STROMATA

Edited for the

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**BOOK REVIEWS**


Linda Joelsson’s dissertation-turned-monograph, *Paul and Death*, is a theological surprise; rather than being a study of Paul’s view of death and the afterlife, Joelsson instead focuses on the coping mechanisms Paul created for himself and his assemblies in order to deal with death, as demonstrated in his seven undisputed letters. For Joelsson, practices and attitudes toward death are an often-overlooked subject in biblical studies, and nowhere does she believe this is more apparent than in Paul. Paul’s perspective on death has traditionally been seen as negative, but Joelsson contends that Paul’s attitude to death proves much more nuanced and, in fact, quite positive (4). An examination of Paul’s epistolary coping mechanisms to deal with death not only reveals the mistakes he made, as well as developments and maturation in his character (9-31), but also sheds light on the kinds of early Christian assemblies Paul was constructing as alternative communities to the imperial cult and other first century religious groups (31-36).

Joelsson limits her study to the seven undisputed letters of Paul because she wishes to remain within mainstream scholarship (23). She examines these seven letters in what she believes is their chronological order of composition, and divides them into four distinct phases that show Paul’s maturation regarding death. In 1 Thessalonians and Galatians, the earliest of Paul’s letters, Paul doesn’t see the need to wrestle with the issue of his or other Christians’ deaths, and instead encourages believers to either shut off their emotions concerning recently deceased believers for the sake of group survival or focus exclusively on the crucified Christ (chapter 2). The Corinthian correspondence represents both an intensification of this lack of concern about death and the beginning of Paul’s maturation, wherein Paul expresses aggression toward death in light of a hoped-for resurrection in 1 Corinthians, but begins to recognize the possibility of his death in 2 Corinthians, even while discussing transformation and the new creation (chapter 3). Romans witnesses Paul’s full embrace of the possibility of his death and his consequent advocacy of human transformation and divine justice as adequate coping mechanisms (chapter 4). Accumulatively, Philippians and Philemon represent the final
development of Paul’s acceptance and preparation for his imminent death in his utilization of cooperation and emphasis on the progressive nature of faith as suitable means of coping (chapter 5). Joelsson concludes that these suggested ways of coping with death not only give us a window into Paul’s psyche, but also show us that coping with one’s personal fate is an ongoing, gradual, and dynamic process (198).

Paul and Death contains three strengths that make this study fruitful for theological and biblical studies that intersect with Paul. First, Joelsson presents an insightful perspective on an aspect of Paul’s character development. Due to its ability to help us clearly see the various coping strategies Paul used for himself and his assemblies, this work enables us to see some of the personal growth Paul underwent in the course of his life; its conclusions could result in a new approach to a biography of Paul and re-launch study of Paul’s psychology and personality. Second, the psychological approach could potentially resolve some of the chronology and authenticity issues that attend Paul’s letters, because it offers new ways to understand Pauline literature. Finally, in a more practical vein, this book has the ability to help pastors, Christian soul care practitioners, and theologians re-envision the intersection of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture with Christian growth and sanctification.

Nevertheless, Paul and Death demonstrates three key weaknesses that seriously distract (if not undermine) from Joelsson’s agenda. First, the work assumes a very ego-centered approach to Paul, wherein his experiences are only interpreted as originating from within his own psyche. Such an approach is contrary to the way Paul repeatedly claims he viewed and understood his life, which tends to cause Joelsson to not take seriously what Paul psychologically interpreted as supernatural intervention in his life and ministry. Second, Joelsson largely ignores the potential impact which Paul’s conversion most likely had on his mental development, psyche, and coping skills with respect to death. Third, when Joelsson deals with Paul’s copious treatments of Christ crucified, she often represents Paul’s views as if the apostle believed Christ is dead rather than that he died and rose again. This is a distortion of Paul’s approach to death, which ignores how the apostle intersects our deaths with Christ’s resurrection from death. Because of this, the book needs to be put into more substantial conversation with the biblical theme of “Christ crucified,” due to Joelsson spending so much time listing Paul’s treatment of Jesus’ death without interacting with it at the level Paul pursues it in his letters.
Examining the issue of Paul and death in light of Christ crucified would only strengthen and sharpen our understanding of both topics.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, *Paul and Death* is a fascinating piece of recent religious writing and a profound work of biblical and psychological investigation that will bear much promise for further Pauline studies, if taken seriously by the academy. More is always being published in Pauline studies than can reasonably be read by scholars, and overlooking much of it will most likely not diminish the scholar’s mastery of this field too much. *Paul and Death* addresses a much-neglected field of inquiry, however, and overlooking this book will likely impede the Pauline scholar’s investigation and well-rounded interpretation of the apostle’s thought.

