of the Reformation, Protestants have accepted a definition of
marriage broad enough to include the use of contraceptives in the context of
marriage.28

Besides this meager evidence, the fact that birth control does not reach
widespread usage among various Christian groups does not, of necessity,
demonstrate its immorality. After all, this argument about the recent availability of
contraceptives focused on artificial methods of birth control. Any effort by couples
to time their intimacy to avoid pregnancy is a version of birth control and that
appears to have been practiced for centuries in numerous cultures as well as in the
church. Even though an openness to birth control may have preceded an openness
to abortion, that reality does not prove that birth control is, in itself, morally
objectionable. The ultimate question is, What does the Bible teach about it?

The Mandate in Genesis 1:26–28 (cf. 9:1, 7)

Do these passages mean that married couples are obligated to have as
many children as possible or to do nothing that might prevent conception from
taking place? Genesis 1:28 affirms: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be
fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the
sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the
ground.’” God gives mankind two key assignments through five imperatives:
procreation (be fruitful, increase in number, and fill) and dominion (subdue and
rule).29 This statement is one of three “God blessed” statements in the creation

26 John T. Noonan, Jr., Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic
27 Ibid., 200–213.
28 Lloyd A. Kalland, “Views and Positions of the Christian Church—An Historical Review,”
in Birth Control and the Christian: A Protestant Symposium on the Control of Human Reproduction,
29 Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17, NICOT (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 1990), 139.
account. In the first one, God blesses the animal world with the ability to reproduce, using the same three imperatives (Gen 1:22). He pronounces this blessing over them, unlike Gen 1:28 where God directly addresses Adam. Also, God blessed the seventh day at the end of the creative week (Gen 2:3). What is the primary significance of this statement? First, the blessing seems to involve the ability to reproduce and the opportunity to rule over the created world on behalf of God, the ultimate sovereign of the universe. Second, we should observe that the commands in Genesis are general imperatives given not to individuals but to the human race as a whole (through their representatives, Adam and Noah). Also, that fact that God commands mankind to “fill” the earth in addition to being fruitful and multiplying demonstrates that this task was not given to individual couples but to mankind in general. This gives room for barren couples who would love to have children and single men and women. Third, the statement begins with the introductory statement, “God blessed them,” not “God commanded them.” The imperatives that make up this divine blessing are not commands that must be kept but a privilege and ideal that should be enjoyed and pursued. For example, as part of his blessing on Jacob, Isaac declares: “Be lord [imperative] over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down [jussive—mild command] to you” (Gen 27:29; cf. Gen 24:60). The imperative, along with the jussive, commonly occurs in statements of blessing, not as a command, but to show the strength of the blessing. Can families have a large number of children? Yes. They should be given respect and not offered derision for their choices. However, this passage does not present a divine demand that families must have as many children as possible. If this were really a divine mandate, it leaves no room for unmarried men and women or childless couples.

Birth Control and Sovereignty

It is absolutely essential for couples to recognize God’s sovereignty as it relates to fertility and conception. He is the giver of life and we must submit to His authority. Any decisions we make with regard to the timing and number of children can be made only as we carefully consider how God would be most honored by our choices. We will interact more with the sovereignty question below. Now let’s turn to the various methods of birth control (see below section on wisdom).

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30 The idea of divine blessing is an important theme in Genesis as well as throughout the OT (Gen 12:2–3; 17:16; 22:17; 26:24; 39:5; 48:3–4; Exod 1:7; Deut 28:1–14). In the OT it often involved many descendants and material prosperity.


32 It is interesting to see how people treat the five imperatives in Gen 1:28 inconsistently. Numerous modern scholars refer to this passage as the cultural mandate that requires that people care for the environment or be involved in world missions. Those discussions generally ignore the implications if the first three verbs that deal with procreation were also treated as a mandate. Most proponents of no birth control, esp. the Quiverfull perspective, give little attention to the requirements of the last two imperatives. Rather than being culturally engaged, they tend to isolation from the world.
Any attempt to affect the timing of conception fits the definition of birth control or contraception. As has been true as far back as we have written records describing contraception, some methods focused on causing the death of the unborn baby. Various modern methods share the same abortifacient function. There have also been methods of birth control that present no intrinsic moral problem. This section will conclude by giving brief attention to a few methods that have engendered significant discussion among prolife evangelicals.

Clearly Abortifacent Methods

If we believe that life begins at conception, an embryo is a human being and bears God’s image. Any method that brings an end to that embryo’s life is unacceptable. Of course, abortion is unacceptable as a means of birth control for a Christian.

RU–486

RU–486 (Mifepristone) has demonstrated its effectiveness in terminating pregnancies, especially in women with pregnancies of 49 days’ duration or less. Some refer to it as the “abortion pill.” It is not the same thing as the “morning after pill” (see below). RU–486 facilitates a non–surgical abortion. The primary chemical, Mifepristone, blocks a hormone required to sustain the pregnancy. Typically it is followed two days later by another drug, misoprostol, to induce contractions, which causes the fetus to be expelled from the woman’s body.

“Morning After” Pill

The “morning after pill” or “emergency contraceptive pills” (ECPs) involves different combinations of hormones. Generally, they involve estrogens, progestins, or both. These drugs act both to prevent ovulation or fertilization and possibly post–fertilization implantation of an embryo on the uterus wall. They are licensed for use up to 3–5 days after sexual intercourse. ECPs are made of the same hormones found in birth control pills (see below). Plan B is a brand of hormone pills specially packaged as emergency contraception. Planned Parenthood

affirms that it is incorrect to say that the morning after pill causes an abortion. They affirm that it is birth control, not abortion. They say this because they do not believe that life begins at conception. If implantation of the embryo does not take place and the embryo is eventually expelled from the woman’s body, they do not consider that as abortion.

Morally Acceptable Methods

There is debate among evangelicals about “natural” versus “artificial” means of birth control. Natural methods of contraception involve choices on when a couple enjoys intercourse. Artificial means of birth control involve the introduction of something that is not part of the body to prevent conception.

Rhythm Method

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) accepts natural methods of birth control but rejects any artificial means. The generally accepted RCC approach is the rhythm method, which involves the couple refraining from intercourse during a certain number of days when the women is thought to be fertile. This method has generally been demonstrated as unreliable or guesswork.

Natural Family Planning (NFP)

A newer method, NFP, observes physical changes in the woman’s body to determine when she is ovulating and susceptible to conception. It broadly refers to a variety of methods used to plan or prevent pregnancy, based on identifying the woman’s fertile days. For all natural methods, avoiding unprotected intercourse during the fertile days is what prevents pregnancy. It is explained and recommended by groups as varied as Georgetown University’s Institute of Reproductive Health and the Roman Catholic Church. NFP does not intrinsically represent a no birth control position.

One example of evangelicals advocating NFP is found in Open Embrace, by Sam and Bethany Torode. This young couple proposes that NFP represents the ideal approach to the question of the spacing of children. They avoid saying that

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37 Consult the RCC documents, *Humanae Vitae* and *Domum Vitae*.


40 Sam and Bethany Torode, *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
other (non–natural) forms of contraception (those processes, devices, or actions that prevent the meeting of the sperm and egg) are intrinsically sinful. Rather, their main point is that those kinds of contraceptive methods are not ideal. They correctly reject out of hand all contraceptive methods that work after conception occurs. They also do not view any sterilization procedure as proper for a Christian.

They offer various arguments against artificial contraceptive methods. First, since humans are made in God’s image, they should not regard their spouses merely as sources of personal gratification. Second, the “one flesh” pattern of marriage precludes holding back anything from one’s spouse, including fertility. Third, they contend that lovemaking should always be life–giving, even when it does not generate a new life, and fourth, suggest that contraceptives represent a selfish withholding of something important from one’s spouse. They propose that one cannot make any legitimate “disconnect” between the use of contraceptives and the practice of abortion. The mindset that justifies the former also legitimizes the latter. They also clearly distinguish NFP from a method of birth control.

In response, does the truth of the image of God and the “one flesh” pattern for marriage clearly demonstrate that the use of contraceptives is an act of sinful selfishness? What is the basis for saying that conjugal relations should always be “life–giving”? Also, it seems logically impossible to present NFP as something that is not a method of birth control. Any attempt to affect the timing of the birth of a child represents a form of birth control.

**Fertility Awareness Method (FAM)**

This method of birth control is not to be confused with the “rhythm” method. It is a natural method of determining whether a woman is fertile or infertile by observing simple body signs and applying a few rules of explanation. On the one hand, fertility awareness is useful for couples who are trying to conceive. The couple is able to understand more accurately when the wife is fertile. On the other

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41 Ibid., 19.
42 Ibid., 25.
43 Ibid., 30.
44 Ibid., 65–71.
hand, it provides direction to those who are aiming to avoid pregnancy without the use of chemical contraceptives. FAM is a form of NFP in that it seeks to utilize the natural rhythms of a woman’s body. However, it is quite different from NFP in that proponents of this approach do not necessarily reject other means of birth control during a woman’s times of highest fertility. Different resources and websites dedicated to FAM refer to the use of anything from barrier methods (see below) to various kinds of chemical contraceptives (RU-486, “morning after” pill, the pill, etc.). Generally, what sets NFP proponents apart from FAM adherents is this. NFP proponents exclusively use an accurate awareness of a woman’s fertility cycle as their method of birth control while FAM adherents feel free to make use of various other strategies during times of peak fertility to avoid conception. Both NFP and FAM represent forms of birth control that are “natural,” but still they are forms of birth control. Couples are deciding to either avoid intimacy or intentionally use other methods to avoid conception at times of peak fertility.

**Barrier Methods**

These methods involve temporary measures that seek to influence the timing of conception. They allow for normal sexual intimacy but prevent the sperm and egg from coming together. For men, this involves condoms. For women, it includes the diaphragm, contraceptive sponges, cervical caps, and female condoms. Some women also use spermicides, which kills the sperm, thus preventing conception. These are the artificial methods of birth control that are not morally objectionable since they do not destroy or prevent the implantation of the fertilized egg.

**Debated Methods**

*The Pill*—Basic Information

The “pill” describes a category of hormonal contraceptives that includes at least forty types of oral contraceptives. Birth control pills or oral contraceptive pills (OCPs) are available only by prescription and in two basic categories: a combination of estrogen and progestin or progestin alone (the “mini–pill”). When they first were prescribed, the dosages were five to ten times greater than what

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47 See Cutrer and Glahn, *The Contraception Guidebook*, 71–83, for further explanation of each of these contraceptive tools.

48 Of course, those who reject all birth control methods find even these morally objectionable.

49 This overview does not consider other ways of delivering the hormones found in OCPs to a woman’s body (e.g., injections, patches, vaginal rings). See Cutrer and Glahn, *The Contraception Guidebook*, 117–24, 219, for an overview of some of these other options.

50 There are sub–varieties of these pills based on the exact kind of progesterone used and the dosage levels (monophasic, biphasic, and triphasic). For a superb and understandable overview of how OCPs function, see Cutrer and Glahn, *The Contraception Guidebook*, 85–100.
occurs presently. The combination pills are the more common type of oral contraceptive. At least 10 million American women and 100 million women worldwide use “combination oral contraceptives.” Doctors generally prescribe the progestin only version for women who have complications from the combination pills. The estrogen suppresses various reproductive hormones and prevents ovulation. They are designed to override the woman’s normal reproductive cycle and tell her body, “I am already pregnant.” The progestin also suppresses a key reproductive hormone and makes it difficult for the sperm to enter the uterus (because of heavy cervical mucus).

Evidence that Suggests a Possible Abortifacient Feature

Various writers have affirmed that OCPs have the potential to be abortifacient, i.e., to cause an abortion. Of course, if ovulation never takes place, there is nothing to worry about concerning the potential for a spontaneous abortion since there is no egg for the sperm to engage. The complicating factor as it relates to the pill and ovulation is that none of the OCPs guarantee that ovulation will never take place. Breakthrough ovulations, i.e., ovulations that take place when ovulation should have stopped, have happened with women taking OCPs. Generally, two variables can introduce the risk of a breakthrough ovulation. First, there are certain medications (certain antibiotics and anticonvulsants) and herbs that interfere with the impact of OCPs on suppressing reproductive hormones and preventing ovulation. Second, if a woman fails to take one or more doses of the OCP, there is in increased chance for a “breakthrough” or “escape” ovulation.

The Physician’s Desk Reference (PDR) is the most frequently used reference book by physicians in America. It lists and explains the effects, benefits, and risks of every medical product that can be legally prescribed. It is the most authoritative source of FDA–regulated information on prescription drugs available, based on scientific research and laboratory tests. Concerning the drug Ortho–

54 Cutrer and Glahn, The Contraception Guidebook, 92.
56 Cutrer and Glahn, The Contraception Guidebook, 90.
57 Numerous resources that deal with OCPs strongly recommend that women who have missed a dose use barrier contraception for at least 7 days (or the entire cycle if they fail to take two doses).
Novum, the most common OCP, the PDR states that “Combination oral contraceptives act by suppression of gonadotropins. Although the primary mechanism of this action is inhibition of ovulation, other alterations include changes in the cervical mucus (which increase the difficulty of sperm entry into the uterus) and the endometrium (which reduce the likelihood of implantation)" (emphasis mine).58 According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), an OCP “thins the lining of the uterus making it harder for a fertilized egg to attach.”59 Numerous other references in PDR say something similar about other common OCPs.60 In light of these numerous statements, Alcorn concludes that OCPs involve three mechanisms: 1) inhibiting ovulation (the primary mechanism); 2) thickening the cervical mucus; and 3) thinning the lining of the uterus (endometrium). He regards the first two mechanisms as contraceptive but the third as abortive.61 A small percentage of women who take OCPs become pregnant, indicating that all three mechanisms have failed.62

Alcorn and Larimore also present two primary arguments in favor of their belief that OCPs have an abortifacient feature. First, they contend that the thinning of the uterine walls hinders or prevents implantation. They recognize that the fact that some women become pregnant while taking an OCP indicates that implantation can take place. Based on that, they conclude that implantation does not take place most of the time because of the hostile environment in the uterus caused by the OCPs.63 Second, they compare the ratio of pregnancies inside the womb (intrauterine) to those outside the womb (extrauterine, i.e., tubal or ectopic) for women not taking OCPs with those who are taking them. They contend that if OCPs have no abortifacient mechanism, the ratio between intrauterine and extrauterine pregnancies will remain the same regardless of whether a woman is taking an OCP or not.64 They point out that women taking OCPs have an increased risk, per pregnancy, of extrauterine pregnancies compared with those who are not taking them. They conclude from this that if there is an increased tubal pregnancy rate, than there must be an increased number of embryos that have entered the

60 See Alcorn, Does the Birth Control Pill Cause Abortions, 14–15. Alcorn’s little booklet is required reading for anyone wanting to investigate this issue.
61 Ibid., 15.
62 Alcorn (Ibid., 16) suggests this is 3% of OCP users based on combining all efficacy rate tables for the various OCP drugs listed in PDR.
64 Ibid., 183–84.
The conclusion by Alcorn and others is that since OCPs *can* prevent the embryo from implanting on the uterine wall, we must reject them altogether as a birth control method. Even though we all face a degree of risk with various activities (being around sick people, driving a car) and that risk does not prevent us from doing that activity, Alcorn points out that most of us cannot totally isolate ourselves nor can we totally avoid driving as a way of avoiding risk. However, with birth control, there are other methods available to us that are clearly non–abortifacient. For Alcorn and other proponents of this position, the choice is clear. Believers should reject the use of OCPs altogether.

**Evidence that Suggests No Abortifacient Feature**

As with the above view, numerous scholars have argued that OCPs have no abortifacient feature. Various factors contribute to the ambiguity of the medical evidence that is cited in favor of the previous position. In the first place, no medical study has been made of women who experience breakthrough ovulation in order to measure the thickness of the uterine wall (in the wake of a “breakthrough” ovulation). No one knows that a breakthrough ovulation has taken place until a woman becomes pregnant, so they cannot predict when to study the lining of the uterus. Secondly, breakthrough ovulation is a relatively rare event. Various medical studies of women who started the OCPs later in the cycle than recommended (even up to three days) demonstrate no increase in ovulation rates. Third, if ovulation

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65 Those who disagree with Alcorn and Larimore contend that the increase in extrauterine or tubal pregnancies is caused by "reduced tubal motility," i.e., reduced motion caused by the progestin and that this does not also indicate an increase of intrauterine pregnancies; Susan A. Crockett, Joseph L. DeCook, Donna Harrison, and Camilla Hersh, "Using Hormone Contraceptives Is a Decision Involving Science, Scripture, and Conscience," in *The Reproduction Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of Sexuality, Reproductive Technologies, and the Family*, 194.

66 It is interesting to note that several secular sources as well as those who conclude that OCPs have no clear abortifacient feature strongly encourage women who miss one of more doses to utilize other methods of birth control for the peak fertility days of their cycle.


takes place when a woman is taking OCPs (caused by the reproductive hormones customarily suppressed by the OCPs), won’t the woman’s body produce enough estrogen and progesterone (which normally accompanies ovulation) to counteract the pill’s negative impact on the uterine lining?69 Fourth, the reproductive hormone that triggers ovulation also stimulates the woman’s body to produce progesterone, which causes the uterine lining to thicken in preparation for the fertilized egg.70 Fifth, medical professionals affirm that an embryo does not require a perfectly prepared endometrium (uterine wall) to implant. There are several cases of embryos implanting “on fallopian tubes, on the ovaries, on the intestines, and even on other intra–abdominal structures.”71 Sixth, many obstetricians have delivered babies that were conceived while the mothers were taking OCPs. Finally, with women who are not taking OCPs, a full 70% of fertilized ova fail to proceed to a full–term pregnancy, with three–fourths of them due to failure of implantation.72 An important statistical comparison of those who use OCPs and those who don’t should provide evidence that OCPs have a clear abortifacient function. Here is the set of circumstances that must exist in this comparison: “(1) In instances of breakthrough ovulation (a rare event), a significant number of sperm must penetrate the thickened cervical mucus (presumably a rare event), thus evading both truly contraceptive effects of OCPs; and (2) If fertilization does occur, an embryo must fail to implant in an endometrium at least somewhat prepared for it, or if it implants, fail to continue to term, and this failure rate must be greater than the 70% that occurs naturally.”73 Those who advocate the use of OCPs point out that there is absolutely no evidence that OCPs cause a greater failure rate than what exists with normal pregnancies (with women not taking OCPs).

**Ongoing Debate and Ambiguity**

Various significant organizations are undecided on this issue. For example, Focus on the Family’s Physician Resource Council (PRC) carefully studied this issue for two years. At the end of that time they did not reach a consensus as to the likelihood, or even the possibility, that OCPs might be abortifacient. The majority of the experts they consulted did not believe that OCP’s were clearly abortifacient, while a minority concluded that there was enough

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70 See the helpful explanation and chart that delineates the development of the uterine lining during a woman’s reproductive cycle in Jenell Williams Paris, *Birth Control for Christians: Making Wise Choices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 58–63.


