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Stromata

“…a vehicle for scholarly expression,”

Edited for the Student Body of Calvin Theological Seminary by

Gayle Doornbos and Mark Hofman  
Cover design by Leslie Yarhouse

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Back issues of Stromata from 2001 to the present are available online at: http://www.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/stromata.php

All printed issues of Stromata are held at the Hekman Library, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Contents

Articles

Moses Under Attack: 
Identifying the Victim in Exodus 4:24-26  
Matt Stob..............................................................................1

Naomi and Ruth as the Literary Characters in the Book of Ruth  
Rong Xie............................................................................16

The Vision of the Surveyor and the Accompanying Oracle:  
Zechariah 2:5-17  
Nevada DeLapp.................................................................35

Commitment as a Context for Discipleship in the New Monasticism  
Sean Baker........................................................................55

Religious Pluralism and Tolerance in the Qur'an  
Geoffrey Van Drag.............................................................74

Ministering to Birthmoms Later in Life:  
What Role Can the Church Play in Areas of Healing and Education?  
Heather Stroobosscher.........................................................89

Sentiments on Hell  
Anthony Sytsma..................................................................96

Sermons

Happy is the One Who...What?: Psalm 1  
David Salverda......................................................................106

Hope for the Grave: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (BC Art. 37)  
Chelsey L. Harmon.............................................................114
Review Essays

Arthur Peacocke. *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*

*Sung-Joon Moo*..................................................................................................................120

Amy Plantinga Pauw. *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards*

*Reita Yazawa*....................................................................................................................125

A Choral Reading

“*Jacob, Esau, and God*: A Choral Reading”

*Randall Buursma*.............................................................................................................132
Moses Under Attack: Identifying the Victim in Exodus 4:24

Matt Stob

INTRODUCTION

A survey of the vast amount of literature resulting from attempts to explain Exod. 4:24-26 proves true what Cornelis Houtman once quipped: “Exodus 4:24-26 is a passage causing exegetes headaches.” Indeed, the competing answers to the many questions arising from these verses—Who is attacked? Why is he attacked? Does Yahweh literally seek to kill this person? Why does Zipporah perform the circumcision? Which son does she circumcise? Whose feet does she touch with the foreskin? Are they really feet? To whom does Zipporah speak? What is meant by the phrase חֲתַן־דָּמִים? Why do these words cause Yahweh to relent immediately? Why are the words חֲתַן דָּמִים repeated? And why does circumcision figure so prominently in this incident?—lead one to wonder if the

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1 This paper was originally submitted to Prof. Leder in partial fulfillment of OT 185: Seminar in Research and Methodology.


“headaches” will ever go away.

However, one need not despair. For although diverse explanations of Exod. 4:24-26 prohibit consensus regarding its central meaning, when addressed individually, the questions that arise from this pericope can be answered satisfactorily. Accordingly, that is what this paper will begin to demonstrate. Limiting ourselves to the first question posed above (i.e., Who is attacked?), we will argue on the basis of the final form of the Hebrew text that Yahweh attacks Moses. First we will present and evaluate answers to the question under consideration deemed inadequate; subsequently, arguments that identify Moses as the victim of Yahweh’s attack will be set forth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Julian Morgenstern acknowledged that one of the difficulties of interpreting Exod. 4:24-26 stems from “the fact that the antecedent of the personal pronoun (אַחֲרֵיהּ, הָמִיתוֹ, וַיֶּעָשֶׂהוּ) is not clearly indicated.” Now although the antecedents of לְרַגְלָיו (“his feet”) and אַתִּיה ("you") are important for understanding Exod. 4:24-26 a whole, they will not be discussed here. Rather, present concern lies with the antecedent of the two pronouns in v. 24: וַיֵּעָשֶׂהּ (“…approached


4 Many suggest that Exod. 4:24-26 does not fit well in its context. For example, Allen, “‘Bridegroom,’” 260, writes, “This passage seems to be an intrusion into the flow of the chapter.” However, we agree with John I. Durham, Exodus (WBC 3; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 58: “Whatever the narrative’s origin and whatever its original context and its meaning in that context, these verses must be understood now in their present context. The editor who assembled the sequence [Exod. 4:18-31] of which they are nearly the middle component must have understood them as both adding to that sequence and as gaining specific clarity from it.”


6 Unless quoted from another work, all translations from the Hebrew are my own.
him”) and יהֲמִיתָה ("to kill him"). As the following discussion exhibits, opinions about the antecedent in question can be placed in four categories: “Him” could refer to Pharaoh’s son, both Moses and his son, Moses’ son alone, or Moses alone.

“Him” Refers to Pharaoh’s Son
If v. 24 is isolated from vv. 25-26, then, as Bernard Robinson notes, “[I]t might seem that the victim is Pharaoh’s heir, whom YHWH has threatened to kill only one verse earlier (iv 23).” Although Robinson quickly separates himself from this view, he does summarize the article written by its proponent, J. Coppens. According to Coppens, Exod. 4:24 does not narrate an actual event but rather predicts Yahweh’s encounter with Pharaoh’s son. When taken this way, as Robinson explains, v. 24 “is construed as the conclusion of YHWH’s speech to Moses [4:21-23] in which he gives him a message for the Pharaoh.” Thus Coppens construes the waw-consecutive imperfects in v. 24 (וַיְבַקֶּשׁ … וַיִּגַּשׁוּ … וַיְהִי) as future tense rather than past tense verbs.

So far as can be determined, Coppens has not received support for his proposal. The most likely reason for this is because his reading of v. 24 is virtually impossible. Again, for Coppens’ theory to hold, the waw-consecutive imperfects in v. 24 must be read as future tense verbs. However, Robinson is right to affirm that these verbs “are most naturally interpreted as past tenses.” Thus, since the grammar required for this theory is problematic, so too is the

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10 Robinson, “Zipporah,” 455, n. 15. According to Thomas O. Lambdin, Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (New York: Scriber’s, 1971; repr., London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), §98, 1+ the imperfect is the common indicator of past tense narrative, especially, as is the case here, when the sequence begins with וַיְהִי (§110).
“Him” Refers to *both* Moses and His Son

A second position contends that the antecedent of the pronouns in Exod. 4:24 is *both* Moses and his son. This perspective was presented by Lawrence Kaplan. According to Kaplan, one cannot decide between Moses and his son as the antecedent since “the redactor has deliberately built the ambiguity into the present narrative.” Thus one infers that the text is violated if only one antecedent is selected.

In order to facilitate this viewpoint, Kaplan divides Exod. 4:18-26 into three units: vv. 18-20, vv. 21-23, and vv. 24-26. Consider, then, Kaplan’s description of the resulting ambiguity:

If we bracket the second unit and link the first and the third units, it is clear that the threat of death to Moses is no longer past but now, emanating from a new source—not Pharaoh but God himself—is still very much present and threatens to strike Moses down. If, on the contrary, we put to the side the first unit and read the second and third units as a whole, it

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11 Besides the grammatical argument, Robinson, “Zipporah,” 455, n. 15, notes several additional difficulties with identifying the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24 as Pharaoh’s son. First, it is unlikely that Yahweh would reference himself using the first person in vv. 21-23 but the third person in v. 24. Second, it is not easy to explain either why Pharaoh’s son is traveling or how, if this happens in Egypt, מָלון (“inn”) can be used appropriately in reference to a palace. Lastly, it is difficult to explain why Zipporah performs the circumcision and not Moses. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find Coppens’ theory labeled elsewhere as “untenable” (Houtman, Exodus, 1:447, n. 28).

12 Lawrence Kaplan, “‘And the Lord Sought to Kill Him’ (Exod. 4:24): Yet Once Again,” HAR 5 (1981): 65-74. It must be noted, however, that although Kaplan fleshed this perspective out in detail, Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), 116, pointed in this direction much earlier. Greenberg suggested, “If, as is usually assumed, the victim of the attack is Moses, then the bond of father and son, which allows the father to be rescued by an action on the son forms a counterpart to the involvement of ‘fathers’ with ‘sons’ that is the central concern in the immediately preceding verses. Just as God and Pharaoh are involved with their ‘sons’ so is Moses with his.” He then adds, “But if the victim of the attack is Moses’ son—and the context points, in that case, to his firstborn, Gershom—then the movement of threat from Pharaoh’s firstborn to Moses’ is strikingly dramatic.”

becomes equally clear that the future threat of death directed against Pharaoh’s first-born son is no longer still in the future but very much present, except that it now mysteriously strikes Moses’ first-born son, not Pharaoh’s first-born son.  

This provides the broad overview of Kaplan’s solution to the difficulty of determining the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24.

With this overview in mind, however, it is also necessary to note how Kaplan links these units in his “bracketed” readings of the text. First, in terms of reading vv. 21-23 and vv. 24-26 together, Kaplan points to Blau and Greenberg, both of whom insist that the focus on “first-born” in vv. 22-23 helps explain the puzzling account in vv. 24-26. In other words, since “first-born” is highlighted in the preceding unit, that must be the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24. Due to this, Kaplan writes that “the future deadly encounter of God and the first-born of Pharaoh is anti-icipated by the mysterious deadly encounter between God and the first-born of Moses.” Thus it is the theme of the “first-born” that links the two units together.

Next, in terms of linking vv. 18-20 and vv. 24-26, the verb בָּקַש (“to seek”) is crucial since it occurs in vv. 19 and 24. In the first verse, God tells Moses, “‘Go back to Egypt for all the men who sought [הַֹֽמְבַקְשִׁים] your life are dead.’” The second verse states that Yahweh “sought [וַיְבַקֶּש] to kill him.” Thus the link is clear. To strengthen his argument, Kaplan then points out that בָּקַש also occurs in Exod. 2:15 and so concludes, “Our analysis of v. 19 (which echoes 2:15) as pointing to Moses being the victim of God’s attack at the lodging place (v. 24) can be clinched by noting that in the Pentateuch the verb ‘bqš’ is used in connection with killing in these three verses and only these three verses” (emphasis his). Accordingly, when the link between 4:19 and 4:24—and 2:15—is juxtaposed with the link between 4:22-23 and 4:24, the identity of the victim is ambiguous. It

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14 Kaplan, “Yet Once Again,” 70.
16 Kaplan, “Yet Once Again,” 68.
17 Kaplan, “Yet Once Again,” 69.
is argued that since one cannot decide conclusively whether the victim is Moses or his son, the reader must allow for both possibilities.

Although Kaplan’s proposal has not gained wide support, there are some who concede its plausibility. For example, Terence Fretheim, sharing the “one textual decision” he has made concerning Exod. 4:24-26, writes that “in the absence of any unequivocal indication as to who it is that God tries to kill, interpretation should leave the matter open, moving with both possibilities, Moses and his (presumably firstborn) son.”19 In addition, William Propp, in his discussion on the role of the redactor in Exod. 3-4, conceives that “the editor created ambiguity as to the victim of the attack.”20

However, despite this support, and although parts of Kaplan’s analysis are indeed helpful and will be recalled below, his theory as a whole must be rejected. The reason for this rejection is due to Kaplan’s misunderstanding—and thus misapplication—of his methodology. In making his argument, Kaplan appeals to Perry and Sternberg’s demonstration that narrative texts frequently require readers to fill in gaps by postulating hypotheses that work out ambiguities.21 Indeed, this is what Kaplan has done. Given the lack of

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19 Terence E. Fretheim, Exodus (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 78. Fretheim points to Gen. 17:14 in support of the possibility that Moses’ son could be under attack (i.e., if Moses’ son had not yet been circumcised, then it might be that he is facing the consequence for that state). Perhaps strengthening the case for ambiguity in regard to the victim of Yahweh’s attack, Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968), 88, points to the same text in support of identifying Moses as the victim. However, while this type of theological inference potentially factors into identifying the victim of Yahweh’s attack, it will not be considered in this paper beyond treatment in this note since it goes outside the Exodus narrative.

20 William H. C. Propp, Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 196. In his analysis, if one reads only the Yahwist (J), to which he attributes Exod. 4:19 and 4:24-26, then the victim is clearly Moses. However, by juxtaposing vv. 22-23, which Propp attributes to the Elohist (E) (195), the possibility exists that Yahweh actually attacks Moses’ son. Cf. William H. Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6),” VT 43, no. 4 (1993), 511, n. 60.

21 Kaplan, “Yet Once Again,” 66, n. 6. The following work is the one upon which Kaplan bases his theory: Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, “The King
clarity regarding the identity of the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24, Kaplan contends that since both Moses and his son can be identified as the antecedent, both must be identified.

Again, though, this argument represents a misuse of the underlying methodology. For although Perry and Sternberg argue that readers must fill in narrative gaps, one is not to label every puzzling element as a “gap.” As Sternberg cautions in a later work, “The multiple system of gap-filling must not be equated with confusion, sloppiness, or vagueness.” What this means is that a puzzling element is not a “gap” merely because certain relevant data happen to be discrepant or lacking or obscure.” When this principle is applied to Kaplan, it must be said that a hypothesis to explain away the ambiguity is not to be postulated simply because the pronouns in v. 24 lack a clear antecedent. Thus, since Kaplan has not identified a legitimate “gap,” his theory as a whole is rejected.

Having rejected the possibility of identifying both Moses and his son as the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24, attention must now be given to the arguments that identify only one or the other.

“Him” Refers to Moses’ Son Alone
Those who wish to argue that Moses’ son is the antecedent of the pronouns in question can find solidarity with Greenberg who writes, “The absence of Moses’ name from the story has led some to suppose that Moses was not present at all, and that a child must perforce have


22 Sternberg, Poetics, 227.

23 According to Sternberg, Poetics, 227-28, the process of “gap-filling” is only appropriate when each hypothesis performs some definite function, illuminating the elements from its own particular angle, and only when the multifold linkage integrates with the other features of the discourse into an overall complex pattern.” In light of this, even if we granted that Kaplan identified a legitimate “gap,” his theory is not automatically justified. After all, as Osborn, “Circumspection,” 258, writes, Kaplan’s attempt to integrate his theory’s significance into the overall narrative framework “remains weak.”
been the victim of the attack as well as the one circumcised.” While this child could be Eliezer, the majority of scholars who think that Moses’ son was attacked identify Gershom as the victim. Thus, those arguments will be of central concern here.

First, then, recalling what Kaplan said about this option, to identify Gershom as the victim is to take seriously the immediately preceding context. Again, since there is an emphasis on the first-born—both of Pharaoh and of God—in vv. 21-23, then it seems that the natural antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24 must be the first-born—though this time not of Pharaoh or God, but of Moses. Accordingly, since the last word of v. 23 is in fact “first-born” (ךָֽ ֹֽבְכֹר), Greenberg infers, “The echo of ‘Lo, I will slay your firstborn son’ (verse 23) lingers through the beginning of verse 24, and, can be heard as a skewed antecedent to the suffixes in verse 24—referring now to Gershom, Moses’ firstborn.”

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24 Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, 112. Cf. Kaplan, “Yet Once Again,” 67. Additionally, since v. 24 begins with yhyw, it might be argued that vv. 24-26 are set “off as a separate incident” (Childs, Exodus, 98). This would then further suggest that Moses is not involved with this incident. However, so far as can be determined, this grammatical evidence has not been used in support of the position presently under consideration.

25 That Eliezer could even be an option is not obvious from the text since only Gershom has been named to this point (2:22); Eliezer is unmentioned until 18:4 (Allen, “‘Bridegroom,’” 267, n. 28). Yet, 4:20 discloses that Moses took “his sons” (בָּנָָּ֗יו; Allen, “‘Bridegroom,’” 267, n. 28; Osborn, “Circumspection,” 250). As Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, 108, notes, this could well open the door for Eliezer’s existence in 4:24: “There is no evidence whatever for the date of Eliezer’s birth. But since the events related from 4:27 on leave little room for Moses to return to Midian and father a second child, it is natural to suppose that the two sons referred to in [ch.] 18 had been born before Moses left Midian.” However, while this possibility must be conceded, בָּנָָּ֗יו in 4:20 could just as easily refer to Moses’ “children” (Robinson, “Zipporah,” 450). Thus, Robinson states that “if there were any question of Moses having more than one son at this time, it would have been necessary in iv 25 to say which was meant” (450-51). In agreement with Robinson, then, if one of Moses’ sons is the victim of Yahweh’s attack, it is most natural to identify him as Gershom.

However, while Kaplan limits his basis for identifying Gershom as the antecedent to the connection with the “firstborn”—and thus only to the immediately preceding unit (vv. 21-23)—Greenberg hints at an additional basis for naming Gershom as the antecedent by considering not only vv. 21-23, but also vv. 18-20. In summing up the connection between vv. 18-20, 21-23, and 24-26, Greenberg writes, “The three brief passages, each three verses long, are permeated with allusions to family—especially sons—and death” (emphasis mine). Thus the inference is that although vv. 18-20 and 21-23 appear to suggest different antecedents for the pronouns in v. 24, as Kaplan argues, it is possible that the connectedness of vv. 18-26 in terms of “family—especially sons—and death” points to a single antecedent: Gershom.

A final argument in favor of identifying Moses’ son as the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24 is provided by Stuart. In noting that Moses is never mentioned in vv. 24-26, he asserts that “the [Hebrew] grammar of the passage uses proleptic pronouns to refer to Gershom.” His contention is that “Gershom is referred to in v. 25 as her son, which tells the reader who it was that God threatened to kill” (emphasis his). Thus rather than looking back for the referent of the pronouns in v. 24, the reader is to look ahead.

death of Pharaoh’s firstborn son provides a spatial setting in the text: we now read a story about the potential death of Moses’ firstborn son, upon whose fate the focus of the pericope should naturally fall.”

Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 116. To be fair, Kaplan, “Yet Once Again,” 70, does make the observation that death is a part of each unit. However, he does not use this connection to argue for Gershom as the antecedent. Indeed, to do so would weaken his solution since it would too closely link the three units.

Stuart, *Exodus*, 153, n. 114. Morgenstern, “Once Again,” 45, also points out that Moses is not mentioned in vv. 24-26 in order to contend that Gershom is the antecedent. Thus he states that “the most natural interpretation is that in this brief passage the masculine pronoun refers regularly, not to Moses at all, of whom there is no explicit mention whatsoever in this narrative, but to Zipporah’s son.” However, unlike Stuart, Morgenstern does not mention anything concerning “proleptic pronouns.”

To be sure, several others opine that Gershom is the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24. However, their primary arguments depend not on the text as it presently stands but on comparative studies. E.g., Hans Kosmala, “The ‘Bloody Husband,’” *VT* 12, no. 1 (1962): 14-28, thinks that vv. 24-26 have “a Midianite background” (20) and that the story is understood best when taken as an account of
However, despite the arguments in favor of identifying Moses’ son Gershom as the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24, this proposal must be rejected for two reasons. First, contra Stuart, it is most natural to look back rather than ahead to find the referent for which a pronoun substitutes.\(^\text{30}\) Thus it is unlikely that the pronouns in v. 24 would refer to הָּּּ֔בְנ (‘her son’).

But second, and more significantly, Houtman asserts that ‘the explicit ‘her son’ in 4:25 is striking if he would be the implied object of 4:24.’\(^\text{31}\) The reason, presumably, is because even though the “first-born” is prevalent in vv. 21-23, Moses remains a central figure to the narrative; after all, he is the one to whom Yahweh speaks.\(^\text{32}\) Accordingly, we agree with Propp who states that “the text would read ‘sought to put Moses’ son to death’” if the narrator intended to depict him as the victim.\(^\text{33}\)

a blood rite to ward off a local deity (21-25). Taking a different angle, Morgenstern, “Once Again,” argues that vv. 24-26 are best explained in light of “beena marriage” (38)—a feature of a matriarchal society. In such a society, children were to be members of the mother’s clan, but for some reason, Zipporah left with Moses and thus removed her child from his proper place (70). Thus she performed the circumcision to remove taboo and protect him from the angry deity (67).

However, while aspects of these studies are intriguing, one cannot ignore what Kosmala himself writes early in his article: “According to the context in which [this episode] now stands God attacks Moses in the night with the intention of killing him” (15; cf. Kline, By Oath Consigned, 88, n. 10). In addition, Childs, Exodus, 98, notes that “the speculative elements” of these reconstructions of the original story “run far beyond the historical evidence” and that they obscure “the present function of the passage in the Exodus narrative.”

\(^{30}\) Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §16.3.1 a.


\(^{32}\) As Goldingay, “Significance,” 10, writes: “A story about a threat to the life of Moses’ and Zipporah’s son would fit well in the context in general, but the specific preceding context suggests that ‘him’ must be Moses, and the specific reference to their son which follows confirms this.”

\(^{33}\) Propp, “Bloody Bridegroom,” 499. Propp’s comment can be used here even though he omits reading vv. 21-23 when making it (in the present context, he argues for Moses as the victim by attributing vv. 19-20 and v. 24 to the Yahwist
Having provided reasons why Moses’ son—specifically, Gershom—should not be identified as the victim of Yahweh’s attack in v. 24, it is now proper to consider the final—and best—option concerning the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24.

“Him” Refers to Moses Alone
Kaplan is right to point out that although Moses is the person most often identified as the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24 and thus as the victim of Yahweh’s attack, many who side with this position do not provide reasons for doing so.\(^{34}\) Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to take this to mean that those opting for this position do so blindly. As it turns out, there are several arguments that compel the reader of Exod. 4:24-26 to identify Moses as the victim of Yahweh’s attack, and to these arguments proper attention will now be given.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF IDENTIFYING MOSES AS THE VICTIM

The first argument supporting Moses as the victim of Yahweh’s attack is the fact that many early and significant translations of the Hebrew text understood this to be the case. In documenting the variations between the different versions of Exod. 4:24-26, Géza Vermès notes that the following either implicitly or explicitly refer to Moses as the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24: LXX, Targum Onkelos, The Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Peshitta. Because particularly LXX and the Targumim “serve as valuable witnesses of early Jewish tradition,” the fact that they imply Moses to be under attack provides a solid, textual foundation for this argument.

With this foundation in place, the next argument which supports identifying Moses as the victim of Yahweh’s attack comes from those who draw an inference from what transpires in vv. 25-26. Paying careful attention to the fact that Zipporah performs the circumcision (v. 25), several scholars have suggested that this could only have been the case if Yahweh was somehow preventing Moses from performing the circumcision. This inference is strengthened by noting that under normal circumstances, one would have expected Moses to perform the circumcision. After all, not only was he the father; Zipporah was a Midianite and thus perhaps not accustomed to this Hebrew rite. In any case, as Childs writes, “The fact that Zipporah took the lead in circumcising the child is another indication

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37 E.g., Ryken, Exodus, 132; Propp, “Bloody Bridegroom,” 499.

38 Allen, “‘Bridegroom,’” 264, n. 21.
that Moses was under attack and incapable of responding."

The third argument in favor of identifying Moses as the victim of Yahweh’s attack is that despite the fact that vv. 21-23 appear to interrupt the narration of Moses’ journey from Midian to Egypt, “The introductory phrase [of v. 24], ‘It happened on the way,’ immediately establishes the chronological linkage with verse 20.” In this case, since it is unambiguous that Moses is the one traveling in v. 20, then it is logical to presume that v. 24 resumes this travel narrative in reference to Moses after a brief interlude. After all, as Christopher Hays maintains, “The person who is attacked must be the same person who is ‘on the way,’” i.e., Moses, since “it is highly unlikely that the narrative would set the scene with reference to a child who has hardly been a part of the story to this point.” Thus to identify Moses as the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24 adheres to the broader flow of the narrative.

The fourth and final argument in support of identifying Moses as the victim of Yahweh’s attack centers on the occurrence of two verbs in v. 24: בָּקַשׁ and פָּגַשׁ. First, in regard to בָּקַשׁ, it is helpful to recall what Kaplan wrote in regard to identifying Moses as the antecedent. To that end, Kaplan suggested that one must skip over vv.

39 Childs, Exodus, 103.
42 That words can function in the book of Exodus to link together different passages has been demonstrated capably by Charles Isbell (“Exodus 1-2 in the Context of Exodus 1-14: Story Lines and Key Words,” in Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature [ed. David J. A. Clines et al.; JSOTSup 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982], 37-61). Commenting on Exod. 1:8-2:22, Isbell notes that “this first unit of the exodus story introduces words whose significance only gradually becomes fully apparent as the story proceeds” (44; for his full discussion on this, see pp. 44-50). It is his contention that these key words help “demonstrate something of the internal coherence of the exodus story in its present form” (56). Accordingly, we believe that his demonstration of how the key words in Exod. 1-2 are links connecting all of Exod. 1-14 provides warrant for suggesting that the key words in 4:24 are linked to other parts of the Exodus narrative as well. When these links are observed, Moses clearly becomes the victim in 4:24.
21-23 and read vv. 24-26 immediately after vv. 18-20. When this is done, one notices the repetition of the verb בָּקַש (4:19). Additionally, one must also recall that בָּקַש also occurs in 2:15. Thus when the reader realizes that Moses is the one being sought in 2:15 and 4:19, the logical inference is that it is Moses who is once again being sought in 4:24. This connection can be strengthened even further since Kaplan claims that these are the only three occurrences בָּקַש in the Pentateuch when it is linked with death.

Along with בָּקַש, however, scholars have pointed to the verb פָּגַש as another clue indicating that Moses is the antecedent. This verb appears in 4:24 and then in 4:27, and it shares the exact form in both instances. Given that these are the only two occurrences of the verb in Exodus and that in 4:27 its object is clearly Moses (“And the LORD said to Aaron, ‘Go to the desert in order to meet Moses,’ and he went and he met him…”), it is natural to believe that Moses is the object of פָּגַש in 4:24 as well.

**CONCLUSION**

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43 Cf. Hays, “Ritual and Kinship,” 41, who adds that once these verses have been skipped, Moses is clearly the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 24 because he “is referred to by name in verse 20.”

44 Cf. Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible, Exodus* (trans. Walter Jacob; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992), 108; Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 235; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 78. Robinson, “Zipporah,” 451, concurs and adds, “I suggest that a clue to the connection of thought may be found in the use of the word ‘men’ in iv 19. Moses has nothing to fear from mere men, but that does not mean that he is safe, for YHWH himself is now to seek to put him to death.”