— Nathaniel Gamble
HERMAN BAVINCK’S DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION: A GIFT AND REWARD

Travis Jamieson

Abstract: What if the systematic theologian was also an ethicist? What if the person who thought theoretically could also think practically? The author proposes that Herman Bavinck is such a person. In Bavinck's articulation of the doctrine of sanctification, Bavinck connects theology and ethics via the organic. He shows his readers that sanctification is a product of grace through and through. However, in his emphasis on grace, the reality of human agency is never lost. The author will argue this point by exploring Bavinck's historical context, explaining his biblical and theological argument, and attempting to apply it to the church today.

Introduction

The doctrine of sanctification is perhaps the most important doctrine for the Christian’s daily existence in Christ. Justification proves helpful when describing how the believer was saved and the doctrine of glorification describes how they will be saved, but the doctrine of sanctification addresses how the believer is being saved today. Sanctification addresses the believer’s growth in their union with Jesus Christ. It is the doctrine that wrestles most with how to be conformed to the image of Christ.

A problem with today’s evangelical Christianity is how the doctrine of sanctification often ends up looking either like moralistic self-help or a passive “let go and let God.” Even for Christians who say that they do not believe either self-help or passive sanctification can often find themselves struggling to understand how to live the Christian life in a way that does not resemble either of these options. In a word, we may think we have a biblical understanding of sanctification, but in practice our sanctification often looks nothing like we imagined.

Do Christians need to find the balance between these two options within their doctrine of sanctification? If so, has the church been missing helpful theological nuances within its understanding of sanctification? How can the church move forward in its understanding of sanctification
in such a way that upholds both the integrity of human agency and the work of God through Christ by the Spirit?

Looking to the rich history of the church often answers questions that Christians have today. Herman Bavinck, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, provides a significantly helpful chapter on the doctrine of sanctification. Although, short in length—only forty pages—Bavinck’s thoughts on sanctification supply the theological resources necessary to have a balanced understanding of the doctrine. His doctrine of sanctification organically connects to his ethics, enabling the Christian to have a renewed excitement about their Christian walk and the hope that they can participate in the work that Christ is doing in their lives. I will prove this by first situating Bavinck in his historical context and explaining Bavinck’s interest in sanctification. Secondly, an overview of Bavinck’s doctrine of sanctification as found in the fourth volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* will be given. Lastly, I will seek to retrieve key elements of Bavinck’s doctrine of sanctification that may enable the church today to better understand the call to be sanctified.

**Historical Context**

Born on December 13, 1854 Herman Bavinck grew up in the conservative branch of the Dutch Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands, in which his father, Jan Bavinck, served as a minister. Bavinck eventually studied theology at his denomination’s Kampen Theological School; however, after a year of study, he decided that he wanted to study at the more liberal University of Leiden. Although this disappointed his father, Bavinck understood that the church needed to gain a better understanding of modern theology and so, he thought, he should go to a school that taught it. Although, he was grateful for his training at Leiden, Bavinck did not feel spiritually nourished during his time there. Bavinck comments; “Leiden has benefited me in many ways: I hope always to acknowledge that gratefully. But it has also greatly impoverished me, robbed me, not only of much ballast (for which I am happy), but also of much that I recently, especially when I preach, recognize as vital for my own spiritual life.”¹ After finishing his dissertation on Zwingli’s *Ethics* at

¹ Quoted by John Bolt in by Herman Bavinck, and John Bolt, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, vol 1, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 13. From this point on all references made to any of the volumes of Bavinck’s *Reformed
Leiden, Bavinck moved into pastoral ministry for a short stint before receiving a call from the Kampen Theological School to be a professor. During his professorship at Kampen, Bavinck wrote his systematic work, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.