73 Sullivan, “The Oral Contraceptive as Abortifacient,” 192.
information to warrant informing women about it. The Christian Medical and Dental Associations (CMDA) recognize that the scientific data may cause legitimate concern, but affirm that “our current scientific knowledge does not establish a definitive causal link between the routine use of hormonal birth control and abortion. However, neither are there data to deny a post–fertilization effect . . . . current knowledge does not confirm or refute conclusions that routine use of hormonal birth control causes abortion.”75 The Association of Pro-Life Physicians has concluded that the “hormonal contraception is abortifacient’ theory is not established scientific fact. It is speculation, and the discussion presented here suggests it is error.”76

Summary

The question does not seem to be whether OCPs cause the uterine lining to thin. The pressing question is whether OCPs cause a thinning effect on the uterine lining even when breakthrough occurs to a degree that prevents implantation more than what usually happens with women who are not taking OCPs.77 There are no medical studies that have tracked the thickness of the uterine wall in the context of a breakthrough ovulation. We cannot confirm the hard facts either way. Where does the above debate leave us? It seems that we must choose from one of three options. First, since OCPs are potentially abortifacient, it would be wrong for a woman to take them as a biblically allowed method of birth control. Second, OCPs have no known abortifacient qualities and there is absolutely no need to be concerned. The majority of obstetricians prescribe OCPs to their patients without a thought about the issue of abortion. Part of the reason for this is that in the medical world generally, any reference to abortion only considers the embryo after implantation. Third, in light of the ambiguity of the evidence, this is a decision each couple must make according to their conscience. In this case, the physician should provide sufficient information for the couple to make an informed and wise decision. Cutrer and Glahn, for example, refer to a risk–benefit ratio.78 They provide various examples of practices that carry a degree of risk, some even thought to be life–threatening. For example, we do not quarantine all pregnant women even though we know that certain viral infections can have a devastating or fatal affect on human embryos. Auto accidents are probably riskier to human life

78 Ibid., 105–6.
than these OCPs (statistically). They conclude that “the risks are quite small in comparison with the benefits.”

I would agree that the evidence available to us does not allow us to make a concrete decision concerning what is right or wrong. In addition, both sides are making some important assumptions about what they believe happens in a woman’s uterus. Consequently, we need to be gracious with fellow believers who make a different decision than we do concerning this difficult question. Some women take the pill to address other issues that relate to their reproductive health. Also, I have great respect for believing medical professionals who have given careful consideration to this issue and feel comfortable prescribing OCPs to their patients. However, I would have a hard time encouraging my wife or someone I counsel to take OCPs in light of what I know and don’t know. If someone decided that OCPs presented them no moral conflict, I would challenge them that they needed to take them faithfully and avoid the medications that suppress their effectiveness. If they missed a dosage, they should use other methods of birth control (abstinence or barrier methods) to avoid pregnancy during that cycle, just to exercise caution.

**Intrauterine Devices (IUDs)**

IUDs must be inserted and removed by a physician. Most resources that describe IUDs affirm that doctors do not totally understand exactly how they hinder fertilization. There are two primary brands of IUD available in the United States—ParaGard and Mirena. The mere presence of the IUD in the uterus interferes with the sperm’s access to the fallopian tube. The ParaGard IUD contains copper, which helps kill the sperm, preventing their journey up the fallopian tube. The Mirena IUD releases a small amount of the hormone progestin, which has the same function as progestin in combined OCPs. According to numerous sources, it prevents a woman’s ovaries from releasing eggs and thickens a women’s cervical mucus. According to Planned Parenthood, both IUD devices “affect the way sperm move, preventing them from joining with an egg. If sperm cannot join with an egg, pregnancy cannot happen. Both types also alter the lining of the uterus. Some people say that this keeps a fertilized egg from attaching to the lining of the uterus. But there is no proof that this actually happens (emphasis mine).”

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79 Ibid., 106.

80 The above discussion gave no attention to potential negative side effects of OCPs for some of its users. These do not involve moral considerations but would be part of the decision–making process.

The maker of the Mirena IUD, Bayer Health Care, says this in response to the question, “How does Mirena work?”:

It is not known exactly how Mirena works. Mirena may work in several ways. It may thicken your cervical mucus, thin the lining of your uterus, inhibit sperm movement and reduce sperm survival. Mirena may stop release of your egg from your ovary, but this is not the way it works in most cases. Most likely, these actions work together to prevent pregnancy. Mirena can cause your menstrual bleeding to be less by thinning the lining of the uterus.82

It is interesting that the manufacture minimizes their IUDs function of preventing ovulation. In an article on emergency contraception, Trussell and Raymond examine numerous methods of emergency contraception, including the IUD. They conclude that the high effectiveness of the IUD as a form of emergency contraception “implies that emergency insertion of a copper IUD must be able to prevent pregnancy after fertilization.”83 In other words, the copper IUD (at least) has an abortifacient function.

However, not all researchers are convinced that IUDs function as abortifacients. For example, I. Sivin argues that no studies show that IUDs destroy developing embryos at rates higher than those found in women who are not using contraceptives. He also writes that in all the studies he considered for his article, the primary mode of IUD action appears to be interference with fertilization rather than with implantation. The studies thus show that the mechanism of action by which IUDs prevent pregnancy is contraceptive; IUDs are not abortifacients.84

Family Health International (FHI) produced a paper entitled “Mechanisms of the Contraceptive Action of Hormonal Methods and Intrauterine Devices (IUDs).” They reject the idea that embryos that rarely make it to the uterus fail to implant.85 As part of their evidence, they cite a World Health Organization technical report that affirms that it “is unlikely that the contraceptive efficacy of IUDs results, mainly or exclusively, from their capacity to interfere with implantation; it is more probable that they exert their antifertility effects beyond the uterus and interfere with steps in the reproductive process that take place before the ova reach the uterine cavity.”86 In other words, whatever happens, caused by an

IUD, that prevents fertilization does not happen after an egg is fertilized and arrives at the uterus. However, as part of the conclusion of that report we learn the following. All IUDs stimulate a reaction in the endometrium (uterine wall) and progestogen–releasing IUDs produce endometrial suppression, i.e., reduction in the thickness of the walls of the uterus, like what occurs with OCPs. Consequently, they conclude that no single mechanism accounts for the antifertility effect of IUDs. They conclude that section by saying that the “mechanisms whereby this effect is exerted remain ill–defined but probably include alteration or inhibition of (a) sperm migration in the upper female genital tract, (b) fertilization and (c) ovum transport. These factors probably play a more important role than does the prevention of implantation resulting from biochemical and histological changes in the endometrium” (emphasis mine).\(^87\) Notice that they do not rule out the prevention of implantation as a result of the IUD, but simply minimize its impact in comparison to the primary function of the IUD.

Another piece of evidence cited in the FHI paper is the statement by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), who reviewed the evidence and concluded that, “As such, the IUD is not an abortifacient.”\(^88\) However, in the technical bulletin of the ACOG (April 2007) that replaces the one cited in the FHI article (written in 1987), they affirm that the hormonal IUD “thins the lining of the uterus. This keeps a fertilized egg from attaching and makes menstrual periods lighter.” They also state that the copper IUD “releases a small amount of copper into the uterus. This can prevent the egg from being fertilized or attaching to the wall of the uterus. The copper also prevents sperm from going through the uterus and into the fallopian tubes and reduces the sperm’s ability to fertilize an egg.”\(^89\)

It seems fair to say that the primary function of IUDs is to destroy or damage sperm or prevent their entrance into the fallopian tube. The hormone–releasing version also limits ovulation and makes the sperms’ entrance into the uterus less likely. However, both kinds of the IUD utilized in the United States seem to impact the thickness of the uterine wall and could impact the implantation of an embryo. Since the hormone–releasing version does not release as much progesterone as OCPs, it does not prevent ovulation as effectively as OCPs. As with OCPs, we do not know whether the fertilization of an egg would cause the release of sufficient hormones to counteract the customary thinning of the uterine walls in the days that pass between fertilization and arrival at the uterus. In the end, it seems that IUDs face some of the same questions as OCPs do. However, the majority of resources found, both from a secular or Christian perspective, contend that IUDs have an abortifacient feature. Consequently, until scholars can conclusively demonstrate that IUDs do not prevent the implantation of the growing embryo,

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 68.

\(^{88}\) “Mechanisms of the Contraceptive Action of Hormonal Methods and Intrauterine Devices (IUDs),” n. 18.

believers should be very cautious with this method of birth control. As with other cases, we need to be gracious with those we know who utilize IUDs, because their physician may not have explained their potential abortifacient function.

**Sterilization**

This is a permanent procedure that almost always prevents pregnancy from happening. For a woman, tubal ligation is a surgical procedure in which the fallopian tubes are blocked (by being tied, cut, cauterized, or pinched). For men, a vasectomy either blocks or cuts the vas deferens, the tube that carries sperm from the testicle to the storage glands. Although both of these are “permanent” methods of birth control, there are many instances in which they are surgically reversible.

If one views procreation as a fundamental and required part of sexual intimacy, sterilization obviously represents a violation of God’s desires. However, if as we have proposed above, procreation is not the only purpose for marriage and sex, what are we to think of “permanent” birth control? First, as with birth control in general, a couple should make sure that biblical values about marriage and children have preeminence in their decision-making process. For example, a couple should not selfishly abandon the blessing of children just to make life more simple or convenient. Secondly, a couple must make this decision in total agreement with each other. One partner in a marriage must not force this decision on their spouse. Third, a couple must not make this decision rashly or too early in life. Numerous couples who found rearing their children exhausting decided to take permanent steps, only to regret it later. Since this is a “permanent” procedure, a couple should give careful and cautious consideration before moving forward. Men or women who get divorced and remarry or lose a spouse and remarry may desire to have children with their new spouse. Finally, avoid harsh, bombastic statements about or to those who may decide to do something different than you might do in this area.

In light of the size of my own family (eight children), I have had many people ask me what I believe about birth control. Some hope that I will confirm their cherished opinion. Many are genuinely confused about what the Bible says about this important issue. Most are young couples approaching marriage who want to do what would honor God in this important part of marriage. When they ask me, “What does the Bible teach about birth control?,” I don’t answer that question

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90 The focus here is on voluntary sterilization, rather than involuntary sterilization. This section focuses on issues faced by a married couple, not by someone who is mentally incompetent, poor, or a habitual criminal whom the government intends to sterilize.

91 Removing the ovaries or the uterus will also cause sterility but are much more risky procedures.

92 Mark Driscoll (Religion Saves, 36–37) refers to friends, a pastor and wife, who suffered through eighteen miscarriages before the husband had a vasectomy to stop what had become for them incredible physical and emotional pain.
immediately. I walk them through some fundamentally important biblical values that provide the foundation for the answer they desire.93

What Does the Bible Teach about God’s Sovereignty?

At the outset of this section, I recognize the debate over how to relate divine sovereignty to human responsibility. I would like to avoid that debate if I could. Where you are on the Calvinist—Arminian spectrum does not impact my primary point here. I am not debating conditional and unconditional election here. I am thinking more broadly about God’s sovereignty. We read in various passages that God opened and closed a woman’s womb, orchestrating certain births (Gen 20:8; 25:21–22; 29:31; 30:1–2, 22; Judg 13:2–5; 1 Sam 1:5–6, 20).94 In the context of the Mosaic Covenant in which He addresses the entire nation, Yahweh promises to “bless the fruit of your womb” (Deut 7:13; 28:4, 11) or to curse “the fruit of your womb” (Deut 28:18). Looking forward to Israel’s restoration to the land, Yahweh declares that he will “make you most prosperous . . . in the fruit of your womb” (Deut 30:9). Various biblical writers attribute the formation of a child in a women’s womb as the work of God. For example, the psalmist writes, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps 139:13; cf. Job 31:15; Eccl 11:5; Jer 1:5). The clear point seems to be that the Lord is involved in the formation of a child in the womb. Blessing or not blessing the womb is under the realm of His sovereignty. Decisions in the area of childbearing must be made with an intentional recognition of God’s sovereignty in this area. We need to be asking how we can honor God’s name with this decision.

What Does the Bible Teach about the Value of Children?

In addition to the fact that a key part of God’s blessing on humanity is the ability to reproduce (Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7), the blessings of the Mosaic Law highlight a healthy and growing family as a fundamental part of an obedient servant nation (Lev 26:9; Deut 28:4, 11). The psalmist praised God concerning the blessing of children when he wrote: “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s

93 Driscoll does something similar when he introduces his comments on birth control with sixteen truths that comprise the biblical worldview that is necessary for answering this question. Religion Saves, 17–18.

94 I realize that these examples deal with Patriarchs and Hannah, Samuel’s mother, and are not commonplace. It seems that this description occurs concerning certain women because the child they will bear will serve an important role in God’s plan for Israel. Also, the Bible does not use this expression to describe average, ordinary women, i.e., women in general. The statement that God opened or closed a woman’s womb describes something God did that had significant implications for the covenant people. On the one hand, there is no doubt that these examples clearly demonstrate the Lord’s involvement in reproductive issues. However, they do not support the far-reaching conclusion that reproduction demands only divine involvement and precludes any human involvement with regard to timing or number of children. That conclusion teaches something from the passage that goes beyond its intended significance.
youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Ps 127:3–5). The very next psalm also describes children as a tangible manifestation of divine blessing: “your sons will be like olive shoots around your table” (Ps 128:3b). The three synoptic gospels contain accounts that show Jesus’ compassion for children. Although the primary point of each story does not focus on the children, they clearly demonstrate that Jesus placed great value on children. Finally, as part of his instructions for widows, this is what Paul writes concerning younger widows: “So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander” (1 Tim 5:14). The Bible places great value on children as part of God’s blessing to His creation. Mohler correctly points out that the Bible rejects the “contraceptive mentality that sees pregnancy and children as impositions to be avoided rather than as gifts to be received, loved, and nurtured. This contraceptive mentality is an insidious attack upon God’s glory in creation, and the Creator’s gift of procreation to the married couple.”

What Does the Bible Teach about Roles in Marriage?

With regard to the above two questions, it may seem patently obvious that couples need to approach the issue of child bearing with a proper theological perspective. They need to make sure that God’s values are driving their approach to this important issue. Unfortunately, many couples think about God’s values somewhat glibly or superficially as they make decisions about family size. Other issues generally receive more attention: convenience, finances, possessions, etc. God’s values should be the fundamental basis for decisions made by couples about having children.

The Bible clearly depicts a husband and wife as having a home–focus rather than a career–focus. The two are not mutually exclusive, but one of the important functions of and reasons for marriage is to establish a family that cherishes each member. A godly father should provide for his wife and children as part of his living for God’s glory (1 Tim 5:8). Wives are “to love their husbands and children . . . fulfilling their duties at home” (Tit 2:4–5). Fathers (and mothers) are to rear their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord. Deuteronomy highlights the importance of parents passing on their passion for honoring God to their children (Deut 6:6–9; 11:18–21). The book of Proverbs has abundant references to the role a mother and father should have on their children (Prov 1:8; 6:20; 13:24; 19:18; 22:6; 29:15, 17). All of this will not and cannot happen unless couples maintain a home–focus, in the midst of their other responsibilities.

Does this emphasis represent a non–negotiable command that every couple must have children or be in rebellion against God? No, but it does represent an ideal that couples have children in whom they invest with the result that those children have a God–honoring impact on the world around them. As couples face

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this issue of family size, they should remember the biblical ideal given to them as a husband and wife.

What Does the Bible Teach about God’s Purposes for Marriage?

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, marriage has at least four purposes: for the mutual help of husband and wife (Gen. 2:18–24), for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue (Gen 1:27–28; 9:1, 7, 9–10, 15–16), for the provision of the church with a holy seed (Gen 17:7–14; Matt 19:13–15; Eph 6:1–3), and for the preventing of uncleanness (1 Cor 7:1–9). Bruce Waltke offers five purposes for marriage: companionship (Gen 2:18, 24), completeness (Gen 2:24), sexual pleasure (Prov 5:15–23; 12:4; 18:22; 19:14; 31:31; Eccl 9:9; Song of Songs), procreation (Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7; Ps 127:3–5), and fidelity (1 Cor 7:1–9).

There are two main schools of thought about the purposes for marriage, especially as it relates to birth control. Both schools of thought value the gift of sexual expression within marriage as a joyful part of husband–wife intimacy. First, many propose that the primary purpose for marriage is to unite two people for reproduction or procreation. Both the unitive aspect and the procreative aspect of marital love must always be present and never separated in each sex act. This is called the “unitive–procreative link.” Some proponents of the “unitive” view reject all forms of contraception (including any human planning). Most proponents of that view allow for some version of natural family planning (see above). All proponents of the “unitive” view would reject any form of birth control beyond natural family planning. Second, others suggest that the primary purpose of marriage is to reflect the intimacy between Christ and His bride, the church. Intimate knowledge is at the core of that image. Procreation is often, but not always, a part of that picture. According to this view, although procreation is part of marriage, it is not the primary focus of marriage nor the main purpose for sex.

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99 I have drawn these two schools of thought and a summary of their perspectives from Cutrer and Glahn, *The Contraception Guidebook*, 35–36.

Consequently, contraception may be acceptable because intimate knowledge can be deepened even when conception is unlikely or even impossible.\textsuperscript{101} Various Scriptures favor the “intimacy” view for marriage and sex. It is interesting that that word chosen to describe Adam’s sexual intimacy with his wife is the verb “to know” (Gen 4:1).\textsuperscript{102} The celebration of marital sexual love in the Song of Solomon does not appear to be fundamentally connected to procreation. Finally, Paul’s exhortation to couples to give themselves fully to each other emphasizes meeting each other’s needs and not procreation (1 Cor 7:5).\textsuperscript{103} Also, if procreation is the primary purpose for sex, what about sexual intimacy between younger couples who cannot have children or couples beyond child-bearing years.

Having argued against an inseparable link between the sexual intimacy of a husband and wife and procreation, it is essential to remember that although God gave us the gift of marriage and sex for several specific purposes (e.g., sexual pleasure, emotional bonding, mutual support, procreation, and parenthood), one of those purposes is procreation. We must carefully avoid severing the blessings of marriage and sex from procreation, choosing only those benefits we desire for ourselves. As Mohler affirms, “Every marriage must be open to the gift of children. . . To demand sexual pleasure without openness to children is to violate a sacred trust.”\textsuperscript{104}

**Does the Bible Condemn Birth Control Anywhere?**

In Genesis 38, Judah married a Canaanite woman and had three sons. His oldest son became married, but before he had any children (and an heir), the Lord put him to death because of his wickedness. Judah commanded his second son to “fulfill your duty to her as a brother–in–law to produce offspring for your brother” (Gen 38:8). However, because Onan knew that this child would not be his, he “spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother” (Gen 38:9). This is not an example of a biblical condemnation of birth control. God put Onan to death because of his refusal to raise up an heir for his deceased brother. The Hebrew construction shows that Onan did this repeatedly, not just once or twice.\textsuperscript{105} The biblical text makes it clear that the purpose of the custom was to produce an heir for his deceased brother. Onan was willing to use the law or custom

\textsuperscript{101} On his daily radio show, Al Mohler addressed the view that “every act of marital intercourse must be fully and equally open to the gift of children.” He responds: “This claims too much, and places inordinate importance on individual acts of sexual intercourse, rather than the larger integrity of the conjugal bond. The focus on “each and every act” of sexual intercourse within a faithful marriage that is open to the gift of children goes beyond the biblical demand,” “Can Christians Use Birth Control?,” http://www.albertmohler.com/?cat=Commentary&cdate=2006–05–08 (accessed 11/8/09).

\textsuperscript{102} A man “knowing” his wife is a common idiom for sexual relations throughout the Old Testament.

\textsuperscript{103} For a helpful overview of the purpose for marriage that does not focus on procreation alone, see Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 43–56.


to gratify his desires, but was not willing to do what his father required.\textsuperscript{106} Therefore, the Bible never provides an implicit or explicit condemnation of birth control.