46 In both instances, *BHS* reads בַּקָּש (qal, imperfect [prefixed with a waw-conversive], third person masculine singular, with a third person masculine singular pronominal suffix).
We began our investigation regarding the identity of the antecedent of the pronouns in Exod. 4:24 by noting that scholars typically opt for one of four possibilities: “Him” could refer to Pharaoh’s son, both Moses and his son, Moses’ son alone, or Moses alone. In due course it became evident that the first three options fail to satisfy. This reality, in conjunction with the arguments in favor of identifying Moses as the antecedent, namely, this position has a textual basis, accounts for why Zipporah performs the circumcision, adheres to the broader narrative, and makes sense of the narrator’s use of בָּקַשׁ and פָּגַשׁ in v. 24, compels the reader to conclude that Yahweh is here attacking Moses. Accordingly, although this paper has not addressed the question of why Yahweh would attack, we are confident that by identifying Moses as the victim at least one of the “headaches” stemming from this difficult passage has begun to subside.
Naomi and Ruth as the Literary Characters in the Book of Ruth

Rong Xie

INTRODUCTION

In a narrative world, the portrayal of character is a very significant way to mold a good story. Generally, there are three types of characters: the round and full-fledged character, the flat character, and the agent. Typically, the full-fledged characters are delineated in a sense of depth and complexity through their speech and silence, their actions and emotion, the reaction of the other characters, and the words of the narrator. Studying the full-fledged character can help the readers to understand the narrator’s point of view directly and indirectly, and therefore to grasp the meaning of the whole narration. This article will analyze the full-fledged characters Naomi and Ruth in the book of Ruth to appreciate the masterful literary artistry by the narrator and to gain a better understanding of the meaning of this book.

NAOMI, MAIN CHARACTER, PERCEPTUAL POINT OF VIEW

Naomi, the Perceptual Viewpoint

As Adele Berlin observes, “Naomi is the central character in the book. All other characters stand in relation to her.”2 Only in Ruth 1:1-2, Naomi is dependent on Elimelek as his wife, and from Ruth 1:3, this is reversed. The narrator focuses the story, by and large, from Naomi’s perspective. Elimelek is Naomi’s husband (1:3, “And Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died.”). Machlon and Chilion are introduced no longer Elimelek’s children (1:2), but Naomi’s

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1 Adele Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative (ed. David M. Gunn; BLS 9; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 85.
“sons/children” (1:3, 5). Ruth and Orpah are Naomi’s daughters-in-law.3 Even Boaz, a relative of Elimelek’s family side, is first mentioned in reference to Naomi (2:1, “Naomi had a kinsman on her husband’s side”). Furthermore, Obed, the child born to Ruth and Boaz, is depicted as a child who is born to Naomi (4:7).

This focus of attention of the narrator typically present in the first chapter allows the readers to see and feel things through Naomi’s eyes and emotion. Naomi stands on “the centre of the stage in opening tragic account of her life and loss.”4 In 1:3, after her husband died, “she was left with her two sons; in 1:5, “both Mahlon and Chilon also died, and Naomi was left without her two children and her husband.” The death of the three men results into virtual status death for Naomi in that society as a man’s wife and/or mother.5 All her hopes are dashed to pieces. R. J. Magonet notices the alternative of the words from “her sons” to “her children”, which “indicate something of the effect of these deaths on Naomi herself.”6 By shifting to “her children” (ילדייה),7 used only here of a married man, from the more ordinary expression “her sons” (בני) is an unusual strategy by the narrator to delineate Naomi’s loss. Although grown and married men, they were still her babies. Now they were taken from her forever. Observing the nuance difference in her suffering of bereavement will help to understand Naomi’s emotional tone in this chapter.8

At this point in the story, Naomi maintains the name of ‘mother-in-law’, otherwise standing independently by her proper

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3 We should pay attention to a factor that it is not clear until the end of the story which son married which daughter-in-law. Thus, for the narrator the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law is his intention.


6 Magonet, "Character/Author/Reader," 6.

7 Using the verb ילד, the narrator not only draws the readers’ attention to Naomi’s loss, but also sets up a verbal echo to the conclusion of the story (4:16), in which the motif of dead/birth and emptiness/fulfillment is adequately presented. See Edward Fay Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB 7; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 56; Frederic William Bush, *Ruth/Esther* (WBC 9; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1996), 66.

8 Magonet, "Character/Author/Reader," 6-8.
name Naomi. Berlin points out that “[t]he way in which Naomi is named confirms her centrality as a main character, and confirms the importance of the mother-in-law—daughter-in-law relationship.”

**Naomi’s Speech and Silence in the First and Fourth Chapters**

D. N. Fewell and D. M. Gunn assume that the character and motivation of Naomi depicted by the narrator should be pondered more critically. They believe that Naomi is altruistic on the surface, but self-centered underneath. For Fewell and Gunn, first, the speech by Naomi in 1:8-9 and 1: 11-13 presents her attitude to her daughter-in-laws as Judah to Tamar, so “her verbal generosity is but polite rhetoric;” second, after Ruth’s unshakable commitment to accompany her (1:16-17), Naomi’s silence betrays her resentment and frustration (1:18); third, Naomi saying nothing of her loyal companion Ruth in the scene of arrival among the women in Bethlehem suggests a unmovable and self-interest Naomi; finally, Naomi’s odd silence at marriage and birth tells her embarrassment to “own her restoration to Ruth, the Moabite woman.” All in all, she sees herself alone.

If it is the case, why does the narrator present a self-centered

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10 Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "'A Son is Born to Naomi!': Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth,” *JSOT* 40 (1988): 102-4; Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 73-4. Fewell and Dunn proposed five notable silences in the Book of Ruth on the reader’s understanding of Naomi. “They are: 1. Naomi’s silence at Ruth's final determination to go on with her to Bethlehem; 2. Naomi’s silence about Ruth on her arrival in Bethlehem; 3. Naomi’s silence about her kinsman Boaz, until prompted by Ruth's story of success at gleaning; 4. Ruth's silence about her own part in the threshing floor scene when she returns to Naomi the next morning; 5. Naomi’s silence about Ruth at the birth of Obed.” See, Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi," 100. The 1st, 2nd, and 5th silences will be argued in this section, the 4th silence will be discussed in Ruth’s section, and the 3rd silence is not a vital issue and we just ignore it.
11 Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi," 103; Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 74.
Naomi to the readers? What is his purpose? Through the plot of the story, the author aims at several binary opposite themes: emptiness/fullness, famine/food, childless/offspring, misfortune/good fortune, bitterness/joy, etc. Since the depiction of the characters should serve the artistry of the plot, our analysis of the characters should follow the narrator’s intention, for “[t]rajectory and plot are in the first place.” In the story of Ruth, Naomi is the subject of the motif emptiness and fullness. The speech and the silence of the character, Naomi, should embody its themes.

In the first place, Naomi’s sending away of her daughters-in-law can be seen as the product of her plight. The hopeless future in her sight provokes her to consider the welfare of her daughter-in-laws. The slight change addressed by Naomi from “each woman” (1: 8) to “my daughters” (1:11) does not suggest Naomi’s change from selfishness to altruism because of the touching love shown by Orpah and Ruth. In fact, the text itself does not show a change of her attitude toward her daughter-in-laws, since she already mentioned her daughter-in-laws’ future security in 1: 9. Actually, the difference between the two speeches is the sense of emptiness and hopelessness. In the first address, Naomi actually tried to disguise her sadness, sending her daughter-in-laws away with pretend nonchalance; while in the second address, Naomi moved by her daughter-in-laws’ love bursts forth her oppressed emotion which contains self-pity of her own hopeless future. There are, indeed,

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15 Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 84.
16 Magonet, Bible Lives, 34. Magonet assumes in the first speech, Naomi wanted to strip of all human companionship and deeply whelmed in her sorrow and emptiness. But in the second time, after the display of love shown by Orpah and Ruth, Naomi became again a mother and began aware of the welfare of the daughters.
similarities between the Naomi-Ruth story and the Judah-Tamar story (marriages to foreign women, deaths of sons), but the former did not duplicate the latter. The narrator did not make comments on the attitude of Naomi toward her daughter-in-laws as that of Judah toward Tamar (Gen 38: 11, 26). Rather, Ruth 1:13 suggests that Naomi thought her misfortune as a result of God’s hand against her. Obviously, Naomi’s reason differed from Judah’s. Even if Naomi might have thought of it, it is not the narrator’s emphasis.

Concerning Naomi’s silence after Ruth’s remarkable speech, it might be a literary technique of the author. Alter points to a desire to avoid excessive repetition by the narrator: “[A] writer who has contrived to have something repeated three times may want to resist the fourth time.”17 Since Naomi already persuaded Ruth three times (1:8-9, 11-13, 15), the further persuasion would be redundant.18 Therefore, I agree with P. W. Coxon’s opinion that Naomi’s silence is not “the silence of stony resistance but the silence of consent.”19

As mentions to Naomi’s silences about Ruth on her arrival in Bethlehem and at the birth of Obed, it fully displays the gorgeous literary technique of the author. Alter points out, “When someone’s silence is actually isolated for narration, we may infer that the refusal or avoidance of speech is itself a significant link in the concatenation of the plot.”20 In the former case, among the whispers of the women in Bethlehem, Naomi complained her empty life in bitterness (she changed her name to “Mara”, bitter). She depicted that the LORD Shaddai had testified against her. Thus how could it be any different having a companion Ruth, her daughter-in-law, the Moabitess? In this sense, she saw Ruth invisible. Here, the perceptual viewpoint of the narrator was different with Naomi’s. Naomi returned to Bethlehem in the beginning of the harvest season, which is a

18 Magonet mentions the striking reptition of the verse (שבת and חורף). According to the Rabbinical interpretation, “one should turn away a potential convert to Judaism three times, but if they persist, then they should be accepted.” (Magonet, "Character/Author/Reader,"12)
20 Alter, Biblical Narrative, 79.
symbolical sign, precisely with Ruth, who would be the agent of God, “an unrecognized blessing,”\textsuperscript{21} to bring hope in Naomi’s life. Therefore, Naomi’s silence in this scene about Ruth fully presented her emptiness, hopelessness, and bitterness, although it was not quite as complete as she thought.\textsuperscript{22}

In the latter case, we hear the fulfillment, fertility from the mouths of the women in Bethlehem. It is a strategy of the narrator to echo the words said by Naomi to the women in Bethlehem in the former case. The words by the women are more powerful to testify the changed situation of Naomi from bitter to sweet, from empty to full. Coxon persuasively argues that,

“Our reading of the closing verses then offers a more optimistic interpretation of Naomi’s last silence. All the main characters are silent at this point. Problems have been resolved and it is left to a third party, the observant chorus of women, to describe what Naomi experiences. In this way we can stand with them and share the spectacle.”\textsuperscript{23}

The women testified of Ruth’s love toward Naomi and of the significant value of Ruth: “who is better to you than seven sons.” (4:15) Further, Ruth was proved an agent of God whose providence fulfilled the emptiness of Naomi through the lips of the women (4:14) and the direct view of the author (4:13). Echoing her pain and childless in the first chapter, Naomi found her security and became a mother in the last chapter: “A son has been born to Naomi.” (4:17) The narrator completed the character Naomi in fullness and joy and left the readers room to contemplate God’s amazing providence.

\textsuperscript{22} Robert L. Hubbard Jr., \textit{The Book of Ruth} (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 108.
\textsuperscript{23} Coxon, "Was Naomi A Scold,” 36.
A surprising agent of God

Ruth
“The Moabitess” (1:22)

Naomi—Women of Bethlehem
Death, Emptiness, Bitterness, “YHWH has testified against me” (1:21)

(SETTING)

Ruth
“Better than seven sons” (4:15)

Naomi—Women of Bethlehem
Birth, fullness, sweetness, “[YHWH] has not left you” (4:14)

Table: Naomi’s silences about Ruth on her arrival in Bethlehem and at the birth of Obed

RUTH, HEROINE, INTEREST POINT OF VIEW
Berlin excellently points out that “the distinction between perceptual point of view and interest point of view is important in the Book of Ruth”. 24 Ruth becomes the focus of the readers. She never leaves the mind of the narrator, even in the fourth chapter, where she is the topic of conversations. Ruth is the heroine, since she is the energetic initiator and the subject of the quest. 25 Thus, although the story is perceived from Naomi’s viewpoint, it is Ruth who promotes the process of the story and facilitates Naomi’s fulfillment. The stirring moment of the readers’ interest for Ruth began at her remarkable confession in Ruth 1:16ff. From that time, the destinies of Naomi and Ruth were interlocked in the story. And also from that time, Ruth stood at the center stage of the story, being the interest point of view of both the narrator and the readers.

24 Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 84.
25 Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Narrative, 78 and 82. Fokkelman proposes three conditions in search of the hero within the narrative: “Is the hero the subject of a quest? Is he/she mostly or permanently present in the text? Finally, does the hero or heroine show initiative?”
**Ruth, the Loyalist**

The narrative is focused on the character Ruth and her incredible loyalty to Naomi. She risks her very life three times, each time on behalf of her mother-in-law.\(^{26}\)

In chapter 1, Ruth threw her life and death away, when she clung to Naomi whose life was being shadowed in the hopeless emptiness. The narrator uses Ruth’s action and speech presenting her fidelity. In Ruth 1:14, the narrator uses the word הָנֵּה “cling to” to delineate Ruth’s action. Outside of the Book of Ruth, the Hebrew word is most frequently used to describe the intimate relationship between man and God, or that between man and woman. Here, therefore, Ruth’s action is striking,\(^{27}\) emphasizing her commitment to Naomi.\(^{28}\) Actually, Ruth’s action surprised her mother-in-law, so Naomi blurted out הָנֵּה “look”\(^{29}\) to highlight the fact that her sister-in-law had gone back and asked her to go back again. In the narrator’s elaborated trilogy of dialogue, we see a much determined statement of Ruth after Naomi’s urging.\(^{30}\) Ruth began her poetic and


\(^{27}\) Ruth’s action reveals her motives and embodies her loyalty to Naomi in this verse. The narrator’s descriptional function of action in 1:14 belongs to the category in Fokkelman’s concept of action. He mentions that “Acting in the strict sense, enduring, and suffering are economically supported by descriptive and explanatory sentences, in which the narrator offers some background, sketches a situation, or reveals motives or purpose.” See Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Narrative, 75.

\(^{28}\) Berquist proposes that “when Ruth clings to Naomi, Ruth takes the male role in initiating a relationship of formal commitment, similar to marriage.” (See Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation," 27) In the Book of Ruth, however, the narrator uses the same word only to describe a intimate relationship which does not imply a male role at all (2:9). Thus, Berquist overstates the word’s function.

\(^{29}\) Berlin points out that in the Book of Ruth, in direct discourse הָנֵּה functions “as an emphatic, registering attention or surprise, and best translated by ‘Look!’ (1:15; 3:2).” See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 95.

\(^{30}\) As Berline mentions that “the dialogue is not just an embellishment to make the presentation more scenic, but that it also plays a vital role in the narrative structure.” See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 106. The structure of the dialogue in 1:6-19b:
formal speech with the parallel and redundant use of infinitive ("to abandon you or return from following you"), followed by a series of the rhythmic parallel of "You….I," climaxing by death and burial, and finished by a concluding oath in the name of YHWH.\textsuperscript{31} The narrator depicts a Ruth who abandoned her own roots and chose Naomi, the Israelite, and YHWH by the forceful speech. Ruth convinced her mother-in-law and the readers that she is utterly willing to remain with Naomi. Thus, the narrator not only represents an allegiant Ruth to Naomi, but also a "returned" Ruth to embrace the covenant community and her God.\textsuperscript{32} P. Trible points out that this is one of the most heroic pictures within the Scripture, even comparable with Abraham’s journey to the Promised Land.\textsuperscript{33} I believe this picture was indeed an allusion by the narrator, which was reinforced

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A  vv.6-7  Naomi prepared to return to Judah with her daughter-in-laws
   B  vv.8-9a  Naomi’s speech: send away her daughter-in-law
      C  v9b-10  Orpah’ and Ruth’s action and speech: stay with Naomi
   B’ vv.11-13 Naomi’s speech: send away her daughter-in-law
      C’ v.14  Orpah’ and Ruth’s action: Orpah left and Ruth stay
   B’’v.15  Naomi’s speech: send away her daughter-in-law
      C’’v16-17 Ruth’s speech: saty with Naomi
A’ vv.18-19b Naomi returned to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law


\textsuperscript{32} Gow, Book of Ruth, 101, n8. This motif of a returned Ruth is also embodied in the structure of the trilogy of dialogue. The echo between 1: 6-7 and 1:18-19b frames the trilogy of speeches by Naomi and Ruth and presents another theme “return” of chapter 1. See footnote 29 above. Further, the verb “return” is a key verb in ch.1 and happened 12 times (1x, v.6, v7, v.8, v.10, v.11, v.15, v.16, v.21; 2x, v.12, v.22). Moreover, Ruth was said to have returned to Bethlehem by Boaz’s foreman. Actually, Ruth returned to her unknown but true homeland of her new destiny. See Alter, Biblical Narrative, 58-9.

\textsuperscript{33} Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 168. Nielson thinks that, “The portrayal of Ruth’s departure echoes that of Abram when he left his land, his family, and his father’s house to go to the land that God would show him. But where Abram set off at the word of God, Ruth dares to break away with no word of any kind. The story shows, however, that this was counted to her advantage. Ruth is here depicted…as a new and better version of Abram.” (Nielson, Ruth, 16.) Also see Alter, Biblical Narrative, 59.
by Boaz’s praise toward Ruth (2:11).  

In chapter 2, again, Ruth strived for survival of Naomi and herself, gleaning in a foreign field. For both Ruth and Naomi, survival was a major issue in a world where food and security are fundamental. In the ancient Israelite society, a widow without sons, typically as a foreigner, had a hard time. Ruth had to take her initiative to fight for survival; nevertheless, her astonishing confession was not merely lip-service.

It may have been true in the Hebrew Law that Ruth had no need to confine her gleaning to the plots of friendly landowners, but Ruth’s statement might picture a real Israelite society. I agree with Gow’s opinion that the repeated command concerning gleaning in various codes (Lv. 19:9; 23:22; Dt. 24:19) suggests that it was not always willingly practiced. Thus, it is not an easy task to pick up the leftover grain even during the harvest. Further, Boaz’s orders to his men in 2:15-16, Naomi’s words to Naomi in 2:22, and the setting of the days of the judges by the narrator, are all clues of dangers facing a woman working in a field. However, Ruth courageously faced the situation, gleaning in the fields for long hours, facing the possible threat from villains, being humble before the landowner, bringing the subsistence food for her mother-in-law and herself. As the foreman proved, Ruth was a hard worker (2:7). In addition, the character Ruth consistently bound herself to Naomi, not only bringing food for Naomi during the whole harvest, but also obeying Naomi. Her

34 Boaz’s praise toward Ruth (2:11): “you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.” Abraham’s call (Gen 12:1): “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

35 The repeated call in the Hebrew law to protect “the alien, the fatherless and the widow” reflects this fact, because a Israelite woman, in terms of her legal and economic status, is regularly either someone’s wife or daughter. See Magonet, Bible Lives, 40; West, "Ruth," 211.


37 Gow, Book of Ruth, 48-9. Gow mentions that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, e.g. Isaiah 1:23; 10:1-2; Malachi 3:5; Psalm 94:1-7, also indicates widows are frequently deprived of their rights.

gleaning in the field got Naomi’s permission first and her staying with Boaz’s girls was keeping Naomi’s direction.

Actually, this Ruth found herself in the field of Boaz who showed her חסד, kindness and generosity. The narrator uses the verb קרה (to happen)\(^{39}\) to suggest the action of divine providence in Ruth’s fortuitous arrival at the field of Boaz. (cf. Gen 24:12) While Ruth and Naomi strived for their survival, the narrator’s technique alludes that their security and strength were found in God. It is He guiding Ruth’s footsteps to the field of Boaz out of human design.\(^{40}\)

Finally, in chapter 3, Ruth risked reputation and perhaps her happy future at the threshing floor with Boaz, seeking marriage for herself and redemption for Naomi and her husband’s family. In the narrator’s chronological information in Ruth 2:23, seven weeks had already passed. Such a long delay between Boaz’s initial interest in Ruth and his extreme reticence with regard to Ruth leads both women in plight to the outrageous and crucial plan that strives for their fate.\(^{41}\) Ruth initatively followed Naomi’s plan, going to the threshing floor at night, lying down at his feet after Boaz ate and drank and lay down. She quietly waited for the crucial moment till Boaz woke up and inquired as to her identity. At that moment, she uttered her request of not only marriage\(^{42}\) but also levirate marriage toward Boaz, which highlighted her incredible devotion to Naomi.

In fact, she did not do “all” that Naomi asked (3:5). Ruth initatively carried out the request not only for her marriage but also

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\(^{39}\) The verb קרה (to happen) is taken as the use of the convention which suggests the action of divine providence. See Gow, *Book of Ruth*, 49-50; Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 51-60.

\(^{40}\) West, "Ruth," 211.

\(^{41}\) Holbert, "Encounter with Ruth," 132-33; Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation," 31. Boaz failed to act initatively toward Ruth. It becomes an important issue to rule him out as the hero in the Book of Ruth. Although he acted honorably later at the trial to be the redeemer of Ruth and Naomi, his action was only promoted by Ruth.

\(^{42}\) Although Ruth did not say the word “marriage,” the sentence (“spread your cloak כנף over your servant”) indeed symbolizes an unequivocal request for marriage (cf. Isa. 4:1). See Sasson, *Ruth*, 81. Further, Ruth’s request for marriage echoed Boaz’s blessing toward Ruth in 2:12, in which Boaz prayed God’s wing (כנף) to protect Ruth and reward her. It suggested Boaz to be the agent of the Lord to protect Ruth. See Gow, *Book of Ruth*, 105-6.
for Naomi’s security rather than waiting for Boaz’s instruction (3:4). It was not of her misunderstanding Naomi’s arrangement of a romantic mission.\(^{43}\) I agree with Sasson’s analysis on the different words of “kinsman” by Naomi (מדעת)\(^{44}\) and by Ruth (גוּלָם)\(^{45}\), which are the author’s technique to depict that Ruth and Naomi loved each other.\(^{46}\) In the quite long instruction to her daughter-in-law, Naomi did not mention one word about Boaz in terms of his function as the redeemer (גוּלָם). She only desired to “seek a happy future for one who risked all in her behalf.”\(^{47}\) On the contrary, Ruth’s request of marriage was uttered in light of Boaz’s identity as the redeemer (גוּלָם), which she learned from Naomi in 2:20, because her commitment and affection to Naomi made her willing to interlock her happiness with Naomi’s.\(^{48}\)

Probably both Boaz and Ruth knew, according to the Law, that Boaz had no obligation to offer levirate marriage for Naomi’s family,\(^{49}\) since doing it Boaz might endanger his own estate (4:6) and

\(^{43}\) Berlin thinks Ruth misunderstood Naomi’s instruction here. See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 90.

\(^{44}\) The word מָדָעַת is only used here by Naomi in the Hebrew text as a kinsman.

\(^{45}\) The word גוּלָם is a technical term for the relative responsible for getting others out of debt or preserving the family land for the dead. See Magonet, Bible Lives, 40; Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 89.

\(^{46}\) Sasson, Ruth, 83. Sasson points out that there are no parallel or replaced use between these two words, therefore it is unnecessary to equate them.

\(^{47}\) Sasson, Ruth, 83. Although Fewell and Gunn believe that Naomi indeed exploited Ruth’s apparent beauty for her own purpose and that she wanted to entrap the pillar of society and enforce marriage, since Boaz had no obligation to offer levirate marriage for Ruth, their assumption cannot find evidence in the text itself. See Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 77-9.

\(^{48}\) Sasson, Ruth, 81-2. Sasson thinks that Ruth carried out two requests: her marriage and Naomi’s redemption. Therefore the relative word should be understood in its corroborative sense rather than in its causal sense. His interpretation of this word is based on his understandings of 1) that intercourse between Boaz and Ruth had occurred at the threshing floor (Sasson, 93-4) and 2) that the trial at the gate was not to deal with a levirate marriage but rather two separate tasks (Sasson, 120-32; Cf. Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 89-90.). We shall deal with these issues in the next section.

\(^{49}\) Although I disagree with the scholars who suggest that Ruth did not ask for levirate marriage to Boaz, I agree that Boaz had no obligation to offer marriage
interests. On the other hand, Ruth the young widow was also not abided to levirate marriage; even she lived at the land of Israel (3:10). Therefore, Ruth’s request might sacrifice her happy future when she thought of her mother-in-law’s well-being in a way of levirate marriage. Thus, the narrator uses the lips of Boaz to praise Ruth’s deeper concern (חסד, “kindness”) to Naomi (3:10). Her latter חי, which referred to her levirate marriage request, was even more significant than the former חי, which referred to her following Naomi to return to Israel. Actually, it exemplified not only Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi but also to the family, continuing the line of her deceased husband. In another words, it presented Ruth’s fidelity to the covenantal law.

Promoted by Ruth’s fidelity to her mother-in-law in a way of Mosaic Law, Boaz responded to her in an honorable way, promising Ruth that he would do all she asked. And so Ruth carried the six measures of barley as well as Boaz’s promise, and in the early morning light came back to her mother-in-law, reporting what had happened to her. By the lips of Naomi, the narrator implies to the readers that Ruth, who performed the true חי, would receive a satisfied answer for her request.

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50 For example, Tamar’s brother-in-law was not willing to produce offspring for his brother (Gen. 38:8-10). The Book of Ruth does not provide the concrete answer how the redeemer’s own inheritance would be affected (4:6). It might assume that the male heir born of levirate marriage would inherit not only the property of the dead but also a share of the redeemer’s own estate.

51 E. W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," VT 31(1981): 138-44, 257-68. Davies mentions that there are two purposes for levirate marriage. One is to produce a male offspring to maintain the property of the dead and another is to ensure the widow’s protection and support even if she does not have a child.

52 Concerning Ruth’s speech in 3:16-17, I agree with Berlin’ view. She suggests that although we lack the original speech in the text, Ruth’s speech is believable. We do not know why Boaz gave Ruth the barley; we know it from Ruth’s perception. Further, Berlin thinks that the absence of the narrator’s point of view here tends toward Ruth’s viewpoint. See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 98.
Ruth, the Moabitess, the Worthy Woman

In the Book of Ruth, naming is the narrator’s technique to present “significant relationships and ways of viewing characters.” The appellations of the character Ruth reveal the story as an elaborate art. Despite the familial terms “daughter” and “daughter-in-law” in regard to the intimate relationship with Naomi, Ruth is labeled a quite persistent name “Moabitess” by the narrator or other characters. It is properly true that the original readers of the Book of Ruth must struggle with a potential prejudice against Ruth addressed as a Moabitess. Yet Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, identifies herself with the life and fate of her mother-in-law in trouble to show her merit of loyalty and finally she joins with Israel.

However, Ruth maintained the archetypal role of stranger among the Israelites until she finds a home with Boaz. In the narrative world, the progressive shifting of the naming between Boaz and Ruth brings insight into Ruth’s identity. On the one hand, Ruth’s three terms in reference to herself before Boaz (נכריה “foreigner,” 2:10; שפחה “maidservant,” 2:13; and Másד “handmaid,” 3:9) reflect a change of status from low to high, from an impersonal relationship to a closer relationship of dependency. In particular, the naming Másד “handmaid” implies to the readers that on the threshing floor, Ruth saw herself as of “ranking among those females who might be taken

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53 Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 87.
54 The name “Moabitess” (1:22, 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10) suggests that the story might “be wrestling with the problem of identity” and that it might be “part of an ongoing tension in the Bible between Israel and its relationship to foreigners.” See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 88.
55 Concerning the Moabite, their father of her people was born of the incest (Gen. 19:32-38). The Law said that Moabite shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord even to the tenth generation. (Deut 23:3). The Israelites were seduced by the daughters of Moab to worship other gods, which brought a deadly plague among Israel, during the wanderings in the wilderness.
58 Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 88.
by a freeman either as a concubine or as a wife.”