Bavinck came of age during a time in the Dutch Reformed tradition when pietism and living out one’s faith were emphasized. This emphasis was strong during Bavinck’s childhood because of what happened in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Christians “had acquired freedom from religious persecution and been granted legitimacy and power by the civil authorities,” but instead of using this newfound freedom to spur the church on toward faithfulness, it resulted in many Christians becoming apathetic and living lives marked by licentiousness.

Therefore, an era known as the “Second Reformation” took place within the Netherlands. Influenced by “English Puritanism and German pietism,” this response came about because of a lack of righteous living among Christians. Bavinck soon became entrenched in an understanding of Christianity that required one’s beliefs about God to determine one’s actions.

Following the writing of his dissertation on Zwingli’s *Ethics*, Bavinck continued to investigate ethics during his short time as a pastor. Although he had little time for study, he devoted what time he did have to the topic of ethics. In fact, while complaining in a letter to his friend, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, Bavinck confessed, “When I have time to study, I work on ethics. I have resolved and I have started to investigate for myself the most important ethical issues.”

Even in those early years, Bavinck

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2 The translation of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* to English was completed in 2008 with the fourth volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. Less well known is the fact that during the time that Bavinck wrote his *Reformed Dogmatics*, he also composed its companion entitled, *Reformed Ethics*.


explored the implications that theology had on ethics. He not only concerned himself with what the church needed to believe about God, but he also wanted to help the church understand how to live before God.

It was during his time as a professor at Kampen, that Bavinck began to write extensively on the topic of ethics. As mentioned above, he wrote *Reformed Ethics* as a companion to his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bavinck defines ethics in *Reformed Ethics* as he does in *Reformed Dogmatics*:

In dogmatics we get an answer to the question: what does God do for us? In this regard, we as human beings are only passive and receptive. Ethics tells us what we, as a consequence, have to do for God... In dogmatics God descends to us; in ethics we ascend to God; in dogmatics we receive God, in ethics we give ourselves to Him; in dogmatics we say: God first has loved us with an eternal love; in ethics we say: and because of that we love Him.⁶

According to Bavinck, ethics is a consequence of dogmatics; the use of dogmatics that does not lead to ethics is not a right use of dogmatics and ethics that does not flow from dogmatics is not a consistent ethic. Bavinck believed that dogmatics and ethics were organically linked. “The two disciplines, far from facing each other as two independent entities, together form a single system; they are related members of a single organism.”⁷ As will be discussed later, Bavinck used the metaphor of “organism” to understand how God has revealed himself as Trinity in his creation.

Bavinck’s doctrine of sanctification constitutes the organic center where his ethics and dogmatics meet. He argues how the doctrine of sanctification articulates how God conforms the believer to the image of Christ; how God continues to save the believer from sin. James Eglinton writes on Bavinck’s view of sanctification: “Exploration of the relationship of dogmatics and ethics in Bavinck’s thought centers on his theology of sanctification.” Eglinton calls Bavinck’s view of sanctification

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⁷ Bavinck, *RD* 1, 58.
“sanctification-as-ethics.”

He argues that Bavinck understands ethics practically as living out one’s own sanctification.

Bavinck’s theology of sanctification, in many ways, responds to the mechanical, deterministic, and deistic worldview that he received from his professors at Leiden, especially Professor Scholten. The professors at Leiden understood the world as a machine that would accomplish whatever tasks were determined by its maker. There was no room for a God who actively involved himself in his creation or a humanity that had any real agency of change within them. Eglinton says; “Scholten’s most significant work, the Leer der Hervormde Kerk (“The doctrine of the Reformed Church”), has no section devoted to sanctification or human agency. Rather, it is structured to encourage the human simply to accept one’s lot in life.”