\textbf{Does the Bible Condone or Endorse Birth Control Anywhere?}

There are no biblical passages that model or encourage birth control. That does not make birth control un biblical, however. The non–mention of something never demonstrates the illegitimacy of that thing. People who assume from this that biblical people refused any involvement in birth control and embraced God’s sovereignty wholeheartedly are making conclusions that are not justified biblically. We don’t know that they practiced or rejected birth control, based on its non–mention in Scripture.

What should we conclude based on the preceding two questions: Does the Bible condemn or condone birth control anywhere? Let me ask another question. How do we deal with other lifestyle questions that are not condemned or condoned in Scripture? We regard them as liberty issues. We turn to Rom 14:13–23 and 1 Cor 8:1–13. I cannot take this opportunity to explain biblical liberty and the weaker/stronger brother issue because of time and space limitations. However, the basic idea is that we need to disagree with each other in a godly fashion as we approach this intimate and debated question. That leads us to the next question.

\textbf{What Role Does Biblical Wisdom Play in the Birth Control Issue?}

In areas that are open for disagreement because the Bible does not explicitly condemn or condone something, we need wisdom to conduct our lives for God’s honor. The above biblical/theological values provide the bedrock for our decision–making. Issues like convenience or material possessions should not be primary factors. Finances are a legitimate factor to consider, but not necessarily from the perspective of “the American dream.”

Here are just a couple examples of applying wisdom to this important area for married couples. What if a married couple has a child who has severe genetic issues and dies within a short time after his birth? The wife is tested and finds that she carries the genetic cause for this problem. It is very likely that most of her children will carry the gene as well and might face the same fate her one child faced. Could that couple decide to avoid future pregnancies in light of that almost guaranteed reality? Let’s say a woman faces grave health challenges caused by pregnancy. It is dangerous to her health, evidenced by a pregnancy she has already experienced. What might be (not must be) a wise option for this couple to consider? What about the timing of children? When a woman gives birth to a child her body is divested of various substances in order to assist the development of the child she

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{106} Since this event predates the Mosaic Law, Onan’s disobedience is not treachery against the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 25:5–10). However, it seems to have been a custom of sorts in the patriarchal period as well. Onan’s conduct was considered treachery in his day.}
carries. It takes several months to restore her body to full health. Is it possible to consider not pursuing another child until she has a couple of years for her body to recharge? None of these issues presents an option that a couple must accept. They all present situations in which a couple must exercise biblical wisdom in deciding how they can best honor God and be stewards of who God has made them.

Does resorting to biblical wisdom in deciding about family size or the timing of children represent a rejection of divine sovereignty? Not at all. Let me illustrate it this way. Let’s say that doctors discovered that my wife had a certain kind of cancer that, left to itself, would certainly result in death. However, there were some treatment options that had a high rate of success. Would I turn to my wife and say, “Sweetheart, I guess it is God’s will that you die”? On the one hand, I would not question that God has not been caught by surprise by this discovery. Regardless, I would resort to the medical technology available to me and pursue treatment that would cure my wife of this cancer. My beloved wife and I would try to make a wise decision. Wisdom and sovereignty are not enemies. In the same way, if I am counseling a couple who are facing major areas of disfunctionality in their marriage, would I encourage them to pursue having additional children? It would seem wise that they avoid (if possible) adding pressure (though God–given) to their circumstances. It might be wise for a newly married couple to seek to avoid pregnancy for a period of time and give themselves time to acclimate to this new blessing of marriage. However, with these and a host of other potential examples, keep in mind that biblical wisdom is not driven by materialism, selfishness, and personal convenience. Those me–focused dimensions are part of worldly wisdom, which explicitly or implicitly shakes its fist at God.

My burden is that we avoid acting or thinking like “pagans” as we approach this question. What are the driving forces behind the decisions we make concerning birth control and family size? Are my biblical values finding preeminence in the decision–making process? Am I asking “Why not have children?,” in addition to asking “Why have children?”

What about Couples Who Choose to Have No Children at All?

I am not thinking here about couples who are not able to have children. We all know numerous couples who, because of various factors, are not able to have children. They are not disobeying a mandate to have children. As a matter of fact, their childlessness may be a source of great sorrow and grief. They have not failed God nor are they necessarily being punished by God through their childlessness.

Instead, I am asking this question. Would it ever be right for a couple to choose never to have children? Is this necessarily the epitome of selfishness on the part of a Christian couple? It could be a manifestation of selfishness, but does not have to be. The starting point is to work through the questions provided above and carefully examine one’s motives. A couple must honestly consider the fundamental factors behind a decision like this? In many cases, people are pursuing wealth, convenience, career, or some other part of the “American dream”. However, this is not always the case. A wife might face such daunting physical illnesses that the demands of pregnancy would be totally dangerous for her health. A couple might
know in advance that one or both of them carries a genetic feature that would have drastic impact on their children (e.g., Tays–Sachs syndrome, Trisomy). Finally, some couples choose to have no children of their own in order to focus on adopting children who have no parents and no hope for a home. Others become foster parents to bring a gospel influence into the lives of needy children. They may choose not to have any natural children and focus their resources and efforts on part of what James exhorted his readers: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Since the 1960s, contraceptives have been freely available throughout the United States (as well as the world). This free access has been accompanied by a general moral decline in modern society. What does the Bible have to say about birth control in general and does it help us determine any contraceptive methods that are morally acceptable? After summarizing and evaluating the “no birth control” position, this article gave primary attention to various methods of birth control. After dealing with those that were clearly abortifacient and unacceptable for a Christian and those that present no intrinsic moral problems (unless you reject birth control on moral grounds), the article focused on three controversial methods, the “Pill,” IUDs, and sterilization. Since there is controversy about the way that two of these methods impact the potential for the implantation of the fertilized egg, believers have debated their morality. Although there is enough evidence to question the absolute decision that both are absolutely wrong because of their abortifacient function (at least in part), I left the issue somewhat undecided. I would not encourage people to use the “Pill,” but respect medical authorities who are confident that it does not cause abortion. The IUD has more evidence against it, even though medical professionals are not totally sure exactly how it functions. Sterilization has caused some people concern because of its “permanent” nature. The last major section of the article focused on embracing biblical values that should be preeminent for couples who are trying to honor God in the way they approach the question of the timing and number of children. Any decisions we make must be compatible with a recognition that God has ultimate sovereignty, and this is not an area for us to regard as a secular province under our control. God values children highly and so should we. Since the Bible does not explicitly condemn or condone birth control, we must employ biblical (rather than worldly) values about children.  

This does not represent a quality of life versus sanctity of life debate since there is no child in the equation at this point. The question is being asked in light of potential pregnancies. Also, since pregnancy by itself represents a certain degree of risk and we all carry some genetic features that are not ideal, we are not talking about total avoidance of risk by avoiding having children. We have in mind concrete examples of high risk.

The absolute “no birth control” view would seem to preclude involvement in adoption, one of the ways Christians can greatly impact the world in which we live with the gospel.
wisdom in determining how we as couples can best bring God great glory through this stewardship of marriage and sexual intimacy.

Once again, Mohler calls us to think biblically about birth control. He writes: “For evangelicals, much work remains to be done. We must build and nurture a new tradition of moral theology, drawn from Holy Scripture and enriched by the theological heritage of the church. Until we do, many evangelical couples will not even know where to begin the process of thinking about birth control in a fully Christian frame. It is high time evangelicals answered this call.”

Rob Bell, in his book, Love Wins, asserts that God’s love means that ultimately all people will be reconciled to God in a saving way either in this life or the next. For him God does not punish eternally because God’s love wins in the end. But Bell’s use of Scripture, theology, and history, is faulty. Plus, Bell’s position demeans the cross and misrepresents God’s character. The consequences for his approach are devastating for those who need to properly understand both the love and wrath of God.

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Love Wins, by megachurch pastor Rob Bell, is, as the subtitle suggests, “a book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived.” Here’s the gist: Hell is what we create for ourselves when we reject God’s love. Hell is both a present reality for those who resist God and a future reality for those who die unready for God’s love. Hell is what we make of heaven when we cannot accept the good news of God’s forgiveness and mercy. But hell is not forever. God will have his way. How can his good purposes fail? Every sinner will turn to God and realize he has already been reconciled to God, in this life or in the next. There will be no eternal conscious torment. God says no to injustice in the age to come, but he does not pour out wrath (we bring the temporary suffering upon ourselves), and he certainly does not punish for eternity. In the end, love wins.

Bell correctly notes (many times) that God is love. He also observes that Jesus is Jewish, the resurrection is important, and the phrase “personal relationship with God” is not in the Bible. He usually makes his argument by referencing Scripture. He is easy to read and obviously feels very deeply for those who have been wronged or seem to be on the outside looking in.
Unfortunately, beyond this, there are dozens of problems with *Love Wins*. The theology is heterodox. The history is inaccurate. The impact on souls is devastating. And the use of Scripture is indefensible. Worst of all, *Love Wins* demeans the cross and misrepresents God’s character.

**A Few Preliminaries**

Before going any further with a critique, a number of preliminary comments are in order. A few opening remarks may help put this critical review in context and encourage productive responses.

One, although Bell asks a lot of questions (350 by one count), we should not write off the provocative theology as mere question-raising. Bell did not write an entire book because he was looking for some good resources on heaven and hell. This isn’t the thirteen-year-old in your youth group asking her teacher, “How can a good God send people to hell?” Any pastor worth his covenant salt will welcome sincere questions like this. (“Good question, Jenny, let’s see what the Bible says about that.”) But Bell is a popular teacher of a huge church with a huge following. This book is not an invitation to talk. It’s him telling us what he thinks (nothing wrong with that). As Bell himself writes, “But this isn’t a book of questions. It’s a book of responses to these questions” (19).

Two, we should notice the obvious: this is a book. It is a book with lots of Scripture references. It is a book that draws from history and personal experience. It makes a case for something. It purports one story of Christianity to be better than another. Bell means to persuade. He wants to convince us of something. He is a teacher teaching. This book is not a poem. It is not a piece of art. This is a theological book by a pastor trying to impart a different way of looking at heaven and hell. Whether Bell is creative or a provocateur is beside the point. If Bell is inconsistent, unclear, or inaccurate, claiming the “artist” mantle is no help.

Three, I’m sure that many people looking to defend Bell will be drawn to a couple escape hatches he launches along the way. As you’ll see, the book is a sustained attack on the idea that those who fail to believe in Jesus Christ in this life will suffer eternally for their sins. This is the traditional Christianity he finds “misguided and toxic” (viii). But in one or two places Bell seems more agnostic.

Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices? Those are questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don’t need to resolve them or answer them because we can’t, and so we simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires (115).

These are strange sentences because they fall in the chapter where Bell argues that God wants everyone to be saved and God gets what God wants. He tells us that “never-ending punishment” does not give God glory, and “God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts” (108). So it’s unclear where the sudden agnosticism comes from. Is Bell wrestling with himself? Did a friend or editor ask him to throw in a few caveats? Is he simply inconsistent?
Similarly, at the end Bell argues, rather out of the blue, that we need to trust God in the present, that our choices here and now “matter more than we can begin to imagine” because we can miss out on rewards and celebrations (197). This almost looks like an old-fashioned call to turn to Christ before it’s too late. When you look more carefully, however, you see that Bell is not saying what evangelicals might think. He wants us to make the most of life because “while we may get other opportunities, we won’t get the one right in front of us again” (197). In other words, there are consequences for our actions, in this life and in the next, and we can’t get this moment back; but there will always be more chances. If you don’t live life to the fullest and choose love now, you may initially miss out on some good things in the life to come, but in the end love wins (197–198).

For anyone tempted to take these few lines and make Bell sound orthodox, I encourage you to read the whole book more carefully. Likewise, before you rush to accept that Bell believes in hell and believes Christ is the only way, pay attention to his conception of hell and in what way he thinks Jesus is the only way. Bad theology usually sneaks in under the guise of familiar language. There’s a reason he’s written 200 pages on why you must be deluded to think people end up in eternal conscious punishment under the just wrath of God. Words mean something, even when some of them seem forced or out of place. Take the book as a whole to get Bell’s whole message.

Four, it is possible that I (like other critics) am mean-spirited, nasty, and cruel. But voicing strong disagreement does not automatically make me any of these. Judgmentalism is not the same as making judgments. The same Jesus who said “do not judge” in Matthew 7:1 calls his opponents dogs and pigs in Matthew 7:6. Paul pronounces an anathema on those who preach a false gospel (Gal. 1:8). Disagreement among professing Christians is not a plague on the church. In fact, it is sometimes necessary. The whole Bible is full of evaluation and encourages the faithful to be discerning and make their own evaluations. What’s tricky is that some fights are stupid, and some judgments are unfair and judgmental. But this must be proven, not assumed. Bell feels strongly about this matter of heaven and hell. So do a lot of other people. Strong language and forceful arguments are appropriate.

Five, I am not against conversation. What I am against is false teaching. I did not go to the trouble of writing a review because I worry that God can’t handle our questions. The question is never whether God can handle our honest reappraisals of traditional Christianity, but whether he likes them.

On the subject of conversation, it’s worth pointing out that this book actually mitigates against further conversation. For starters, there’s the McLarenesque complaint about the close-minded traditionalists who don’t allow for questions, change, and maturity (ix). This is a kind of pre-emptive “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” approach to conversation (cf. 183). In essence, “Let’s talk, but I know already that the benighted and violent will hate my theology.” That hardly invites further dialogue. More practically, Bell includes no footnotes for his historical claims and rarely gives chapter and verse when citing the Bible. It is difficult to examine Bell’s claims when he is less than careful in backing them up.

Six, this is not an evangelistic work, not in the traditional sense anyway. The primary intended audience appears to be not so much secularists with objections to Christianity (á la Keller’s Reason for God), but disaffected
evangelicals who can’t accept the doctrine they grew up with. Bell writes for the “growing number” who have become aware that the Christian story has been “hijacked” (vii). Love Wins is for those who have heard a version of the gospel that now makes their stomachs churn and their pulses rise, and makes them cry out, “I would never be a part of that” (viii). This is a book for people like Bell, people who grew up in an evangelical environment and don’t want to leave it completely, but want to change it, grow up out of it, and transcend it. The emerging church is not an evangelistic strategy. It is the last rung for evangelicals falling off the ladder into liberalism or unbelief.

Over and over, Bell refers to the “staggering number” of people just like him, people who can’t believe the message they used to believe, people who want nothing to do with traditional Christianity, people who don’t want to leave the faith but can’t live in the faith they once embraced. I have no doubt there are many people like this inside and outside our churches. Some will leave the faith altogether. Others—and they are in the worse position—will opt for liberalism, which has always seen itself as a halfway house between conservative orthodoxy and secular disbelief.

But before we let Bell and others write the present story, we must remember that there are also a “staggering number” of young people who want the straight up, unvarnished truth. They want doctrinal edges and traditional orthodoxy. They want no-holds-barred preaching. They don’t want to leave traditional Christianity. They are ready to go deeper into it.

Love Wins has ignited such a firestorm of controversy because it’s the current fissure point for a larger fault-line. As younger generations come up against an increasingly hostile cultural environment, they are breaking in one of two directions—back to robust orthodoxy (often Reformed) or back to liberalism. The neo-evangelical consensus is cracking up. Love Wins is simply one of many tremors.

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With those as preliminaries, you know this won’t be a brief review. The hard part is knowing where to begin. Love Wins is such a departure from historic Christianity, that there’s no easy way to tackle it. You can’t point to two or three main problems or three or four exegetical missteps. This is a markedly different telling of the gospel from start to finish. To fully engage the material would require not only deconstruction, but a full reconstruction of orthodoxy theology. A book review, however, is not the place to build a systematic theology. So where to begin? I want to approach Love Wins by looking at seven areas: Bell’s view of traditional evangelical theology, history, exegesis, eschatology, Christology, gospel, and God.

1. Not Your Grandmother’s Christianity

Perhaps the best place to start is to show that Bell routinely disparages the faith of traditional evangelicalism.
A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear (viii).

At least Bell is honest. In the next chapter, not even his grandmother gets off unscathed. Bell reminisces about the scary picture in her house of a floating cross-bridge to heaven. He likens it to a joint project from Thomas Kinkade and Dante or like Dungeons and Dragons, Billy Graham, and a barbecue pit rolled into one (22–23). He and his sister were freaked out. This story of leaving earth to go to heaven by means of faith in Christ is not the story he wants to promote anymore.

Later, Bell allows that traditionalists can believe their story of heaven and hell, but “it isn’t a very good story” (110). Traditional Christians have inferior news to share because in their story so many people end up in hell. “That’s why the Christians who talk the most about going to heaven while everybody else goes to hell don’t throw very good parties” (179). Not only are they bad at parties, traditionalists are bad at art: “An entrance understanding of the gospel rarely creates good art. Or innovation. Or a number of other things. It’s a cheap view of the world because it’s a cheap view of God. It’s a shriveled imagination” (180). So much for finding beauty or delight in Western civilization. I’ll leave it to the art critics and the partygoers to determine if it’s true that, second to blondes, universalists have more fun.

What’s interesting is that Bell struggles to leave his evangelical upbringing behind. He knows the temptation to be embarrassed that “we were so ‘simple’ or ‘naïve,’ or ‘brainwashed’ or whatever terms arise when we haven’t come to terms with our own story” (194). And yet, he believes it’s important to embrace past understanding of the faith, even if people like him were shaped by a certain environment and reared in certain experiences that can be easily deconstructed (e.g., praying the sinner’s prayer) (193–95). Again, we sense Bell is trying to reconcile an earlier faith with his present trajectory. The result is an awkward attempt to claim his past while still wanting to evolve out of it. This presumes, of course, that the Christian faith is not a deposit to guard or a tradition that must not change (2 Tim. 1:14; 2 Thess. 2:15). Much of Bell’s polemic fails if there is a core of apostolic teaching that we are called, not just to embrace as part of our journey, but to protect from deviation and defend against false teaching (Acts 20:29–31).

2. Historical Problems

Bell maintains he is not saying anything new. And that’s right. The problem is he makes it sound like his everyone-ends-up-restored-and-reconciled-to-God theology is smack dab in the center of the Christian tradition. And so, beginning with the early church, there is a long tradition of Christians who believe that God will ultimately restore everything and everybody, because Jesus says in
Matthew 19 that there will be a “renewal of all things,” Peter says in Acts 3 that Jesus will “restore everything,” and Paul says in Colossians 1 that through Christ “God was pleased to . . . reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (107, ellipsis in original).

It’s important to Bell that he falls within the “deep, wide, diverse stream” of “historic, orthodox Christian faith” (ix-x). Therefore, he argues that “at the center of the Christian tradition since the first church has been the insistence that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins” (109).

This bold claim flies in the face of Richard Bauckham’s historical survey:

Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated. . . . Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of the universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. (“Universalism: A Historical Survey,” Themelios 4.2 [September 1978]: 47–54)

Universalism (though in a different form than Bell’s and for different reasons) has been present in the church since Origen, but it was never in the center of the tradition. Origen’s theology was partly anticipated by his fellow Platonist Clement of Alexandria and later shows up in the Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa. But according to William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, Gregory’s theology of hell is hard to pin down. He makes much of God being “all in all” and evil being eradicated, but he also warns of the final judgment and the flames ready to engulf the wicked (NPNF ser. 2, 5:16). Whatever Origen’s influence on the Cappadocian fathers (and it was considerable), Origen’s views were later refuted by Augustine and, as Bauckham notes, condemned in 543 in a council at Constantinople.