On the other hand, Boaz’s terms in regard to Ruth also progress, from the first time נערה “girl” (2:5), to “my daughter” (2:8), and, finally, to “a worthy woman” at night (3:11). Sasson rightly points out that by using this typical term שֶׁת חִיל “a worthy woman,” Boaz not only raised Ruth’s status to that of his own, but also she was now viewed as an ideal wife as mentioned in Proverbs 31.

Ruth, the worthy woman, encountered Boaz, איש בור חיל “a man of substance,” (2:1), who acted honorably at night in the threshing floor, promised security for both Ruth and Naomi, and adhered to the procedures of legitimate succession. Here, it is worth

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59 Sasson, Ruth, 53, 80-1. It should pay attention to the difference between the appellations שפחה “maidservant” and מָה “handmaid,” the former being of lower status than the latter. In in 1 Sam 25:42, Abigail used both terms in a way which shows their difference. ‘Look, your servant is but a שפחה to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.’ Abigail is an מָה but wants to further reduce herself to a שפחה in reference to David. See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 89.

60 In Prov. 31: 10-31, the term of שֶׁת חִיל “a worthy woman” is described a paragon of a honorable and gifted wife.

61 Sasson, Ruth, 87-8; Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 89.

62 These two noble characters, Ruth and Boaz, acted at night in the temptation (ch. 3) which was described by the narrator “full of double entendres, most of which can be euphemisms for sexual terms.” The author successfully created a pervasive ambiguity to increase a dramatic tension which may even cause the readers to doubt whether intercourse had occurred on the threshing floor. Bernstein points out that the narrator skillfully handled “ambiguity of language to depict the tension of emotion, enabling him to convey the atmospherics of the scene without digressing from his narrative to describe them.” A careful reader, however, understand that “nothing untoward took place that night, but rather that Ruth and Boaz rose above the culture, maintaining goliness.” Otherwise, as Bernstein mentions, “It was a shame with Boaz tricking the unnamed redeemer into relinquishing his rights a woman who has already physically bound herself to Boaz. We confidently know that the narrator depicted Boaz as a noble character, so it wouldn’t be his trick. Furthermore, the narrator has his proper phrase בֹּוא אֶל to describe the sexual relationship (4:13). It confirms the readers to avoid distraction of double entendres. See J. Bernstein, "Two Multivalent Readings in the Ruth Narrative," JSOT 50 (1991):17, 20; Harry J. Harm, "The Function of Double Entendre in Ruth Three," JOTT 7 (1995): 25-6; Linafelt, Ruth and Esther, 46, 63.

63 Concerning the loyalty of Boaz toward the Law, it should deal with the readings in 4:5, either the MT (Kethib) reading (קָנִיתִי, “I acquire”) or the Qere reading (קָנִיתָה, “you acquire”) in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Syriac. Those scholars, who prefer the Kethib reading, often assume that Boaz and Ruth had a
mentioning a symmetrical structure of comparison in Ruth, with which the author ingeniously presents both the man of substance and the worthy woman. In Chapter 4, the narrator compared Boaz with the unnamed redeemer. The closest relative refused to fulfill the role of family redeemer. He didn’t make a blunder, since he had no obligation to marry Ruth in a way of levirate marriage. Nevertheless, he also did nothing memorable. He remains anonymous in the narrative world.  

This Mr. So-and-So contrasts sharply with Boaz’s adherence to the law and his interests of the family of the deceased one. Corresponding to the contrast between Boaz and the unnamed redeemer, the narrator uses a similar comparison between Ruth and Orpah. In Chapter 1, when Orpah left Naomi to look for her own happiness, she did not make a mistake. However, her behavior provided a perfect foil for Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi. Obviously, physical relationship. If the Kethib is original, however, it largely weakens the noble character of Boaz delineated by the narrator. Indeed, it is too difficulty contextually. I believe that the Qere is probably original. First, as Boaz stated in 3:13 that there was a nearest kinsman who had the first right to require in a way of levirate marriage, the Qere reading provided such option. Second, as Ruth bonded her marriage and the field together in a way of levirate marriage, only the Qere reading presented the same package deal. I believe that it was not the narrator’s intention that Boaz won his marriage and the field by tricking the unnamed redeemer. On the contrary, the narrator created a tension that the unnamed redeemer might respond to Ruth’s request. However, it was the hidden hand, YHWH himself directing to the happy ending out of human design. Thus, as Berlin suggests, “It is not that by fulfilling his obligation as redeemer that Boaz appears so loyal to the interests of the family; rather his loyalty is in his willingness to relinquish that privilege if law or custom demanded it.” See Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 85-6; Frederic W. Bush, Ruth, Esther (WBC 9; Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1996), 216-7.

Berlin is right that “Boaz could never have called the goel Mr. So-and-So. He would have used the goel’s proper name. What we have here is the presence of the narrator coming though his story; we are suddenly conscious of the teller in addition to the tale. We are not really present at the conversation between Boaz and the goel, but are hearing a second-hand report of it from the narrator.” See, Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 99.

the narrator made the worthy woman Ruth and the man of substance Boaz a perfect match for each other. Then, the Moabitess Ruth found her new identity in Israel through the wedding blessing of the elders at the gate. She was listed in the ancestors who built up the house of Israel (4:11-12). In this moment, the voice of the narrator sounded again to testify that the Lord was the hidden hand, the blessing fountain (4:11, 13), who granted marriage and childbirth as the special blessing dear to Ruth and Naomi. Under God’s wings, both of them finally found their destinies.

**CONCLUSION**

The narrator uses speech, action, repetition, word play, comparison, etc. to describe the full-fledged characters, Naomi and Ruth. Through the vivid characters, the narrator masterfully presents the theological themes of the book of Ruth.

Emerging out of the chaos of the days of the judges, the character Ruth played her role as a woman of compassion and loyalty

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Ch.1 People who died before main action

**Ruth↔Orpah**

Women of Bethlehem — Naomi

Ch.2

Naomi — Ruth
Boaz — servant
Boaz — Ruth
Boaz — servants
Naomi — Ruth
Naomi — Ruth
Boaz — Ruth

Ch.3

Naomi — Ruth
Naomi — Ruth
Boaz — Ruth

Ch.4

**Boaz↔The unnamed redeemer**

Naomi — Women of Bethlehem

People who were born after main action

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66 Linafelt rightly points out, “[t]he ‗gate’ in the Bible represents the place of public, male power; a place where legal decisions and economic transactions take place in the presence of other men who wield power in a patriarchal society.” Linafelt, *Ruth and Esther*, 64.
to commit herself to her mother-in-law Naomi, who was suffering emptiness and hopelessness. Both of them as marginal women in the narrative world strived for their survival and sought to preserve the family. Nevertheless, human initiative is futile without God’s participation and blessing. From Ruth and Naomi, the readers know that they can only find the solidarity and strength in God. \(^6^7\) It precisely presents the core motif designed by the narrator that, as Nielsen rightly points out, “Ruth presents two women who despite loss and hardship are part of Yahweh’s redemptive plan—as more than passive victims.”\(^6^8\) The Lord is working on the life of ordinary people in a way of hidden and continuous providence. \(^6^9\)

The highly artistic narrative frames its characters Ruth and Naomi with the historical setting of the judges and the genealogy of David. Comparing with the corrupted people in Israel, the Moabitess Ruth abandoned her own roots and embraced Naomi, the covenantal community, and the Lord. She of all people was elected by God. Her marriage was blessed with memories of the patriarchs and she became the ancestress of King David, the greatest monarch in Israel. \(^7^0\) It is this God who is free to choose whoever embraces Him and is the master of history. \(^7^1\) Corresponding to Ruth’s ḥesed toward Naomi, the Lord granted her unexpected ḥesed. Therefore, the way of depicting Ruth is a very skillful way by the narrator not only to defend the Moabite strain in David’s ancestry, but also to testify the Davidic dynasty as the abundant and continued blessing of YHWH. \(^7^2\) Viewing the scriptures as a whole, the remarkable confession of Ruth to Naomi is properly seen as an echo of the earlier separation of Lot from Abraham. Ruth’s commitment to Naomi is a reunion, which even death cannot separate, between the families of Lot and Abraham.

\(^6^8\) Nielsen, Ruth, 30-32.
\(^6^9\) Grant, "Literary Structure," 441; Longman and Dillard, Introduction to the Old Testament, 149.
\(^7^0\) Nielsen, Ruth, 1.
\(^7^1\) Grant, "Literary Structure," 441.
\(^7^2\) Gow, Book of Ruth, 139; Prinsloo, "Theology of the Book of Ruth," 340.
It brings forth the new birth of salvation. Through this loyal Ruth, the Divine Architect arranges “His Son, the Savior of the world, to be born into that world through the lineage of David.” (Matthew 1)

The Vision of the Surveyor and the Accompanying Oracle: 
*Zechariah 2.5-17*

*Nevada DeLaap*

I. Introduction

Contemporary news accounts are filled with stories of displacement and exile. The images of gaunt refugees haunt television screens, and the brutal reality of conquest gives even the coldest heart pause. These are people whose lives have been shattered, their homes taken, and their families extirpated. Some manage to escape only to find the promised heaven of a refugee camp a living hell. Others find themselves slaves in their own land. In such instances, hope is in short supply while religious leaders struggle for words that will bring comfort to sorrowing hearts.

In some ways little has changed in 2600 years. In the early part of the 6th century B.C., the small kingdom of Judah was caught between the imperial interests of Egypt and Babylon. When the smoke cleared, all that remained of its capital city was a few fire-scarred stones. Close to a century later the Jewish refugees were allowed to go home, but there was little incentive to go back. All hope seemed lost. Indeed, the exile would prove to be a watershed in Judah's history. Everything would be measured as coming before or after it.¹

*Zechariah 2.5-17* displays the efforts of one Hebrew prophet to speak a word of comfort in the midst of such sorrow. The third of eight visions, the pericope calls the exiles back to the God they had abandoned. The prophet reminds them that even though darkness surrounds them, there still is hope. Drawing on themes characteristic of Ezekiel and 2nd Isaiah, he paints a vivid picture of God's protection and blessing. Though Israel and Judah have been unfaithful, God will remember his covenant and renew his people. The Divine Presence

¹Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 284. The authors note that even modern historians divide “the latter part” of Israel's history into pre-exilic and post-exilic.
will dwell in the rebuilt temple, and God will be a wall of fire consuming Judah's enemies. Exile will finally be over. The oracle following the vision provides a foil to the glories of restoration, describing the horrors that will come upon Babylon. Any Jews left in the city must flee to Jerusalem, the paradoxical place of safety and rest. As a result the covenant people are exhorted to rejoice and participate in the building of God's kingdom. On a practical level this comfort is intended to drive the post-exilic people to rebuild the temple.

II. Historical Context

Composed after one of the most painful times in Israel and Judah's history, Zechariah 2.5-17 belongs to a period of imperial change. In 587 B.C. Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, fell to Nebuchadnezzar. The victorious Babylonians destroyed the temple of Solomon and carted off Judah's royalty into exile.² The prescient predictions of Proto-Isaiah and Jeremiah became flesh and blood reality. From the prophetic perspective, God was disciplining his people for their failure to keep the covenant (cf. Moses' warnings in Deuteronomy).

Upon the death of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Empire went through a crisis of authority. Scholar John Bright notes that “within seven years the throne had changed hands” three times.³ Eventually Nabonidus, a powerful military leader, emerged to take control and offer some semblance of stability. While Nabonidus was a capable ruler, his religious tastes made him unpopular with the powerful priests of Marduk in Babylon. “A devotee of the moon god Sin,”⁴ he was unconcerned with carrying out the expected cultic duties of a king in Babylon. Instead, leaving his son Belshazzar in charge, Nabonidus neglected appearing for the New Year Festival,

² While the Biblical documents are ambiguous and appear on a cursory reading to indicate a massive relocation effort (especially 2 Kings), it is likely that only a little over 800 people were actually taken into exile. See Provan, et al., 281-282.
⁴ Ibid., 353.
effectively ruining the cultic year. In addition, Nabonidus imported gods from conquered shrines and temples throughout the Ancient Near East. Such a move further alienated the Babylonian priests and had the added disadvantage of angering locals frustrated over the loss of their gods.\(^5\) Thus, when Cyrus of Persia entered Babylon in triumph in 539 B.C., many hailed him as a hero and savior. According to ancient tradition, not a single drop of blood was shed as the army entered the city,\(^6\) and Cyrus wasted no time ingratiating himself in the eyes of the people. Like most of the other Babylonian vassals the Jews in Babylon were overjoyed at Cyrus' victory and hopeful at its religious possibilities.\(^7\) However, there was still a keen sense of disappointment that Babylon had not received the prophesied destruction.

Meanwhile, Cyrus for his part was a shrewd politician and immediately ordered all of the gods harbored in Babylon to be returned to their own shrines and temples.\(^8\) In addition, if a temple had been razed, Cyrus ordered that it be rebuilt with imperial funds. Such a move won him favor among his subjects. In the midst of this imperial generosity, a small remnant of Jewish exiles made the long trek from Babylon back to Jerusalem under the leadership of Shesh-bazzar and later Zerubbabel. There they rebuilt the altar and laid the foundations for a second temple. However, the people surrounding Jerusalem were uneasy with the reconstruction efforts for a variety of political and social reasons.\(^9\) They worked tirelessly

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5 Ibid., 360.
6 Provan, et al., 285. Bright argues for the truth of the account: “One might dismiss this as propaganda were it not for the fact that both the Nabonidus Chronicle and the so-called “Verse Account of Nabonidus” tell much the same story. The Babylonians were more than ready for a change, while toleration was characteristic of Cyrus. Neither Babylon nor any of the outlying cities was harmed. Persian soldiers were ordered to respect the religious sensibilities of the population and to refrain from terrorizing them.” (360)
7 Bright, 360.
8 Ibid.
9 The identity of these surrounding “enemies” is not clearly known. According to Provan, et al., it is likely that “Zerubbabel came into conflict only with an ethnically mixed and religiously syncretistic element among those who remained in the land—not the masses” (294). The authors' point is that it is highly unlikely that these persons were simply the lower classes left during the
to stop it and succeeded. It would be over twenty years before the temple would finally be completed.

Cyrus' rule would only last nine years before an untimely death. His son Cambyses would rule the empire for the next eight years managing to annex Egypt before the throne eventually passed to Darius. It would be in Darius' reign that the rebellious city of Babylon would finally exasperate the patience of the Persians, and the Jews would be able to rejoice over its destruction.

According to its opening preface, the book of Zechariah (at least chapters 1-8) was written during the first few years of Darius' reign, most likely in October-November 520 B.C. The book assumes the earlier return from Babylon headed by Zerubbabel, the early attempts at rebuilding the temple stemming from Cyrus' decree, and the community's subsequent discouragements and failures prompted by the hostility of the surrounding peoples. Thus, the book's most likely audience was a smattering of discouraged Jewish exiles camped among the ruins of their former capital city.

It should be noted at this point, however, that their discouragement was only partially the result of opposition to the temple project. Bright and Boda both point out that with the advent of Cyrus, the Jews were hopeful of a grand restoration of Israel. The glories promised by 2nd Isaiah filled them with dramatic hope, but as the years passed and nothing happened, the hope dimmed. Among the exiles themselves there was considerable inconsistency. “The prevalence of syncretistic religious practices show[ed] that many in Judah were anything but dedicated Yahwists.” Likewise, in the mad dash for land, there were plenty of economic struggles and likely a great deal of injustice. How could the inhabitants of Jerusalem hope for the New Creation when its own people were little more than pagans? On top of this, the reality of Darius' military strength

deportation. Similarly, Bright hints that they were a combination of Samaritan aristocracy and non-deported Jews (365-366).

10 For a brief overview of Cambyses' reign see Bright, 364-365.
12 Cf. Bright, 360, 364-365; Boda, 173.
13 Bright, 368.
14 Ibid., 367.
eliminated any hopes at independence. Bright is worth quoting at length:

That the morale of the community was dangerously low is clearly betrayed in Haggai, Zechariah, and Isa., chs. 56 to 66. Indeed, the danger existed that, except in name, the restoration would fail altogether. Hopes had been pitched too high. The glowing picture of the triumphant new exodus and the establishment of Yahweh's universal rule in Zion bore no resemblance to realities... Most of the people wanted to know why hope had been deferred. The pious cried to God for his intervention (Zech. 1:12; Ps. 44; 85), while others began to doubt his power to act (Isa. 59:1, 9-11; 66:5).

It was within this morbid context that Zechariah composed the eight visions given in Zech. 1.7-6.8. Undoubtedly, his intent was not only to bolster the people's hopes, but also to motivate them to finish rebuilding the temple. After all, a rebuilt temple even if smaller than the original would be seen as a foretaste of Ezekiel and 2nd Isaiah's eschatological expectations. Thus, like the concurrent prophecy of Haggai, Zechariah's message was one of comfort and hope.

III. A Detailed Analysis of the Pericope:
A. Delimitation:

Syntactically, Zechariah 2.5-17 comprises a single pericope. This is clear for a variety of reasons. First, verse 5 begins with Zechariah's customary vision formula: “I lifted up my eyes, looked, and behold...” (וָּאֶשֶּׁאֲרִי וַּעֲסֵא הָאֵשֶׁאֲרִי) (cf. 2.1, 5.1, 5.5, 5.9, 6.1). This formula invariably signals, with one exception (5.9) the initiation of a new pericope (i.e. vision) within the vision sequence. In addition there are three other instances where the author of Zechariah uses modified versions of this formula to introduce a new vision (1.8; 3.1; 15

Boda, 173.
16 Bright, 367.
17 I am well aware of the debates surrounding the authorship of Zechariah. For convenience's sake and the reality of lacking an alternative which is not highly speculative, I will take Zechariah 1-8 as the work of Zechariah the son of Iddo.
While they differ from the formula, each includes the requisite “seeing” verb, and two out of the three include “behold” (1.8, 4.2). Second, there is a change in subject between 2.4 and 2.5. The former chronicles the actions of the craftsmen (3 mp) arriving to cut off the horns displayed in the second vision. In contrast, 2.5 begins with the first person singular subject, “I,” referring to Zechariah.

Third, it is that clear verse 17 rounds out the pericope for the following reasons: 1) a change in mood (from an interjection functioning imperatively\textsuperscript{18} to a WaYQTL); 2) a change in person (2 ms to 1 cs); 3) an obvious change in literary genre (oracle to vision); and 4) the presence of a modified vision formula (3.1) to initiate the fourth vision.

While there is little debate in the secondary literature that the third vision begins in 2.5 and the fourth vision begins in 3.1, there is debate on the place of 2.10-17 within the pericope. The material is clearly not part of the third vision in 2.5-9 and represents a shift in literary genre to something resembling a Woe Oracle. However, despite this literary shift, it is my contention that the two units of 2.5-9 and 2.10-17 were intended to be read together. My reasons will become clear in what follows.

B. The Vision and its Meaning:

Zechariah 2.5-17 comprises a relatively small amount of material. The vision itself is briefly described in five verses (vv. 5-9). However, despite its brevity, it contains typical prophetic ambiguity. Thus, like all of Zechariah's night visions, it has promoted a wide range of interpretations and opinions.

The vision begins with the prophet lifting up his eyes to a new scene. Before him stands a man with a “rope of measurement” (חַ֥בַּ֖ל מָדָּֽה), in other words, a surveyor. Conscious of how stretching out a line for measurement has both positive and negative associations,\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Depending on parsing סָּ֔ז could be a Hiphil Imperative.
\textsuperscript{19} Cf. 2 Kgs. 21.13 and Zech. 1.16 which both use a cognate phrase (for a discussion of the similarity of the phrases see Boda, 222). The idea of measurement can symbolize destruction (I.e. 2 Kgs.) and blessing (I.e. Zech. 1.16). However, given its use earlier in Zechariah and the fact that Zechariah frequently
Zechariah asks the man where he is going. The man responds simply: “To measure Jerusalem. To see what is its distance and its length.” Here there are various understandings of the surveyor's actions and intentions. To begin with, Michael Floyd argues in opposition to many commentators that the distinct term “חַבֵּל” refers to the kind of measuring line “used to mark off or subdivide a given area” after construction has been going on for some time. Contrasted with this is the “קו” measuring line mentioned in Zech. 1.16 which is used at the very beginning of the construction process. From this distinction Floyd gathers that Jerusalem was already under construction, and the surveyor's intentions are merely to begin the next phase of the construction project. Floyd's proposal is attractive because it explains the difference in terminology; however, it is difficult to know whether the distinction he makes can be drawn so clearly. It is possible that the meanings of “חַבֵּל” and “קו” overlap to such an extent that they can be used synonymously.

For H.G. Mitchell the surveyor's intentions are cautiously hopeful but still weighed down with pragmatism. The man hopes that the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah is true, but he is concerned that a wall be built for protection before the temple project gets underway. Similarly, Joyce Baldwin suggests that while there was a promise of the builder's line being stretched over Jerusalem in Zech. 1.16, there was no clear indication of how to begin the process. “Was alludes to Ezekiel (who also uses this cognate phrase—Ez. 47.3), it seems likely that the positive connotations outweigh the negative in Zechariah 2. In other words, Zechariah is eagerly hoping that this symbolizes the promised restoration of both the temple and Jerusalem. See H.G. Mitchell, J.M. Smith, and J.A. Bewer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (New York: Scribner, 1912), 137.


See for example Jeremiah 31.39 where the same adjective modifies both “קו” and “חַבֵּל” in Zechariah 2 (חַבֵּל וָקוֹד). Again, also cf. Boda, 222.

Mitchell, 137.
it safe to rebuild the Temple while the city remained defenceless?"  

Elizabeth Achtemeier, meanwhile, imputes a lack of imagination to the surveyor. She argues that the man had “no vision of a greater city.”  

He merely assumed that the new Jerusalem would be identical to the old. In contrast, Barry Webb views the surveyor as a positive character seeking to obey God. His only need is of a “fuller revelation, to enable him to understand the will of God more fully.”  

Much of how one decides this issue depends on how one understands the remainder of the vision.

Suddenly, the interpreting messenger prominent in the preceding visions appears on the scene. This messenger goes forth from Zechariah's presence presumably because he is not needed to interpret. However, upon his departure another messenger rushes after him and commands him to hurry and speak to “that young man” (הַנַַ֥ףַר הַלִָּ֖ז). It is unclear who exactly the “young man” is. Grammatically, the phrase could refer to either Zechariah or the surveyor. Scholars who tend to take a negative view of the surveyor's intentions and/or actions almost universally identify the surveyor as the young man. Those who are more favorably inclined towards the surveyor tend to see the message as addressed to Zechariah. For example, Eugene Merrill, who understands the surveyor's actions to be related to the redistribution of property in Jerusalem, argues that “it is Zechariah who must understand that the city to come will spill out of its ancient walls and that YHWH will become the wall, the measurements of which the surveyor is taking.”  

In one fashion or another, Zechariah learns what the message of the interpreting messenger is to be: “Jerusalem will be like an open region from the many humans and animals in her midst. I, myself,
declares the Lord, will be a wall of fire surrounding her, and I will be the glory in her midst” (vv. 8-9). This direct speech concludes the vision and contains lexical links with what follows.

From this message and its urgency it is difficult to believe that Zechariah is the intended direct recipient. Indeed, the context of the commissioning in vv. 7-8 appears to preclude the possibility. Zechariah, himself, witnesses the commissioning of the interpreting messenger, and we have no report that the message was delivered as one would assume if the message was intended directly for Zechariah. Granted, in the Biblical witness the delivery of a message usually goes unreported; however, because of the context of the visions it seems strange that Zechariah would witness the entire encounter between the two messengers only to hear it all for a second time.\(^{28}\) In addition, the two imperatives in v. 8 (i.e. “Run! Tell!”) are unfounded if Zechariah is the direct recipient (i.e. Where had Zechariah gone?). Merrill tries to get around this by suggesting that the imperatives indicate the imminent redistribution of property.\(^{29}\) However, it is the surveyor who is described as going (ךְּהֹל) in v. 6, not Zechariah.\(^{30}\)

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Zechariah is the intended indirect recipient. As the one who enters the world of the vision on behalf of his listeners, Zechariah must be given all of the relevant information. In one sense, then, it is perfectly acceptable that the Hebrew is ambiguous. Neither the surveyor nor Zechariah are the point of the vision. Rather, the surveyor's actions provide the opportunity for the all-important message which Zechariah must give to the people.\(^{31}\) Barry Webb picks up on this in his commentary when he notes that “it does not really matter who he [i.e. the surveyor] is; it


\(^{29}\) Merrill, 115.

\(^{30}\) The verbal form is a masculine singular Qal Active Participle—in other words, it represents present ongoing action. It is as if Zechariah called out to him as he was in the process of walking out of the area.

\(^{31}\) In a metaphorical sense, one could be tempted to argue that the surveyor represents the post-exilic community.
is what he is doing that is significant.”

This all-important message to the surveyor is replete with emphatic constructions. To begin with, each of the three clauses of the speech operate disjunctively accenting the initial words of the clauses (i.e. the nouns placed in the usual initial position of the verb). The first clause demonstrates a contrastive function with the surveyor's intent to measure the city. The second clause uses the disjunctive construction to highlight the causal connection between it and the first clause. Meanwhile, the third clause uses the disjunctive construction adverbially in a temporal sense to define when the promise of the speech will be fulfilled. Piling on to all of this is the “unnecessary” use of the first person pronoun in the second clause for a further degree of emphasis. Thus, the speech can be read as follows:

פְרָּזותה֙ ת ש ֵׁ֣ב יְרוּשָּלַ ָ֔ם מ רַֹ֥ב אָּדִָּ֛ם וּבְה מִָּ֖ה בוכֹּּֽה (8e): “Don't! For like open regions (ones without walls!) Jerusalem will be inhabited on account of the many humans and animals (every single kind of creature!) in her midst.”

וַאֲנ ִ֤י א ֹֽהְי ה־לָּה֙ נְאֻם־יְהוָָ֔ה חַ֥ומַת א ִ֖ש סָּב ָ֑יב (9a): “Because I, myself (and no other!) will be for her, declares YHWH, a wall of fire surrounding her.”

וֻלְכָּבִ֖וד א ֹֽהְי בְתוכָֹּֽה (9b): “And I will be Glory (yes, glory!) in her midst!”