Without true human agency, the doctrines of sanctification and ethics lose their meaning. Hence, Scholten did not believe that prayer could help a person change his life, but rather he encouraged people to use prayer as a way of accepting the way things are. Trying to change one’s lot in life was pointless because good ultimately would triumph over evil. Why seek to change something that had already been determined to change? Scholten, therefore, did not understand Jesus to be someone we should follow now, but rather someone humanity would eventually become. Humanity becomes like Jesus not because they have any responsibility to do so, but rather because it has been determined beforehand.

Bavinck, on the other hand had a very different understanding of the world. The most important statement by Bavinck on human agency, according to Eglinton, is, “in the preservation and government of all things, God maintains this distinct existence of his creatures, causes all of them to function in accordance with their own nature, and guarantees to human beings their own personality, rationality and freedom. God never coerces anyone.”

A view of a God that never coerces his creation lies in

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stark contrast to the views that were being taught at Leiden. In fact, Bavinck’s understanding of God \textit{ad intra} as Trinity required him to understand humanity as having actual agency. Scholten, however, thought that doing theology did not even require a doctrine of the Trinity. Eglinton writes, “It seems that in Bavinck’s system, a triune doctrine of God requires a noncoercive account of human agency because the reality of agency within human society reflects (noncoercive) reality of agency within the divine society that is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”\footnote{Eglinton. “Sanctification-as-Ethics,” 173.} Bavinck says, “God himself, the entire deity, is the archetype of man. . . The triune being, God is the archetype of man.”\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{RD} 2, 554-55.} For Bavinck, the doctrine of the Trinity is not just a helpful idea about God, but it is essential to gaining a true understanding of all things. Bavinck asserts, “The mind of the Christian is not satisfied until every form of existence has been referred to the triune God and until the confession of the Trinity has received the place of prominence in all our life and thought.”\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{RD} 4, 22-23.}

\textbf{Bavinck’s Doctrine of Sanctification}

\textbf{The Biblical Argument}

Bavinck roots his doctrine of sanctification in a covenantal understanding of redemptive history. God has covenanted with his people to make them holy and blameless. Therefore, God will accomplish his purposes as laid forth in those covenants. Bavinck explains:

In Adam, God already made a covenant with humanity for the purpose of leading it to victory over the serpent’s offspring. As soon as God had established his covenant with Abram, he commanded him to walk before him in all blamelessness (Gen.17:1). He gave his people Israel a law that can be summed up by saying that Israel had to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6; Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 20:7, 26). \footnote{Bavinck, \textit{RD} 4, 232.}
This covenantal rootedness that Bavinck emphasizes within his doctrine of sanctification he calls a gift.\(^{15}\) The people of God do not deserve holiness, but rather it is a gift given to them because of the covenant that God made with them.

However, every gift comes with the risk of it either being taken for granted or not being accepted. Shortly after God covenanted that he would make his people holy, they began to take this gift for granted. They thought that if they were fulfilling the sacrificial requirements, they did not have to worry about moral obedience. Bavinck references 1 Samuel 15:22 and comments, “Obedience, the prophets said, is better than sacrifice.”\(^{16}\) Bavinck believed that the Scriptures point to a life marked by true obedience to God's commands, rather than one marked by sacrifices.

As time went on in Israel’s history, the people began to swing to the other side of the pendulum and refused to accept God’s. Instead of neglecting obedience, they made an idol of it and sought to achieve righteousness through their obedience. Bavinck contended that the Israelites had become “nomistic” and were “controlled by the scheme of work-and-reward.”\(^{17}\) Obedience to God is crucial to a healthy relationship with God, but as soon as God’s people begin to use it to earn God’s favor or to gain a reward, then their obedience becomes legalistic.