Bell also mentions Jerome, Basil, and Augustine because they claimed many people in their day believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God (107). But listing all the heavyweights who took time to refute the position you are now espousing is not a point in your favor. Most egregiously, Bell calls on Martin Luther in support of post-mortem salvation (106). But as Carl Trueman has pointed out, anyone familiar with Luther’s creedal statements and overall writing, not to mention the actual quotation in question, will quickly see that Luther is not on Bell’s side.

Universalism has been around a long time. But so has every other heresy. Arius rejected the full deity of Christ and many people followed him. This hardly makes Arianism part of the wide, diverse stream of Christian orthodoxy. Every point of Christian doctrine has been contested, but some have been deemed heterodox. Universalism, traditionally, was considered one of those points. True,
many recent liberal theologians have argued for versions of universalism—and this is where Bell stands, not in the center of the historic Christian tradition.

3. Exegetical Problems

Some people may be impressed by the array of biblical texts Bell employs. But there is less here than meets the eye. Time after time, key points in Bell’s argument rest on huge exegetical mistakes. A partial list—an even ten—in no particular order:

One, Bell cites Psalm 65, Ezekiel 36, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Philippians 2, and Psalm 22 to show that all peoples will eventually be reconciled to God. He does not mention that some of these are promises to God’s people, some are general promises about the nations coming to God, and others are about the universal acknowledgement (not to be equated with saving faith) on the last day that Jesus Christ is Lord. Not one of his texts supports his conclusion.

Two, similarly, Bell lists a number of passages that point to final restoration—Jeremiah 5, Lamentations 3, Hosea 14, Zephaniah 3, Isaiah 57, Hosea 6, Joel 3, Amos 9, Nahum 2, Zephaniah 2, Zephaniah 3, Zechariah 9, Zechariah 10, and Micah 7 (86–87). Anyone familiar with the prophets knows that they often finish with a promise of future blessing. But anyone familiar with the prophets should also know that these promises are for God’s covenant people, predicated on faith and repentance, and fulfilled ultimately in Christ.

Three, Bell seems to recognize the covenantal nature of the promised restoration, so he goes out of his way to point out that the restoration is not just for God’s people. To prove this point he cites a passage from Isaiah 19 where it is predicted that an altar to the Lord will be in the midst of the land of Egypt. Bell concludes that no failure is final and that consequences can always be corrected (88–89). But Isaiah 19 is not remotely about postmortem opportunities to repent. The text is about God’s plan to humble Egypt to the point where they cry out to Israel’s God for deliverance: “The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them” (Isa. 19:22, ESV). God makes no promise that every soul in Egypt will be saved. Rather he promises, like the prophets do time and time again, that if they call on the Lord he will have mercy on them. There is no thought that they will do this calling in the afterlife.

Four, Bell makes no attempt to understand John 14:6 in context. After acknowledging that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and the only way to the Father, Bell quickly adds, “What he doesn’t say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Jesus. He doesn’t even state that those coming to the Father through Jesus will even know that they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him” (154). Even a cursory glance at John 14 shows that the through in verse 16 refers to faith. The chapter begins by saying, “Believe in God; believe also in me.” Verse seven talks about knowing the Father. Verses nine and ten explain that we see and know the Father by believing that Jesus is in the Father and the Father in him. Verses 11 and 12 touch on belief yet again. Coming to the Father through
Christ means through faith in Christ. This is in keeping with the overall purpose of John’s gospel (John 20:31).

Five, Bell thinks the rich man’s question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” has nothing to do with the afterlife. He isn’t asking about how to go to heaven when he dies (30). He’s simply wondering how to get in on the good things God is doing in the age to come (31, 40). Again, Bell ignores all contextual clues to the contrary. Given the resurrection discussion alive in Jesus’ day (see Mark 12:18–27), the rich man is likely asking, “How can I be sure I’ll be saved in the final resurrection?” He is thinking of life after death. That’s why he says “inherit” and why the previous section in Mark discusses Bell’s dreaded “entrance” theology (Mark 10:13–16). What’s more, verse 30 makes clear that some of the blessings in following Jesus come in the next life, what Jesus calls “in the age to come, eternal life.” If eternal life is equivalent to saying the age to come (31), then Jesus is the master of redundancy. But the two terms are not identical. Eternal life here means life that lasts forever.

Six, Bell reads too much into Paul’s discipline passages. Paul handed over Hymenaeus and Alexander to teach them not to blaspheme. He disciplined the man in Corinth so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. Therefore, Bell reasons, failure is never final (89–90). But stating the purpose and hope of discipline (as Paul does) is one thing, assuming the repentance happened is another, and thinking any of this opens the door to postmortem second chances is a thing the text never hints at.

Seven, sometimes Bell just ignores the verses that don’t support his thesis. While arguing that we should be extremely careful about making negative judgments on people’s eternal destinies, Bell cites Jesus’ words in John 3:17 that he “did not come to judge the world but to save it” (160). This Jesus, Bell says, is a “vast, expansive, generous mystery” leading us to conclude hopefully that “Heaven is, after all, full of surprises.” Bell’s lean into universalism here would be significantly muted had he gone on to Jesus’ words in verse 18: “Whoever believes in him [i.e., the Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Likewise, according to John 3:36, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

Eight, Bell’s overview of Revelation skims along the surface of the book in a way that misses all the hard parts he doesn’t want to see. Bell explains that Revelation is a book written for God’s people during a time when they were being persecuted. As such, there are lots of pictures of wrongs being righted and people being held accountable (112). But, he says, “the letter does not end with blood and violence” (112). It ends with the world permeated with God’s love (114).

This is not a bad summary, but the three points he draws from this narrative are problematic. First, he explains the judgments by reminding us that people often reject the love and joy in front of them and “choose to live in their own hells all the time” (114). But even a cursory read through Revelation shows that violent judgments issue from God’s throne. They are poured out from bowls and thrown down on the earth. Christ comes on a war horse with a sharp sword in his mouth. There’s no sense that the wicked are suffering only from their poor
decisions in life. They wail for fear because the one whom they pierced is coming with the clouds for recompense (Rev. 1:7).

Second, Bell suggests that maybe the gates in heaven are “never shut” because new citizens will continue to enter the city as everyone is eventually reconciled to God (115). This interpretation is clearly at odds with the rest of Revelation 21–22 which emphasizes several times that there are some accursed ones left outside the city (21:8, 27; 22:3, 14–15, 18–19). The theme of judgment carries through right to the end of the book. What’s more, those facing this judgment will be thrown into the lake of fire where torment never ends, which is the second death (20:10; 21:8). There is never a hint of postmortem second chances and every indication of an irreversible judgment decreed of every soul at the end of the age. The gates are open as a sign of the city’s complete safety and security, not as an indication that more will be saved after death.

Third, according to Bell, the announcement “I am making all things new” suggests new possibilities. This, in turn, means we should leave the door open that the final eternal state of every person has not been fixed (116). Again, this is a supposition without any warrant in the text, where the newness of heaven speaks of a new holiness, a new world, a new pain-free existence, and a new closeness with God. Heaven is not new because people in hell get new chances to repent.

Nine, what Bell does with Sodom and Gomorrah should make even his most ardent supporters wince. Really, you have to wonder if Bell has any interest in being constrained by serious study of the biblical text. In one place, Bell argues from Ezekiel 16 that because the fortunes of Sodom will be restored (Ezek 16:53), this suggests that the forever destiny of others might end in restoration (84). But it should be obvious that the restoration of Sodom in Ezekiel is about the city, not about the individual inhabitants of the town who were already judged in Genesis 19. The people condemned by sulfur and fire 1,500 years earlier were not getting a second lease on postmortem life. The current city would be restored. And besides, the whole point of Sodom’s restoration is to shame wicked Samaria (Ezek 16:54) so that they might bear the penalty of their lewdness and abominations (Ezek 16:58). This hardly fits with Bell’s view of God and judgment.

If that weren’t bad enough, the other discussion on Sodom is even worse. Because Jesus says it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for Capernaum (Matt 11:23–24), Bell concludes that there is hope for all the other Sodoms and Gomorrah (85). Bell takes a passage about judgment—judgment that will be so bad for Capernaum it’s even worse than God’s judgment on Sodom—and turns it into tacit support for ultimate universalism. Jesus’ warning says nothing about new hope for Sodom. It says everything about the hopelessness of unbelieving Capernaum.

Ten, not surprisingly, Bell frequently harkens back to the Pauline promise in Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1 that God is reconciling or uniting all things together in Christ (149). These are favorite passages of universalists, but they cannot carry the freight universalists want them to. Take Ephesians 1, for example. Paul says that God’s plan in the fullness of time is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10). The Greek word for “unite” is a long one: anakephalaiōsasthai. It means to sum up, to bring together to a main point, to gather together. It is like an author finishing the last chapter of his book or
a conductor bringing the symphony from cacophony to harmony. It’s a glorious promise, already begun in some ways by the word of Christ. But we know from the rest of Ephesians that Paul does not expect all peoples to be reconciled to God. He speaks of sons of disobedience and children of wrath in chapter two. In chapter five, he makes clear that the sexually immoral and covetous have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ. In Eph 5:6 he warns that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. The uniting of all things does not entail the salvation of all people. It means that everything in the universe, heaven and earth, the spiritual world and the physical world, will finally submit to the lordship of Christ, some in joyful worship of their beloved Savior and others in just punishment for their wretched treason. In the end, God wins.

One last general point about Bell’s exegesis: Bell has a reputation for being brilliant and creative, and he probably is in certain spheres. But his use of Scripture exhibits neither characteristic. In fact, it is naïve, literalistic biblicism. He flattens everything, either to make traditional theology sound ridiculously inconsistent or to make a massive point from one out-of-context verse. He makes no attempt to understand metaphors, genre, or imagery (either in Scripture or in his grandmother’s painting). He does not to try to harmonize anything that might rot his fresh take on the Bible. He loves Jewish background and context, but he shows very little familiarity with the actual storyline and the shape of the Old Testament. His style may be engaging to some, but look up the passages for yourself and then pick up a reputable study Bible or a basic commentary series. You’ll seriously question Bell’s use of Scripture.

4. Eschatological Problems

Bell’s eschatology is muddled. On the one hand, he goes to great length to argue that eternal life is not really forever life, just abundant life or life belonging to the next age (57, 92–93). He maintains that the images of hell refer to the pain we create for ourselves on earth and to the impending disaster on Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (81). Bell sounds like an overwrought preterist at times, having no place for end-times judgment or an unending existence after death. But on the other hand, he seems to leave all these arguments behind later when he talks about an eternal postmortem existence. He does believe in heaven after you die, and he believes in hell.

But in a strange bit of logic arising out of the parable of the prodigal son, Bell maintains that heaven and hell exist side by side. It’s not always clear what Bell thinks, but it seems he believes everyone goes to the same realm when they die; but for some people it is heaven, and for others it is hell (170). If you don’t accept God’s story about the world and resist his love, heaven will be hell for you, a hell you create for yourself. We are supposed to see this in Luke 15 where both brothers are invited to the same feast but one can’t enjoy it. Heaven and hell at the same party (176). To call this a little stretch is like calling pro wrestling a little fake. Jesus told all three “lost” parables to explain why he was eating with “sinners” (Luke 15:2–3), not to posit a thoroughly un-Jewish notion that the afterlife is whatever you make of it. If the parable of the prodigal son teaches Bell’s theology
of heaven-and-hell-at-the-same-time, then the Bible can teach anything Bell wants it to.

In a similar vein, Bell seems unaware that theologians of various traditions have talked about the two sides of God’s will (or two lenses through which God views the world). To be sure, there is mystery here, but it’s common to distinguish between God’s will of decree, whereby everything that he wills comes to pass (Eph 1:11), and his will of desire which can be rejected (Matt 7:21). And yet one of Bell’s main planks in support of universal reconciliation is that if God wants all people to be saved, then all people must eventually be saved. “How great is God?” Bell asks. “Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do, or kind of great, great most of the time, but in this, the fate of billions of people, not totally great. Sort of great. A little great” (97–99). The strong insinuation is that a God who does not save everyone is not totally great.

All this is built on the statement that God wants everyone to be saved. There’s no exegetical work on the meaning of “all people” and no discussion on the dual-nature of God’s will. In Bell’s mind, if all people do not end up reconciled to God it is tantamount to God saying, “Well, I tried, I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure” (103). Bell has taken one statement from 1 Tim 2:4 (God desires all people to be saved), avoids any contextual work on the passage (e.g., all probably means “all kinds of people”), and refuses to bring any other relevant passages to bear on this one (e.g., Rom 9:22, “What if God desiring to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?”) The result is a simplistic formula: “God wants all people to be saved. God gets what he wants. Therefore, all people will eventually be saved.” This is a case of poor theologizing beholden to mistaken logic. If it is “the will of God” that Christians “abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3), does that mean God’s greatness is diminished by our impurity?

In the blog buzz leading up to the release of Love Wins, there was a lot of discussion about whether Bell is or is not a Christian universalist. After reading the book, I see no reason why the label does not fit. Now it’s true, Bell believes in hell. But he does not believe that God pours out his wrath on anyone forever (I’m not sure he thinks God actively pours out wrath on anyone at all). Hell is the sad suffering of this life (71). Hell is God giving us what we want (72). Postmortem hell is what we create for ourselves when we refuse to believe God’s story, when we resist his love (170-71, 172, 177). There is hell now and hell later. “There are all kinds of hell because there are all kinds of ways to reject the good and the true and the beautiful and the human now, in this life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next” (79).

So why do I say Bell is a universalist if he believes in hell? Because he does not believe hell lasts forever. It is a temporary “period of pruning” and “an intense experience of correction” (91). Bell’s hell is like purgatory except his “period of pruning” is for anyone, not just for Christians who die in a state of grace as Catholicism teaches. For Bell, this life is about getting ourselves fitted for the good life to come. Some of us die ready to experience God’s love. Others need more time to sort things out. Luckily, in Bell’s scheme, there is always more time. “No one can resist God’s pursuit forever because God’s love will eventually melt
even the hardest hearts” (108). Bell does not believe every road leads to God. He is not a moral relativist. You can get your life and theology wrong. Heaven is a kind of starting over, a time to relearn what it means to be human. For some this process may take a while, and during the process their heaven may feel more like hell. But even those who get everything wrong in this life, will eventually get it right over time in the next life. In Bell’s theology, ultimately, everyone will be saved. If he’s right, most of church history has been wrong. If he’s wrong, a staggering number of people are hearing “peace, peace” where there is no peace.

What’s wrong with this theology is, of course, what’s wrong with the whole book. Bell assumes all sorts of things that can’t be shown from Scripture. For example, Bell figures God won’t say “sorry, too late” to those in hell who are humble and broken for their sins. But where does the Bible teach the damned are truly humble or penitent? For that matter, where does the Bible talk about growing and maturing in the afterlife or getting a second chance after death? Why does the Bible make such a big deal about repenting “today” (Heb 3:13), about being found blameless on the day of Christ (2 Pet 3:14), about not neglecting such a great salvation (Heb 2:3) if we have all sorts of time to figure things out in the next life? Why warn about not inheriting the kingdom (1 Cor 6:9–10), about what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31), or about the vengeance of our coming King (2 Thess 1:5–12) if hell is just what we make of heaven? Bell does nothing to answer these questions, or even ask them in the first place.

5. Christological Problems

Most readers of Love Wins will want to talk about Bell’s universalism. But just as troubling is his Christology. Bell has a Joseph Campbell “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” view of Christ. Jesus is hidden in various cultures and in every aspect of creation. Some people find him and some don’t. Some call him Jesus; some have too much baggage with Christianity, so they call him by a different name (159).

Bell finds support for this Christological hide-and-seek in 1 Corinthians 10. This is where Paul calls to mind the Exodus narrative and asserts that the rock (the one that gushed water) was Christ (1 Cor 10:4). From this Bell concludes, “There are rocks everywhere” (139). If Paul saw Christ in the rock, then who knows where else we might find him (144)? Jesus cannot be confined to any one religion, Bell argues. He transcends our labels and cages, especially the one called Christianity (150). Christ is present in all cultures and can be found everywhere. Sometimes missionaries travel around the world only to find that the Christ they preach was already present by a different name (152).

This does not mean Christ is whatever you want him to be. Some Jesuses should be rejected, Bell says, like the ones that are “anti-science” and “anti-gay” and use bullhorns on the street (8). But wherever we find “grace, peace, love, acceptance, healing, forgiveness” we’ve found the creative life source that we call Jesus (156, 159).

Elsewhere, after describing a false Jesus “who waves the flag and promotes whatever values they have decided their nation needs to return to,” Bell
offers the promising alternative: “the very life source of the universe who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with his love and power and grace and energy” (156).

These [Eucharist] rituals are true for us, because they’re true for everybody. They unite us, because they unite everybody. These are signs and glimpses and tastes of what is true for all people in all places at all times—we simply name the mystery present in all the world, the gospel already announced to every creature under heaven (157).

This is classic liberalism pure and simple, a souped-up version of Schleiermacher’s feeling of absolute dependence. This is all immanence and no transcendence. This is not the objective gospel-message of Christ’s work in history that we must announce. This is an existential message announcing a rival version of the good news, the announcement that you already know Christ and can feel him in your heart if you pay attention.

To suggest the Lord’s Supper unites all people makes a mockery of the sacrament and the Christ uniquely present in the bread and the cup. The Table is a feast for those who trust in Christ, for those who can discern his body, a family meal for those who together will proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again. It brings us together under the sign of the cross. The sheep “not of this pen” are not adherents of other religions who belong to Christ without knowing it (152), but Gentiles who can now fellowship with Jews through the blood (Eph 2:11–22). And let’s not forget all of this rests on an illegitimate reading of 1 Corinthians 10. First, the fact that Paul found a type of Christ in the Old Testament does not give us warrant to find whatever types we like in the world. Second, Paul did not mention the rock willy-nilly because it seemed beautiful to him. The gushing rock was a picture of God’s provision and salvation for his people in the Old Testament just like Christ is for the church in the New Testament. Third, the rest of 1 Corinthians 10 militantly opposes everything Bell wants to get out of the chapter. The reason Paul brought up the rock in the first place was as an example, “that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor 10:6). Paul wants the Corinthians to avoid being “destroyed by the Destroyer” (1 Cor 10:10) and to “take heed lest [they] fall” (1 Cor 10:12). There’s no thought that the Corinthians should find Christ in ten thousand places. The whole chapter is a warning against idolatry, to flee from it (1 Cor. 10:14), not to embrace it in the name of mystery.

6. Gospel Problems

This review is too long already, but I really must say something about the two most grievous errors in the book: Bell’s view of the cross and his view of God. According to Bell, salvation is realizing you’re already saved. We are all forgiven. We are all loved, equally and fully by God who has made peace with everyone. That work is done. Now we are invited to believe that story and live in it (172–73).

Bell is not saying what you think he might be saying. He’s not suggesting faith is the instrumental cause used by the Spirit to join us to Christ so we can share
in all his benefits. That would be evangelical theology. Bell is saying God has already forgiven us whether we ask for it or not, whether we repent and believe or not, whether we are born again or not. “Forgiveness is unilateral. God isn’t waiting for us to get it together, to clean up, shape up, get up—God has already done it” (189). This means the Father’s love just is. It cannot be earned and it cannot be taken away. God’s love is simply yours (188). Heaven and hell (however Bell conceives them) are both full of forgiven people.