32 Webb, 81.
33 For a discussion of how word order can affect emphasis in Hebrew see Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 96-99.
34 I am hesitant to state that this is the only “literal” reading. It must be kept in mind that Hebrew (as any language) allows for a variety of options when deciding on the the syntactical function of a particular clause. This does not mean that such decisions are arbitrary; but rather, that they are interpretive decisions, not the result of an automatic unquestionable mechanical process.
35 GKC notes in § 118r that “פְרָּזות” is an example of an adverbial accusative (i.e. “Like open regions...”).
Thematically, the speech is filled with echoes of priestly literature. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, Zechariah is indebted to the other priest-prophet Ezekiel for much of the imagery throughout this chapter. Second, undergirding Ezekiel is the Pentateuch, particularly the book of Leviticus. Overall there are three main priestly images. To begin with the messenger describes Jerusalem as a city without walls because of the many “humans and animals in her midst.” The vocabulary used here is drawn from Genesis 1.26-28 which uses the same words for humans and animals (i.e. אדם and בְּהֵמָה or “Adam” and “behemah” in 1.26). Such a use of priestly terminology to refer to humans and creatures is common throughout the prophets (e.g. Zeph. 1.3 which uses the identical phrase אדָם וּבְהֵמָה) and signals a strong link between Torah and Prophecy. Here as in other contexts the phrase operates as a merismus encompassing all creatures.36

Secondly, the phrase “a wall of fire surrounding” is a two-fold reference.37 First, it echoes Israel's deliverance from the forces of Egypt at the Red Sea. Exodus 14.20-31 relates how YHWH set the pillar of cloud/fire between the camps of the Israelites and the Egyptians. In the morning when the Egyptians were allowed to pursue the Israelites into the Red Sea the text reads that YHWH looked out at the Egyptians from the pillar of cloud/fire and struck them with confusion (וַיַּנְּצֵר הֶּגֶר וְיֵשָׁא יְהוָּה אֶל מַחֲנֵה מְצִיאֵם). Some of the Egyptians recognized their adversary and called on Pharaoh to flee from the Israelites because YHWH was fighting for them (14.25: כי יְהוָּה נַלְחָם).

37 Contra Petersen who claims the question of the wall of fire is impossible to answer before positing the intriguing suggestion that it alludes to the ritual fire altars surrounding the Persian city of Pasargadae (see Petersen, 171). While such an allusion is possible, it seems strange to ignore the clear parallels within Israel’s story—especially parallels found in an event as paradigmatic for Israel's national identity as the Exodus.
Second, the phrase overlaps the third priestly category of Shekinah Glory. In Leviticus 9.24, at the inauguration of the priestly ministry, fire comes out of the presence of the Lord (i.e. the fiery Shekinah Glory covering and filling the tabernacle; cf. Ex. 40.34-38). By extension, this is the same fiery Glory which Ezekiel observed re-entering the temple in Ezekiel 43. Thirdly, as already noted, the final echo of priestly literature in the speech is in the reference to YHWH's Glory and presence. It is an echo of the prevailing theme of the book of Leviticus: a holy God dwelling with His people. Within Zechariah's context, it holds out hope for the renewal of the temple cult. Like Ezekiel before him, Zechariah anticipates the complete restoration of the ritual relationship between God and Israel.

In summary then, the third vision of Zechariah depicts a surveyor going out to measure the future city walls of Jerusalem (presumably for building). This scene occasions a proclamation by the interpreting messenger which paints a different image of the future Jerusalem. There will be no walls because God will be protecting the thriving, rebuilt city. In addition God's presence will have returned to the temple, and as a result God will fight against His people's enemies like He did at the Red Sea.

C. The Oracle and Its Meaning

It is intriguing how many commentaries are determined to treat Zechariah 2.5-9 and 2.10-17 separately. For example, H.G. Mitchell in the International Critical Commentary on Zechariah argues that the two sections must be treated separately because: 1) there is a change in speaker from the interpreting messenger to Zechariah; 2) the audience has changed from those living in Jerusalem to those living in Babylon; and 3) the oracle is an appeal based on all three of the first visions. Nor is Mitchell alone in his suggestion. David Petersen, Elizabeth Achtemeier, and Eugene

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38 Mitchell, 139.
39 Mitchell, 139.
40 Mitchell, 140.
41 Petersen, 185-186.
42 Achtemeier, 109.
Merrill all agree that the oracle must be taken separately for similar reasons.

All in all Mitchell's third argument is the most convincing. The first two reflect an over-reliance on source criticism and a bias against viewing the book as a redactional unity. In one sense Mitchell's third argument is right. The oracle can be seen as the culmination of the first three visions. However, because of the strong lexical coherence between the message in 2.8-9 and the oracle in 2.10-17, it is difficult not to assign a priority of connection between the oracle and the third vision. In fact such a priority makes good sense. On a redactional level, the third vision functions as a pivot to the oracle which then explicates or applies the first three visions with a penultimate emphasis on the third.

The oracle itself is divided into four calls: 1) A first call to flee grounded in the punishment of exile; 2) A second call to flee grounded in God's wrath against Babylon; 3) A call to rejoice for God's presence, electing love, and the conversion of the nations; and 4) A universal call to silence as the Divine Warrior prepares for battle. Merrill observes that this series of calls displays an inverse relationship between the “increasingly narrow parameters of YHWH's inheritance” and the “increasing broadness of His saving activity.” Such poetic movement reflects the use of “intensification,” where the author builds the poem (or in this case, the oracle) in such a way that each line or segment intensifies what

43 Merrill, 119.
44 Both repeatedly use the phrase “נְאֻם־יְהוָָ֑ה” and the words “כָּבוד” and “בתוך”.
45 In arguing for a redactional connection between the third vision and the oracle, I am not suggesting that the oracle is original to this context. Given its emphasis upon the destruction of Babylon it is likely that it was originally given as a warning to Jews in Babylon as Cyrus' armies marched towards the city (i.e. several years prior to the composition of the vision cycle).
47 Merrill, 127.
proceeds it before culminating in a climax.\(^{48}\)

Beginning then with the first segment or call, the prophet begins with a double interjection: “Ah! Ah!” It is difficult to precisely translate. BDB suggests that the word usually has connotations of “dissatisfaction and pain.” However, the authors argue that in this context “הָ֗וי” simply means something like “Attention!” with possibly a “touch of sympathy or pity.”\(^{49}\) Whatever its precise meaning, it expresses the urgency which becomes clear in the next clause. The audience is implored at the command of YHWH to flee from the land of the north (i.e. Babylon). Gesenius argues that here we have an example of the protasis being suppressed because of haste.\(^{50}\) The Qal imperative verb “וְנִֻ֛ס” includes the waw copulative which assumes a protasis. In other words, he takes the waw as functioning causally and assumes that whatever precipitated the “therefore” was left out to give the sense of great urgency. There is merit to Gesenius' suggestion; however, there may be another reason for the inclusion of the waw copulative. As noted above, it is my contention that the oracle must be read in conjunction with the third vision (even if the oracle also functions as an application of the first three visions). It would make perfect sense to take the third vision as the “missing” protasis. Thus, the “הָ֗וי” would function both as an interjection and as a transition to the “therefore, flee!” The first section of v. 10 could then be translated “Attention! Attention! (Because of the vision and its meaning), therefore flee from the land of the north declares YHWH!”\(^{51}\)

The final section of the first call to flee, is a causal “כ י” clause answering the question of why the audience is in the land of the north. As a dependent clause it operates parenthetically: “(Remember you are there) because I scattered you like the four winds.”

The second segment or call begins with the same interjection,


\(^{49}\) BDB, Enhanced Edition, s.v. “הָ֗וי.”

\(^{50}\) GKC, § 154b.

\(^{51}\) I am indebted to Dr. Al Wolters for pointing out to me that the assumed protasis could also be taken from v. 9: “If I will be a wall of fire...then flee...”
but lacks the waw copulative attached to the imperative verb. Here the audience is explicitly defined as Jews living in Babylon. In this call, the prophet tells Zion to “escape” (הלל) from the Daughter of Babylon. The reason for this is not only the good things God is doing in Jerusalem, but also God’s announcement of judgment against Babylon. If the exiles stay, they will be caught in the middle of God's vengeance upon the city. The last clause of v. 12 begins with a causal “כ” clause spelling out why God will do this: “The one touching you, touches the pupil of my eye.” The “כ” clause which follows is asseverative: “Surely, I am about to shake my fist against them, and they will become plunder to their slaves!” After this Divine prediction, the prophet begins speaking again directly to Zion: “Then you will know that YHWH of Hosts sent me.” The purpose of this is to confirm Zechariah’s prophetic credentials.

Having given the general outline of the second call, there is the troubling question of the intervening sentence between the messenger formula in 12a and the recitative “כ” clause mentioned above: “After glory, he sent me to the nations who plunder you” (אחר כבוד שלמהוшие נهذه סלאי). It is not an exaggeration to say that this is perhaps one of the most puzzling passages in Zechariah. Al Wolters in his essay “Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah” notes that if left without emendation there are approximately eight different ways one could construe the sentence. Given the messenger formula, the recitative clause, and the prophet's speech at the end of v. 13, the sentence appears to

52 This would strengthen the case for taking the initial call as transitional.
53 Notice the intensification. There is movement in the oracle from a generic audience living in the land of the north to the specific people of “Zion” living in the “Daughter of Babylon.”
54 In the MT one of the tikkune sopherim where the Masoretes changed “my eye” to “his eye.”
55 Peterson (177) and Baldwin (110) agree with this assessment.
56 This, of course, follows from the Torah's insistence that a true prophet's words will come to pass (cf. Deut. 18.22).
parallel the prophet's speech. In other words, it seems to behave like a parenthetical interjection.\footnote{Mitchell, 141.}

The problematic words, of course, are “after glory” (אַחֵַ֣ר כָ֔בוד). While the scope of this essay limits the amount of attention that can be devoted to this, I propose two tentative suggestions. First, it is striking that some scholars seem to forget the previous mention of “כָּבוד” in 2.9. This is likely due to the prevailing determination to read 2.10-17 as a separate oracle. However, if one takes this as a reference back to 2.9 all of the priestly echoes generated in the vision emerge for a second time. Given the priestly language operant in vv. 14 and 15, it is likely that this reference to “glory” has something to do with the glory of the temple. The second tentative suggestion is a possible textual emendation. If one were to replace the dalet with a resh and the kaf with a bet in “כָּבוד” the phrase could be read as “אַחֵַ֣ר בַּבּוֹר.” “After in the pit, He sent me to the nations who plunder you.” It is interesting that the only other time “בּוֹר” or “pit” is used in Zechariah is in connection with the verbal phrase “שָּלַח” “to send” (i.e. Zech. 9.11—גַּם־אֵַׁ֣תְ בְדַם־בְר ית ָ֗ךְ ש לִַ֤חְת י אֲס ירַַ֨י ךְה֙ מ בָ֔ור א ַ֥ין מִַ֖י ם בוֹֽ׃

Verse 14 begins the third call. While the previous two calls were negative in tone, the third is positive. The Daughter of Zion is called to give a ringing cry of joy\footnote{Peterson notes that “רָּנַ֥י” is only used in contexts associated with YHWH's return to Zion. See p. 179.} and rejoice because YHWH is about to reenter His temple and dwell in the midst of His people. The “הְָ֣זִ֥ה” plus the Qal active participle “בִּּ֛א” denotes the imminence of

58 Mitchell, 141.
59 Boda, 419.
60 Peterson notes that “רָּנַ֥י” is only used in contexts associated with YHWH's return to Zion. See p. 179.
the action. The wait is nearly over. Judah will once again experience the blessing of the manifest presence of God as King. Mitchell points out that the language here is identical to that of Ezekiel 43. In Ezekiel's vision the prophet sees the Glory of the Lord enter the temple from the east. Once the Glory has filled the Lord's house, Ezekiel is told by a man standing nearby that if the people stay faithful to their God, YHWH will “dwell in their midst for eternity” (Ez. 43.6, 9). The language here also echoes the closing lines of the third vision arguing again for a close relationship between the vision and the oracle.

In v. 15 the segment takes a surprising twist. On that day of enthronement many nations will be united to King YHWH, and they will be His people. David Petersen argues that “הֲנָך” here should be understood as the creation of a “single people” out of all nations (including the Jews). This is partially true in so far as the goal is the universal rule of King YHWH. However, the text is here specifying the act of the inclusion of the nations into the people, not the end result of a single people. In other words, v. 15 focuses on the process rather than the completion. Meanwhile, the clause “And I will dwell in your (i.e. the Jews) midst” hints that worship must still pass through the temple. The people who are already a people will witness the engrafting of those who were not a people and provide the means of proper worship for these new “converts.” Once this has

61 See GKC § 116p. Also notice that this is the same construction used earlier in v. 13.
62 Baldwin points out that such such ringing cries of joy are typical of enthronement Psalms (cf. Ps. 84.2). See p. 110.
63 Mitchell, 143.
64 Peterson, 182.
65 Because of the 2nd person singular suffix, it is also possible to read the clause as a reference to the one new people.
66 Mitchell, 144.
67 It is tempting to see a word play in the choice of “להֲנָך” to describe the engrafting process. As is well known, the tribe of Levi (i.e. the priestly tribe) derives its name from this verb. After giving birth to her third son, Leah names him Levi (לְוֵי) with the hopes that her husband will become “attached” to her (וֹּלַָ֔ה אַּֽלְמַּה לָּו ִֽי). It is possible that there is an allusion here to the role of the temple cult in the conversion of the nations.
happened Zechariah's audience will know that YHWH of hosts has sent Zechariah to them as a true prophet.

The language here is clearly Abrahamic. God is promising through Zechariah that the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled. Israel will finally prove to be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12.3), and Abraham will once again turn out to be the father of many “גוים” (Gen. 17.5).

The final two clauses of the third calling segment are an allusion to Deuteronomy 32.9 where it reads, “For YHWH's portion is His people; Jacob is the marked out of his inheritance” (כוּי חַלְּקָה יְהוֵּה וּ֝שִׁפְּרָה חַ֖בֵּל נַחֲלָּתוֹ). The verse is from Moses' final song before his death and recalls God's special electing love when He “divided all mankind” and “set up boundaries for the peoples” while lavishing His protection and love on Israel (Deut. 32.8).

Finally, the oracle concludes with a call for all flesh (i.e. all peoples both the Jews and the nations who will eventually serve YHWH) to be silent before the Lord because He has roused Himself from His holy habitation. The vocabulary used here plays on the “Day of the Lord” theme found in Zephaniah 1.7. The image is of the Divine Warrior roused for battle against His enemies. Thematically, this creates an inclusio with the first call segment. It is as if the prophet rounds out his message with a reminder about the urgency of the situation and the desperate need to flee Babylon.

In summary then, the oracle of 2.10-17 consists of four calls which especially explicate the third vision. The exiles living comfortably in Babylon must flee. Jerusalem will be the new

68 See Mitchell, 144 and Webb, 82-83.
69 Notice the use of the word “חַלְּקָה,” the same word used in the third vision for the measuring “rope.” While not technically an example of lexical coherence, the reference to Deut. 32.9 provides another argument for reading the third vision and the oracle together.
70 Charles Feinberg, God Remembers: A Study of Zechariah, 3rd ed. (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1977), 47: “Some, because of senility, infirmity, or ties of one character or another, had chosen to remain in the heathen capital rather than assay the trying journey to the desolated home of their forefathers.” 19th Century commentator John Trapp deftly applies a proverb to those reluctant to leave Babylon: “they that were born in hell know no other heaven.” A Commentary
capital of the world, and the post-exilic Jewish community will be the means and recipients of blessing. God will again fight for His people, and His presence will manifestly dwell with them in His temple.

IV. The Redactional Intention of the Pericope

All of this leads to the question of intention: what were the final redactor's intentions in 2.5-17? In other words, how did he desire his readers to respond to his composition? In a sense, the answer to this question is clear. The third vision and the oracle were to be taken as God's own words (cf. the repeated use of the prophetic phrase "נְאֻם־יְהוָֹֽה"), and so the post-exilic community was expected to work for this coming re-institution of the kingdom of God. The labor on the temple must go on in faith that God will return in glory. The inhabitants of Judah must not give up hope. Given the historical context outlined in Section II, the vision of the surveyor was undoubtedly intended to comfort a fearful people. The God who had sent them into exile, now offered them tokens of the return of His presence. The land of Judah would once again be a land of prosperity and peace. Thus, words of joy were to be on the lips of the people in the midst of their labor and toil. YHWH Himself will return to dwell with them in Zion! He will be their fiery light and

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It should also be remembered that by the time Zechariah actually composed the vision cycle, Babylon had already fallen twice: the first time to Cyrus and the second time to Darius on account of the rebellion. Because of this, there is also the strong possibility that in writing the (older) oracle into the vision cycle, Zechariah now intended “Babylon” as a metaphor for any place outside of the promised land.

71 Merrill notes that “The insistence by Haggai and Zechariah on the importance of the Temple as the earthly center of YHWH's universal dominion must have provided great impetus to their community to undertake Temple reconstruction as a necessary precondition to that eventuality.” (127)

72 Again Merrill rightly discerns that the “this theology of divine presence...was especially meaningful in the days of the regathered community that
the defense of their life. Of whom should they be afraid (Ps. 27.1)?

V. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, these words were a balm to the spirits of many of the exiles. Under Zechariah and Haggai's influence, the temple was finally rebuilt. The strange vision with its youthful surveyor and walls of fire caught the imagination of the people, and the strong words of the oracle encouraged them to press on in the face of their difficulties. The words of Haggai and Zechariah “were bold words, inflammatory and highly dangerous. But they served their immediate purpose. Work on the Temple went forward apace.”

To Zechariah's mind the finished temple was the first step in the fulfillment of the joyful visions of Ezekiel and 2nd Isaiah. Here was a foretaste of the future when YHWH would descend upon the temple in fire and cloud. Once and for all Israel would be a blessing to the nations as the world came to pay homage to the True God.

was struggling to build a Temple worthy of God's dwelling-place.” (126) Similarly, Charles Feinberg calls them “words of consolation...for Israel” (46).

73 Bright, 371.
Commitment as a Context for Discipleship in the New Monasticism

Sean Baker

Church critics have seldom been bound by the adage, “if you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything at all.” It is hardly worth mentioning that a lot of people have issues with the church. Criticisms of the church, including many valid ones, abound. They originate both from within and without the church. And while some critics are vicious and unyielding and some critics are full only of hot air, every once in a while a group comes along that has at least as much constructive to say as destructive. Every once in a while a critical group comes along with such apparent yet inexplicable love for the church that both their criticisms and corrections require Christians’ attentive ears. The New Monastic movement is one such group.

In this paper, I will argue that the New Monasticism is composed of loosely-affiliated, church-supporting communities of commitment designed to foster discipleship and Christ-likeness among Christian believers. After considering the New Monasticism’s criticisms and reflecting on their hope for a united orthodoxy and orthopraxy, I will demonstrate that all of their shared practices share the virtue of commitment as expressed in a type of stability. It is this stated commitment which ultimately distinguishes the New Monasticism from the status quo disciple-making fellowship of many churches: their coffee hours and their small groups.

The New Monastics and many of their colleagues are disappointed with much of what they see in the church today. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, the most prominent theologian of the New Monasticism movement begins his book on the New Monasticism with a compelling yet commonplace observation on the church. Noting that church conflicts abound concerning theology, practice, homosexuality and poverty, he claims: “There seems to be a consensus on this: the church in America isn’t living up to what it’s
supposed to be. Somehow we’ve lost our way.”¹ At the heart of it, disillusioned Christians have observed a vast divergence between their common understandings of Jesus and the rigidity and sterility of Jesus’ church. Shane Claiborne, in his influential book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, argues for a unity between right teaching and right action, between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. He writes that, “Neither our churches nor our society were measuring up the way of Jesus.”² Wilson-Hartgrove says it this way: “Fewer services, more service…it’s become too easy to think that the church is [only] about going to worship services.”³ Brennan Manning, a prominent evangelical speaker, captures the quandary: “The greatest cause of atheism is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him with their lifestyle.”⁴ The church in North America, part of what the Apostle Paul describes as the body of Christ, seems to this group to bear strangely little resemblance to the unpredictable, transformational, revolutionary Christ of the gospels. In the experience of these New Monastic critics, the church often fits the description of the Pharisees better than it fits with a description of the person of Jesus Christ.

The contrast for these Christians is too much to bear. They speak in tune with Claiborne who recalls a moment when he brokenheartedly confessed to a friend, “I think I’ve lost hope in the church.” His friend replied, “You may have lost hope in Christianity or Christendom or all the institutions, but you have not lost hope in the church. This is the church.” Sitting in an abandoned church building, holding ground with a group of homeless Philadelphians, Claiborne resolved, “We decided to stop complaining about the church we saw and we set our hearts on becoming the church we dreamed of.”⁵

Most fundamentally, these Christians desired a more integrated discipleship—an opportunity to live a life of integrity in

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⁴ Claiborne, 270.
⁵ Claiborne, 64.
terms of their beliefs and their whole lives. Though frustrated, they remained hopeful. They hoped for a return to the blessed-to-be-a-blessing ecclesiology of Abraham. And then they found, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s seminal work, *Life Together*, a colleague who, “longed for a community that, with the courage of Christ born out of obedience to the Word, could live out the gospel more intensely…and courageously cope with the crises facing the world.”

The group loved the call for community but they found that the crises, about which Bonhoeffer wrote, had already infiltrated the church. The church, which would have been a natural source for such discipleship-generating community, seemed to have become more individualistic, more materialistic and more submissive to the order of the day than many secular groups around them. Could genuine discipleship take place in a setting so compromised in its ideals? Their answer emerged by mining church history, where they came across accounts of early monastic communities. These monks and nuns attempted to establish communities more faithful to the Word by fleeing the post-Constantine church and its accommodations. Claiborne describes the process this way,

“During eras of history when the identity of Christian disciples became all but lost, the Spirit has always led small groups of people into exodus, into the wilderness, into the desert or the abandoned places within the empire…it is not so much a fleeing from something as dancing toward something new…creating a culture in which it is easier for people to be good.”

Put another way, “We hoped God would move to create communities that could imagine new forms of faithfulness for American

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6 Claiborne, 356.
9 Claiborne, 149.
Christianity.‖ The group desired to live in a place where faithfulness was more easily fostered. Though they expected the church would provide such a structure, they found their own churches lacking in this respect. And so, without leaving the church, they went ahead to create supplemental Christian communities where, “it is easier for people to be good,” where it is possible to imagine beyond the restrictions of this world into the Kingdom of God reality about which Jesus speaks so frequently.

Through a combination of factors, communities began sprouting all around the country. Until they were all brought together for a conference in 2004, many of these communities felt their nearest forebear was Bonhoeffer. As they gathered, they reflected on those practices and dispositions which have situated them to be good more easily or to live faithfully more capably. The practices and dispositions emerged from a combination of sources. First, these communities shared a fairly uniform concept of who the person of Jesus Christ is. They also shared a commitment to be like this Jesus. Jesus, as they found him described in the gospels, was a revolutionary, in both loud and quiet ways. Jesus was full of compassion and yet proclaimed a kingdom of dramatic upheaval. Jesus loved deeply and yet brought with him transformation and conversion. And so, their practices all stand, in some way, in reference to this person of Jesus Christ. All their practices are judged by how faithfully they encourage Christ-likeness. Second, these communities drew from parts of church history. Looking especially at the monastic traditions of people like Francis and Benedict, they found inspiration in the radical commitment to place, to people and to a plan for discipleship exemplified by these monastic communities. Third, these communities learned by trial and error. If a practice seemed to facilitate deeper discipleship, they adopted it. If not, they let it go. In this manner, these communities have set out to form the type of space where Christ is proclaimed and people are transformed through the simple act of intentionally-shared life together.

The unifying thread running through all the practices of New Monasticism, in addition to Christ-likeness, is commitment. The

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10 Schools for Conversation: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism, Ed. Rutba House, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005), 38.
centrality of commitment emerges from the New Monasticism’s understanding of covenant theology. The New Monastics argue that because God makes promises to us, we, in response, can and should be a promising people: a people who “bear a living testimony to YHWH’s loyalty by being loyal to one another.”  

11 And so, it is not surprising that in almost every chapter of every book detailing the stories of these varied communities, commitment emerges as a central counter-cultural and disciple-shaping principle. Several communities reference the influence of a passage in Benedict’s Rule which has shaped their understanding of the priority of commitment. Benedict writes, “Do not grant newcomers to the monastic life an easy entry…if someone comes and keeps knocking at the door, and if at the end of four or five days he has shown himself patient… then he should be allowed to enter.”  

12 Such a high bar for membership is unheard of in most Christian circles today. But Benedict made commitment central. From the earliest section of his rule, he condemns the monks called gyrovagues, “who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region.” To Benedict, the gyrovagues, who never settled into commitment, were worse in every way than the Sarabaites, another type of monk which he had already described as, “the most detestable type of monk.”  

13 New Monastics have embraced Benedict’s strong words. In fact, commitment is such a central aspect of common life that the New Monastics are puzzled by the rest of the church’s “nominal” or “superficial” rather than “genuine membership.”  

14 In terms of commitment to people, one New Monastic, Maria Russell Kennedy, writes, “In our highly individualized culture, we are not used to forming intimate relationships and deep commitments with others.”  

15 For the New Monasticism, this is most troubling because commitment is the context for discipleship. Alan Hirsch grieves his experience with the church: “the Western Church…has by and large lost the art of

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11 Rutba, 15.  
13 Benedict, 20.  
14 O’Connor, Elizabeth, Call to Commitment (Washington DC: Potter’s House, 2003), v.  
15 Rutba, 51.
disciple-making…it seems we have lowered the bar for participation in Christian community to the lowest common denominator…discipleship is too easy.” The irony, as the New Monastic sees it, is that the church has lowered the bar on commitment in order to get more people in the seats but has sacrificed the very context in which those people become disciples. The situation in the church was so desperate, in the view of many New Monastics, that new and complimentary communities of high commitment were needed for disciples to be formed. Some even suggest that Christians should pledge allegiance to their church rather than the flag. While many see such high commitment as an inevitable turn-off and restriction of all-important personal liberties, the New Monastics testify that the American dreams of mobility and freedom are not ultimately experienced as freedom at all. In the New Monasticism’s estimation, commitment is the only context where discipleship and full life will happen.

The alternative to love within commitment is death for discipleship. As David Janzen writes, “Love without stability permeates our popular culture…such love is marked by its self-centeredness and its shallowness and is merely a shadow of love...if we are to grow in love, we must give ourselves to stability.” Stability, as Janzen describes it, is really commitment expressed physically. When someone is committed: to a person, to a place, to a plan; that commitment translates into stability: Stability of people, stability of place, stability of plan. Commitment expects roots to extend deep into the ground. When committed, people refuse to follow the dominant culture’s impulse to freedom, to terminate the relationship when times become difficult. The path of discipleship is described by Jesus as narrow, not wide. Yet Christians in North America live within a culture gone crazy with the wide way. Keep all options open, all the time, our culture says. In the March 2009 issue of the Atlantic Monthly, Richard Florida predicted that the best way to encourage economic expansion is to expand mobility of

17 Wilson-Hartgrove, 72.
18 Wilson-Hartgrove, 72.
19 Rutba, 92.
individuals. If a worker can move freely to where the work is, the economy will not be slowed down by ponderous stability. Should the economy go the way Florida suggests, the disciple-making task of the church will be placed against even more impossible odds. Christians, argues the New Monasticism, should be at the forefront of those who proclaim a different anthropology, where the cost of unrestrained mobility is the loss of stability and thus, the absence of a context for discipleship.