Israel, especially the Pharisees, were caught in a deep-seated legalistic lifestyle when Jesus came on the scene. Jesus showed people what it meant to follow the “righteousness of the kingdom of heaven.”\(^{18}\) He did not want people to obey because they expected a reward, but rather because they desired “mercy.”\(^{19}\) The Israelites’ legalistic obedience could never live up to God’s standard because it bypassed conversion and faith. Bavinck

\(^{15}\) The assumption that God’s covenant began with Adam has been disputed over the years, but the principle of God as giver still remains true.

\(^{16}\) Bavinck, RD 4, 232.

\(^{17}\) Bavinck, RD 4, 233.

\(^{18}\) Bavinck, RD 4, 233.

\(^{19}\) Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
asserts, “A person obtains such perfection only by conversion, faith, regeneration (Mark 1:15; John 3:3), leaving everything behind for Jesus’s sake, taking one’s cross, and following him (Matt. 5:10ff.; 7:13; 10:32-39; 16:24-26).” The only hope of walking in the way of God is through being a converted person of faith that had a regenerate heart. Furthermore, Bavinck held that Jesus left an assurance with his people by fulfilling true obedience on their behalf. Bavinck says, that Jesus’ death was “a sanctification of himself that by his word they too might be sanctified in the truth (John 17:17, 19).”

Jesus sanctified himself by taking up his cross, so that his people might also be sanctified.

Bavinck said that, like the example of Christ, this obedience will primarily look like “self-denial and crossbearing.” However, this self-denial did not call God’s people to become ascetics and to flee the world, but rather to live in the world with wisdom and discernment. Bavinck comments that Jesus “called for conscientious stewardship of the talents entrusted to a person (Matt. 25:15-30), insisted on faithfulness and caution (wisdom, prudence) in life (7:24; 10:16; 24:15-18), and said he would one day judge everyone according to their works.”

The call of God is to go into the world and live according to his ways with wisdom, reverence, and fear in light of the warning of judgment. Considering this warning of judgment, Bavinck contends that Jesus incentivized the following of himself with rewards. In referencing Matthew 19:29; 25:34, 46, Bavinck says that Jesus “repeatedly presents the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as a reward.” These passages begin to highlight a major tension within Bavinck’s view of sanctification: the tension of gift and reward. Although, this tension will be discussed in further detail later in this essay, it is worth noting that Bavinck does not understand ethics to be either a gift from God or a reward from God, but rather both/and. Therefore, holding these two realities in tension is of utmost importance.

20 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
21 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
22 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
23 Bavinck, RD 4, 234.
24 Bavinck, RD 4, 234.
for Bavinck. For example, near the end of his section of the biblical defense of the doctrine of sanctification he claims, “All the benefits that believers enjoy or will obtain are gifts of the grace of God (Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 2:8; etc.), yet everyone is rewarded according to his works (Rom. 2:6-11; 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:8; 2 Cor 5:10; Gal. 6:5; Rev. 2:23; 30:12).”

Another clue for why Bavinck places such an emphasis on reward may be the connection he sees between sanctification and the perseverance of the Christian. In fact, he titles his chapter on sanctification, “Sanctification and Perseverance.” He says this of the benefits of reward, “The thought of future glory spurs them on to patience and perseverance.” The sanctification of the believer requires the perseverance of the believer as well. If one is to be sanctified by God, they must persevere in the faith given to them by God. Therefore, God incentivizes his people to persevere by offering a reward.