So what does Bell believe about the atonement? He starts with the familiar refrain that there are many images for what the death of Jesus accomplished and none of them should be prized more than another (though he claims Christus Victor was the dominant understanding for the first thousand years of church history). The point is not to argue about the images. “The point then, as it is now, is Jesus. The divine in flesh and blood. He’s where the life is” (129).

You may wonder where the sacrificial system is in all this. After all, as a friend reminded me, years ago Bell was best known for being the pastor who started his church by preaching from Leviticus. I’m not sure what Bell taught back then, but now it appears his understanding of sacrifice is almost entirely negative. Sacrifice in the ancient world (and he fails to distinguish between Israel and other nations) meant “Offer something, show that you’re serious, make amends, find favor, and then hope that was enough to get what you needed” (124). Sacrifice is a kind of plea bargain, not a substitution.

Consequently, Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was a generic doing-away of all sacrifices. It means “no more wondering if the gods were pleased with you and or ready to strike you down” (125). Notice, Bell does not say that Jesus’ death appeased the anger of God/gods, only that his sacrifice shows us we don’t have to wonder any more if the gods are angry. Sacrifice, whether in the Old Testament or on the cross, is not about loving divine self-substitution, but the divine manifestation of love already present in the world, a love whose only obstacle is our ignorance of it and unwillingness to receive it. For all the talk of social justice, there is apparently no need for God to receive his justice.

Bell categorically rejects any notion of penal substitution. It simply does not work in his system or with his view of God. “Let’s be very clear, then,” Bell states, “we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is the rescuer” (182). I see no place in Bell’s theology for Christ the curse-bearer (Gal. 3:13), or Christ wounded for our transgressions and crushed by God for our iniquities (Isa 53:5, 10), no place for the Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), no place for the Savior who was made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21), no place for the sorrowful suffering Servant who drank the bitter cup of God’s wrath for our sake (Mark 14:36).

In Bell’s theology, God is love, a love that never burns hot with anger and a love that cannot distinguish or discriminate. “Jesus’ story,” Bell says, “is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love and it is for everybody, everywhere” (1). Therefore, he reasons, “we cannot claim him to be ours any more than he’s anybody else’s” (152). This is tragic. It’s as if Bell wants every earthly father to love every child in the world in the exact same way. If you rob a father of his unique, specific, not-for-everyone love, you rob the children of their greatest treasure. It reminds me of the T-shirt,
“Jesus Loves You. Then Again He Loves Everybody.” There’s no good news in announcing that God loves everyone in the same way just because he wants to. The good news is that in love God sent his Son to live for our lives and die for our deaths, suffering the God-forsakenness we deserved so that we might call God our God and we who trust in Christ might be his children. The sad irony is that while Bell would very much like us to know the love of God, he has taken away the very thing in which God’s love is chiefly known: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

7. A Different God

At the very heart of this controversy, and one of the reasons the blogosphere exploded over this book, is that we really do have two different Gods. The stakes are that high. If Bell is right, then historic orthodoxy is toxic and terrible. But if the traditional view of heaven and hell are right, Bell is blaspheming. I do not use the word lightly, just like Bell probably chose “toxic” quite deliberately. Both sides cannot be right. As much as some voices in evangelicalism will suggest that we should all get along and learn from each other and listen for the Spirit speaking in our midst, the fact is we have two irreconcilable views of God. Here’s how Bell understands the traditional view of God:

Millions have been taught that if they don’t believe, if they don’t accept in the right way according to the person telling them the gospel, and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would insure that they would have no escape from an endless future of agony.

If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities. If there was an actual human dad who was that volatile, we would contact child protection services immediately.

If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like this could ever be trusted. Let alone be good.

Loving one moment, vicious the next. Kind and compassionate, only to become cruel and relentless in the blink of an eye.
Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die?

That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can’t bear it. No one can. . . . That God is terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable (173–75).

Of course, this is a horrible caricature that makes God seem capricious and vindictive. No one I know thinks God is loving one minute and cruel the next. But God is always holy. And holy love is not the same as unconditional affirmation. Holy love is more terrifying than even Bell thinks and more unbelievably merciful and free than Bell imagines.

Bell’s god is a small god, so bound by notions of radical free will that I wonder how Bell can be so confident God’s love will melt the hardest heart. If God’s grace is always, essentially, fundamentally, resistible (72, 103–4, 118–19), how do we know some sinners won’t suffer in their own hell for a million years?

Bell’s god may be all love, but it is a love rooted in our modern Western sensibilities more than careful biblical reflection. It is a love that threatens to swallow up God’s glory and holiness. But, you may reply, the Bible says God is love (1 John 4:16). True, but if you want to weigh divine attributes by sentence construction, you have to mention God is spirit (John 4:24), God is light (1 John 1:5), and God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). The verb “is” does not establish a priority of attributes. If anything, one might mention that the only thrice-repeated attribute is “holy, holy, holy.” And yet this is the one thing Bell’s god is not.

Having preached through Leviticus he should remember that holiness is the overarching theme. The sacrifices are a pleasing aroma in God’s nostrils because they satisfy his justice, making way for a holy God to dwell in the midst of an unholy people. That Christ’s sacrifice is the same pleasing aroma to God (Eph 5:2) undercuts Bell’s insistence that God did not need to rescue us from God.

It would be unfair to say Bell doesn’t believe in sin. He clearly does. But his vice lists are telling: war, rape, greed, injustice, violence, pride, division, exploitation, disgrace (36–37). In another place, he says that in heaven God will say “no” to oil spills, sexual assault on women, political leaders silencing by oppression, and people being stepped on by greedy institutions and corporations (37–38). These are real problems and throughout the book Bell mentions many real, heinous sins. But all of these sins are obvious to almost everyone in our culture, especially progressives. What’s missing is not only a full-orbed view of sins, but a deeper understanding of sin itself. In Bell’s telling of the story, there is no sense of the vertical dimension of our evil. Yes, Bell admits several times that we can resist or reject God’s love. But there’s never any discussion of the way we’ve offended God, no suggestion that ultimately all our failings are a failure to worship God as we should. God is not simply disappointed with our choices or angry for the way we judge others. He is angry at the way we judge him. He cannot stand to look upon our uncleanness. His nostrils flare at iniquity. He hates our ingratitude, our impurity, our God-complexes, our self-centeredness, our disobedience, our despising of his holy law. Only when we see God’s eye-covering holiness will we grasp the magnitude of our traitorous rebellion, and only then will we marvel at the incomprehensible love that purchased our deliverance on the cross.
Bell begins the book by noting how fed up he is with the traditional story about Jesus. He insists on telling a different story. And he does. His story, as I’ve noted before, is “first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love and it is for everybody, everywhere” (vii). On the right lips, this might possibly be a fine statement. But from Bell it signals a deviation from the Bible’s plotline. Look at God’s people in the garden, then kicked out of the garden; God’s people in the promised land, then booted out of the promised land; God’s people in the New Jerusalem, then the wicked and unbelieving locked outside the New Jerusalem. Trace this story from tabernacle to temple through the incarnation and Pentecost and the coming down of the new heaven and new earth and you will see that the Bible’s story is about how a holy God can possibly dwell among an unholy people. The good news of this story is not that God loves everybody everywhere and you just need to find Christ in the rocks all around you. The good news is that God over and over makes a way for his unholy people to dwell in his holy presence, and that all these ways were pointing to the one Way, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

At bottom, Bell’s vision of heaven and hell doesn’t work because his vision of God is false. I cannot imagine the angels singing “holy, holy, holy” or Isaiah crying out “woe is me” at the feet of Bell’s god. I see no place for divine wrath or divine justice in Bell’s theology. All our punishment, in this life and the next, is manmade. We get what we want and it makes our lives miserable, now and for a while in heaven. There is some truth to this. The pain of hell is our fault. But it’s also God’s doing. Hell is not what we make for ourselves or gladly choose. It’s what a holy God justly gives to those who exchange the truth of God for a lie. The bowls of wrath in Revelation are poured out by God; they are not swum in by sinners. The ten plagues were sent by God, they were not the product of some Egyptian spell gone wrong. God’s wrath burns against the impenitent and unbelieving; they do not walk into the fire by themselves.

Bell’s god is wholly passive toward sin. He hates some of it and says no to it in the next life, but he does not actively judge it. There’s no way to make sense of Nadab and Abihu or Perrez-Uzzah or Gehazi or Achan’s or Korah’s rebellion or the flood or the exodus or the Babylonian captivity or the preaching of John the Baptist or the visions of Revelation or the admonitions of Paul or the warnings of Hebrews or Calvary’s cross apart from a God who hates sin, judges sin, and pours out his wrath—sometimes now, always later—on the accursed things and peoples of this world. God is God and there is no hope for non-gods who want to be gods, except through the God-man who became a curse for us.

That’s bad news for some, and unfathomably good news for all those born again by the sovereign Spirit of God unto faith in Christ and life eternal.

**A Ξονέμον γ Πασορα Ποσπέριτ**

The tendency in theological controversy is to boil everything down to a conflict of personalities. This is the way the world understands disagreement. This is how the world sells controversy. It’s always politician versus politician or pastor versus pastor. But sometimes the disagreement is less about the men (or women) involved and more about the truth.
This is one of those instances.

I have not spent hours and hours on this review because I am out to get another pastor. I may be a sinner, but with four young children and a very full church schedule, I have no time for personal vendettas. No, this is not about a single author or a single church. This is about the truth, about how the rightness or wrongness of our theology can do tremendous help or tremendous harm to the people of God. This is about real people in East Lansing where I serve and real people an hour down the road in Grand Rapids where I grew up. This is about real people who have learned from Bell in the past and will be intrigued by his latest book, wondering if they should be confused, angered, or surprised to hear that hell is not what they’ve been told.

No doubt, Rob Bell writes as a pastor who wants to care for people struggling with the doctrine of hell. I, too, write as a pastor. And as a pastor I know that Love Wins means God’s people lose. In the world of Love Wins, my congregation should not sing “In Christ Alone” because they cannot not believe, “There on the cross where Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.” They would not belt out “Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood.” No place for “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted” with its confession, “the deepest stroke that pierced him was the stroke that Justice gave.” The jubilation of “No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine!” is muted in Love Wins. The bad news of our wrath-deserving wretchedness is so absent that the good news of God’s wrath-bearing Substitute cannot sing in our hearts. When God is shrunk down to fit our cultural constraints, the cross is diminished. And whenever the cross is diminished we pain the hearts of God’s people and rob them of their joy.

Just as damaging is the impact of Love Wins on the nonbeliever or the wayward former churchgoer. Instead of summoning sinners to the cross that they might flee the wrath to come and know the satisfaction of so great a salvation, Love Wins assures people that everyone’s eternity ends up as heaven eventually. The second chances are good not just for this life, but for the next. And what if they aren’t? What if Jesus says on the day of judgment, “Depart from me, I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23)? What if at the end of the age the wicked and unbelieving cry out, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16)? What if outside the walls of the New Jerusalem “are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev. 22:15)? What if there really is only one name “under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)? And what if the wrath of God really remains on those who do not believe in the Son (John 3:18, 36)?

If Love Wins is wrong—if the theology departs from the apostolic good deposit, if the biblical reasoning falls short in a hundred places, if the god of Love Wins and the gospel of Love Wins are profoundly mistaken—if all this is true, then what damage has been done to the souls of men and women?

Bad theology hurts real people. So of all the questions raised in the book, the most important question every reader must answer is this: is it true? Whatever you think of all the personalities involved on whatever side of the debate, that’s the one question that cannot be ignored. Is Love Wins true to the word of God? That’s
the issue. Open a Bible, pray to God, listen to the faithful Christians of the past 2000 years, and answer the question for yourself.

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REVIEWS


Reviewed by Michael J. Vlach, Professor of Theology.

Editors G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson offer Bible students a massive and important work with their 1,239-page project, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament. This book is one of the most detailed and serious discussions of New Testament (NT) use of the Old Testament (OT) ever compiled. According to the editors, this book took nearly a decade to be completed (vii), which is not surprising considering the technical nature of this work and the number of scholars compiled to complete it. Eighteen scholars (including Beale and Carson) were asked to address various books of the NT and how these sections cited the OT. To maintain consistency in the book, all contributors were asked to address six separate questions:

1. What is the NT context of the citation or allusion?
2. What is the OT context from which the quotation or allusion is drawn?
3. How is the OT quotation or source handled in the literature of Second Temple Judaism?
4. What textual factors must be borne in mind in understanding a use of the OT?
5. How is the NT using or appealing to the OT?
6. To what theological use does the NT writer put the OT quotation or allusion?

Significantly, the editors state in the Introduction that this book is not about a particular theory of how the NT uses the OT. It is not an attempt to solve whether the NT writers are primarily using the OT contextually or not. It does not choose sides in the debate over how the NT uses the OT. It does not try to solve whether the NT writers were relying upon hermeneutical principles of Second Temple Judaism or not. If a student is looking for answers to those issues he or she
may be disappointed. At times, the individual contributors may address some of those things, but the editors clearly state that addressing those issues was not their goal.

The contributors are asked to directly address all the quotations and probable allusions to the OT found in the NT. This plays into the book’s greatest strength which is detailed analysis of all explicit quotations and allusions to the OT in the NT. As with any book that has many contributors, the quality of the book will vary although the scholarship is very good across the board. This is not a book that most will want to read cover to cover since it functions more as a reference book and is very technical in the biblical languages. This reviewer has been doing recent studies in Matthew, Hebrews, and Revelation and has targeted the comments of Craig L. Blomberg (Matthew), George H. Guthrie (Hebrews), and G. K. Beale/Sean McDonough (Revelation).

The book will be especially helpful for pastors and students who come across many quotations of the OT as they study the NT books. The editors have a noble goal: “If this volume helps some scholars and preachers to think more coherently about the Bible and teach ‘the whole counsel of God’ with greater understanding, depth, reverence, and edification for fellow believers, contributors and editors alike will happily conclude that the thousands of hours invested in this book were a very small price to pay” (viii). This hope of the editors should be realized.

The eighteen contributors appear to be a mix of amillennialists and historic premillennialists. This reviewer was disappointed that no dispensationalist was a contributor. Yet, I am mostly positive about this work and believe it has a place on the shelf of pastors and teachers.


Reviewed by Alex D. Montoya, Professor of Pastoral Ministry.

*Christians at the Border* is an attempt to make sense of the current immigration crises in America and help the Christian church develop a biblical approach at dealing with this thorny issue. The author, M. Daniel Carroll R., is Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary and adjunct professor at El Seminario Teologico Centroamericano in Guatemala City, Guatemala. The author is himself a son of a Guatemalan mother and an American father, and thus can speak on behalf of both worlds.

The author’s intent is “to try to move Christians to reconsider their starting point in the immigration debate. Too often discussions default to the passionate ideological arguments, economic wrangling, or racial sentiments that dominate national discourse…This book is a modest attempt to help remedy that shortcoming. It is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. Rather, it is designed as a primer for a more biblically and theologically informed approach to the topic” (19–20).
In setting the background for the book, the author argues for the term *Hispanic* to identify the various groups of immigrants and groups coming from Latin America. He also prefers the term *undocumented immigrants* over *illegal aliens* when speaking of that group of Hispanics that has immigrated to America and is the focal point of the political discussion.

The author divides the book into five chapters. In the first he presents the history of Hispanic immigration, giving a summary of the major movements in American history. He enlightens the reader by showing how the immigration problem came into existence, and also the various contradictory and ineffective ways the government has addressed it. He does not propose a political solution to the problem.

The second and third chapters deal with the Old Testament treatment of immigrants, aliens, and sojourners, dealing first with biblical examples of immigrants in the history of God’s people, and then giving the biblical instructions in the Law concerning the treatment of sojourners, and the behavior of sojourners in a foreign land. The fourth chapter is the New Testament teaching concerning the treatment of immigrants; although here, the author confesses that there is not much that is said. He draws some parallels from our Lord’s treatment of Samaritans as a way in which the church is to treat the immigrant.

The author leaves the discussion from Romans 13 to the end, arguing that the church should consider the non-legal matters before resting on the application of the law to the immigration issue. He seems to argue that if one views the immigration law as unreasonable and against Christian principles, that one has the right to disobey it. Carroll tempers any gross misunderstanding by stating, “Before this statement raises all kinds of alarm, let me make it very clear that I am not advocating civil disobedience on a large scale….It is a narrow understanding of the nature of law and the Christian’s relationship to human government that I question” (132).

The final chapter “Where Do We Go From Here?” offers a general appeal to Christians to begin to look at the immigration issue from a biblical perspective. The author asserts, “Christians at the Border, above all else strives to motivate believers of the majority culture and Hispanics to begin thinking, talking, and acting as Christians in regard to immigration” (138). This reviewer concurs that the book does move the Christian reader to begin to consider Scripture as the basis by which to assess the immigration problem and to use Scripture as the basis for a solution.


Reviewed by Gregg L. Frazer, Professor of History, The Master’s College.

*Christian America?* offers four competing answers to the question of whether America was founded as a Christian nation. Such books of this nature are often the work of four authors and are, as a result, often uneven in quality. Such is the case with *Christian America?*
David Barton, the “guru” of Christian America advocates, begins the book with his case for America being “distinctively Christian.” City University of New York professor Jonathan Sassi follows with his argument for America being “religious, eclectic, and secular.” William Henard, a pastor and professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, suggests that America is “essentially Christian.” The fourth view is offered by Darryl Cornett, a pastor and the book’s editor. He maintains that America’s founding was “partly Christian.” As is typical of “four views” books, after each view is presented, the other three contributors respond with comments regarding the argument, the evidence, and/or the presentation.

Barton begins by offering a five-part definition of a “Christian nation”; then he marches the reader through what he calls “eight categories of irrefutable historical documentation proving that America was deliberately formed, and continued to operate as a Christian nation” (39). The problems are that his definition is idiosyncratic and conveniently contrived, and his documentation is neither irrefutable nor does it prove what he claims.

In defining “Christian nation,” Barton takes what all would identify as characteristics of America and makes them the defining elements, thus trying to win the debate by defining the terms in a way that no one else would. He does not use the Bible to form his definition or even to demonstrate that there can be such a thing as a Christian nation. Under his definition, neither the Puritan commonwealth nor the Mosaic commonwealth nor the millennial kingdom would qualify as a Christian nation, but America, being America, does.

Though his evidence is far from “irrefutable,” it overall constitutes a very typical model of the Christian America case. Even if I were to devote the rest of this review to Barton’s evidence, there is not nearly enough space to point out all of the problems—certainly not to delve into all eight of his categories of evidence—so a few highlights must suffice to illustrate extensive evidential issues.

Ironically, the piece begins with two standard Barton tactics that are very problematic. He opens with a sliced-up quote from John Adams, improperly using ellipses to change or obscure the meaning of the original statement. This tactic is a Barton favorite. A critical part of Barton’s “irrefutable” evidence consists of quotes from endless numbers of individuals in favor of Christianity, but their opinions are not helpful unless we know what they meant by the term. Removing the quotes from their context in order to serve his argument only obscures the search for truth. Barton employs another of his standard tactics in the second paragraph where he quotes—as a definitive authority on the intent of the Founders—a relatively obscure individual who was not yet born in 1789, giving his own opinion more than fifty years later. This is an example of what Barton considers a “primary” source.

In general, Barton attempts to impress the ignorant and to intimidate opponents with a deluge of endnotes—385 in this essay. Dozens—perhaps hundreds—of the references are irrelevant to the issue at hand and most of the rest seek to establish matters which are not in dispute, such as the fact that the early Puritans sought to create a godly society or that some people living in the founding era self-identified as Christians.