**Commitment as Stability of Person**

Commitment is heard in a vow and seen through stability. Stability of person is the first defining stability or commitment of the New Monasticism. The discipleship practices which the New Monasticism has adopted cannot be practiced apart from a stability of person. For the New Monasticism, stability of person is ensured by some form of a vow. Like all previous monastic communities, the New Monasticism has identified vow-making as a means for clarifying expectations and encouraging accountability. The vow, as Jon Stock describes, is a way that, “the people of God, despite our weakness, might bear a living testimony to YHWH’s loyalty by being loyal to one another.” The vows clearly define the group’s purpose—and central to that purpose is a commitment to those who share the vow. Vows do not assume perfection. They carry provisions for failure, for neglect and for conflict. The vows cannot extend far beyond the community’s reality. They only capture what people can promise to one another and to God regarding their shared. Stock cautions, “If vows are applicable…they can only be such in a setting where face-to-face encounter is a daily reality. Vows, ultimately, are only as true as the life together they represent.” In this way, the vow becomes a point of stated contact between orthodoxy and orthopraxy for a group of people committed to one another.

The vow describes both the reality and the hopefulness of a community, while requiring commitment to those around you in

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21 Stock, 8.
22 Stock, 15.
23 Stock, 8.
everything in between. Life together must be lived between these two places in sanctification—who we are and who God is shaping us to be. But living in between these two naturally produces disappointment. Thus, from the very earliest monastic communities, confession of sin has been a necessary part of shared life together. It is not surprising, then, that the New Monastics have found confession to be essential. Bonhoeffer boldly stated, “Only in the liberating effect of private confession of sins can genuine community be formed.”²⁴ But the New Monastics were unable to find much reason for mutual confession of sin in their conventional church community where no one even knew anyone else’s name. In response, the New Monastics began confessing to one another on a regular basis. One New Monastic testifies, “In community, God has given me others to help me name my sin. Because these others live with me, they have some interest in helping me grow up in Christ. And because they’ve promised to stick it out with me in love, I can trust them enough to listen.”²⁵ Mutual confession outside of commitment can be a dangerous game of voyeurism. But within committed community, confession enters territory of sincerity and accountability seldom seen within a conventional church. In community, a person’s actions and behavior are on display for much more than a mere 60 minutes a week at church. Fellow community members see how a person lives and see that how a person lives impacts other community members. Within a New Monastic community, the number of stakeholders invested in your sanctification grows. Furthermore, a member is not resigned to share only their spiritual mountains and valleys with others but also the many steady plateaus which constitute the Christian life. Since confession and sharing occur on a regular basis in these communities, much more of life has the opportunity to rise to the surface. Since hard-earned trust permeates all of shared life, the community confession can be the crucible in which both sins and virtues are named and subsequently tackled or encouraged.

If confession fails apart from commitment, so too does the practice of listening so vital to substantive relationships. Listening is a premier expression of love and a necessary prerequisite to every

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, 17.
²⁵ Stock, 35.
spiritual intervention from reproach to encouragement. In interviews with New Monastic communities from Chicago to Washington, the importance of focused listening to one another surfaced again and again. The testimony suggests that humans need good listening to develop trust out of which real life together can flourish. Listening is about investing energy to know someone else. When coupled with a shared vow and a desire to grow in Christ-likeness, this self and other-knowledge is indispensible. Sadly, the New Monasticism has failed to find this sort of attentiveness in their churches. Wilson-Hartgrove comments that in churches today, “very little energy is put into helping members know one another well enough that they could tend to a culture of grace and truth in their midst.” If this perceived failure is widespread, it may be a symptom of a deeper problem. Bonhoeffer observes that there is a strong relationship between ability to listen to one another and ability to listen to God. He writes, “Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either.” Bonhoeffer argues that the stakes are high for life together with others because it is always an analogy for life with God. In light of Bonhoeffer’s warnings, New Monastic communities have built attentive listening into their life blood, carving out intentional times where listening and sharing are practiced. When listening is practiced in intentional (even contrived) moments, it will be more natural when the harsh realities of life and conflict hit. Stock writes, “The object is to practice listening and speaking so regularly that when tensions are high and conflict abounds, we listen and speak by instinct, by habit.” Little will communicate commitment and sincere love to another person more clearly than attentive listening, both in the good times and the bad.

Listening in the good and bad times will also yield another practice which flourishes within a commitment of person. Encouragement has always been central to the Christian life. The Apostle Paul practically made a career out of it. If the world is as

26 Stock, 79.
27 Wilson-Hartgrove, 139.
28 Bonhoeffer, 98.
29 Stock, 51.
Richard Florida describes, where people end up being primarily economic tools to be traded around the country, faithful (and unfaithful) Christians (and non-Christians) need all the encouragement they can find. Since New Monastics already foster good listening in the context of an openly shared common vow, encouragement can take a substantive role in bridging the gap between a person’s low self-esteem and their hope as expressed in the vow. Claiborne describes the modern predicament this way: “Everything in this world tries to pull us away from community and pushes us to choose ourselves over others, to choose independence over interdependence, to choose great things over small thing, to choose going fast alone over going far together.”

The New Monastics all identify the fundamental conflict between the way of the world and the way of Christ, between an anthropology of efficiency and an anthropology of image-bearing. Against false anthropology, Christians need clear voices reassuring them of the good news. No one says it clearer than Bonhoeffer. He writes, “God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living word in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of other human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves out of the truth.”

For the New Monasticism, this encouragement comes in the form of a

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30 Claiborne, 135.
31 Bonhoeffer, 32. It is interesting to note that this is precisely how John Calvin understood what happened in confession. The priest, after hearing the sins of the confessor, ought to proclaim as clearly as possible the truth of the gospel in a way tailored to the sinner’s situation. Nowhere in my research did I find the New Monastics make such an explicit connection between confession and gospel-encouragement.
support network much broader than mere nuclear families.\textsuperscript{32} It will envelope both single and married since, “even marriage doesn’t seem to last very well without the context [of encouragement in community].”\textsuperscript{33} But encouragement will extend from intentional words to intentional actions. Wilson-Hartgrove winsomely writes, “You can’t make community grow. All you can do is tend to a culture of grace and truth by listening to every voice, loving people who frustrate you, telling the truth as best as you can and doing the dishes.”\textsuperscript{34} For the New Monastic, when life is shared in commitment, encouragement goes even deeper and further toward prodding others on to greater faith, hope and love.

\textit{Commitment as Stability of Place}

Commitment to person, though not necessarily so, is most likely working in tandem with commitment to place. One New Monastic writes, “The commitment to geographic proximity is primarily a consequence of other practices, beliefs, ends or marks…if you are committed to spiritual disciplines together…geographic proximity is a great catalyst.”\textsuperscript{35} A commitment to place helps create the family atmosphere and sense of belonging within itself that is so essential to the practices listed above. But commitment to place also helps a community go beyond itself.\textsuperscript{36} When committed to a place, a community is better situated for mission, witness and hospitality. Apart from a commitment to a place, a Christian is rootless, and, as Benedict warns of the gyrovagues, unlikely to be fruit-bearing.

When committed to one place, a community is better able to engage in mission. For the New Monastic, this takes shape in particular ways because of another commitment they share. The first so-called, “mark” of the New Monasticism is “relocation to the abandoned places of the empire.”\textsuperscript{37} The abandoned places of the empire are the places with higher concentrations of people whom the world might call, “the least of these.” The New Monastics eagerly

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{32} Wilson-Hartgrove, 72.
\footnote{33} Wilson-Hartgrove, 72.
\footnote{34} Wilson Hartgrove, 136.
\footnote{35} Rutba, 125.
\footnote{36} Stock, 89.
\footnote{37} Rutba, 10-25.
\end{footnotes}
desire to proclaim a kingdom gospel marked by the upside-down-ness of God’s reality. And so they go to the people on the bottom—to blighted neighborhoods and neglected rural communities. In the midst of all which the world might be inclined to ignore, they desire to, “nurture an atmosphere that tastes and smells like the kingdom of God.” Without a doubt, the New Monasticism’s idea of mission has a strong justice flavor. Claiborne famously rebukes those who take a pass on addressing poverty in the shadow of Jesus’ words, “The poor you will always have with you.” Claiborne resists and says, “Are the poor actually with you?—that’s Jesus expectation.” With a noticeable passion, the New Monastics plunge into life with the poor and forgotten. Their lifestyle, then, is so conspicuously different that they have abundant opportunity to explain about the Spirit who compels them and the Christ they follow. The New Monastics have found, however, that it takes time and trust to overcome the shock of “the other,” which both the poor and the New Monastic can feel around each other. Clearly, the New Monastic way of life is different. Sadly, the different can be easily dismissed. Whether a New Monastic is labeled weird or different, radical or saint, all of these labels distance the observer from the observed. Dorothy Day once said, “Don’t call us saints; we don’t want to be dismissed that easily.” In the New Monastic’s experience, nothing cuts through the obstacles that stand between people quite so effectively as time together. If a neighborhood believes a community is only in the neighborhood for a short while, they will be dismissed as not credible. But if a community chooses to stay and vows to stability of place, transformational mission and witness can take place. Considering the New Monasticism’s high value of united orthodoxy and orthopraxy, it is little surprise that stability of place would be a priority. Only with stability of place can a missiology of action and word find fruition.

Stability of place also creates the context for meaningful hospitality. Tim Otto asks, “How can a place offer authentic welcome to the stranger and the pilgrim if all are strangers to one another?”

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38 Wilson-Hartgrove, 76.
39 Rutba, 125.
40 As quoted in Claiborne, 133.
Stability of place is required so that a home and identity can be formed. Apart from a strong self-identity, especially one founded on Christ, it is nearly impossible to extend lasting and meaningful Christian love to someone else. Such a strong self-identity emerges out of the stability of place so essential to New Monastic life. The New Monastic’s high value of hospitality stems from the experience of monks throughout the centuries. Even the most radical hermits were expected to end a fast if a visitor should happen upon them. The New Monastics, like centuries of monks and nuns before them, follow the logical consequence of Matthew 25: aware that in their hospitality, they may be dining with Christ himself. Given Jesus’ unsavory masks in Matthew 25 (sick, naked, in prison), Bonhoeffer warns, “Exclusion of the weak and insignificant from Christian life in community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ himself.”

And so the New Monastics appeal to broad Christian hospitality, holding onto their own possessions and property loosely so that they may never be stingy in their extension of grace. In this way, the life of the Spirit which they foster so carefully and methodically with one another has a chance to escape into the lives of those they encounter.

**Commitment as Stability of Purpose**

So far, we have seen how the New Monastics’ core ideals of bridging orthodoxy to orthopraxy and living toward Christ-likeness can best be nurtured in a community of commitment to people and place. The final piece of commitment which can create a place where goodness and virtue can abound is stability of purpose.

We had previously discussed vows in relation to stability of person. The vows are essential to New Monastic life because they are encoded with language of interdependency—a verbal commitment to stick it out with those around you. The rule functions in a similar way to the vow. In some communities, they are even the same. The only difference is that the rule tends to parse out more particulars about how we as a community will live life together. The rule assumes commitment to person and place. But it sets out to go beyond those commitments to clarify the nuts and bolts of discipleship and Christian vocation. Tim Otto writes that the rule provides “the

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41 Bonhoeffer, 45.
concrete and particular ways to live out the ways of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{42} The rule intentionally goes beyond the Bible—stating not just, “we will live according to the Bible,” but actually clarifying: “Given whom God has made us in this community to be, how will we use our gifts and circumstances to live like Jesus here and now?” Certainly, much of this commitment to purpose will be manifest within the community. Bonhoeffer describes his ecclesiology as “Christ existing as community…It challenges believers to behave as Christ to one another…Christian community has to integrate the gospel into daily life and reflect this to the world.”\textsuperscript{43} The rule clarifies what it will look like to behave as Christ to one another. But it also clarifies what it will look like to behave as Christ to the world around them. The rule puts in writing what many Christians only assume (often to their peril). It clarifies purpose and vocation in such a way that accountability and encouragement in community can function with integrity. If I know how you intend to live for Jesus, it is easier to encourage you when you are doing well and challenge you when you are failing.

Some object that a rule makes the Christian life too rigid—too pharisaic even. But a good rule, according to the monks, “brings someone into sustained confrontation with realities that might otherwise be avoided.”\textsuperscript{44} Rather than allow discipleship to be reshaped constantly, (possibly to take the easy way from time to time), a stable rule yields a stable purpose which can help keep sinful humans on the road of what Eugene Peterson called, “a long obedience in the same direction.”\textsuperscript{45}

By committing to a shared rule in a community, a person has taken a major step toward accepting an authority over their life bigger than just their self. Such an obedience has always been an essential aspect of monastic life. While obedience certainly seems unpalatable to most contemporary ears, for the monk it is the only path to humble Christ-likeness. The New Monastics are convinced that no one chooses whether to be obedient or not. Rather, “the only choice is to

\begin{itemize}
\item Stock, 77.
\item Bonhoeffer, 8.
\item Stock, 90.
\item Eugene Peterson, \textit{A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society} (Downer’s Grove: Inter-Varsity, 2000).
\end{itemize}
whom we are going to be obedient.” Given the choice to be obedient to a dominant culture, to the opinion of our passing friends or to the fleeting desires of the individual, obedience to a shared rule actually sounds pretty good. If nothing else, obedience is acknowledging that which is bigger than you and denying the self-determination so deeply engrained in the Western Christian.

While stability of purpose can be expressed well through a shared rule of life, it finds a much more solid foundation when tethered to the church. A New Monastic, Ivan Kauffman, considering the problem with self-determination and self-reliance, writes, “The only alternative to the twin evils of individualism and spiritual pride is humble submission to Christ’s body, the church.” Another New Monastic, Sherrie Steiner, resolves, “The institutional church offers the New Monasticism a reference point—a place of mooring—for always remembering the good news that God has saved us.” By submitting to the church, the New Monasticism, for all their grandiose ideas, keeps their ideas connected to the rock which Christ established so long ago. Especially with so many rules and vows, the New Monasticism always do well to remember that, “God saved us (even from ourselves)” and that we didn’t save ourselves. This New Monastic wisdom is actually old monastic wisdom: “The medieval monastic movement fed the wider church with a constant inflow of new practices and ideas, and at the same time was protected from the constant temptation to reinvent the gospel.”

The purpose of the New Monasticism, as it turns out, is to be an extension rather than a reinvention of the church. When functioning on all cylinders, the New Monasticism will be fed by and accountable to the church while constantly pressing the church and her members to more committed discipleship.

Concluding Thoughts

Commitment, in terms of stability of person, place and purpose, creates the context for integrated discipleship. Through

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46 Stock, 72.
47 Rutba, 74.
48 Rutba, 104.
49 Rutba, 75.
commitment, the New Monastics have resolved to endure in discipleship beyond the termination dates of mere programs. In this way, all of life is brought under the Holy Spirit’s conversion in discipleship. It is good that the New Monastics have found a way into this commitment and discipleship which has encouraged the faith of many, has witnessed to the gospel clearly and which has attempted to refresh the church. Sadly, the New Monastics, though they may forever resent it, still seem radical to most inside and outside of the church. The questions for those who may never move in to a house with a name like Reba or Rutba is: “Can I adopt some of the valuable lessons of the New Monasticism without becoming a New Monastic? If so, how?”

To respond, one must acknowledge that discipleship is difficult. Jesus’ words about discipleship warn about high costs—costs much higher than most are willing to pay, in fact. The New Monasticism challenges me so directly because it makes me ask why my own path of discipleship has persisted so much on my own terms. The Bible, especially when lived as explicitly as it is in the New Monasticism, compels me to reconsider under whose authority I pursue Christ. Am I calling the shots? Am I quite comfortable? Is that what I should expect?

The call of the New Monasticism on Christians is to expect that if you are living a Christ-like life, your family and neighbors might think you are a radical. If we accept the call to radical discipleship, I suspect we are going to want very much to have a community around us helping us along the way—a community which shares our values, a community committed to listening to us, to hearing our confession, to encouraging us along the way.

I hope and pray that the churches in which we find ourselves are those kinds of churches. I fear, however, that they may not be. Here are a few ways that I have considered the church could become a little more faithful to radical disciple-making and one way the New Monasticism would do well to submit to the church.

1. The church may need to expect more commitment from members and its members may need to expect more commitment from the church. It is possible that other worthy commitments of members will have to take a back seat. But the choice does not concern a mere social club—it concerns the fount of God’s blessing
to the world and the support network which helps carry a believer through into Christ-likeness. To what extent does the church encourage bold commitment? Is the bar for membership too low? The consequences of low commitment are many and problematic: Will the church be able to engage in meaningful confession? Meaningful encouragement? If your commitment to me is only as strong as the style of worship we both like, what happens when our tastes change? Or that great organist dies? What holds us together? I suspect that the kind of discipleship we need to be engaged in requires bonds much deeper than mere worship style. Is the church willing to raise the bar? Can membership be reserved for the very committed while maintaining a strong culture of hospitality? The New Monastic experience would suggest it can be done, but that it is very difficult.

2. In the section of stability of place, I wrote that “Commitment to person, though not necessarily so, is most likely working in tandem with commitment to place.” In my study of communities, I have found an utterly counter-cultural and compelling practice which might cover the, “not necessarily so.” One New Monastic described it this way, “What if every time we made a job decision, we were to ask, “How will this affect my relationships at church?” Another way to say it is to ask, “How will my decision to break stability impact my church’s and my own ability to function as the body of Christ, working toward Christ-likeness through discipleship and mission?” The Church of the Savior, a network of house churches and intentional communities in Washington DC, has developed a practice of discernment and missionary-like sending. I quote the section in full:

“One of the ideas of the community which is, as far as I know, original is the idea that people can be called to leave a fellowship just as they are called to enter it, and that they should not leave unless they are thus called. This means that a committed member will not leave because of wanderlust, or even because of better opportunities for employment in another city, but only because the opportunity to serve Christ’s cause seems greater. The dedicated Christian will not make this momentous decision alone but will seek the prayerful judgment of the group before acting. “As there was a
reception service, there would now be a departure service—the farewell of a community to a sister or brother who is called of God to do a work of God in another place.”

This practice is so compelling because it is a tangible announcement of the alternative anthropology built into the New Monastic life. People are image-bearing disciples, not mere economic engines. Also, this practice presupposes an intimate knowledge of one another within the church. It presupposes healthy relationships and hard-won trust. It also requires that people in the community are actively discerning their vocation, their calling as disciples and image-bearers. It may mean that a church’s stability of person and purpose could be preserved even if a stability of place is lost. Perhaps, when a person is sent from, say, Washington to Ohio, she and her church remain in close contact until both parties discern she has found a new place in which to make vows. This way, her discipleship is never foisted only on her, for her to discern and carry out in the already tumultuous throws of a cross-country move. Furthermore, she remains grounded in the most helpful way, assured that even in a new place, her identity as a child of God and God’s stable commitment to her is fixed (even if her stability is not.)

The Christian Reformed Church Order, Article 14, stipulates, “A minister of the word, once lawfully called, may not forsake the office…except for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of the classis.” While this stipulation presupposes a strong calling and clearly defined vocation for a minister, the absence of such stipulations for other Christian vocations exposes the church’s neglect of the calling and vocation of lay members. Perhaps, like the Church of the Savior, even members of the CRC may not forsake their church except for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of the church. Certainly, such a proposition may be ripe for abuse, but it presupposes the context of stability which promotes far-reaching discipleship.

3. I believe the New Monasticism clearly illustrates that there are people who are craving more integrated discipleship but they do

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50 O’Connor, vi.
not know how to do it or where to find it. The church will be in trouble if it allows only fringe communities like the New Monasticism to embrace such earnest Christians. It is possible that too many churches assume their members expect very little in terms of their sanctification, discipleship and church membership. I think the New Monastic experience ought to make churches ask why they are not assuming the opposite—assuming their members expect costly discipleship in the name of Christ.

4. I wonder if church-wide vows or rules may help facilitate the sort of accountability, confession, listening which could move a community beyond mere after-service small talk and into the sorts of integrated discipleship which will transform people and communities.

5. Considering the marriage-centrism of many churches, I wonder if, like the New Monastics, the church can create room for community units bigger than a mere nuclear family.

6. While the church can learn a lot from the New Monasticism, I am eager to echo the words of Ivan Kauffman—the New Monastics must remain in humble submission to Christ’s body the church. The chief reason, as far as I can tell, is that the New Monastics, with their constant emphasis on their understanding of the person of Jesus and a united orthodoxy/praxy, will always be given to a save-yourself, works righteousness faith. Ironically, Jesus may be too easily swept aside as we rely merely on one another, not on Christ the King. Furthermore, anytime a Christian embarks on something they judge, “new,” they are always at risk of spiritual pride. Remaining humbly submissive (yet appropriately agitated) is the most Christ-honoring posture a group like the New Monasticism could adopt.
Religious Pluralism and Tolerance in the Qur'an

Geoffrey Van Dragt

In the global context in which we live, the issue of Islam’s attitude toward the non-Muslim world is one of paramount significance. As nations, cultures and religions come into more constant contact with one another, the issues of pluralism and tolerance become less issues of purely intellectual interest and more issues of practical concern. Nowhere is this truer than in those places where Muslims are faced with the reality that not all people accept Muhammad as prophet and the Qur’an as the revealed word of God.

From the time of its birth in the Arabian Peninsula nearly 1,400 years ago up to the present day, Islam has been faced with the reality that there exists a plurality of religions. Indeed, as a religion, it owes much to those monotheisms which preceded it and which were present in Arabia in the seventh century. However, the existence of these and other religions presents a dilemma for the Muslim who claims his religion to be the culmination of revelation, the straight path and the just religion.

Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims have responded to this dilemma in different ways. At times, Muslim societies have been places where dialogue has flourished and where people of differing religions have lived together harmoniously. However, the more dominant trend in Muslim societies has been toward the suppression of divergent beliefs and the oppression of those who hold them. Sadly, this is still the case today in most countries where Muslims are the majority. In these places, non-Muslims are still often treated as second class citizens and are severely restricted in the practice of their faith. Also, all too often, Muslims who choose to leave their faith do so at the risk of being shunned or even killed.

In theory, these and other repugnant practices are justified by appealing to the sacred sources of Islam; the Qur’an and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. It is to these authoritative sources that Muslim jurists have turned in their formulation of religious laws which restrict all non-Muslim religious beliefs and practices while
simultaneously compelling Muslim ones. In their effort to promote Islam to the exclusion of other religions, they cite numerous Qur’anic suras (verses) as well as hadiths (traditions) of the prophet which seem to not only allow for but actually require that apostate beliefs be suppressed and that infidels (non-Muslims) be punished.

However, in recent years there have been a growing number of scholars who have called into question this traditional Muslim understanding of pluralism and tolerance. These scholars have pushed for a reinterpretation of the sacred texts, giving particular attention to the Qur’anic suras often quoted in support of religious intolerance. Also, they have called attention to other suras which seem to promote a more positive and tolerant view of variant religions, especially of the monotheistic traditions which were present in seventh century Arabia.

Who then is to be believed? Are the traditional interpretations of the Qur’an and the sunna the correct ones? Or is there something to the modern claims that Islam truly is, by nature, a religion of peace and tolerance?

I do not believe myself capable of definitively answering the above questions. They are huge questions which require much more time and expertise than I have to offer. However, what I do hope to accomplish, in what follows, is to look at the positions held by each side. I will attempt to present the Qur’anic data and to discuss some of the hermeneutical issues involved in the interpretation of that data. Finally, I will argue that one’s position on the issues of pluralism and tolerance from a Muslim perspective depends upon one’s hermeneutical assumptions. More specifically, I will argue that the Muslim doctrine of naskh, or abrogation, is the key concept lying at the heart of this debate.

Before entering into this discussion, I must point out that I am making a conscious decision to focus exclusively on the Qur’anic data to the exclusion of the relevant hadith literature. There are a couple of reasons for this. First of all, I simply do not have the space to give adequate attention to the hadiths involved. However, more importantly, I am focusing on the Qur’an because it is the final authority in Islam. Though much weight is given to hadith literature, no hadith is considered infallible or God-given. It is widely recognized among scholars, even conservative ones, that many
hadiths are contrivances designed to give validity to one group or another. Consequently, the Qur’an is left as the one unassailable authority within Islam. It is the Qur’an that has the final say on all matters of faith and conduct and so it is there that I will focus my attention.

Religio-Historical Background

That there were Christians and Jews present in seventh century Arabia is beyond dispute. While pagan idolatry was the dominant religious system, the many references in the Qur’an to the “People of the Book” make it abundantly clear that Christians and Jews were also present. What is disputed by scholars is just how many of these monotheists were there and what their theologies looked like. Many Western scholars have suggested that the Jewish and Christian presence was quite significant and that, consequently, Islam should be seen as having grown out of these traditions. However, recently some scholars, both Western and Muslim, have pushed back on this assumption, insisting that “in its nativity Islam grew out of an Arab background, although in its formation and development there have been many important influxes from the Judeo-Christian tradition.” (Rahman 1994)

Whether the number of Christians and Jews in Arabia was substantial or negligible, the fact remains that Islam, from its very genesis, was faced with the question of how to relate to these other religions. Consequently, there are many verses in the Qur’an which demonstrate Muhammad’s attitude towards those to whom he referred as the “People of the Book.” However, that attitude was by no means static but, in fact, changed significantly over the course of Muhammad’s prophetic career.

In order to understand Muhammad’s changing disposition toward Jews and Christians, it is necessary to know something of the history of Muhammad’s prophetic career. The Qur’anic prophecies were spoken by Muhammad over the course of some twenty-two years and in two distinctly different settings. Scholars typically speak of Qur’anic suras as being either Meccan or Madinan. This is because some of them came to Muhammad in the early years of his prophethood when he was living in Mecca, and others came to him after the hijra (migration) to Madina in 622. This distinction between
Meccan and Madinan suras is significant because the situation of Muhammad and his followers was considerably different in the two cities. In Mecca, the small Muslim community was the minority, struggling against the polytheists and suffering oppression at their hands. In Madina however, Islam was essentially the state sponsored religion, with Muhammad as its spiritual and political leader. After the hijra, Muslims were no longer the oppressed minority in search of allies but the powerful majority seeking to assert itself and spread its belief system.