The Theological Argument

If Bavinck’s biblical argument for sanctification is rooted in the covenants found throughout Scripture, then his theological argument for sanctification is grounded in his understanding of the doctrine of union with Christ. Bavinck uses words such as “spiritual” and “mystical” to describe the believer’s union with Jesus. However, he is clear that this “mystical union” is not pantheistic, but neither is it mere rationalism. In other words, Christ does not become one substance with the believer, so as to confuse the distinction between Christ and humanity, but the relationship between Christ and humanity is also not strictly cerebral. He asserts, “What Scripture tells us of this mystical union goes far beyond moral agreement in will and disposition. It expressly states that Christ lives and dwells in believers, and that they exist in him.” In the believer’s union with Christ, there is a real coming-togetherness that goes beyond mere belief. He looks to metaphors in Scripture such as branches and the vine, the body, and a marriage, to further elaborate on his understanding of this union. He also makes clear that this union does not come about apart from

25 Bavinck, RD 4, 236.

26 Bavinck, RD 4, 236.

27 Bavinck, RD 4, 251.
the work of the Spirit. He says, “This mystical union, however, is not immediate but comes into being by the Holy Spirit.”

Through a believer’s union with Christ, as shown in baptism, they not only receive justification, but also sanctification. The believer’s union with Christ is the means through which sanctification is communicated to them. Sanctification does not flow out of justification, but rather, like justification, it is a benefit of the one-flesh union with Christ. Justification is not the source of sanctification, Christ is. Bavinck claims, “Believers are people who by the grace of God have not only received the forgiveness of sins but by their baptism have also been brought into fellowship with Christ. They have received Christ not only as righteousness but also as ἁγιασμός (hagiasmos)—not holiness, but sanctification. The fellowship that the believer shares with Christ is where true sanctification takes place. In fact, Bavinck argues that through this union between humanity and Jesus the entirety of redemption is worked out.

Bavinck was concerned about the people in his day who thought and acted as though justification is by faith alone, but sanctification is achieved through human merit. This kind of thinking, which is still very much alive today, does not put sanctification in its proper place. Bavinck maintains that “by his righteousness, accordingly, he does not just restore us to the state of the just who will go scot-free in the judgment of God, in order then to leave us to ourselves to reform ourselves after God’s image and to merit eternal life.” Bavinck insists on a holistic view of salvation that does not end once a person has converted to Christ. A holistic salvation, one that is rooted in union with Christ, takes into consideration the reality that salvation comes by grace alone. If sanctification is part of that salvation, then it also comes by grace alone. “Justification and sanctification,

28 Bavinck, RD 4, 251.

29 Bavinck, RD 4, 234-35.

30 Bavinck, RD 4, 232.

31 Bavinck, RD 4, 248.

32 Bavinck, RD 4, 248.
accordingly, grant the same benefits, rather, the entire Christ; they only differ in the manner in which they grant him.”

Bavinck further categorizes justification and sanctification, respectively, as righteousness and holiness. Within these categories, Bavinck provides substantial argumentation for the distinct, but unified nature of the two doctrines. Justification and sanctification are distinct because justification has to do with one’s legal standing before God and sanctification has to do with one’s moral standing. Bavinck explains that “a juridical act” is “completed in an instant. But sanctification is ethical: it is continued throughout the whole of life and, by the renewing activity of the Holy Spirit, gradually makes the righteousness of Christ our personal ethical possession.” Although, justification happens in a moment, the process of sanctification is a lifetime experience for each believer. What is made ours legally before God in justification is made ours ethically in sanctification.

Without losing the importance of the distinction between justification and sanctification, Bavinck also wants to shed light on the unity between them. He says that these two doctrines are “inseparably connected.” He grounds this argument in his understanding of Christ’s work. He says, “Christ, that is, by his suffering and death has not only accomplished the righteousness on the basis of which believers can be acquitted by God; he has similarly secured the holiness by which he can consecrate them to God and purify them from the stains of sin (John 17:19).” Jesus’ death and resurrection is not merely about giving people hope in the judgment, but it is also about giving people hope in their life before the judgment by being purified from their sins. He goes on to say that:

his obedience to the point of death was aimed at redemption in its entire scope, not only as redemption from the legal power of sin but also as deliverance from its moral domination. To that end Christ gives himself to them, not only objectively in redemption,

33 Bavinck, RD 4, 249.

34 Bavinck, RD 4, 249.

35 Bavinck, RD 4, 249.

36 Bavinck, RD 4, 250.
but also imparts himself subjectively in sanctification and unites himself with them in a spiritual and mystical manner.\textsuperscript{37}

Through the work of Christ and his union with humanity, righteousness and holiness are both given freely to the believer.