In his superficial approach, Barton routinely quotes ministers as evidence of Christian and biblical influence on the Revolution without investigating whether
they were, in fact, Christians making biblical arguments. Two of his favorites, Jonathan Mayhew and Charles Chauncy, denied the fundamentals of the faith and preached salvation by works and universalism. Their arguments in favor of revolution were based on rationalism, not the Bible or Christian faith. Using these ministers as representative of Christianity or a biblical approach is like using John Shelby Spong or Deepak Chopra for that purpose.

Blatant errors on Barton’s part include: a) his apparent ignorance of the abysmal treatment of blacks, Native Americans, dissenters, and loyalists; b) improper use of “framer”; c) conflating the eighteenth-century notion of “freedom of conscience” and the biblical meaning of “conscience”; and d) treating the words “religious” and “Christian” as synonymous.

Ultimately, Barton lays down an impressive smoke screen of “historical documentation,” but his presentation is missing a smoking gun. None of the Founders said that they “deliberately formed” America as a Christian nation and the founding documents certainly did not so. As one of the other authors observed in his response to Barton’s essay, David Barton is an apologist, not a historian—and it shows in his contribution to *Christian America*.

In his essay, Jonathan Sassi contends that the American founding was “religious, eclectic, and secular.” He rightly focuses on the “last quarter of the eighteenth century” when the Revolution occurred and the United States was established. Sassi explains that centering attention on the early colonial period (as Christian America advocates do) “would obscure the tremendous changes that took place over the first century and a half of the colonial period and impose a proleptic unity over the colonies’ diverse histories” (103). This is a crucial point, critical to a proper understanding of this issue.

Sassi effectively traces the religious diversity, eclecticism, and spirit of toleration which characterized eighteenth-century America and suggests that such religious pluralism “confirmed the necessity that governments confine themselves to secular matters” (106). He also discusses the fact that many of the Founders mixed Enlightenment rationalism with religious belief. So, while they were not irreligious, they were not motivated predominately by Christian faith.

Sassi contends that the causes of the American Revolution were “primarily secular ones” and that religious factors “played only a subsidiary role” (116–17). He importantly notes that there was no unified position among Christians; some were “patriots,” but many were loyalists or even pacifists. Sassi observes that “the Continental Congress took a largely hands-off approach to religious matters, leaving them to the several states” (129) and that the Constitution did fundamentally the same thing. He calls the Constitution “a perfectly secular text for the founding of the new nation” (130). Sassi’s contribution reflects solid scholarship and mostly sound reasoning. However, he makes a better case for religious eclecticism than the secular aspect of his view.

Henard’s essay, supposedly representing a third view, begs the question as to why it was even included. His position, that the founding was “essentially Christian,” is nearly identical to that of Barton. One is forced to wonder whether it was included merely to complete a foursome. Henard’s argument only makes matters worse. One of the other authors charitably commented that an entire section of the essay is “not particularly helpful” (256). To put it more bluntly,
much of Henard’s contribution is irrelevant and unnecessary. Extensive biographies of various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century individuals consume 65 of the 72 pages; but in so doing tell us nothing of consequence about the founding of America. He finally gets to some ideas, but as another responder observes: “he never ties any of them to the Revolutionary era or the founding of the United States beyond mere assertion” (251). Henard makes broad claims without any support, while assuring us that “one can surmise” or “one can imagine.” A reader skipping this section will miss little of importance.

The final essay is the gem in the collection. Cornett effectively presents the view that America’s founding was “partly Christian.” His plainly stated thesis is: “Although the people who eventually became the United States of America came from a culturally Christian context, the primary shaping ideology of the Revolutionary Period was that of the European Enlightenment” (265). His essay persuasively supports that thesis.

Cornett’s is the one essay which defines terms biblically and in which biblical principles are addressed, such as the inappropriateness of rebellion by a Christian. The historical evidence is solid and the train of argument compelling. He gets right to the heart of the issue regarding the founding documents by pointing out that the language of the Declaration can be embraced by Christians, Deists, and Unitarians alike; and that the Constitution contains “not a hint of desire in bringing glory to God or to advance Christianity in the society” (297). He pointedly asks: “If the Founders drafted the Constitution as a Christian document, then why conceal the fact by excluding clear Christian language” (325n)?

One might read Christian America? to find a typical case for the Christian America thesis or a serviceable case for the secular America thesis. Those interested in the truth should read it for the concluding essay. Since readers of this journal are particularly interested in theology, I strongly recommend The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders: Reason, Revelation, Revolution by Gregg L. Frazer (Univ. of Kansas Press, 2012) and In God We Don’t Trust by David Bercot (Scroll Publishing, 2011). Both books address the issue from sound historical and theological perspectives.


Reviewed by Dennis M. Swanson, Director of the Seminary Library and Director of Academic Assessment.

The issues in the current news from economics to the forthcoming presidential election; from the debate about health care to the issues of war, violence, and revolution around the world, all have a common thread—at their core lays a question of ethics. Even how those issues are confronted: from those who would “occupy” to those who would take up arms; working within the established socio-economic-politico structures or abandoning those structures and creating new ones; the chosen response is driven by ethical considerations.

The challenge of applying Scripture to ethical issues is considerable. In his Introduction, Joel B. Green, the general editor, states that, “for all the scholarly
attention to the relation of Scripture and ethics, it remains a labyrinth” (1). Differences in one’s theological framework, one’s view of Scripture, and the varying exegetical/hermeneutical options, will all, often, lead to a differing ethical conclusion. Green acknowledges this point and states,

The *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* does not pretend to resolve all of these problems but rather serves to codify the issues and to identify ways in which they are being acknowledged and addressed in contemporary discussion… It may be too much to hope that this dictionary will provide a way out of the labyrinth, but it aims to provide a little light on the path (2).

Green, Professor of New Testament and Associate Dean for the Center for Advanced Theological Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, demonstrates a skillful editorial hand, and the overall structure of the work (from the introductory articles, to the entries themselves, to useful indexes) cannot be faulted at any level. The introductory articles (“Ethics in Scripture” by Allen Verhey, 5–11; “Scripture in Ethics: A History,” by Charles H. Cosgrove, 13–25; and “Scripture in Ethics: Methodological Issues,” by Bruce C. Birch, 27–34) are essential reading if one is to use this volume to its full profit. Specifically, Birch’s section “The Nature of Biblical Authority” (31–32) will be of particular interest as his views are pervasive in the subsequent entries. He details his position clearly and cogently, but those holding to an inerrantist or even a maximalist position of Scripture will likely not be enthusiastic. Birch states,

The Christian moral life must include the Bible and its interpretative traditions as authoritative in some manner; otherwise, there is no basis on which to label our ethics as Christian. However, in Christian ethics, the Bible, though always primary, is never self-sufficient. The Bible cannot be the sole source of authoritative influence, and thus is never the exclusive authority for the moral life (31).

By and large the entries in this volume reflect this view of Scripture. One other over-arching criticism is that relative lack of contributors from a more conservative theological and/or socio-political and economic perspective. The reader is left with the notion that more conservative writers have made little or no contribution in the area of the application of Scripture to ethics.

The entries are well-written and obviously well-researched (each entry has a good bibliography and the longer entries are often accompanied by a significant one). The “see also” listings at the end of most entries are extremely helpful and lend cohesion to the volume. The entry titles are always clear and demonstrate an experienced hand in proper headings.

The less than “conservative” view of Scripture, generally presented in the entries, is also combined with a generally “left of center” socio-political perspective as well. “Capitalism” (115–17) is not viewed favorably (see also, “Wealth”, 827–31 and “Welfare State,” 831–33), but rather “Distributism” is generally portrayed as the Christian ideal; although there is no entry for this “third way” of economic theory (nor, sadly an entry for either G. K. Chesterton or Hillarie Belloc who
advanced this theory). Oddly, there is also no entry for “Socialism” or “Christian Socialism,” which was a significant movement and was the precursor to the “Social Gospel” (inexplicably there is no entry for this topic either). “Capital Punishment” (118–20), is regarded as being rejected by Christ and a societal relic of a past age. “Egalitarianism” (270–71) is viewed as the Scriptural ideal, although the balance of the volume would have been better served with an entry on complementarianism. While the entry on “Headship” (349–50) has an obligatory reference to the complementarian scholar Wayne Grudem and wisely refrains from any reference to the works of Catherine C. Kroeger in the bibliography, the text itself is a rather one-sided presentation in favor of the egalitarian interpretation. The entry on “Abortion” (35–37) is largely an exercise in circumlocution, failing to even mention the issues of creationism and traducianism, and in the end saying essentially nothing of value or interest. One might also quibble on some definitional points presented in “Evangelicalism” (287–88) and “Evangelical Ethics” (284–87). And some will certainly be surprised to see Greg Bahnsen and Rousas Rushdoony identified as “Fundamentalists” (319–20). The entry on “Eschatology and Ethics” (276–79) is exceptionally disappointing in that it is devoid of any discussion of futurism or any other millennial constructs as though one’s view of the millennium has no consequence to corporate or individual ethical outworking.

However, despite these criticisms, which given the stated theological orientation of the work should not be unanticipated, the overwhelming number of entries are excellent and thought provoking (even if one disagrees in terms of theology or praxis). The entry on “Divination and Magic” (238–42) by Bill T. Arnold is excellent. At first glance, the entry, “Healthcare Systems in Scripture” (358–60) might seem anachronistic, but Green nonetheless makes an excellent contribution. “Ecological Ethics” (255–60), is detailed and stimulating. The entry on “Reformed Ethics” (661–64), and its discussion on the contribution of John Calvin (1509–64) is excellent. Richard N. Longnecker on “Resurrection” (677–80) might be the most well-developed entry from a scriptural viewpoint. Other notable entries are “Free-Will and Determinism” (313–15); “Leadership and Leadership Ethics” (475–77); “Just War Theory,” (445–49); and “Public Theology and Ethics” (646–49).

There are also entries for each of the books of the Bible designed to “focus on the ethics of each book of the Bible and on the possible significance of each book for contemporary Christian ethics” (3). When read for what they are intended to accomplish, these entries are generally helpful. There are some entries that are a tad mystifying. The entry on “Information Technology” (407–09) is so randomly vague and largely self evident that it really makes no advancement, although it does acknowledge that there is no scriptural instruction on the subject at all.

Our overarching criticism of this work is the general lack of balance. The perspectives of traditional Protestant liberalism and Catholicism dominate this work. More conservative viewpoints, both in terms of Scripture and larger social, political, and economic viewpoints are not only absent as entries, but largely ignored even as a point of interaction. That being said, this work fills a void in the arena of theological reference, bringing topics of ethical importance into a single volume. It brings together a significant amount of research and deals with topics that are often excluded from other reference works.

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

In 2000 Kregel released John Hannah’s *The Kregel Pictorial Guide to Church History* to begin what is now a five-part series. That introductory volume presents a wide sweep of the major developments from the early church, which he divides as AD 33–500, up through the final chapter entitled “The Future of the Church.” In volume 5 of this series Hannah combines chapters four and five of the first book, “The Late Modern Church” (parts I and II), to serve as the framework of this present volume. I would recommend having both books present, if possible, when you read this newest volume because Hannah presents much information regarding the negative influence of the Enlightenment and secular philosophy. And having both volumes will give you a good idea of the “bigger picture” God was and is doing. The first book also contains a foldout chart of church and secular philosophy that is useful.

Even though it is presented as a pictorial guide, I was amazed by how much valuable information this book contains. I went through seminary, but I do not consider myself a good enough church historian to teach a class on church history. I am more in the category of “educated layman” as it relates to this topic. I was a Bible Exposition major all throughout seminary, so some of these matters in philosophy and their harmful effects were good reviews for me. Many may be in my situation, or for many, this will be entirely new information. Hannah superbly weaves the religious and secular histories through the book giving the reader many people and events to explore elsewhere in more detail, if they desire. Like a wounded bird that slowly circles downward, Hannah notes the disastrous effects these pagan teachings had on society in general. And also he discusses how these ultimately infiltrated and continually harmed the church. In 1 John 4:1–3 Christians are warned: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.” “The Spirit of the Antichrist” best describes so much of what has happened in history past and is gaining momentum in these last days. Nothing that occurs today simply takes place; all connects with history past, especially with the purposeful rejection of God’s propositional truth.

In this edition, Hannah focuses much on “The Modern Age” and how it affects modern thinking, but he notes, “The Modern Age as an era is difficult to define” (4). He dates the early modern period from 1500–1650 and sees it rooted in the late medieval Renaissance and characterized by a break with their predecessors when they set human reason over the authority of Scripture. Significant in this “new perspective” was the basis for much of what is occurring throughout the world including many of the same catchphrases popular today: “In the new outlook, philosophy had precedence over theology, the natural sciences and natural
philosophy over grace, and reason over faith. Human rights displaced religious creed in a progressively Christless, secularized worldview” (5). Further, “The Enlightenment was a death sentence for Christian culture dominance in the Western nations” (5).

In a section of the book entitled “The Enlightenment and the Rise of Skepticism,” the downward trend away from true biblical truth became more prevalent because of the replacement of core foundations: “The Age of Reason, as the Enlightenment is sometimes called, came about through a confluence of three phenomena: (1) the emergence of secularized philosophy; (2) the discrediting of revelation and tradition as sources of authority, and (3) advances in the natural sciences” (6). Further, “The world no longer was a mysterious place controlled by an incomprehensible God. Its complexity was governed by intelligible laws. Understanding those laws, humankind could engineer a glorious future. Ancient truths, such as the deformity of human sin, gave way to confidence that education would quiet the beastly side of human nature” (6). Fast forward this four to five centuries and the end result is the same core teachings of the Secular Progressive worldwide movement; indeed of truth Eccl 1:9 summarizes perfectly: “That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun.”

Hannah incorporates in his book how Deism became part of the logical digression downward as “an isthmus connecting the philosophical continents of theism and atheism. Like its close cousin, Unitarianism, it was designed to rescue religion from its out-of-date ideas,” such as “the divine Trinity, deity of Christ, divine justice, moral inability, and blood atonement were set aside as ridiculous and unneeded” (8). Under these parameters Deists sought to find the God whom they had already rejected. Later in a section entitled “The Rise of European Liberalism and Materialism,” we see where these picked up many of the previous denouncements of God and truth and added to them instead a humanistic view, however, that will manifest itself completely during the Tribulation. From their perception, “An impersonal force in the universe, the Deist, is pushing the human race forward to perfection” (15). From God’s perspective, 2 Thess 2:11–12 reveals where such rebellion is “progressing” to: “And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.” One can see how this unified worldwide view of attaining human perfection—even deity within themselves for some—only germinates in what has been sown centuries before.

Hannah’s Pictorial History can be helpful in various settings. For beginners or for youth groups who are godly, this is a tremendously helpful tool in seeing “the big picture.” As I read and wrote this review, I would turn on the news and see evidence of the downward spiral away from God and the increasingly growing trends toward a perfected, one-world society. Also, depending on the interest, many subsidiary studies can emerge from this book. Often Hannah will write a paragraph on a particular group or person; entire books have been written on virtually all of these. So for those who want to dig deeper, this can be a good launching pad for additional and deeper studies. Further, especially when coupled with Hannah’s first book, these can be a good quick reference (especially the
historical chart included in the first volume). As sad as it is to read the spiritual
decline as God and His Word are repeatedly and purposefully rejected, these books
also point to God actively working in bringing about different ministries around the
world. Indeed the wheat and the tares currently do grow side by side (Matt 13:30).
Finally, this could make a good seven-week (or longer) overview course in “how
things got to be the way things are” as the lost world races toward the revelation of
the man of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3–4) and his worldwide dominion that includes
Satan’s authority (Revelation 13), while the church looks for “the blessed hope and
the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Tit 2:13), as
we see both days “drawing near” (Heb 10:25).

Timothy Paul Jones, David Gundersen, and Benjamin Galan. *Rose Guide to End-
$19.99.

Reviewed by Abner T. Chou, Associate Professor of Bible, The Master’s College.

Timothy Paul Jones is Associate Professor of Leadership and Church
Ministry at Southern Baptist Seminary in Kentucky. He has written several works
including *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s
“Misquoting Jesus”* (IVP, 2007) and *The Da Vinci Codebreaker: An Easy-to-Use
Fact Checker for Truth Seekers* (Bethany House, 2006). His most recent work (co-
authored with Benjamin Galan and David Gundersen, M.Div. and Th.M. graduate
of The Master’s Seminary) brings clarity to the issues in eschatology, a subject ripe
with complexities and debate.

The *Rose Guide to End-Times Prophecy* serves as a textbook on
eschatology. As such, it is far more thorough than typical viewpoint books which
focus only on particular topics (e.g., interpretation of Revelation or the views of the
millennium). Most refreshing is the irenic tone in discussing the information, as
well as a distinct focus on producing a “deeper recognition of the majesty and
sovereignty of Jesus in all of life—including the end of time” (6).

The physical layout of the book aids in presenting complex information in
an accessible fashion. The pages contain pictures, diagrams, schematics, and
comparison charts to visually illustrate and synthesize the data. They are in color,
which helps in differentiating categories of information (e.g., views, biblical books,
and time periods). This makes the book an excellent tool for quick reference and
handouts. However, an index of tables/charts where the reader can locate these
diagrams is noticeably absent. Likewise, a scriptural index is also missing. Even
though there is a topical index, it does not provide pinpoint accuracy of locating the
desired information. Thus, one has to guess or recall where a table would be in the
book. This lack hampers the ability of the book to be a quick reference guide.

In evaluating the content of the book, we ought to ask two major
questions. First, does the book accomplish its purpose to direct the readers to seeing
the glory of Christ and Christian devotion? Second, how fairly, clearly, accurately,
and comprehensively does the book present the various viewpoints?
In answering the first question, Johnson solidly connects eschatology and practical theology. He begins by discussing the dangerous extremes of eschatological speculation and cynicism. To remedy these incorrect attitudes, the writer reminds his audience that eschatology can display the glory of Christ. Jesus talks about eschatology and demands His disciples to watch for His return (cf. Matt 24:42). That watchfulness does not mean going into wild conjecture but rather to anticipate and be ready for His coming through holiness and an eager yearning for God to display His glory (Matt 25:1–13; Rom 8:18–23; 2 Pet 3:11). The writer’s tone assuages those who may perceive that eschatology is just for argumentative people.

The author continues his emphasis on the devotional implications of eschatology at the end of each major section. In his concluding remarks on eschatology in the Old Testament, Johnson reminds his readers that God will fulfill His Word (173). For the New Testament, the writer exhorts his audience to see the definitive victory of Christ and His supremacy over all creation (262). Johnson even gives practical insights of each eschatological viewpoint. Amillennialism reminds us of Christ’s victory at the cross and resurrection (289). Postmillennialism champions the power of the gospel in this world (301). Dispensational Premillennialism teaches us to handle God’s Word carefully and to preach the gospel in the current time (318). Historical Premillennialism reiterates that God will continue to purify His people through suffering (334). Overall, the book points people to the reality that eschatology is important and impacts one’s walk with Christ.

Moving to the second question, Johnson is clear, accurate, and comprehensive in his presentation of views. At times, one may quibble with some of his wording that seems to be reductionistic and slightly misleading. For instance, he characterizes Dispensationalism as having two purposes and two peoples whereas Historical Premillennialism has a distinctive of a “singular plan” (329). While it is true that Dispensationalism asserts a distinction between church and Israel, does that mean that those two entities fall outside of a single plan? Such disagreements over word choice are minor in this reviewer’s mind. The book provides working definitions that sum up viewpoints with clarity that a layperson can easily grasp.