In addition to this change in status, Muhammad and the Muslim community, over the years of the Qur’an’s revelation, came into more regular contact with Jews and Christians. While in Mecca, Muhammad certainly had the opportunity to meet members of these other faiths. In fact, Muslim tradition recounts that some of Muhammad’s early supporters came from among the other monotheistic traditions. However, over time, it seems that Muhammad became disillusioned with both Christians and Jews. When these were slow to accept his prophethood as valid, his attitude toward them became increasingly negative. This is reflected in the Qur’an as the later, Madinan suras tend to speak negatively of the “People of the Book” after the earlier, Meccan suras had presented a more positive attitude toward them. This shift in attitude is the reason for the contemporary debate within Islam over the issues of pluralism and tolerance. In what follows, I will present some of the Qur’anic material which exemplifies the swing from the Qur’anic (Muhammad’s) acceptance of Jews and Christians to its unfavorable view of them.

**Pluralism in the Qur’an**

In discussing the Qur’an’s attitude toward other religions, we must answer two fundamental questions. First, how does the Qur’an depict other religions in terms of their origins, their validity and their salvific efficacy? In other words, according to the Qur’an can God be approached and salvation achieved through religions other than Islam? This question gets at the Qur’anic understanding of religious pluralism. The second question follows from the first. Given the Qur’an’s opinion of other religions, what kind of direction does it give to Muslims as they interact with members of other religions?
This question gets at the Qur’anic understanding of religious tolerance. Let us start with the Qur’anic view of pluralism.

Central to the Qur’anic understanding of God and religion is the concept of *tahwid* or unity. It was Muhammad’s firm conviction that all monotheisms had a divine origin and came about through divine revelations through human prophets. For that reason, Muhammad considered himself to be the last in what had been a long line of prophets. Hugh Goddard explains it this way:

Part of his conviction was evidently that his was not an isolated prophetic calling but rather the latest in a line of such callings, going back firstly to figures in the Arabian religious memory such as Hud, Salih, and Shu’ayb, who were regarded as having proclaimed the message of monotheism in earlier times in Arabia, and secondly to figures who were of deep religious significance to earlier monotheisms in the wider world, especially the Jews and Christians, such as Ibrahim/Abraham, Musa/Moses, and Isa/Jesus. (Goddard 2000)

Given that Muhammad placed himself in the line of prophets which included many biblical figures, it was natural for him to initially seek solidarity with those who had previously received divine revelation. In his estimation, the Jews and Christians had been given, in their Scriptures, essentially the same message which he was then bringing to the Arabs. This understanding is reflected in Qur’anic verses like the following:

I believe in whatever Book God may have revealed. (42:15)
For every people a guide has been provided. (13:7)
Mankind were one single community. Then God raised up prophets who gave good tidings and warnings and God also sent down with them The Book in truth, that it may decide among people in regard to what they differed. (2:213)

Because of this firm belief in a single heavenly book revealed to a line of prophets, Muhammad was quick to seek affirmation from and
solidarity with the people whom he dubbed “People of the Book.”

So positive was Muhammad’s view of Christians early on that he was moved to state the following, which is recorded in Sura 2:62: Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians,- any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

It would appear from this sura, which is believed to have been revealed immediately following the *hijra* to Madina, that Muhammad initially believed the other monotheistic faiths, having come about as the result of divine revelation, to be capable of leading their adherents to salvation. It is to this sura that those modern Muslim proponents of religious pluralism often appeal. While its application is limited to other monotheistic faiths, it does at least display Muhammad’s early solidarity with others who believed in the oneness of God.

However, it would seem that Muhammad’s positive disposition towards Jews and Christians was short lived. Not long after the revelation of the above sura, his tone changes dramatically. Consider these words from sura 3:85: “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost.” Clearly, some experience or experiences with the “People of the Book” dramatically impacted Muhammad, to the point that he essentially reversed his position on the efficacy of their religions for obtaining for them salvation.

Historians point to the fact that, in Madina, Muhammad came into contact with both Jews and Christians who refused to acknowledge that he was, indeed, sent by God as a legitimate prophet and reformer. Instead of receiving him as such, they continued to cling to the distinctive of their respective faiths. These unique characteristics of Jews and Christians, such as the Jews’ understanding of election and the Christians’ doctrine of the Trinity drew harsh criticisms from Muhammad which are recorded in the Qur’an. Muhammad had this to say about the Jews with whom he came into contact: “Strongest among men in enmity to the believers
wilt thou find the Jews and Pagans.” (5:82) And in regard to Christians, Muhammad exhorts them to lay aside their distinctive beliefs in order to come into line with his teaching.

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His apostles. Say not "Trinity." Desist. It will be better for you, for Allah is one Allah. Glory be to Him, (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs. (4:171)

Muhammad goes even further in his condemnation of the Jews and Christians. He argues that, having received revelation from God, they then deviated from that revelation, allowing it to become corrupted

If they had observed the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have eaten from above them and from below their feet; among them are those who keep to the right path, but many of them do evil. (5:66)

This deviation from the divine revelation made necessary the coming of another messenger, namely Muhammad. Muhammad then takes it upon himself to call Christians back to a pure monotheism: “O People of the Book! Let us come together upon a formula which is common between us – that we shall not serve anyone but God, that we shall associate none with him.” (3:64)

In essence then, Muhammad finally settles upon a largely negative view of Christians and Jews. Though he never reverses his belief that the two faiths came about as a result of divine revelation, he does come to see himself and his message as superseding and perfecting the earlier revelations. Hence, the call to Christians to set aside those beliefs which differ from those he came to preach and to join him in confessing one God without associates. It seems that these are the conditions Muhammad set for the Christian and Jewish
communities. He would recognize their validity if, and only if, they recognized his prophethood as authentic and revised their beliefs to match his own. This idea of conditional acceptance leads Goddard to speak of Muhammad’s desire for Christians to become “Qur’anic Christians” or Christians “who either accepted the prophethood of Muhammad and the revelation entrusted to him or would have done had their historical circumstances permitted.” (Goddard 2000)

**Tolerance in the Qur’an**

Just as Muhammad’s estimation of the Jews and Christians evolved over the course of his prophetic career, so also his teachings on tolerance changed over the years. Clearly, during his time in Mecca, Muhammad was in no position to call for an armed struggle against those who disbelieved his message. He and his followers were a relatively powerless minority simply struggling to survive. Also, at this point in his career, Muhammad still hung onto the hope that the “People of the Book” would be persuaded to believe and accept him of their own accord. And so, we read the following in this early verse:

> Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things. (2:256)

This is the Qur’anic verse to which nearly every modern Muslim appeals in arguing that Islam is truly a religion of tolerance and peace. About this verse, Mohsen Kadivar has the following to say:

This verse contains prohibitions and negations – negating the assumption that the Almighty has based faith on force and compulsion, and prohibiting the imposition of faith on others. After all, neither forced faith nor forced sin has any validity. The rejection of force and compulsion in this verse amounts to an endorsement of freedom to choose religions. (Kadivar 2006)

If 2:256 were the only Qur’anic verse speaking to the issue of
religious tolerance, it would be easy to accept the modern Muslim claim that Islam is, by nature, a religion of peace. However, the issue becomes less clear cut when one considers the following verses spoken by Muhammad during his time in Madina:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (9:29)

O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust. (5:51)

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. (9:5)

It would appear that, as Muhammad’s opinion of non-Muslims soured, so also his tolerance of their religions diminished and his commitment to non-compulsion was lost.

During the Madinan period, as Muhammad became disenchanted with Jews and Christians, his political and military power increased. Consequently, he became able to back up his condemnation of these religions with military force. Whereas in Mecca, Muhammad and his followers were powerless to force their religious views on anyone, in Madina they found themselves in a position to impose their beliefs with force.

It seems appropriate at this point to give mention to the Islamic concept of jihad. This is, of course, a hugely contentious issue and one which I can in no way explore in depth in the space of
this paper. Indeed, whole books have been written on the many nuanced meanings given to the word jihad. However, no treatment of the Qur’anic concept of tolerance would be complete without at least some consideration of the concept.

Harold Coward identifies four types of jihad:
1) jihad of the ‘heart’ (spiritual striving);
2) jihad of the hand (physical striving, work, labor);
3) jihad of the tongue (striving in preaching or debate);
4) jihad of the sword (striving in war, hence ‘holy war’). (Coward 2000)

It is this final form of jihad, jihad of the sword, which has received so much attention in the media as of late. This form of jihad can be understood in a couple of different ways. There are those who interpret the Qur’anic injunctions as a call to defensive war. Richard Bonny describes this understanding as follows:

And then Allah granted permission to the Prophet and his followers to fight their enemies with the Divine command, “Permission to fight their enemies is granted upon those who were unjustly wronged…” (Q.22:39). They were then enjoined to wage war against those who initiated aggression against Muslims (Q.22:39). (Bonney 2004)

However, there are others who understand jihad of the sword to be an unconditional offensive war to subdue all non-Muslims and to put them under Muslim rule. Those who hold to this understanding appeal to some of the above Qur’anic passages as support for their position. They understand, from verses like 9:29, that all non-Muslims must be subdued and forced to either convert or live as second-class citizens who are forced to pay a special tax and are restricted in the practice of their religion. Clearly, this concept of jihad is the driving force behind much of the terrorist activity in the world today.

The Doctrine of Naskh

How then does one make sense of the Qur’anic data presented above? How do we arrive at an understanding of the Qur’an’s
teaching on these issues of religious pluralism and tolerance when it seems to contain so many internal contradictions?

For the non-Muslim scholar, these contradictions present no significant dilemma. As someone who considers Muhammad to be a man like any other who mistakenly understood himself to be a prophet, I have no qualms with saying that Muhammad simply changed his mind. Though he initially considered Jews and Christians to be his co-religionists, he later came to the conclusion that they had actually strayed from the straight path of true religion. Where he first believed in non-compulsion in religion, he subsequently decided that compulsion was necessary for advancing the Muslim cause. As a non-Muslim, I have the luxury of being able to say that Muhammad simply changed his mind and that this shift in his thinking is reflected in the Qur’an.

However, the Muslim scholar does not have this same luxury. As an adherent of the Islamic faith, the Muslim scholar cannot accept the idea that the God-given Qur’an would contain internal contradictions. As God’s infallible word, it must certainly be above containing any sort of imperfection. And so, the Muslim is faced with the task of trying to make sense of the contradictory verses presented above.

Traditionally, the way that Muslim scholars have done away with the Qur’an’s internal contradictions is by employing the doctrine of naskh or abrogation. According to this doctrine, which is really a type of hermeneutical tool, there are verses in the Qur’an which actually abrogate, or substitute, earlier verses. Coward explains that, according to the Muslim understanding, “God’s will could be revealed successively in different ways, and therefore a series of revelations was possible.” (Coward 2000) Muslim scholars find justification for this doctrine in the following Qur’anic verses:

None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things?” (2:106)

When We substitute one revelation for another, and Allah knows best what He reveals (in stages), they say, "Thou art but a forger": but most of them understand
Muslim scholars have afforded themselves of this doctrine of naskh to eliminate those clear Qur’anic contradictions related to the issues of religious pluralism. And since the verses promoting pluralism and tolerance tend to come early in the Qur’an’s chronology, they are the ones abrogated, or replaced, by the verses espousing exclusivism and intolerance. The most startling example of this kind of substitution relates to verse 9:5, which has come to be known as the “verse of the sword.” I have already cited this verse but because of its great import, I cite it again here.

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. (9:5)

According to conservative Muslim scholars, when the doctrine of naskh is applied, this one verse nullifies no fewer than 124 earlier revelations. Among those verses which are abrogated by the “verse of the sword” are the most fundamental verses promoting religious pluralism (2:62) and tolerance (2:256).

This radical application of the doctrine of naskh is still accepted by many conservative Muslim scholars today. In fact, the study of abrogation in the Qur’an has grown up, over the centuries, into a discipline in its own right. In his classic work, The Abrogator and the Abrogated, Muslim scholar, Abil-Kasim Hibat-Allah Ibn-Salama Abi-Nasr asserts that, of the Qur’an’s 114 suras, only forty-three remain unaffected by the doctrine of naskh. (Araby n.d.) If one accepts this wide application of the doctrine to be valid, then the Qur’an does indeed become a proponent of religious exclusivism and extreme intolerance.

However, today there are more and more Muslim scholars who have grown dissatisfied with the traditional application of the doctrine of naskh. Whether motivated by a desire to be faithful to the Qur’anic text or by a longing for Islam to be known as a tolerant
religion of peace, they can no longer accept the wholesale negation of the verses in the Qur’an that seem to promote pluralism and tolerance.

The primary task before the modern Muslim scholars is to recover those verses which conservative scholars have judged to be abrogated and to reconcile them with those later verses which seem to contradict them. Abdulaziz Sachedina is one scholar who strives to recover those early revelations which speak positively of pluralism and tolerance. He describes the dilemma of the modern Muslim scholars this way:

The principal problem that modern Muslim scholars face is deciding whether or not to accept the judgment of past scholars that Qur’anic verses which deal with interfaith relations have been abrogated. Evidently, in resorting to the principle of abrogation, many earlier commentators and legal scholars have not paid attention to the apparent sense of the verses that have been abrogated and which they have assumed to be inconsistent with each other. As a result, they have felt free to maintain that the chronologically later verse, which speaks about initiating hostilities with the disbelievers, abrogates the tolerant ruling of the earlier one. In my estimation, this attitude is rooted either in poor judgment or in a loose application of the meaning of the term abrogation in its lexical sense. (Sachedina 2006)

Sachedina goes on to present his reasoning for deeming the broad application of abrogation to the tolerant verses as unwarranted. In essence, he sees the reason for a change in the Qur’an’s attitude toward non-Muslims as reflective of a change in the circumstances of the Muslim community, so that the later verses in no way substitute the earlier ones but instead give fresh instruction for a new historical situation.

Sachedina is one of many modern Muslim scholars calling for a revisitation of the Qur’anic text to recover those verses which promote a tolerant view of other religions. However, as important as this recovery is, it is not the only task facing the scholar who desires
to present Islam as a religion of peace and acceptance. There are still those many verses that promote intolerance and violence and they must somehow be reconciled with the other verses which they contradict.

Toward this end, Muslim scholars are diving deeper into the historical context in which the Qur’an was given by Muhammad. They are taking a closer look at each of these verses to determine whether or not their injunctions can be explained and contextualized. One example of this effort relates to those verses which speak of the *jizyah* or poll tax. In his essay, “The Place of Tolerance in Islam,” Khaled Abou El Fadl goes to great lengths to explain the historical circumstances in which this practice of taxing non-Muslims was instituted.

When the Qur’an was revealed, it was common inside and outside of Arabia to levy poll taxes against alien groups. Building upon the historical practice, classical Muslim jurists argued that the poll tax is money collected by the Islamic polity from non-Muslims in return for protection of the Muslim state. If the Muslim state was incapable of extending such protection to non-Muslims, it was not supposed to levy a poll tax. In fact, Umar, the second Rightly-Guided Caliph and close companion of the Prophet, returned the poll tax to an Arab Christian tribe that he was incapable of protecting from Byzantine aggression. (Fadl 2002)

El Fadl goes on to explain that, since the poll tax was a culturally acceptable practice in seventh century Arabia, we are in no position to pass judgment on the Qur’anic mandate that it be collected. However, he also argues that since such a practice would be condemnable in modern culture, it cannot and should not be allowed today.

This is the kind of creative reinterpretation that is today challenging the orthodox, conservative establishment within Islam. Whether one agrees with the logic of their claims or not, one can only hope that they succeed in their attempts at arguing for a tolerant and peaceful Islam. This is a debate which belongs to the Muslim
community, the results of which carry weighty consequences for the future of Islam and for the well-being of the world today. Will Islam be able to recreate itself and find its place in the global community? Only time will tell. As those who can only observe this debate from the outside, we can do no more than pray that, for the sake of peace, the modern Muslims will win out. But ultimately, our prayer must be that the truth will win out, the truth that Islam doesn’t have the answer for true peace. It is only the Prince of Peace who can and will ultimately usher in true shalom.

Works Cited
Ministering to Birth moms Later in Life: What Role Can the Church Play in Areas of Healing and Education?

Heather Stroobosscher

In her 1989 book *Saying Goodbye to a Baby*, Patricia Roles writes, “There is an ample supply of books on loss and grief in death, divorce, and separating, but only a chapter or article here and there about birth parents’ grief.”\(^1\) Unfortunately, over the past twenty years, that detail hasn’t greatly improved. In fact, current articles often heavily cite publications from the eighties and nineties. Statements from our decade such as the following are common: “One aspect that has often been underrepresented in the professional literature is the birth mother”\(^2\) and “birth parents are the least studied, least understood, and least served members of the adoption triad . . . the invisible members of the adoption triad.”\(^3\)

It seems rare, if ever, that the church acknowledges or attends to the spiritual needs in the heart of the birth parent, yet, there are “up to 10 million . . . birth parents of adoptees” in this country. One researcher calls the number of birth parents “a global population.”\(^4\)

In other words, birth parents are part of our church families, and their struggle requires our attention.

The Issue: Ministering to Birth moms Later in Life

In an open adoption the birth mother is VIP; she is the carrier of precious cargo. Shortly following relinquishment, the adoptive family moves on to begin their perceived “happily ever after;” however, the birth mother is left childless, purposeless, and

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4 Ibid.
overwhelmed with grief. Little attention is paid to instructing the birth mom on healthy relinquishment--on how to grieve well and heal. Fast forward five, ten, and twenty years and many questions arise: What is a birth parent’s responsibility to subsequent children (the relinquished child’s half-sisters and -brothers)? What, if any, is a birth parent’s moral obligation to the now-adolescent or adult relinquished child? What opportunity for ministry do these circumstances offer the church? What ministry might the church be missing? Furthermore, how can we effectively attend to the buried wounds of birth parents in our midst? James Gritter puts it this way:

As long as they hold the make-or-break power to decide whether there will be an adoption, potential birth parents are considered highly interesting and worthy of persistent and energetic courtship. Once the decision to move forward with adoption is legally made . . . their stock routinely plummets. . . . As far as the system is concerned, the birth parent journey . . . ends at the point of legal relinquishment; it does not occur to very many people that birth parents are of long-term significance in the lifelong journey called adopting. The birth parent sun sets as swiftly as it rises. We can do better than this.5

I am a birth mom. Nineteen years ago I had a crisis pregnancy and relinquished a daughter to a loving Christian couple who had been struggling with infertility for over ten years. It was a terrible situation for which God provided a beautiful solution. The adoptive parents got to begin the family that their hearts had been longing for, and Melissa, my child, got to start life in a stable, loving, Christian home--something I myself had never experienced. I grieved for a time, but then I turned my mind toward preparing for college and beginning again on what one might call the “right” track. I transplanted from central California to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to attend Calvin College. Any evidence of having had a baby six weeks prior was completely hidden. I considered the situation a

win-win-win. I’ve since come to learn this idea is the “traditional view of adoption.”

Nineteen years later, I now have three other children and Melissa has invited me to be her friend on Facebook. My children don’t know about my “other” birth daughter, and I felt fear, panic, and uncertainty. What does Melissa want from me? Can I give her what she needs? I thought her life was picture-perfect. That’s what the annual pictures and Christmas letters imply. What will my children do or think? Will they feel betrayed? Will they want a relationship with Melissa? Does she want a relationship with them? Do I want that? I’m not ready to be the mother of a teenager. What’s my move? Many resources address issues of adoption and relinquishment surrounding a child’s birth, but there doesn’t seem to be a later-in-life play book.

Contextual Factors

The post-relinquishment birth parent state is varied. Some birth parents have been involved in open adoptions, others closed. Some have gone through healthy periods of grief while others have buried their sorrow deep, wishing they could forget. Some birth mothers bonded with their child, others never saw their child’s face. Some relinquished their child freely, others were coerced, and still others were conflicted and deeply regret their decision. Some birth mothers ended up marrying the birth fathers and have spent a lifetime feeling their family is missing someone. It’s not uncommon post-relinquishment, even dozens of years later, for birth parents to wrestle with visible demons such as substance abuse or depression. Also connected to the birth-parent experience later in life are things like secondary infertility or being an overprotective parent. The effects of the journey are many and varied, but birth parents seem to have one thing in common: birth parents do not forget.

Part 3. Theological Reflection

Many birth mothers live in a kind of bondage. Their life story

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7 Deykin et al. “Surrendering Parents,” 278–279;
involves a decision often resulting from sexual sin, which is something our religious culture does not graciously maneuver. Birth mothers bear the weight of disappointing people they love—family, friends, the church. They bear the weight of disappointing God, and their shame is profound. Also, relinquishing a child that by God’s intended design she has spent months nurturing and bonding with, a child that one minute is flesh of her flesh and the next minute is simply gone, is devastating. The birth mother knows deep down this is not the way it’s supposed to be, and she knows it’s all her fault.

However, nothing this side of heaven is the way it’s supposed to be. We live in a fallen world. The good news is God is in the process of redeeming what is broken, and to experience release from their bondage, birth mothers need forgiveness and healing. The avenue for that is truth.

Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Much of the spiritual wrestling of birth parents results from hidden truth, untruth, or a lack of access to truth. For birth parents to experience freedom in Christ, they need clarity about truth in three areas: about their value, about God’s hand in their circumstances, and about adoption psychology. In ministry, we can help with all three.

Practical Strategies/Applications

Strategy 1: Acknowledge Loss, Communicate Value

This is a critical step. By acknowledging a birth parent’s journey, one communicates value to the birth parent. It communicates that his/her pain and hurt matter, his/her journey matters to the family community, and he/she matters. A birth parent likely has received many messages to the contrary. Deykin et al. point out that “losses inadequately grieved may produce feelings of unworthiness, diminished self-esteem, and depression.” Helping a birth parent acknowledge loss is a step toward healing and claiming the truth about self worth. Inviting birth parents to tell their stories says we care, and there is healing in the telling of stories.

Finally, we can use Romans 8:14–17 to celebrate that we are

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8 John 8:32
all co-heirs with Christ in the family of God, regardless of our back-story. Helping birth parents to claim correct theology and to be able to stand firm on Christ’s truth, regardless of what others may believe, gives them tools to become well differentiated people helps them journey towards freedom.

Strategy 2: Reframe the Story

Much shame is associated with anything surrounding sexual sin. When I became pregnant, I had to move out of town away from my church and family. My father and stepmother didn’t speak to me for the duration of the pregnancy, and they have never acknowledged the existence of the child I relinquished. For years it was an extended family scandal and the topic of whisperings among aunts and uncles. Some within my family have never been able to move past it.

The church can help reframe this story of shame through healing and celebration by acknowledging how God works in and through all circumstances. Consider recognizing in a worship service all members of adoption triads—adopted children, adoptive parents, and birth parents. Consider including healing prayers for each of these individuals and others within the community who aren’t able to go public. Consider including testimonies of how God has shown his face through various circumstances and given evidence of his redeeming love and redemptive work through the pains and joys of adoption.

LaVonne Stiffler offers another suggestion: “Encourage your pastor to mention on Mother’s Day that some women have lost children through adoption separation, and that some have been blessed through reunion.”

By referencing relinquishment and adoption as common family circumstances in a public and healing way, without association of shame, we have the power to reshape people’s thinking on this topic—particularly, in this case, a birth parent’s. This, in turn, would perhaps give a birth mother a necessary tool to share her story with her own children in a celebratory way. Such a corporate celebration could also serve to educate congregations about the

blessings of adoption. This could even lead to a community commitment to a program, such as Bethany’s, which is committed to providing homes for the six thousand children in the state of Michigan who need homes.

**Strategy 3: Help Birth parents Navigate Uncharted Territory**

When Melissa first Facebooked me, I had no idea how to respond. I weighed my response options from multiple angles—now that she’s in college, away from home, and a legal adult what is she intending, and how will I complicate things for her parents? What if she were to come here? What would I do? I thought that chapter of my life was closed. Prudence and wisdom escaped me. So, I asked adoption expert Ron Nydam his opinion and his answer was straight and simple: “If you don’t accept her invitation, you will hurt her. If you do accept, you will love her. None of us has too many people who love us.”

I accepted. As a result, her (adoptive) father facebooked me, and we have since been engaged in extensive dialog regarding the past nineteen years. It’s been a blessing, but my response to Melissa’s initial invitation was not intuitive. I needed to be educated in order to respond rightly and to receive the blessing that was in store for me on the other side.

Because of a lack of resources educating birth parents on their roles later in life, it makes sense that pastors step up as a resource to shepherd birth parents through the navigation process. Diana Garland’s suggestions on hospitality apply here. She writes that hospitality is “a means of inviting another into the heart of the family as a valued representative of Christ’s presence.”\(^{11}\) What if a birth mother viewed contact from a birth child not as a threat to the life she has created, but rather as an opportunity brought on by Christ himself? What if a birth mother could prayerfully step forward in faith, trusting that God hasn’t missed a thing--that he is even involved in this? A gentle pastoral presence could serve well here to help a birth parent live in a place of trust and not in one of fear.

Serving the birth parent in this case would be helping him or her turn responsibility language into opportunity language. God is

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\(^{11}\) Diana Garland. *Family Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 355
gifting her with the opportunity to be a vessel of love and grace to a child who has been wounded through relinquishment. She has a unique role that not one other person on earth has. It’s not a burden; it’s a privilege. Birth moms are uniquely positioned to be agents of God’s grace in a particular way in this broken and hurting world. And what I find beautiful is this: often those who are willing to serve as agents of healing somehow find healing themselves.
Sentiments on Hell

Anthony Sytsma

The doctrine of everlasting punishment of the wicked has been taught in the Church since the beginning, producing sharp debate, criticism, and passion. What are we as Christians to think of this view of hell? In this paper, I will summarize the traditional view of hell as formulated by Herman Bavinck. I believe in the traditional view and will refrain from defending against objections to the traditional view. Thus, after summarizing Bavinck’s formulation of hell, this paper will examine the reactions and feelings of Christians who hold to this traditional view. The reactions vary from hating the reality of hell to taking delight in the notion of people being punished everlastingly to satisfy God’s justice. I will argue that it is acceptable to dislike and be bothered by the traditional view of hell while at the same time believing in it, as long as one also trusts in God’s goodness and sovereignty, understanding hell to be just.

To begin, let us look at the traditional view of hell. Bavinck has a careful analysis of hell in his *Reformed Dogmatics* which I will now briefly summarize. The New Testament calls the place where the wicked went to be punished “Gehenna.” Originally the name for the valley of Hinnom southwest of Jerusalem, it later became the name of the place where the wicked went after death. The actual valley was used for dumping and burning trash, which became symbolic of the place where the ungodly would be burned everlastingly in fire.

Hell is a place distinct from Hades, the place where people reside during the Intermediate State. Hades is the same place as the

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2 For example, I will not take time to defend against a purgatorial view of hell, annihilation, or universalism.
5 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics iv*, 703.
lake of fire in which Satan and his demons will be thrown. It is a place of darkness and unending torment, and it is a place away from fellowship with God. For Bavinck, hell is not annihilation. Bavinck makes it clear that he agrees with the Church’s traditional view of hell.

Bavinck defends his view with an abundance of biblical texts. He mentions how much Jesus spoke of hell. He defends vigorously that hell is everlasting. Against annihilation views, he appeals to the immortal nature of humans. He interprets so-called universalistic texts as saying that Christ’s work is of infinite value and benefits the whole world. There is no room for repentance and forgiveness in hell. Hell is a real place of everlasting suffering and torment for the ungodly.

Bavinck says that to understand hell, we must comprehend the justice of God and the seriousness of sin. For Bavinck, sin is lawlessness and rebellion towards God, and it is an infinite rebellion because it is committed against the “Highest Majesty” who is infinitely worthy of our obedience and worship. Because of sin’s nature, everlasting punishment is just. All sinful human beings deserve this punishment. This justice coincides with God’s goodness.

When God pronounces everlasting punishment upon sinners in the Day of Judgment, this will fully vindicate him in the presence of all his creatures. We as God’s people wait for this day with

6 2 Peter 2:17, Rev. 14:11, Matt. 8:11-12.
7 This is in direct contrast to some universalistic views that believe that people will be there for a short period until they repent.
8 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 704.
9 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 709.
10 He delves thoroughly into the Greek words actually used to describe hell’s everlasting state.
11 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 710. He makes a distinction between death and non-existence, and between life and existence. People can die and then be in hell everlastingly, but that does not mean that they do not exist.
12 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 711.
13 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 714.
14 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 711.
15 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 712.
16 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 713.
expectation because of the suffering we have endured and seen on this earth. We wait for God to triumph over all opposition.\footnote{17} The reality of Christians being saved through Christ from this wrath and judgment reveals to us the depth of God’s love.\footnote{18} Bavinck ends by discouraging Christians to not speculate about other details of hell. What Scripture tells reveals is enough.\footnote{19}

In other sections of the \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, Bavinck wonders about the wideness of God’s mercy in connection with salvation and hell. He concludes that Reformed Theology is in a very favorable position.\footnote{20} Reformed Theology locates the ultimate source of salvation in God’s good pleasure, compassion, mercy, and grace.\footnote{21} Bavinck claims that people who never had any knowledge of salvation will be judged by a different standard. Furthermore, Bavinck thinks it is very important to remember that God, through his grace and power, can save without the external preaching of the Word through the internal calling and regeneration of the Holy Spirit.\footnote{22} Bavinck seems to hold out great hope in God’s mercy and that many people will receive God’s mercy.\footnote{23}

Before investigating reactions to this view of hell, let’s examine how this doctrine of hell fits in with the rest of Reformed Theology. The Reformed Creeds and Confessions have continued to uphold the Church’s view of hell. Reformed theology states that all humanity is guilty of both original sin through Adam and actual sin; therefore, all humans are guilty of God’s wrath and deserve hell.\footnote{24} Sin needs to be punished by God for his justice to be upheld.\footnote{25} The only way that we can be forgiven and not experience God’s wrath is to have that justice satisfied by another. Jesus did this for us, but we

\begin{itemize}
\item[\footnote{17}{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics iv.}, 699.}]
\item[\footnote{18}{He states: “The eternal life he imparted to us presupposes an eternal death from which he saved us.” Bavinck, Vol. 4, 713.}]
\item[\footnote{19}{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics iv.}, 714.}]
\item[\footnote{20}{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics iv.}, 724.}]
\item[\footnote{21}{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics iv.}, 727.}]
\item[\footnote{22}{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics iv.}, 632.}]
\item[\footnote{23}{He also explains some of the various views that Reformed theologians have had about children who die before an “age of discretion” and how they are in the covenant of grace. Bavinck, HS.C.NC., 725.}]
\item[\footnote{24}{Belgic Confession, Article 15.}]
\item[\footnote{25}{Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 4.}]
\end{itemize}
can only be saved by true faith in Christ.\textsuperscript{26} Those without faith will be punished in hell. God is completely just and good in punishing sinful humans in hell.\textsuperscript{27} However, God is also merciful in that Jesus died on our behalf, so that we, wholly undeserving, can be forgiven for our sins and have everlasting life.

While all humanity deserves hell, God elects some for everlasting life by creating faith in us through his Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{28} Those whom God does not elect are the reprobate and will be in hell forever. The Canons of Dort make the Reformed theology of Salvation and Predestination clear. The Canons raise the issue that we might want to complain that God elects only some to salvation, when he could elect more or all. The Canons’ response is that we should not question or talk back to God, but we should, with Paul, praise God even though we don’t understand him.\textsuperscript{29}

Now we can observe the different ways people react to this doctrine. Some people are not bothered by the doctrine. They easily see how it fits with God’s justice. Some people, who have suffered injustices, longingly wait for certain people to be in hell. Some who strive to appreciate God’s justice in addition to his mercy think that we should take delight in God’s judgment because God is glorified when his justice is shown through punishment. They believe that in heaven we will look at those suffering in hell and smile. Augustine held this view\textsuperscript{30} as well as Peter Lombard. \textsuperscript{31} Jonathan Edwards claimed that the sight of the sufferings of the damned, even those close to us, would lead to praise and glory of God.\textsuperscript{32} Such views were immortalized by the poet Dante in the \textit{Inferno}.\textsuperscript{33}

I shudder to think of feeling delight about people suffering

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\item \textsuperscript{26} Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 7.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 7.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Canons of Dort I, Article 18.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Harry Buis, \textit{The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment}, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), 69.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Philip C. Almond, \textit{Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 98.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Pinnock, 139.
\end{itemize}
either in this age or the age to come. Concerning this view Clark Pinnock remarks, “Reading Edwards gives one the impression of people watching a cat trapped in a microwave squirm in agony, while taking delight in it.” Even if Pinnock is incorrect, and it is fine to delight in hell, it is at least not wrong for these feelings to be absent. Now we can begin to discuss why it is acceptable and understandable for us to be bothered by hell, to be sorrowful about it, and to wonder about it.

I assent to these views of Bavinck on hell and these tenets of Reformed Theology about who will be in hell. However, I, like many others, do not like that this is the case. It is necessary that I still trust humbly in God; he knows what he is doing. I must realize that I do not understand his sovereign plan. I must not question his wisdom but rather respect him and give him glory like the Apostle Paul in Romans 9-11. But at the same time, I believe in this traditional view of hell with unease and sorrow. I would like to believe something else but Scripture does not permit me to hold a different view. Bavinck agrees writing, “If human sentiment had the final say about the doctrine of everlasting punishment, it would certainly be hard to maintain and even today find few defenders.” But, both Bavinck and I give Scripture the final say. Besides, we do not know the mind of God. Perhaps someday hell will make more sense to us.

My first argument for why it is acceptable for us to be bothered by hell pertains to the nature of Christ’s work. Our Reformed theology makes it clear that Christ’s death is sufficient for all of humanity. Christ’s death satisfied God’s wrath fully. God’s mercy and justice are both upheld and both virtues glorified in Christ’s work on the cross. Because of this, I see no reason for hell. It

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34 As I have noted, these are feelings that the theologians claim that we will feel once we are in blessedness and understand God’s justice more. Since God is completely good, he must take delight in all his decisions. These authors follow the natural conclusion that in heaven we will understand God’s justice and delight in the same things he does. However, as I later point out, Bavinck and I would both argue that God himself does not even take delight in those suffering in hell. It glorifies his justice, but it will not give him or us pleasure.

35 Pinnock, 140.


is not that I do not think all people deserve to be in hell; however, if God had mercy on some, why not on all? His justice has already been fully upheld through the punishment placed upon Christ. Moreover, why did God choose only some and not others, and why me? We have no clear answers to these questions, so we just have to trust God. We must be thankful that we, though undeserving, have been chosen and have everlasting life to look forward to, but we can still be bothered at how hard it is to understand these things.

My second argument pertains to God’s nature and our relationship to him. We know that God is love and that God is merciful, compassionate, and slow to anger. God’s punishment of people in the Bible is almost always to bring people to repentance. Connected with the first argument, these traits of God make us wonder even more why he does not elect more of humanity to receive his mercy. Furthermore, why does he make hell an everlasting punishment rather than a temporal one with the possibility of repentance? It is also important to note that God created every person. Why does he give mercy only to some? How are we to understand God making beloved creatures and allowing them to be everlastingly tormented in hell? Looking at all these things together, the fact that the Creator God is overwhelmingly loving, merciful, compassionate and yet punishes people to bring about repentance, it is hard to understand how he could want to punish everlastingly in hell in revenge—even if people deserve punishment.

My third argument deals with the nature of the punishment. It is often argued, as Bavinck did, that because God has infinite honor and glory, sins against him deserve infinite punishment. This makes sense; yet, it is then usually inferred that sinners have to go to hell to satisfy God’s justice because it alone gives infinite punishment. However, hell is everlasting but not infinite. At no point of time, even after being in hell for a long while, will people satisfy an infinite punishment. Hell is actually less bad than it could be in that it does not fully satisfy God’s justice. If God is able, (as he apparently is) to make the punishment less than what people deserve, why not make it much less than people deserve or nothing at all? Since being

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38 1 John 4:8. Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, etc.

39 Aquinas argued this in his Summa.
everlasting, hell never lives up to being an infinite punishment. Why not make hell temporary? However, God has not done this. It is still a place so dreadful that it hurts to think about hell. This does not make me reject the traditional view of hell, but it causes me to feel more bothered and confused about why God lets hell exist.

It is frustrating and unhelpful when Christians try to defend hell by trying to show its necessity. This is not a good argument to make as hell is not necessary for at least two reasons. First, as mentioned above, hell does not even begin to match up to what we deserve. It is not necessary in that it does not satisfy God’s justice perfectly. Second, we have already seen an example of what infinite justice and punishment looks like. The death of God on the cross was the only infinite punishment since it was God who died. Hell is not an infinite punishment since we are only finite creatures. The infinite punishment was already poured out on Christ. So hell, by any argument, is not necessary, and we should not argue that it is as Christians. We should believe that it exists, but we should not argue that it is necessary as if we know why it exists. Since we know it is not necessary, it bothers us!

My fourth argument has its basis in Jesus’ teachings about how we should relate to others. Jesus’ ethic was that we should turn the other cheek instead of taking revenge, which is exactly what he did by dying for us. Jesus wanted us to love even our enemies. Jesus wanted us to visit those in prison even if they deserved to be there. If this is how Jesus wants us to treat other people, is it not natural for us to expect God to act this way? Hans Kung has asked, “what would we think of a human being who satisfied thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?”

Pinnock goes so far as to say this view of hell paints God as a sadistic torturer roasting people like chestnuts over a fire for revenge. On the one hand, Jesus does not want us to get revenge, but on the other hand, God is getting revenge for sin with an everlasting hell. It is hard not to be bothered by my God punishing...
people in hell for eternity when this same God has told me to love others unconditionally.

My fifth argument is closely related to my fourth argument. It concerns our relationship to those who are going to hell. In Reformed Theology we believe that all people are deserving of wrath and punishment in hell, including ourselves. It is natural for us to squirm thinking of people in hell. We do not want unbelievers to be there anymore than we want ourselves to be there. In addition, the Bible emphasizes that we are not to feel more special or deserving than others. Israel is rightfully critiqued by God in Jonah 4:1-4 for thinking God only cares about Israel and not others. The New Testament tells us to proclaim the good news to all people. Election in both Testaments was never to be about thinking we are more special or deserving. This clear view of Scripture naturally leads us to be bothered about hell, knowing that we are no more special or deserving to escape punishment than anybody else.

My sixth and last argument concerns anguish and lament in the Scriptures. Calvin, Bavinck, and Berkhof all rightly point to Paul’s rhetorical questions and doxology in Romans 9-11. Who are we to question God? Paul clearly states in Romans 9:2, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” Paul also does not understand the ways of God, but he does not reject God’s plan and come up with his own view. He still praises God, but he is

realize that God has a completely different point of view than we do as he is being perfect. He is allowed to take revenge even if we are not. This does not wholly relieve our feelings from our point of view though.

Perhaps people who take delight or relief in thinking about people in hell have not grasped their own sinfulness and deserving of hell enough. Perhaps they have not understood the depth of God’s grace in their lives.

They were to follow God’s lead in caring about all the nations, and not just themselves from the very beginning in Genesis 12 with the covenant of Abraham.

Passages like Acts 1:8 and 1 Corinthians 9:16.

greatly bothered and full of sorrow. Calvin and Bavinck jump too quickly to how we do not understand God’s justice and that we should not question this idea of hell. Bavinck seems to think that wondering about how hell fits with God’s goodness is just our “human weakness and wimpiness.” In contrast, I want to stress that we can lament over the existence of hell as Paul laments over his own people not being saved. At least Bavinck stated that the pain God inflicts on those in hell will not bring us or God pleasure.

Bavinck rightly argues that we cannot say that the existence of hell shows that God is not really good any more than we can say that the existence of suffering in this world proves that God is not good. However, I would like to point out how full the Bible is, especially in the book of Psalms, of laments to God about suffering in this world. Neither suffering in this world nor the existence of hell should lead us to claim that God is not good, but they still give us reason for lament.

We must conclude with Hoekema that “one can certainly understand the difficulties people have with the doctrine of everlasting punishment. We all naturally shrink from the contemplation of such a horrible destiny. It is natural for us to want to alleviate human suffering. But this doctrine must be accepted because the Bible clearly teaches it.” We need to speak about hell with reluctance, with grief, and with tears, but we must continue to speak about hell.

47 At times Calvin seems to try to banish all wonderings and questionings about God’s plan. “And men’s insolence is unbearable if it refuses to be bridled by God’s Word, which treats of his incomprehensible plan that the angels themselves adore.” Calvin, 947-948. But other statements seem to show that he wonders about hell but realizes we will not get the answers we seek about it. “He who here seeks a deeper cause than God’s secret and inscrutable plan will torment himself to no purpose.” Calvin, 978. Moreover, Berkhof notes how even Calvin calls reprobation the “dreadful decree.” Berkhof, 116.

48 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 712.

49 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 714.

50 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics iv., 712.

51 Anthony A. Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 266. Chrysostom agrees: “For indeed my heart is troubled and throbs, and the more I see the account of hell confirmed, the more do I tremble and shrink through fear, but it is necessary to say these things.” Buis, 66.

52 Hoekema, 273.
We do not understand all of God’s reasons for the existence of hell, but we believe that God has a good sovereign plan. We trust him even when we do not understand. We must find comfort in our salvation and we must let the doctrine of hell spur us on in our mission efforts. Let us hope in God’s mercy.
Psalm 1: Happy is the One Who.... What?

David Salverda

Introduction
Happy is the one who delights in the law of the Lord. Happy. Happy happy, is the person. The happiness's of the person. This word is difficult to pluralize, but that it how it is to be read. Happiness in abundance belongs to the person who delights in the law of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm for the road, instructing us in the ways of happiness—of happiness in abundance.

The Old Testament's Relevance
You know, sometimes people think the Old Testament is an archaic text—not so relevant for today. I mean, how many of you eagerly wade into the book of Numbers for your personal or family devotions? Not too many. I imagine that even the Jewish High school kids of ancient Israel shook their heads when, yet again, they were forced to memorize the Torah. “What does this have to do with anything?” they'd complain. But then, in walks their wise old teacher, the Psalmist, to prove them and us wrong. “Do you want to be happy?” he asks with a grin on his face.

Do you want to be happy?

The Desire for happiness is always relevant, ever present. Day after day, year after year, century after century, like explorers, humans of all times and places have roamed the planet, lifting every rock, peering around every corner, striving ceaselessly, using every mean available, pursuing happiness. Do you want to be happy? Well, of course. Who doesn’t?

If you want to be happy, as I do, then Psalm 1 appears to be the place to go. Maybe its time we take a few moments to sit at the experienced feet of the Psalmist.
"Happy Happy, is the person who turns to God's Law," says our wise teacher. Law, in this psalm, meaning the Ten Commandments, but also more generally the received instruction of God as passed down. And turning to God’s law is only the first step, he continues. Happiness in abundance belongs to the one who *delights* in the instruction of the Lord. This person walks right past the ways of the wicked, the position of the sinners, and the seats of scoffers. Instead of wasting time with them and their petty amusements, this pious fellow, is eagerly drawn to the Lord's instruction, his law.

And by doing this, by delighting in the law—by finding joy and excitement in its teaching—this person becomes something special. Like a tree planted by the waters, the text says. A tree that has deep roots, that yields fruit in season, whose leaves do not whither.

That simile may not sound like a big deal to us living in lush Southern ON, but it certainly grabbed the attention of the Middle Eastern reader surrounded by rock and desert. And add to this the fact that the ancient Jewish reader would have experienced the word 'plant' as 'transplant,' and well, the Psalmist has created a rather pertinent illustration. Happy is the one who delights in the law of the Lord. This person becomes as a tree that has been 'transplanted' from a desert wasteland to fertile soil near a river, from mere survival to robust flourishing.

NOT so the wicked, says the Psalmist, in firm contrast. These folks, neglecting to delight in the teachings of God, become like chaff—a mere by-product blown to and fro by the wind. Flourishing is certainly not an applicable word to describe their state. They have become superfluous waist. In fact, God does not even need to punish them, for as verse six insinuates, their ways simply self-destruct—they destroy themselves.

And, well, there you have it. This sermon could end right here. The text is clear: Don't be like the wicked who bypass the law of God. Rather, delight in the Lord's instruction and you will experience happiness in abundance. Enough said. Go in Peace. (Pause)
**Happiness consists in Delighting in the Law?**

But what do you think about this? We’re not dealing with hard a fast theory here. Our wise teacher is basically just putting together his collective experience and is drawing some conclusions about the nature of the good life. Of course, it is also in the Bible, but let us dare to place that on hold for the moment. Happy is the person who delights in the law of the Lord? Does this fit with your experience? What do you think?

Well, it is not initially intuitive. Most of us spend our lives trying to wiggle out of the stranglehold of rules and regulations. Happiness is not delighting in God's law, it is: 1) an open highway heading north, the first day of vacation; 2) the moment when the last of your children is in bed and fast asleep; 3) or an open fairway still moist with the morning dew (Ping). God's law does not usually make it into the top ten list of things that make us happy. It is more of a burden.

H. L. Menchen, a 20th century satirist, once said: “*Say what you will about the ten commandments; but at the end of the day you must always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.*” That pretty much sums up the attitude of the day—and this attitude is in the Church as well.

The Psalmist says that happiness in abundance belongs to the one who delights in the law of the Lord. What do you think?

**‘Groundhog Day’**

Not too long ago, I watched a film entitled 'Groundhog day.' In the movie, Meterologist Phil Connors is forced by his news agency to go to Punxsutawney Pennsylvania to cover the story and festivities surrounding the Towns groundhog—or, as Phil Connors describes him, ‘a weather forecasting glorified rat.’ Needless to say, Mr. Connors is not pleased with the assignment. To make matters worse, midway through the day a blizzard comes through town, closing all the highways; cutting off all the phone lines. Phil is forced to spend the night. Too his horror, he wakes up the next morning only to
discover that it is February 2 all over again, and he is the only one experiencing it as a repeat. And this trend continues day after day after day. The rest of the world is on continues auto-repeat, and he is the only one who knows it.

Naturally, he thinks he's going insane. But after a while, he begins to take advantage of the situation. His actions, after all, have no long-term consequences. And so Phil goes out chasing women, stealing money, going to the best restaurants, drinking heavily. After all, each new day he wakes up to find that he is in the same hotel bed with a blank slate. He can do anything that he wants!

But the thrill soon begins to fade, however. Now instead of calmly hitting the snooze button on the hotel alarm clock, Phil smashes the clock with all his might. Nothing left seems to satisfy. He continues to look hard for happiness—under every rock and around every corner, but his life has become meaningless and empty.

Surprised? Well, our wise teacher, the Psalmist, certainly would not be. Happiness, after all, consists in delighting in law, not in doing whatever you want whenever you want.

Something tells me that there are many Phil Connors roaming around our world right now. And I would wager that like Phil, they are not happy.

Jerry
When I think and reflect on Psalm 1, I always think about a man I met not too long ago. Jerry (not real name) is a man who has experienced a lot. He is one of those people that has searched everywhere for happiness. For a while he found it in a particular substance. “I

1 Jerry is not actually from west Michigan and that is not his real name. Jerry is actually someone from Ontario that I met while growing up. I changed the story around because I figured if I mentioned his real name or real address, someone in the St. Catherine’s congregation probably would have known who I was talking about.
delighted in it,” he said to me one time. “It made me feel good. But eventually, the thrill began to fade. Laughs and good times quickly devolved into blackouts, bar-fights, and car wrecks.”

Thankfully, for Jerry, God transplanted him. Now he is one of those extraordinarily loud and off tune singers that you are thrilled to be worshiping next to in church. He is filled with life, much like a tree that has been transplanted near streams of water.

"I have experienced the bankruptcy of doing whatever I want whenever I want. Now," as he explained in a small group setting, "Now I consider it a privilege to follow God's wisdom, God's instruction. It's given me some much needed roots." (Pause)

Once again, our wise teacher would not be surprised. After all, happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord, who meditate on it day and night. They are the ones who will flourish.

**Returning to our Wise Poet.**
What do you think? Is the Psalmist on to something?

The Psalmist has indeed tapped into something profoundly true! Following the instruction of God is good wisdom for the road. In this journey that we are on, it is a pure gift to have rules and instruction. God has graciously put up signposts to direct our steps, "Don't go looking under that rock, or peering around that corner, for those paths lead to a dead end. If you would like to flourish in life follow the trail I have blazed. Delight in my instruction, in my law.” God’s instruction is a gift!

This is actually one of those often neglected, but rather important, Reformed doctrines. God's law, as the catechism says, certainly condemns us by revealing our faults, but it also serves an alternative function. God's law is also that which aides us in our striving to be more Christ-like. For those who are in Jesus—who have died and have been raised with him—the condemning function of the law has been lifted (at least with respect to eternal salvation), and the law becomes for us good news; a gift to aid in our living a life of gratitude.
The instruction of God is grace.

God's instruction, therefore, is not something to be resisted or scared of, but something to be profoundly thankful for, to delight in even. Happy is the one who delights in the law of the Lord. The language here is not legalistic or condemning, but positive and life giving!

Brothers and Sisters. Ask someone sometime who has lived or is living in a country that is not governed by the rule of law whether or not the lack of law is a good thing. They will tell you that it is not a good thing. Law is extremely important for collective flourishing. The same principle holds for individual life as well. Life without law will leave you, like it did Phil Connors, lifeless.

Existential Issues
Now, at this point, a very important question might pop into your head.
If the person who delights in the law is set to receive happiness in abundance, then why is it that many law delighting Christians often experience the opposite of happiness in abundance—grief in abundance maybe?

There are two things that can be said about this. First, Psalm one is general wisdom for the road; it deals with the good life in general. Our wise teacher is not saying that the one who delights in the Law of the Lord is always happy. Our wise teacher is saying that in general, those who are tuned into and delight in the goodness of God's law, experience happiness. Psalm 1 is general wisdom. Secondly, this is a tension that cannot be resolved. In fact throughout the Psalter many other psalmists react angrily against the Psalm 1 thesis. In Psalm 73, for instance, the Psalmist agonizes: "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure, for I am punished every morning, while the way of the wicked prospers continuously.” This is the opposite of what is supposed to happen, according to Psalm 1.

Life is sometimes a complicated mess, and sometimes no amount of delighting in the law is every going to make you happy. If you are experiencing grief in abundance, don't automatically assume you are
on the path of the wicked. Things are not that simple. This is a tension.

But this tension, however, does not overthrow the overall message of Psalm 1: Happiness in abundance does belong, in general, to the one who delights in the Law of the Lord. This is still good wisdom for the road.

**Application**
So, Covenant Christian Reformed Church. Do you want to be happy? Do you want to be as a tree transplanted from the desert to streams of water—to grow, to flourish, to produce fruit in season.

You know, there is a whole market out there that produces books and resources geared towards bringing about congregational renewal. I know because I have to read some of them for class. They often have fancy titles: *10 Ways to Renew your Congregation; The Congregational Renewal Guide*; there is even a *Center for Congregational Renewal* website. And some of these resources are really helpful. But, you know what: these books and resources rarely ever include the law of God in their renewal strategies.

It just sounds so strange doesn’t it—to adopt a congregational renewal plan that is based in delighting in an ancient set of rules. But that is what the Psalmist is saying:

O the happinesses of the Church that delights in the law of the Lord. They will be as a tree that has been transplanted from the desert near streams of water. They will bear fruit in season, they will not wither—their aspirations will be caused to prosper. Sounds pretty good doesn’t it?

**Conclusion**
Friends in Christ: Those who are in Christ Jesus are no longer (ultimately) condemned by God's instruction, they are set free by it. God's instruction is grace, meant for our own good—for our happiness even.
Many of us, however, have and will continue to learn this the hard way, amen. We, like Phil Connors, or Jerry, have searched and will continue to search under too many rocks and around too many corners. Such explorations have and will continue to leave us with many scars and bruises. Humans are foolish that way. The lure of lawlessness has and will continue to draw us into her trap.

But Brothers and Sisters, the message of Psalm 1 is that happiness does not consist in doing what we want whenever we want. Happiness in abundance is given to those who follow the trail that the Lord has blazed. It belongs to those, to the Church, who delights in the law of the Lord. This is indeed some good wisdom for the road. Thanks be to God. Amen.
Hope for the Grave. I Thessalonians 4.13-18

Chelsey Harmon

An elderly couple is sitting at their kitchen table about to enjoy breakfast. They join hands to pray before their meal, but when the husband opens his eyes at the end of the prayer, his wife is gone. All his hand is holding is her wedding ring.

“In the twinkling of an eye, loved ones disappear without a good-bye. Heaven rejoices as millions are welcomed into the unspeakable presence of God. The darkest days may lie ahead for those who have been left behind. On earth some realize what has happened . . . what they’ve lost . . . what they’ve missed. And, the darkest days lie ahead for those left behind.”

We have now heard four descriptions of what will happen in the end times. You may have recognized the last one; it’s the description that accompanies the book The Rapture in the Left Behind Series. The one about the elderly couple is a YouTube clip about the Rapture. These stories are unsettling. They are downright haunting. They are warnings. Don’t find yourself on the wrong side when the time comes—when Jesus comes back to earth.

The first and second depictions we read are meant to be comforting accounts. The Belgic Confession is a document written in the sixteenth century that our church still considers to be a statement of our faith. It was written for a community of Dutch Christians who were being oppressed by the Roman Catholic government. They dreamed of the day when Christ would come back to earth, fulfill the kingdom, end their suffering, and last pass the judgment for all of eternity.