The book’s structure attests to its comprehensive scope. It covers hermeneutics, genre, Old Testament passages, New Testament passages, and concludes with a synthesis of eschatological viewpoints. Johnson defines four eschatological views (Amillennial, Postmillennial, Dispensational Premillennial, and Historical Premillennial), three theological systems (Dispensationalism, Covenantalism, and New Covenantalism), and four hermeneutical methods (Futurist, Preterist, Idealist, and Historicism). He traces how the different views/theological systems/hermeneutical systems interact with various biblical passages. The approach itself is helpful. It shows how different perspectives interpret specific texts. Conversely, the writer rapidly switches between all of these terms in his discussions and charts/tables. He talks about the covenantal viewpoint of the Abrahamic Covenant (99) but then discusses an amillennial position concerning the Davidic Kingdom (102). These shifts can be overwhelming and may provide a disjointed reading/learning experience. The reader can easily be confused
in correlating differing terms with their respective positions. It would be far simpler to choose one set of terms (e.g., the three theological systems) consistently used throughout the book so that each position could be easily traced.

Johnson’s discussion on hermeneutics and genre is standard. He argues for the primacy of sensus literalis but acknowledges that certain eschatological passages have symbolism deriving from apocalyptic literature. What stood out was his substantial attention on the Old Testament. That particularly delights this reviewer since eschatological discussions often interact primarily with New Testament texts and make the Old Testament secondary. By page count, the book interacts with both sections of Scripture equally (approximately one hundred pages a piece).

In the Old Testament section, the book surveys through redemptive history showing the promise in the Garden (Gen 3:15) to the Exile. Within this, the book tackles a plethora of passages and issues. It includes discussions on Abrahamic and Davidic Covenant, Daniel’s seventy weeks, Day of the Lord, and Ezekiel’s temple. It even covers more detailed and nuanced issues such as how the phrases fit together in Daniel’s seventy weeks based upon Hebrew accents. The breadth and depth of discussion is excellent.

Johnson presents the various viewpoints on these matters accurately. For example, Dispensationalism understands that the Abrahamic promises dictate that the nation of Israel will possess the land in the end times exactly as Gen 12:2–3 stipulates (57–58). Covenantalists believe that the church inherits the Abrahamic promises spiritually (59). The Abrahamic promise of land might have been fulfilled in the days of Joshua or Solomon (60). Alternatively, according to Covenantalists, Israel may have forfeited these promises by their rejection of Jesus (60). New Covenantalism views that the Abrahamic promises were a “temporary picture of what God would provide in Jesus” (100). This view argues that the land, seed, and blessings promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are really predicting the fullness of the people of God in Christ.

The book then moves to the discussion on the New Testament. It primarily covers the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation. The epistles receive some attention (254). The reviewer wished for more interaction with those texts (e.g., Rom 9–11; 1 Thess 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess 2:1–16; 2 Pet 3:8–16).

Johnson continues to show how different theological systems interpret elements of the New Testament passages. He provides detailed descriptions of each of these views as they interpret each verse of Matt 24:1–35 (202–20). He rightly assesses that Premillennialists view the Olivet Discourse as primarily future with a possible exception of Luke 21:20–24 (200). Amillennialists and Postmillennialists tend to view that Jesus’ discourse predicts AD 70 (201).

His discussion of Revelation is equally as detailed. Johnson provides helpful charts describing the various viewpoints on the various characters in the book (e.g., the twenty-four elders and the beast who comes from the sea). He again reports the various views accurately and clearly. The book then provides another chart summarizing how the various interpretations (i.e., Futurist, Historicism, Idealist, and Preterist) of Revelation view every chapter of the book.

In the final part of the book, Johnson provides a synthesis of Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Dispensational Premillennialism, and Historic
Premillennialism. This is useful since the presentation thus far has not been systematic but rather has examined the interpretation of each viewpoint on particular passages. At times, some of these discussions appear to be reductionistic (as mentioned above). Nevertheless, the book overall presents the various viewpoints within each system accurately.

On that note, Johnson’s work accomplishes his tasks. He lays out a vast amount of information clearly and fairly in order to show people how eschatology exalts Jesus Christ. This reviewer particularly appreciated the side-by-side comparisons of how different systems interpret various parts of Scripture. Although I have expressed some reservations with his presentation, coverage, and wording, I can commend the book for higher Christian education and personal reference.


Reviewed by Dennis M. Swanson, Director of the Seminary Library and Director of Academic Assessment.

At the end of any theological discussion, the foundational issue will always come down to the single subject of hermeneutics; that is how is the biblical text to be interpreted and thus viewed in a theological construct and then applied in a meaningful way to life? Despite the fundamental importance of hermeneutics, useful texts are still somewhat scarce (particularly from an inerrantist perspective on the Bible). The work by Köstenberger and Patterson ably fills that scarcity with this new volume.

The book is designed as a classroom text. At the end of each chapter there is a set of “Guidelines” which serve as a set of “bullet points” for the material just presented: “Key Words,” “Study Questions,” “Assignments,” and a generally thorough “Bibliography” of works on the chapters subject. At the end of the work there is a useful set of indexes and two appendices: “Building a Biblical Studies Library” and a “Glossary” of common terms used throughout the book. Both appendices are useful and the section on “Building a Biblical Studies Library” makes recommendations for a basic library, covering all the areas of biblical and theological studies as well as a series of recommended commentaries on each book of the Bible. The recommendations are thorough, and although one might question the inclusion and exclusion of a title here and there, it is a thoughtful and scholarly compilation. Beyond this the authors provide their email addresses and welcome “questions, comments, or suggestions for improvement” (29). They also provide a link to the resources not contained in the book, including a syllabus shell, chapter quizzes and Power Point slides (ibid). One minor criticism is that the lengthy outline of the book (31–47) would have been much more useful if the page numbers of the book had been connected to the outline sections.

The opening chapter presents an overview of the history of biblical interpretation and then details the “triad” schema that forms the foundation for the
rest of the book. There is also a helpful discussion of the “character” requirements for the interpreter of Scripture (62–65).

The authors build their hermeneutical method around the triad of History, Literature and Theology, and the chapters are built around those themes. Those looking for the “traditional” hermeneutical labels (e.g., “Grammatical-Historical or Redemptive-Historical,” etc.) will be disappointed. Those labels are generally ignored and they simply present and defend their approach. In comparing their work to others in their field the author’s note:

This is now at least the third geometric figure used in a hermeneutical context. First came the hermeneutical circle (the notion that one’s understanding of a text in its entirety provides the proper framework for understanding the individual parts and vice versa). Then came the hermeneutical spiral (the notion that “biblical interpretation entails a spiral from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization or significance in the church today”). Now, at long last, comes the hermeneutical triad: the proposal that history, literature, and theology form the proper grid for biblical interpretation (23).

In explaining their methodology the authors also point out,

What is more we don’t start out pretending the Bible is just like any other book, because we don’t believe it is. Rather our purpose here is not to study just any form of human communication; our purpose is to study the Bible—the inerrant, inspired Word of God. This conviction governs our presentation from the very outset and it is maintained throughout the entire volume (26).

Around the triad, the authors present a seven-step outline:

- Step One: Preparation
- Step Two: History
- Step Three: Literature: Canon
- Step Four: Literature: Genre
- Step Five: Literature: Language
- Step Six: Theology
- Step Seven: Application and Proclamation

Each “step” is explained in detail and the authors (Patterson in the OT and Köstenberger in the NT) present “Sample” exegesis on particular passages to demonstrate an end result (e.g., The Book of Nahum [344–45]; Mark 15:33–41 [407–11]; Rev 11:1–13 [559–63]). The text is highly readable and the authors provide a wealth of information without getting bogged down in any one area. The notations reflect current scholarship and provide the reader with excellent resources for further study.

The bulk of the material is dedicated to the “literature” corner of the triad and here the authors provide the student with excellent discussions of genre and
aspects of language; both in terms of grammar and syntax, but also structure and argumentation. There is a helpful discussion of exegetical fallacies, particularly as they relate to determining word meanings (630–50). The discussion of biblical theology, which the authors call, “the crowning aspect of the hermeneutical triad” (693) is perhaps a little brief, given the “pinnacle” nature at which the triad places it. The final chapter is a concise and practical discussion of taking the hermeneutical skills and applying them to actual study. The discussion of resources, both print and electronic, is helpful. The brief discussion on “time management” (728–29) is very helpful.

The section “From Study to Sermon” (741–800) takes the reader through an overview of issues related to preaching different genres. The authors state that while a sermon may be “topical, textual or expository,” “It is our conviction that the majority of preaching should be expository, that is, explication a biblical text. A steady diet of topical messages or unconnected texts is hazardous for the health of your audience” (741).

This volume represents a valuable contribution that any student of the Bible will profit from. Patterson and Köstenberger, avoiding the parochial stridency that often enters into the discussion, have crafted a positive statement regarding biblical hermeneutics and clearly delineated a methodology that can only help any serious student of the Bible.


Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

The revised edition of *Expositor’s Bible Commentary (EBC)* sports new editors, new cover, new layout, and some new authors. The purpose and general theological tone of *EBC* remains unchanged from the first edition edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Both John H. Sailhamer and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., also contributed their respective commentaries (“Genesis,” 21–331; and “Exodus,” 333–561) to the older edition. However, in this volume, the “Leviticus” (563–826) commentary by Richard S. Hess replaces the prior commentary by R. Laird Harris.

*EBC*’s new look makes the text more readable with larger page surface, larger fonts, added headings, shading for the NIV text, and newly formatted charts and tables. Both Sailhamer and Kaiser perform a fairly thorough revision of their commentaries for this edition without altering overall content. Unfortunately, the bibliographies for “Genesis” (44) and “Exodus” (342–43) do not give much evidence of being up-to-date. Sailhamer adds only two sources from the 1990s (Sailhamer and Witte) and none from the 2000s. Kaiser includes only two from the 1990s (Houtman and Hoffmeier) and one from 2000 (Enns). In stark contrast, the bibliography by Hess (“Leviticus,” 574–76) presents a more complete listing of references with twenty-two from the 1990s and seven from the 2000s. However, it is unfortunate that he fails to include Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Baker 2002).
In his “Introduction,” Sailhamer expands his section on “Authorship, Date, and Place of Origin” (25–33) and adds sections on “Genesis and the Final Shape of the Primary History” (42–43) and “Genesis and the Tanak” (43–44). His “Bibliography” (44) continues to lack adequate references and omits three recognized evangelical commentators whom he had previously included (Aalders, Kidner, and Leupold). Sometimes notes have been shortened (e.g., 1:1 [51–53]; 4:8 [99]; 8:17 [129]) and, in at least one case, a note (for 2:15) is cited in the text (79) but no longer exists (cf. 82). Occasionally, Sailhamer adds a note (2:24 [83]). New charts in table format with cell borders enhance the commentary (e.g., 133). Readers will appreciate Sailhamer’s insertion of a significantly expanded commentary on 12:1–5 (150–55) that provides a fuller presentation of his views on the promise narratives and messianic implications—an area upon which he has more recently discoursed in *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (IVP 2009; see review in this issue of *MSJ*).

For “Exodus” Kaiser adds a new section (“Text of Exodus,” 337) to his “Introduction” and reduces his “Bibliography” (342–43), although his list of references is more complete and helpful than Sailhamer’s. Omission of the map of the exodus and the diagram of the tabernacle, which were in the former edition, impoverishes this revised edition. As with Sailhamer’s commentary, Kaiser utilizes refreshed charts in table form containing bordered cells (e.g., 339–40, 347, 399), but he inserts fewer than those Sailhamer provides.

Hess utilizes charts more frequently and quite effectively (e.g., 586–87, 605–6, 614–15, 651–52). Readers will find his commentary very informative. This reviewer was disappointed, however, in the relatively sketchy treatment of one of the most important chapters in the Pentateuch: Leviticus 26.

Hopefully, Zondervan will be able to publish the remaining volumes in this revised edition of *EBC* in a timely manner. To date, the second volume (*Numbers–Ruth*) has yet to appear, although some of its commentaries have been completed for nearly seven years. That circumstance can result in even the newer of the commentaries being severely dated at their time of publication. Regardless, *EBC* will continue to be a set that pastors, professors, and students alike will find profitable to possess for years to come.


Reviewed by James E. Rosscup, Adjunct Professor of Bible Exposition.

Five faculty members of The Master’s Seminary present reasons in ten chapters for believing that the most straightforward interpretation of biblical prophecies upholds the futuristic position. One thrust is how this stance can be consistent with a Calvinistic perspective. This book’s writers argue that Scripture viewed in its most natural sense supports this view. One emphasis is that the New Testament does not reject a premillennial view of details in the Old Testament, but upholds it.
John MacArthur, the seminary’s president, contributes a lengthy Preface that ends with a chart on the sequence of events from Christ’s cross to eternity future. MacArthur also contributes three chapters, “Does Calvinism Lead to Futuristic Premillennialism?” “Does the New Testament Reject Futuristic Premillennialism?” and “How Certain is Futuristic Premillennialism?”

The arguments in the book validate a literal, yet not a wooden, rigid interpretative system, understanding the frequent places where the meaning of figurative language and symbols must be discerned. The contributors also argue that regardless of their affirmation of a distinction between Israel and the church, the means of salvation in any age is always the gift of grace.

Regarding dispensationalism, this book presents the argument that God administered His program in different ways at various times. It insists that He will fulfill His Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants literally (cf. 11).

Richard Mayhue, Executive Vice-President and Dean, crafted the Introduction, “Why Study Prophecy?” plus the chapters “Why Futuristic Premillennialism?” and “Why a Pretribulational Rapture?” Michael Vlach, Associate Professor of Theology, offers lucid chapters on what dispensationalism is, then what it is not, plus a third called “What About Israel?” These parts contend for a future restoration of Israel to its ancient land to fulfill Old Testament promises in their most evident, plain sense. Nathan Busenitz, Instructor in Theology, calls upon probing research as the other writers do to support his affirmative answer in “Did the Early Church Believe in a Literal Millennial Kingdom?” And Matt Waymeyer, Instructor in Bible Exposition, delves deeply into Revelation 20 and details how the references to a thousand years most naturally point to a literal millennial reign of Christ filled with spiritual values after His second advent, before the eternal state.

This irenic book is articulate so as to be helpful to professors in seminaries and Bible colleges, students, pastors, and lay people. The work follows in a long train of books that endorse a premillennial case. Examples appear in recommended sources near the end. This list might be extended to include many other works that directly address premillennialism. Some early books, even those not as quick to get to the point, are Nathaniel West’s The Thousand Years in Both Testaments and George N. H. Peters’ The Theocratic Kingdom (3 vols.). Still, the list supplies a wealth of supportive sources, such as Alva J. McClain’s The Greatness of the Kingdom, Ronald Diprose’s Israel in the Development of Christian Thought, Robert Thomas’ meticulously detailed exegetical commentary, 2 vols. on Revelation 1–7 and 8–22, Barry Horner’s Future Israel, and Michael Vlach’s published doctoral dissertation, Has the Church Replaced Israel? The arguments of each chapter are supported by copious endnotes, at times with pertinent detail, showing frequent interaction with the best resources otherwise written on the issues.

MacArthur’s chapter (7) on Calvinism (Reformed Theology) proposes that reform in such areas as eschatology would help a system of much truth to be even more consistently reformed to fit the Scriptures. He develops a point that those of his position, and also of Reformed Theology, often advance. If amillennialists would interpret prophecies literally as they interpret much of other Scripture, the premillennial conviction would be the consistent product. He cites Reformed scholars’ candid statements which admit this (145–46). MacArthur reasons that just
as God will fulfill His elective promises to believers, so He will be just as insistent to carry out what He has pledged on the election of ethnic Israel. In both cases, he sees this in grace that triumphs over sinful failure. He cites Calvin to this effect, as well as Jürgen Moltmann (151). MacArthur also builds a case for the word “Israel” in its many occurrences in the Bible as always referring to people of ethnic Israel. He provides reasoning on examples in the most debated texts to show this—Rom 9:6 and Gal 6:16 (152–53). He shares how close study of verses in both Old Testament and New Testament led him to believe that he had no consistent option in eschatology but premillenialism (153–56). This will no doubt speak persuasively to influence many readers as they, too, weigh what is the most fitting, probable sense of Bible statements.

This reviewer himself has sought in nearly fifty years of seminary teaching on all the Bible’s prophetic books to grapple seriously with interpretive issues in the passages and in top commentaries and books. The fruitage of this background leads to a fair conclusion: the present product, despite its brevity, is as a “primer” one of the most clarifying, definitive, stimulating, and appealing works to date. This book is serious yet readable, and probes on issues, spotlighting them with provocative awareness. Writers here are aggressively abreast of relevant literature, old and recent. They press to the point about what is at stake and offer straightforward reasons on why the premillennial perspective flows out as the most natural hermeneutical sense of biblical statements. Mayhue’s points that favor taking “a thousand years” in Revelation 20 as literal (67–71) will offer evidence persuasive to many. Granted, others will opt for a figurative sense despite considerations he adduces. Waymeyer’s chapter (6) on Revelation 20, richly fed by his earlier book Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate, erects more detail for a meaningful literality. If the natural sense makes sense even in prophecy, as premillennialists believe, his setting forth of specific, concrete evidence is not easy to dismiss.

Recommended sources are not the only added feature as the book draws to a close. The Glossary defines thirty-two terms for those needing the help, and at the very end is an extensive Scripture Index.


Reviewed by Michael A. Grisanti, Professor of Old Testament.

This volume is part of a series that seeks to engage the biblical text in a paragraph-by-paragraph fashion while maintaining a deliberately theological focus. McConville is a well-known Old Testament scholar while Williams works in systematic theology. Their shared effort is called “theological interpretation” in modern scholarship. McConville wrote the introduction to the Book of Joshua and the commentary itself. Then Williams wrote a section dealing with the theological horizons of Joshua and another on reading Joshua today. McConville also wrote an essay on Joshua and biblical theology. Both authors respond to each other’s
theological observation. The book concludes with a helpful author and Scripture index.

McConville’s commentary occupies only ninety pages in this volume, so his comments are very selective and addressed to the pericope or section rather than details of a passage. In vintage McConville fashion, he writes with clarity and substance. This volume, as others in the series, offers a glimpse into the interrelationship of exegesis and theology (both systematic and biblical). On the one hand, the connection of exegesis and theology is necessary for both disciplines to correctly contribute to our biblical understanding. Neither exegesis nor systematic theology can exist for long without the other. On the other hand, this volume also demonstrates how one’s theology impacts their interpretation of the ultimate significance of a passage. For example, Williams’ view of the “land” in the New Testament (regarding it as a non-issue in the NT) impacts his understanding of the biblical (OT and NT) teaching about the land of promise. Since the New Covenant community does not give attention to the “land,” it is not part of the heritage of the NT believers and beyond.

Both McConville and Williams are clear writers and have given careful thought to the theological significance of the Book of Joshua. However, if you want a solid commentary on the Book of Joshua, I would look elsewhere.


Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.