Like the Belgic Confession was for Dutch Protestants, Paul’s words in our Scripture passage were meant to be a salve for the wounds and worries of the Thessalonian church. The Thessalonian believers were
new Christians, mostly Gentile, who had turned from their old way of living as Roman citizens to living as Christians within a Roman city. This meant that, among other things, they no longer participated in the rituals of the imperial cult like sacrificing meat on behalf of the emperor or to the Roman gods. The local Roman leaders were worried that Rome would find out about this and punish them for these Christians’ behavior, so they made it hard to be a Christian in the city. Christians were ostracized, ridiculed and socially harassed.

They were a small group of believers in a huge city that was full of people who didn’t want them around. But even more terrifying to the Thessalonian community than their present state, was the state of their dead brothers and sisters in the Lord. They wrote to Paul because they did not know whether or not those who had died before Jesus came back would participate in the second coming. They worried that they had some sort of advantage over them because they were still living. They had no doctrine of the afterlife to hold onto.

In the Greco-Roman world--even among Christians in the first century--there was no clear understanding of what happened after you died. In fact, the most widely held belief was that nothing happened at death; you simply died and existed no more. Christians knew that this was not the case, but the Thessalonian church was a young church filled with members who were converts. They were terrified to think that they, as alive Christians, were at an advantage for Christ’s return. They cared deeply for their loved ones, friends, and family members who had suffered along with them in a hostile city. They couldn’t understand how someone who had given their whole life to Christ would not be reunited with Christ when he came again. The Thessalonians lacked an understanding of what happened to a believer at death and what would happen when Christ came back.

What happens to us when we die? When we die, when our hearts stop beating, when they stop pumping blood through the miles of veins in our bodies, and when our lungs no longer expand and contract with oxygen, what happens? Our physical bodies are left on earth. We know this for sure because we, the living ones, see the bodies of the dead. But what happens to Sue and Tom, Bill and Sarah, our friends
and family, neighbors and strangers when they no longer live and breath on earth?

We worry about the present state of our children, grandparents, co-workers, and acquaintances. We worry about them not only while they are living but even more so when they die. We try to look back for signs of faith in God or words of belief that they may have spoken—anything that will help us to say without doubt that they are with the Lord. We wonder where they are and what will come of them when their corpses have decayed and Jesus comes again to reunite their souls and bodies.

When my cousin John died unexpectedly at the age of 26, a large portion of our family stayed at the church the entire day of the visitation. There were over thirty of us there mourning our loved one together, making sure that there was food to eat, and assuring that the flowers were arranged neatly in the sanctuary around the casket. We each spent time alone with John’s body crying and asking God, “Why?”

I remember another one of my cousins, Erika, who was ten at the time, walking slowly down the aisle towards the casket with her mother. They got half-way and stopped to sit in a pew because Erika was too scared to keep going. As Erika cried, she asked her mother where John was now. She was afraid to be close to his body because she knew that it somehow was and wasn’t John, her cousin, whom she had laughed and played with. Erika knew that there is something innately wrong about death.

Neither the Bible nor the Belgic Confession really tells us what happens to us when we die because they point us to something bigger and greater. What they do tell us is what happens when Jesus comes back. The Confession talks about Christ cleansing the world with “fire and flame,” but it also says that Christ comes from heaven to judge. The living and the dead are also gathered on the cleansed earth for the final judgment.

Christ comes back to us returning to the created world that he made;
to the place where he took on human flesh and lived; to the place where blood coursed through his veins; to the place where his lungs expanded and contracted with air; to the place where he died and was buried and people wondered what had happened to their Lord; to the place where people mourned and cried and asked where he was now; and to the place where he gave us a glimpse of what was to come when he rose from the dead and promised to return again. Jesus will come back to this earth, to our earth, to his earth.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians of these same promises of God. Paul says that the dead shall come back to life when Jesus comes back, and then, together with the living Christians, they will be taken up to heaven to greet Christ. The word he uses to talk about this gathering is *apantesin*. In Hellenistic culture, gathering means something quite different from what some people understand it to mean today. The *apantesin*, or "meeting," represents a special kind of gathering. When an important political leader or dignitary was going to visit a city, the citizens of that city would prepare a celebration within the city walls. Then, when they knew that the dignitary was on his way, they would go out onto the road and meet him. They would join the dignitary on his journey and escort him back to the city.

It’s Palm Sunday and the Triumphal Entry at its extreme. When Jesus comes back, we’re going to go out onto the “road” in the air and meet him as he descends back to the earth to rule. We’re going to get to greet him, praise him, and welcome him to the creation that he made and sustains. We’re going to celebrate with him all of the work we’ve done by the power of his Spirit to build his kingdom here on earth. And, we’ll get to celebrate, and party, and reunite with fellow believers from all times and places who have died, knowing that the new kingdom is here to stay.

Like the Thessalonians in the first century and the Dutch Protestants in the sixteenth, we are a people with hope. We are a people who hope in the promise of life everlasting. We are a people who believe that we will share in the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes back, he is going to renew creation. He’s going to take what is dead and make it alive again.
Jesus is going to take our decomposing, broken, dead bodies and mold us into the perfect image bearers, reuniting our souls and physical selves for all eternity.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that because they have this hope, they can comfort one another in the promises of God concerning their fellow brothers and sisters who have died. We can comfort one another in the promises of God as well. Rev. Mel Hugen once wrote that “few things are so painful to a grieving family as silence from the community after the funeral” of a loved one.

When we mourn together, we remember the life and death of one of God’s children. God’s grace and forgiveness frame all of our memories and all of our hopes for the future--of being reunited. When my cousin Erika and her mother sat halfway down the sanctuary, staring at John’s dead body and casket, her mother comforted her with the promises of God. Her mother told her that God was holding John closely and welcoming John to himself. Her mother told her that there was nothing to fear about John’s body because even that would one day be made whole again. Even though his body seemed like an empty shell now, John would fill it again because God would unite him with it for the rest of time. Erika's mother told her that God loves John, God loves her, and God the Holy Spirit was there with them. Moreover, the Holy Spirit was with John at that same moment in order to comfort them all.

With that hope and comfort, Erika stood up and walked the rest of the way to the casket, which she returned to several times that day in order to look and remember her cousin. Erika was no longer terrified of her cousin’s death because she knew that her God was bigger, better, more powerful, and loving than death.

God comforted us all that day in the quiet moments of reflection. God comforted us by the sheer number of acquaintances that came to the funeral because their lives had been touched by John’s life. God even served comfort to us in the ham buns and coffee of the funeral meal. God comforted us by allowing us the space and ritual to mourn the loss of life.
Funeral services bring people together in ways that only baptism ceremonies rival. Gathered together as God’s people, we watch as God welcomes our children into his family at their baptisms. At death, we watch and comfort one another with the promises God made at those baptisms. We comfort one another with Paul’s words that when Jesus comes again we’ll be reunited, the dead and the living, to be with Christ forever.

When he left the first time, Jesus promised us the great Comforter, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who cries for us and with us in our mourning as well as in our celebration, is here with us now and will be with us for all eternity! One day we’ll join with our fellow brothers and sisters who have died in welcoming and celebrating a new creation that has no death but only life-everlasting.
Review Essays


Sung Joon Moon

Arthur Peacocke, a doctor of science and theology at the University of Oxford, was one of the leaders in investigating the relationship between religion and science. Just before his death on October 21, 2006, he composed an essay about the religion-science dialogue. In addition to Arthur Peacocke’s final essay Philip Clayton, Peacocke’s friend in the same academic field, gathered nine responses to his essay from Philip Hefner, Willem B. Dress, Christopher C. Knight, Karl E. Peters, Donald M. Braxton, Ann Pederson, Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell, and Keith Ward. Philip Clayton, the editor, also added his response to these. Then, Arthur Peacocke responded to the responses one by one, and Arthur Peacocke’s Nunc Dimittis was placed at the end of the book.

Overall, this book is intended to briefly address an attempt to bridge religion and science. Peacocke notices that traditional Christianity fails to meet the need of integrating theology with the natural scientific worldview. Here he explores the possibility of “naturalistic Christian theology.” Could the Christian faith be consistent with naturalism? Difficulty lies in the nature of both Christianity and Naturalism. Christians traditionally believe in God as a supernatural being and miracles as supernatural events. Natural scientists basically reject any supernatural notion in doing scientific experiments and investigations. Peacocke’s concern in connection with the dialogue between religion and science lies in the interrelationships of God, nature, and humanity.

The body of All That Is consists of two parts. In Part one, Peacocke’s aim is to figure out the philosophical and theological consequences of some scientific perspectives such as physicalism and emergentism. In the second part Peacocke deals with the
application of the philosophical and theological consequences to several Christian beliefs like: Jesus Christ, the Eucharist, and most of all the doctrine of the God-world relation. This framework reveals Peacocke’s methodological assumption that Christian belief must be tested through the lens of current philosophical and theological frameworks. In other words, the rule of faith in Peacocke’s mind lies much more in contemporary science than in the Bible and church tradition.

In particular, the first part consists of a survey of the three philosophical and theological consequences: emergent monism, theistic naturalism, and panentheism. According to Peacocke, emergentism is based on physicalism, i.e., a belief that “all concrete particulars in the world (including human beings) – with all of their properties – are constituted only of fundamental physical entities of matter/energy at the lowest level and manifested in many layers of complexity” (Peacocke, 12). In short, ultimately there is only one entity in the world, yet it has some different kinds. Being against supernaturalists who believe that there are some extra entities beyond matter/energy, Peacocke also rejects reductionism. Reductionism is a belief that the nature of complexity could be explained by reducing them to a simple and basic kind. Peacocke characterizes the differences between the kinds by saying that “each level has to be regarded as a cut through the totality of reality” (13). Peacocke believes that new kinds at the higher levels of reality have emerged from the lower. Here, in addition to the nonreductive feature, Peacocke’s layered physicalism shows the characteristics of emergence. Thus, his ideas could be summed-up as physical monism, nonreductive physicalism, or emergent monism. From this perspective, acknowledging bottom-up causation and top-down causation, Peacocke argues that the whole determines its parts. This implies that the highest in the levels of the system determine the parts on the lower levels.

Second, Peacocke identifies naturalism as a belief that the world could best be understood by natural science without any appeal to the supernatural. Peacocke remarks that traditional theologians overemphasized God’s transcendence, which resulted in the dominance of deism. But now Peacocke sees a revival of “the immanence of God as Creator ‘in, with and under’ the natural
processes of the world unveiled by the sciences” (19). Peacocke finds a clue to solve the problem of ‘theistic’ naturalism in the idea of emergence. He believes that within the whole hierarchy of emergent dynamics, the immanent Creator keeps doing the work of creatio continua in time without violating the created order.

Third, Peacocke thinks that traditional transcendental theism is inappropriate to the evolutionary perspective that God’s action is no other than natural processes in the world. This scientific age is in need of an alternative theism and new spirituality. Peacocke’s alternative is a model of panentheism, that is, a belief that the “Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in God and (as against pantheism) that God’s Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe” (22). Thus, according to panentheism, the world is in God, on the one hand, yet God is more than the world, on the other hand. By using the panentheistic model, Peacocke tries to define the relationship between God and the world. He uses the analogy of the human body-soul to describe the God-world relationship. Here his understanding of the body-soul relationship is the same as Spinoza’s two aspects view: physical description and mental description are about the same psycho-physical event. This is why Peacocke says that “God is creating the world from within and, the world being ‘in’ God, God experiences its sufferings directly as God’s own and not from the outside” (25).

In the second part, Peacocke applies his naturalistic theism, Emergentist-Naturalistic-Panentheistic perspective (ENP), to Christology and the Eucharist. Here Peacocke’s task is to show how Jesus Christ’s divinity could be understood in light of the naturalistic faith of ENP. When Peacocke deals with Jesus Christ’s resurrection and incarnation, he describes the divine events with naturalistic words or human psychological terms. For example, Jesus’ resurrection, Peacocke argues, is a complex of psychological experiences (34). He also insists that incarnation is not a “descent” into the world but the “manifestation of what, or rather of the One who, is already in the world” (34). Peacocke understands Jesus’ mediating work as new information-bringing work. For Peacocke, the difference between Jesus Christ and humans is not in kind but in degree. In this way, Peacocke makes a case for the naturalized
Jesus-Christ. If this is the case, Peacocke’s understanding of Jesus’ salvific work is that he does not save humans from sin or solve the problem of sin. Instead, he provokes and generate what humans already have, that is, a “radical openness to God, a thoroughgoing self-offering love for others and obedience to God” (38). In connection with the Eucharist, Peacocke thinks that God is present ‘in, with, and under’ the holistic event of the Eucharist, and God is acting on the individual and community through the Eucharist.

Peacocke’s ENP perspective also includes a notion of ‘personal’ God. Based on his ideas that God acts in different levels, such as the level of the whole and of the human person, and that human’s God-talk has a personal character, Peacocke argues that God is “at least personal” (47). In addition to the notion of God’s at-least-personality, Peacocke deals with the doctrine of God’s grace. Peacocke’s “grace” refers to all the transformative actions of God on humanity and the world. At the end of his essay, Peacocke hopes that his ENP perspective will change the dualistic understanding of the human and divine nature that, according to Peacocke, “have plagued Western culture for too long.” Yet he does not talk about how dualism screwed up the Western culture.

Ten responses follow Arthur Peacocke’s essay in a variety of voices. I would like to address some of the criticisms from the responders. Philip Hefner contends that in ruling out supernaturalism and any idea of the miraculous, Peacocke does not leave any crucial part of classic Christian faith remaining. Hefner comments, “at no point has he overwhelmed the integrity of either side” (68). Keith Ward casts a skeptic question: can a theistic faith really rest content with the thesis that there are no supernatural elements in the world? Ward rightly notices that Peacocke’s doctrine of God is a kind of dualism, and he thinks that “Peacocke has no problem with that sort of dualism, between a spiritual God and the created universe” (154). In Ward’s eyes, Peacocke’s idea of panentheism also is a kind of dualism based on the difference between spirit and matter.

Christopher C. Knight distinguishes between a strong theistic naturalism where there is no special providence and a weak theistic naturalism where specific divine actions become a part of the full explanation of special providence. Knight also differentiates between strong panentheism where the laws of nature are “a mode of God’s
presence in the world,” (83) from a weak panentheism where “the laws of nature have an autonomous status that makes them equivalent to something that is ‘outside’ of God” (83). Then, Knight argues that Peacocke is a weak naturalist. Finally, Willem B. Dress seems to be the most severe critic of the respondents. Emphasizing that emergence is another word for reductionism, Dress does not feel the need of the concept of emergence because he believes that we do not need to promise a complete understanding of reality. Dress challenges Peacocke for his use of biblical studies. In other words, why is the engagement with biblical studies significant at all? Furthermore, Dress comments, “Though I value his engagement with Jesus Christ as pivotal to the Christian heritage, I am puzzled as to how this fits into his approach in general” (77).

These sound criticisms, in my view, basically have to do with Peacocke’s metaphysical assumptions, nonreductive physicalism and emergentism. Nonreductive physicalists believe that mental phenomena do not come from a mental entity while arguing that the spiritual phenomena must be regarded as functions of the neurobiological processes in the brain. Is it a reasonable argument that there exists function without entity which corresponds to the function? They might answer that the functional phenomena emerge from the brain processes. But I want to hear a clearer explanation of the term “emergence.” Are nonreductive physicalism and emergentism really monism? In my eyes, both ideas are too dualistic to call it monism. Nevertheless Peacocke’s experiment has some problems, yet his question is still meaningful: Is natural Christian theology possible?
1. INTRODUCTION

Amy Plantinga Pauw’s book, *The Supreme Harmony of All,* is the first systematic account of Jonathan Edwards’s doctrine of the Trinity. Basically she accomplishes two things in this book. The first is exploring and demonstrating how Edwards’s trinitarianism permeates his biblical interpretation, doctrine of Redemption, sense of beauty and excellency, interpretation of the relationship between God and the world, understanding of the Great Awakening, and his pastoral practice exemplified in his struggle with the Half-way Covenant. In general, Edwards’s metaphysical deliberation and his practical pastoral works have been examined separately without any organic coherence. Pauw argues that “Edwards’s trinitarianism provides an unusually wide view of his deepest philosophical, theological, and pastoral inclinations” (3). In other words, Edwards’s trinitarian perspective provides an overview of his entire career.

The second purpose of the book is to indicate the relevance of Edwards’s trinitarian thought in theology today. The twentieth century saw a significant resurgence of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. However, Pauw’s concern is that this Renaissance of the Trinity has developed without satisfactory attention to American theology before the twentieth century (16). Thus Pauw contends that “Edwards’s trinitarianism has a place in this discussion, and offers largely untapped resources for understanding the complex issues of...
Christian practice and communal life” (16).

On one hand, Pauw compares Edwards’s thought with the Cambridge Brethren such as, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Goodwin, John Preston, John Owen and draws attention to many resonances between Edwards and the Spiritual Brethren (7 and many footnotes). She also calls attention to the continental theologians, van Mastricht and Francis Turretin, to show that Edwards and these theologians shared the same interest in the Trinity. Yet, on the other hand, she points out several fields such as, the concept of divine simplicity, covenant of redemption, and the doctrines of Sin and Eschatology, where Edwards departs from the Reformed tradition or felt unsatisfied with his theological legacy and reformulated it as his response to challenges of his era.

With respect to looking at both continuity and discontinuity in Edwards’s theological inheritance, Pauw presents a fairly balanced account. She also acknowledges tensions and inconsistencies contained within Edwards’s theology and their implications for contemporary theology. In this sense too, Pauw’s account is insightful, yet a presentation of unsolved questions in Edwards’s thought naturally makes the conclusion of this book an open question. Pauw recognizes a continuing debate on the Trinity in today’s theological arena and is trying to contribute to it by reminding today’s church and theologians to pay due attention to the rich resources of a great eighteenth-century American divine.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL MODELS

Traditional theology has identified two major streams of interpretation regarding the Trinity. One is a psychological model in which the Father is the primordial fountain of the deity; the Son is described as the Wisdom; and the Spirit is called the Love of the One God. In this model, God’s oneness is emphasized. The other is a social model in which the relationship among the trinitarian Persons is recognized as the society or family. In this case, the emphasis is not on unity but rather the mutual interrelatedness or, more precisely, the unity in plurality (11). Today’s theology debates the appropriateness of each model and the difficulty of integrating them. What is striking is that Edwards does not take one side but adopts both models and utilizes either of them depending on his context. According to Pauw,
“Edwards was willing to live with the theological tension between these two models for the Trinity because he found them each indispensable for telling the story of God’s great work of redemption through Christ” (11). For Edwards, the focus of his interest was the usefulness of the Trinity (15); the Trinity’s helpfulness for “the way of piety” (27); 3 or how the doctrine of the Trinity helps believers “live unto God” (75). In other words, he preferred “practical outworkings” rather than “conceptual harmony” (15). Wherever appropriate, Edwards felt free to adopt either the psychological or social model of the Trinity. For him, both models are necessary and relevant.

This flexibility has significance for the contemporary debate over the appropriate trinitarian model for divine Persons. Three points can be raised regarding this theme. First, Edwards’s social Trinity adumbrates today’s inclination toward the social model. The general tendency of contemporary theology is its emphasis on a social analogy of the Trinity to the detriment of the divine unity exemplified in a psychological image. For example, both Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg stress the social image of the Trinity and the intimate relationship between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. As a result, the inseparable relationship between God and the world comes to the forefront. 4 In Reformed theology of the seventeenth century, the teaching of divine simplicity was tied with “substance metaphysics,” (60) which viewed God as the “ultimate reality as self-existent, possessing its identity apart from the relations in which it stands to others” (60), or “the most unified and thus the most invulnerable to dependence and disintegration” (61). Compared to this traditional understanding of the divine being, the contemporary trend of the doctrine of God seems to be heading for the other end: “the relational ontology” (58). Edwards

3 Pauw adopts this expression from Peter van Mastricht to describe Edwards’s motive of his trinitarian delineation. Peter van Mastricht, Theoretico-practica Theologia (Utrecht, 1724), lixxxvi.

4 The difference of nuance must be admitted, though. Moltmann virtually abolished a sharp distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity and identifies these two almost as the same, whereas Pannenberg retains the divine aseity, but says that once the world is created, God’s rule over it becomes a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the divine sovereignty.
transformed the concept of divine unity or simplicity by introducing new notions of beauty or excellency: “What holds it together is the conviction that relationality is at the heart of metaphysical excellence” (80); and “beauty is a matter of proportion and harmony within the thing itself, and in its relations with other objects” (81). In this respect, Pauw maintains that “Edwards anticipated a trend in some contemporary theology to cultivate deliberately a plurality of models for God” (50).

However, it is important to noted that some scholars argue that Pauw’s reading, antithetically opposing the psychological and social models, is not consistent to the real Edwards. Although Pauw asserts that Edwards uses both psychological and social models ambidextrously and thereby causes ambiguity, scholars such as Robert W. Caldwell and Steven M. Studebaker contend that Edwards’s trinitarianism falls in the traditional Augustinian trinitarian theology. For example, Studebaker argues that “His (Edwards’s) usefulness for contemporary trinitarianism is not to suggest an eclectic method of appropriating conflicting conceptualities, but to challenge the common assumption that Western Augustinian trinitarianism is inherently monistic and must be transcended by recourse to the Eastern trinitarian tradition.”5 They locate Edwards’s social trinitarian model within the Augustinian tradition in a broad sense. Pauw’s characterization of “cobbled trinitarianism” (183) is at least debatable.

Third, Pauw’s interpretations of Edwards’s teaching on sin and eschatological punishments are also debatable. Pauw argues:

When cut loose from its anchor in the psychological

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model’s depiction of God’s primordial graciousness, Edwards’s account of the ‘interpersonal’ agency of the Trinity drifted into treacherous waters of trinitarian discord and pitiless divine vengeance. The depiction of God’s glory and beauty funded by the psychological model became warped in Edwards’s social account of the divine economy, where the role of the Holy Spirit was muted (187).

Pauw seems to argue that the social Trinity, not underpinned by the psychological model, can lose the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit and the divine graciousness, which degenerates God into a monolithic agent of ruthless judgment. I do not quite understand why Pauw attributes the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit and God’s graciousness chiefly to the psychological model (43, 121-122) and then concludes that the social Trinity, lacking the psychological image, leads to “an undifferentiated ‘God’” (133). It seems that a major reason for his strict treatment of sin and eschatological retribution comes from, as Pauw herself also argues, the grievousness of sin as “creaturely resistance to the aims of God’s great work of redemption” or the sin against the Holy Spirit (137). Is it really appropriate to correlate Edwards’s treatment of sin with the difference of motifs between the psychological and social models?

3. COVENANT OF REDEMPTION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT AS THE BOND OF UNION

Pauw identifies the covenant of redemption at the core of the linkage between the immanent and the economic Trinity (93). Prior to the temporal manifestation of the divine design of redemption, there was an eternal consultation between the Father and the Son. The aim of this covenant is “the extension of the loving union of the Godhead to include the elect” (103). Put another way, the divine being originally entails the disposition of communicating himself to the non-divine, created beings and inviting them to participate in the affluence of the divine life. For Edwards, this is the fundamental reason for the creation and redemption of the world. In this way, the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity should correspond to each other.
Edwards was never satisfied with a traditional interpretation of covenant theology. What was not fully developed in covenant theology was the peculiar role of the Holy Spirit in the grand design of redemption. As the eternal conference was made mainly between the Father and the Son, the Spirit’s role was mainly the application of the accomplishments obtained by the agreement between the Father and the Son. In Edwards’s estimation, this seemed that “Reformed covenant theology had diminished the Spirit’s role in the work of redemption” (121). What Edwards did in response to this defect was “to transcend the bounds of covenant theology, with its implicitly social view of the Trinity, and extrapolate a new economic office based on the Spirit’s role in the psychological model as God’s love” (121).⁶

In connection with this conceptual expansion of the covenant of redemption, Edwards’s distinctive term “union” must not be overlooked. One of the most helpful treatments of this book is that of “union” as the function of the Holy Spirit. The notion of “union” as “an extremely elastic and adaptable term in Christian theology” conveys the significance of incarnation and the suffering of Jesus Christ; enables the description of the seriousness of sin beyond the typical Reformed formulation in which sin is defined as the unfaithfulness to God’s law; helps descriptions of the procedure and end of human redemption and the major role of the Holy Spirit in its transaction; and envisions the life of the organic community as church on earth and the world of love in heaven (149). By seeing the Holy Spirit as the bond of union, Edwards has succeeded in discerning the significance of the work of the Spirit in divine providence and redemption. The Holy Spirit unites the divine Persons in the immanent Trinity, unites God and creatures, and unites created beings to each other (120).⁷ Edwards implements and expands the meaning and use of the term “union” broadly and comprehensively. Although delineations of the Spirit sometimes fluctuate depending on the context, the development of the role of the Holy Spirit and

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⁶ Here again I wonder why Pauw ascribes the role of the Spirit as love mainly to the psychological model.
⁷ Robert W. Caldwell plumbed this theme in his Ph. D. dissertation. The edited version is Caldwell, *Communion in the Spirit*. 

130
concomitant understanding of “union” are Edwards’s (American theology’s) great contribution to the Reformed tradition. This exploration of the work of the Holy Spirit entices researchers to use Edwards for dialogue with other theological traditions (167).

4. A REMAINING QUESTION

Pauw demonstrates both the permeation of the trinitarian framework in Edwards’s thought and its fluctuation in his trinitarian models and pastoral practices. She also presents the rich potential of Edwards’s theology for contemporary theology. For instance, she stresses Edwards’s significance for today as a potential source for renewing theological language based on Edwards’s freedom in using extra-biblical sources. My remaining question is what will be the criteria when “new attempts to speak God’s language beautifully” are made (191)? If the Bible is the paradigm, how does it function? How can the renewal of theological vocabulary be protected from the pitfall of the projection of arbitrary or ideological assertions onto theology?

8 For example, Anri Morimoto points out the affinity of Edwards’s vision of salvation with that of the Catholic. Anri Morimoto, Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Morimoto also makes a connection between Edwards’s notion of “union” with the Orthodox notion of theosis.
“Jacob, Esau, and God:
A Choral Reading”

Randall Buursma

Esau: I am your twin, Esau
Jacob: I am your twin, Jacob
God: I am your God
Esau: I hunger
Jacob: I deceive
God: I supply your every need
Esau: What do you have to offer for my hunger?
Jacob: Immediate satisfaction for future considerations
God: I offer myself
Jacob: I take your offering and run
Esau: I take your offering and still hunger
God: My blessing is sufficient for you
Jacob: I keep running, deceiving, hungering
Esau: I make my own way, I hunt for that which fills me, but does not satisfy.
God: I am relentless in my pursuit of you. Eat of me. Drink of me.
Jacob: Esau, I am weary of running. I am tired.
Esau: Jacob, I am burdened by our broken relationship. I am tired.
God: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.