John N. Oswalt authored *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (NICOT, Eerdmans 1986) and *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (NICOT, Eerdmans 1998), *Called to Be Holy: A Biblical Perspective* (Evangel Publishing House 1999), *Isaiah* (NIVAC, Zondervan 2003), and *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Zondervan 2009). He was a member of the New International Version translation team and the Senior Translator, Prophets, for the New Living Translation. At the present he serves as Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.
The Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (gen. ed. Philip W. Comfort) is based upon and contains the full translation of the second edition of the New Living Translation (NLT). The series represents the work of nearly one hundred biblical scholars of various evangelical church backgrounds from the United States, Canada, England, and Australia. Each commentary commences with an “Introduction” (“Genesis,” 3–29; “Exodus,” 261–83). Ross’ “Introduction” follows nearly the same arrangement and content as in his Creation and Blessing. The main body of each commentary is then presented by giving the full NLT text of the text unit, followed by “Notes” (dealing with the Hebrew text) and “Commentary” interpreting that text unit. In some cases, the treatment of an interpretive issue appears somewhat repetitive. For example, Ross’ discussion of Genesis 1:1–2 in the “Commentary” (32–33) repeats much of what he already presented in the “Notes” (31–32). At the end of each commentary, the volume includes a brief “Bibliography” (“Genesis,” 255–58; “Exodus,” 559–60).

In this commentary Ross does not come to a clear identification regarding the age of the earth or of the universe. His discussion implies that he only sees life on this planet as recent (32). For him, the “formless and empty” condition of the created earth and its darkness (Gen 1:2) indicates something that requires correction (33). This leads him to the conclusion that the creation account reveals that the Creator is “a redeeming God” (35). In another interpretive matter, Ross identifies the different ways to account for the origin of light on the first day as compared to the events of the fourth day, but does not take a position himself (38). Overall, the commentary does not provide a full interpretive analysis of the biblical text. The author by-passes a number of interpretive issues in order to give the reader an overview that touches on what the author has determined to be the more significant theological issues. For example, the reader finds no help with regard to whether it was a “spring” or a “mist” that watered the garden in 2:6. Nor does Ross explain the emphatic clause, “you are sure to die” (2:17) or identify the interpretive problem in 3:5 (“like God” or “like gods”?) or discuss the potential anachronism of “Chaldeans” in 11:28, 31 or the debate over the mention of “Rameses” in 47:11. On the other hand, he does explain what “helper” means in 2:18 (48), the meaning of “call on the name of the LORD” in 4:26 (63), and offers one potential solution for the use of “Dan” in 14:14 (105). When it comes to the flood, Ross understands 8:1–2 to say that both rain and “subterranean water upheavals” continued another 110 days following the initial torrential rain of forty days (76).

In his commentary on Exodus, Oswalt argues for a fifteenth century B.C. dating of the exodus from Egypt (265–66), but offers no mention or explanation of the debate over “Rameses” in 1:11 (286–89). However, he does examine briefly the variety of names applied to Moses’ father-in-law (293, 305), provides a fairly in-depth analysis of “I AM” in 3:14 (303–4, 311–12), and offers insightful comments regarding the incident with Moses and circumcision in 4:24–26 (306, 316).

Overall, this volume delivers what the commentary series promises. It is solidly evangelical in its theology and in its handling of the matters of authorship, date, and authenticity. Readers will need to resort to the more extensive exegetical commentaries on Genesis and Exodus to delve more deeply into the many interpretive issues not touched upon by Ross and Oswalt. No one will walk away from this commentary, however, without gaining a very good foundation in the
individual messages of Genesis and Exodus, as well as a very useful examination of the theological significance of these two biblical books. The two commentaries in this volume are very readable, presenting the reader with many delightful and thought-provoking statements. A few will suffice for illustration: “Thus, the Old Testament in general and the book of Genesis in particular are a cemetery for lifeless myths and dead gods” (16, Ross); “Although not many scholars are satisfied with the obvious, in this case it seems obvious that the text means what it says” (81, Ross); “If God did not act in the ways recorded, then the unique theology of the Bible becomes both inexplicable and suspect” (263, Oswalt); “Once again, as with the midwives, Jochebed, Miriam, and the pharaoh’s daughter, it is a woman who took courageous action to further the cause of Yahweh’s redemptive purposes” (316, Oswalt).


Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

Sailhamer has authored a number of Old Testament studies, most focusing on the Pentateuch: *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Zondervan 1992), *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Zondervan 1995), and “Genesis” in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan 1990), see review, 148–49. He also has published works in other areas of OT studies: *The Translational Technique of the Greek Septuagint for the Hebrew Verbs and Participles in Psalms 3–41* (Peter Lang 1991), along with a number of periodical articles and essays in collected works on a variety of OT topics. As Professor of OT at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Brea, CA, he has a reputation for immersing his students in the Hebrew Bible.

*The Meaning of the Pentateuch* comprises a compendium of conclusions Sailhamer has reached as the result of years of study, writing, and teaching. The volume focuses on “the compositional strategy of the biblical author of the Pentateuch” (11). Its goal is to identify the meaning of the Pentateuch for today’s readers (13). As Sailhamer unfolds his approach to the Pentateuch, he reveals that he holds to two editions of the Pentateuch (23), with the second coming after Malachi, the last of the prophets (24), and comprising the only edition to which the modern reader has access (24–25). He believes that the second edition has been retrofitted with “new ‘prophetic extras’” (51). Nowhere does the author explain why he would consider it impossible for the prophetic elements of the Pentateuch to be part of the first edition. In fact, he actually admits that the prophetic sources for the second edition were themselves “a product of the Mosaic Pentateuch” (52). This reviewer finds this two-way composition (Pentateuch > Prophets > Pentateuch) without adequate foundation. Sailhamer fails to present sufficient evidence contrary to a view holding that the prophets only expounded the Pentateuch—a one-way relationship (Pentateuch > Prophets). In other words, the prophets did not inform a supposed final edition of the Pentateuch at all. Their revelation expounded on the
Pentateuch’s message, but they did not expand the written Pentateuch itself. It was already in its final form long before they proclaimed their supplementary revelation.

As far as the content and meaning of the Pentateuch is concerned, Sailhamer believes it to present a message quite “close in meaning to [the] NT book of Galatians” (27). He observes that Paul’s view of the law in Galatians approximates that of the Pentateuch’s view of the law (28). Just as in *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, the poems of the Pentateuch not only fill the seams of the Pentateuchal structure, they direct the readers to “the promise of a coming messianic king” (36)—a major and quite significant contribution of the Pentateuch.

The author divides his volume into three parts: “Approaching the Text as Revelation” (57–218), “Rediscovering the Composition of the Pentateuch within the Tanak” (219–415), and “Interpreting the Theology of the Pentateuch” (417–601). Much of the first part involves an extended discussion of hermeneutics in which Sailhamer regales the reader with the historical development of grammatical-historical hermeneutics. He calls evangelicals back to a focus “on the meaning of the Scriptures themselves (sola Scriptura)” (87). The question he asks concerns the “historical meaning” of Scripture and the apparent movement to separate history from the text itself (100–148). In this somewhat lengthy and seemingly esoteric discussion, Sailhamer examines the contributions of Ernesti, Keil, Schleiermacher, Wellhausen, Geiger, and others to the relationship of history and the text. In addition to the role of history to the text, Sailhamer seeks to define and identify authorial intent (the big picture) in the biblical text (150–56). He associates authorial intent with the interpreter’s goal (153). The results of his analysis point to both “obedience to the law” and “living by faith” as the main emphasis of the Pentateuch as a whole (156).

Part Two explores “an evangelical alternative to the approaches of both von Hofmann and Hengstenberg” (233) with regard to the messianic strategy of the Pentateuch and of the entire Hebrew Bible. Three propositions express Sailhamer’s approach: (1) prediction and identification are both part of the messianic prophecy of the Hebrew Bible, (2) in the final stages of composition the messianic vision’s fragments gain an increasing cohesiveness, and (3) the Hebrew Bible displays commentary as much as it does text (235). Again and again, Sailhamer declares that the true focus of the Hebrew Bible, even in the Pentateuch, resides in the New Covenant (205, 243, 342, and 556). Basically, no substantial difference exists between what the Hebrew Bible conveys and what the apostle Paul taught (243). Accordingly, the author concludes that “the Pentateuch and its compositional strategy are strongly messianic” and that later stages of the Hebrew Bible “treat the earlier stages much like the NT treats the OT” (246).

As Sailhamer points out, no interpreter need go to the NT in order to properly interpret Genesis 3:15 as messianic. In his words,

One might be applauded for being careful not to see Christ too quickly in the words of the poem in Genesis 3:15, but in the end, one might also prove shortsighted in failing to find the author’s delayed identity of that “seed” within the further compositional strategy of the Pentateuch and its poems.
The Pentateuch highlights the rising of a future king and the establishment of his kingdom (335, 582). The relationship of the part (e.g., Gen 3:15) to the whole inheres in the principle that “It is the whole that gives meaning to the parts” (491). The Pentateuch’s compositors employ even the exodus event itself “as a key messianic metaphor or image” (518).

If the focus of the Pentateuch directs readers to the New Covenant, how do its legal contents relate to that strategy? The author suggests that it is part and parcel of the propensity of mankind to seek gods other than the true God. That propensity necessitated the giving of laws to govern behavior and to turn people from idolatry (363). It is within the context of this discussion that Sailhamer’s narrative tends to be overly repetitious (cf. 388–98). Although the reader appreciates the author’s care to ensure proper understanding, the length of some discussions can cause the reader to lose sight of the logical order of overall argumentation.

Part Three of the volume examines the theological message of the Pentateuch, touching upon the themes of promise and blessing (419–59), as well as Messiah (460–536). One chapter approaches the topic of Mosaic law by asking what the Christian’s relationship to that law might be (537). Sailhamer’s answer comes by first making a distinction between the law and the Pentateuch (e.g., 552), in order to counter the commonly held opinion that the Mosaic law and the Pentateuch are virtually identical. Secondly, God intends the Pentateuch (with the law as only one part of the whole) “to be the object of meditation and reflection” that results in the imprinting of justice on the heart (562). The law supplements the New Covenant focus by providing both “concrete and qualified situations” (562) for instructing believers in obedience to a holy and righteous God.

The final chapter deals with the theme of salvation within the Pentateuch (563–601). Although Sailhamer has touched upon unwritten (or primeval) revelation a number of times throughout the volume (e.g., 137, 184–97), he returns to it in discussing salvation, because God cannot have failed to communicate with fallen mankind concerning the solution to sin’s problem (566–70). Setting the matter of unwritten revelation to the side, the author narrows the question to what the Pentateuch tells its readers about salvation (570). Sailhamer argues that the Pentateuch identifies the power of sacrifice to break the curse resulting from the fall (596–97). In so doing, the sacrifice opens a way for a new life that might receive God’s blessing (601).

Whether or not the reader agrees with everything within this volume, Sailhamer’s detailed study of the Pentateuch has much to commend it. Anyone interested in identifying the content of messianic revelation in the OT should not ignore this volume and its significant contribution to the topic. The reader will come away with a larger view of the Pentateuch, even if he cannot accept its two-Pentateuch model. No study of the Pentateuch should omit this volume from its sources.

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

Some of the cruelest acts ever done to me, or the meanest things said to or about me have come from Christians—not by the unsaved. Sadly, if you are like me, generally we are more prone to guard our own hurt in such cases than to even begin to consider or admit that we, too, may very well be on someone else’s list(s) of the cruelest things done and the meanest things said to them. Even though saved, even if we love the Lord, we are repeatedly placed in situations where conflict arises, and usually we need help in dealing with such problems and returning to a proper biblical focus.

Based on the keynote verse of Gal 5:15, Strauch’s work is wise, godly, biblical counsel that is so desperately needed today. When writing this review, I began thinking of who would benefit from this book: beginning with me and working outward to my family, my church, my friends, associates—and on it goes. Strauch writes with biblical authority, godly humility, and always points the reader to the person of Jesus Christ and to biblical principles, and he does so in a masterful way. Although the material itself is easy to read, the content of this book takes long to digest (in the best sense of the term) because it forces us to deal with our own areas of weakness, something which most of us are not prone to do on our own.

When I first started reading this book and taking notes for the review, I saw this would not be the normal way of writing a book review. If I wrote all I learned from Strauch’s wise counsel, I would turn in around a 30-page review. So let me see if I can condense this and point people in the right direction beginning with the Introduction.

After Adam and Eve sinned, the unity of paradise was lost, and conflict immediately arose and continues to arise in every area of life—including the church (1). Accordingly Strauch writes,

My intent through this book is to explore God’s way of handling conflict so that other congregations may also experience peace and unity. This study will draw out from Scripture key principles for handling conflict *with special emphasis on biblical attitudes and behaviors*. . . All Christian believers need to know and practice these biblical principles because we all face controversies and relational disagreements. Church leaders especially need to understand the biblical principles for dealing with conflict because leaders greatly influence how conflict is handled in the local church” (4, emphasis in the original).

Continuing the same line of reason, Strauch adds, “Churches would help themselves significantly by teaching Christian people how to behave biblically when conflict strikes and by holding one another accountable for sinful behaviors and attitudes. Faithful adherence to biblical principles is the best policy when it
comes to preventing damaged relationships and discrediting the witness of the gospel” (4).

Strauch writes that the aim of his book is to provide a better understanding of what the Bible teaches about conflict and to help believers implement such biblical teaching. It is not so much a book about mediation or arbitration as it is a biblical approach to resolving conflict. Each chapter is thus a biblical exposition on pertinent passages. The first three chapters lay down the foundational biblical principles about addressing conflict: (1) Act in the Spirit, (2) Act in Love, and (3) Act in Humility. The remaining seven chapters deal with specific principles for handling conflict: (4) Control the Anger, (5) Control the Tongue, (6) Control the Criticism, (7) Pursue Reconciliation, (8) Pursue Peace, (9) Face False Teachers, and (10) Face Controversy. Each chapter ends with 3–4 “Key Principles to Remember.”

A free study guide is available from the publisher’s website for group or individual study. Also, a helpful Appendix is included at the back of the book entitled “Understand the Word Flesh.”

Each chapter contains easy to follow subheading and highlighted bullet points along the way. For instance the chapter, “Act in the Spirit,” has this thought so set forth: “Nothing but the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to enable believers to resist the flesh and to live the Christian life” (15). This bullet point in the chapter “Act in Love” is so wisely profound: “Love lowers the temperature of most conflicts by refusing to engage in retaliation.” And as the writers of the gospels and epistles did, Strauch repeatedly points to the person and work of Jesus as the primary example for us to follow as the One who modeled for the world what true biblical humility entails.

This is a wonderful, profound resource for the Body of Christ. After much thought, I cannot think of a group of believers from the youngest all the way up to the elderly saints who would not benefit from this godly biblical counsel. It will be a much-used resource in my own life, home, and church.


Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

In the realm of OT textual criticism, Emanuel Tov holds the status of an ultimate virtuoso or supreme maven. As J. L. Magnes Professor of Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Editor in Chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls Publication Project he continues to train students in the finer arts of the Hebrew Bible and to ensure that all Hebrew scholars have access to the latest primary materials from the Judean Desert. His publications include The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research (Jerusalem Biblical Studies, Simor 1981, 2nd ed. 1997); The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint (VTSup 72, Brill 1999); Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert (STDJ 54, Brill 2004); Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible, and Qumran: Collected Essays (TSAJ 121, Mohr Siebeck 2008); and Revised Lists of the Texts from the Judaean Desert (Brill 2010).
The first English edition of Tov’s *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible (TCHB)* was published in 1992 (the Hebrew had been published in 1989). His second revised edition came out in 2001. Thus, he has updated this volume decade by decade, rather than waiting until a quarter century or more has passed. This pattern of editions displays the author’s pursuit of excellence and his love of accuracy in presenting the evidences for the Hebrew Bible. From the very start, Tov revised each edition. He added, omitted, or changed examples and even revised some of his views. At each stage he brought the data up to date—a prime example being his statistical analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls (94–98 and 107–10; cp. 2nd ed., 101–5 and 114–17). In his preparation of the second English edition he was somewhat restricted by sticking to the camera-ready page format, not allowing the revision to be as extensive as he desired (xvii). Such a restriction is absent for the preparation of this third edition. Prior to this third edition he also published a German edition (Kohlhammer 1997) and a Russian edition (Biblisko-Bagalskovo Institut Sv. Apostola Andryeya 2001)—both of them prior to the second English edition (Fortress 2001).

This edition includes the addition of a “Brief Didactic Guide” (lvii–lviii). Additions to Chapter 1 (“Introduction,” 1–22) include “Text, Canon, and Sacred Status” (20–21, identifying the presence of scribal processes prior to final canonization and a brief discussion of the authority of non-Masoretic sources) and “Subjectivity of This Book” (22, rightly warning readers that some material is, by necessity, subjective). Tov rewrote and re-organized “Development of the Consonantal Text” (27–36; cp. 2nd ed., 22–36) in Chapter 2, updating the discussion and providing additional data pertinent to the topic. It is at this point that the author adds a new siglum (+) to refer to the combined evidence of the Masoretic Text (MT), Targums, Syriac Peshitta, and Latin Vulgate (29). In Chapter 2 he also adds “Non-Biblical Sources: Quotations and ‘Rewritten Scripture’ Texts” (114) comparing quotations of biblical text in rabbinical sources with quotations in nonbiblical Qumran materials. Students and professors alike will appreciate the more straightforward labeling of Tov’s five factors for evaluating differences between an ancient translation and the MT (123–24; cp. 2nd ed., 130).

It comes as no surprise, given Tov’s obvious interest in Septuagintal studies, that he has expanded his treatment of the Greek sources from fourteen pages in the second edition (134–48) to twenty-one pages in this third edition (127–47). Among the benefits of the expansion is a far more complete comparative analysis of the text-critical value of the Septuagint by means of a survey of the books in the Septuagint that differ significantly from the MT (136–39).

Chapter 3 (“History of the Biblical Text,” 155–90) has been rewritten (esp., 161–90) with two additions: “Central Position of M in Tradition and Research” (160–61) and “The Myth of the Stabilization of the Text of Hebrew Scripture” (174–80). Tov alters his focus on the MT in this same chapter (“Shape of the Biblical Text in Early Periods,” 161–69), as well as in Chapter 7 (“Evidence,” 286–324) by including witnesses later than the MT in textual-literary analysis. Chapter 9 (“Scholarly and Non-Scholarly Editions,” 341–76) grew from nine pages in the second edition to its current thirty-five pages. One of the most helpful of the major revisions for this age of computers and internet access is the addition of Chapter 10 (“Computer-Assisted Tools for Textual Criticism,” 377–82). In keeping
with the content of the tenth chapter, bibliographies within each of Chapters 1–8 include an expansion providing “Electronic tools” (e.g., 1, 24, 40). Lastly, the addition of a “Glossary” (417–23) provides readers with handy access to the author’s definitions for key terms.

Other slight changes in the material include a renewed stress on the textual proximity of the Septuagint and Samaritan Pentateuch (82, 136). Also, Tov supplies more detailed evidence for discussion of issues like the comparison of the MT and the Septuagint texts in Joshua (297–98; cp. 2nd ed., 330–31). New photos replace most of those that were present in the second edition (e.g., 384–86, 390; 2nd ed., 380–82, 386). There are also some alterations in the labeling of some of the plates. The sample plate for the Samaritan Pentateuch had been from the Sadaqa edition (2nd ed., 398), but the third edition presents a sample from the Tal-Florentin edition (402). Tov also inserts a sample plate from BHQ (412).

Without doubt, the third edition of TCHB will find immediate acceptance and adoption as the primary textbook for all graduate-level courses on OT textual criticism. One does not have to agree with every aspect of Tov’s views or his methodology in order to appreciate the value of his work as represented by this volume. If the growth of discoveries, materials, and new hypotheses continues, we can only hope that Tov lives long enough to see the book into its fourth edition.
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