Bavinck also contends that the unity between justification and sanctification is found in the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit binds the believer and Jesus. Bavinck remarks, “For the Spirit whom Jesus promised to his disciples and poured out in the church is not only a Spirit of adoption, who assures believers of their status as children, but also the Spirit of renewal and sanctification.”\textsuperscript{38} The Spirit communicates all that Christ is to the believer, so that the believer can embrace his life as a renewed human being created in the image of God and live as a citizen of the kingdom of God.

\textbf{Sanctification as Gift and Reward}

As mentioned above, in Bavinck’s doctrine of sanctification, he consistently seeks to hold together the tension between gift and reward. He argues that if a believer emphasizes one over the other, then their view of the Christian life will lead to either nomism or antinomianism. On the one hand, if a believer leans towards nomism, then they have disregarded the reality that sanctification is a gift. On the other hand, if a believer is marked by antinomianism, then they have no real understanding of sanctification as a reward. Bavinck asserts:

Scripture always holds on to both facets: God’s all-encompassing activity and our responsibility. Just as in the preaching of the gospel, faith is a gift of God and yet people are responsible for their attitude toward God (e.g., Rom. 9:1-29 and 9:30-10:21), so here the possession of all the benefits of the covenant (forgiveness, adoption, life, salvation) is secured before any kind of work, yet

\textsuperscript{37} Bavinck, \textit{RD} 4, 250.

\textsuperscript{38} Bavinck, \textit{RD} 4, 251.
over and over and with great urgency there is an insistence on good works as if those benefits can only be obtained by these works.\textsuperscript{39}

Bavinck argues that God has given his people sanctification - Christ will make them holy – but Bavinck also holds in tension God’s call on believers to live out their sanctification through good works. He categorizes this two-fold reality within sanctification as passive and active sanctification.

Sanctification is a passive process insofar as the believer receives the gift of Christ from the Father by the Holy Spirit. In a trinitarian fashion, Bavinck argues that sanctification is first and foremost a work and gift of God. Bavinck describes this gift as a special setting apart by God: “Believers are regularly described as ‘saints,’ because by being called (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2: ‘called to be saints’) they stand in a special relationship with God and, taking the place of the old Israel, they are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Pet. 2:9).”\textsuperscript{40} The believer is objectively holy because God has set them apart from the rest of the world. In today’s systematic theological vernacular, this is referred to as positional sanctification. For Bavinck, this is where the sanctification process begins and must always have its foundation. It is firstly God’s gift to humanity. Only after receiving the gift of holiness can the believer seek to walk in accordance with that holiness. Bavinck continues, “Those who are born of God increasingly \textit{become} the children of God and bear his image and likeness, because in principle they already \textit{are} his children. The rule of organic life applies to them: Become what you are!”\textsuperscript{41}

Although, the process of being sanctified is firstly a passive reality, it also has an active component. God not only makes believers holy in Christ, but he also calls them to live lives marked by this holiness. In fact, he has given the Holy Spirit to empower them for this very purpose. The Spirit enables Christians to live lives that are filled with obedience to God. Bavinck references the Heidelberg Catechism, and says, “this active sanctification coincides with what is called ‘continued repentance.’”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} Bavinck, RD 4, 253-54.

\textsuperscript{40} Bavinck, RD 4, 252.

\textsuperscript{41} Bavinck, RD 4, 255.

\textsuperscript{42} Bavinck, RD 4, 252.
Continued repentance is the putting off the old self and active sanctification is the putting on the new self. In this active sanctification, believers “sanctify themselves and devote their whole life to God.”

Bavinck acknowledges that many different people find this articulation of sanctification troubling. He says that the Roman Catholics became so caught up in the active side of sanctification, that they began to see good works as a means to merit their salvation. The Lutherans, on the other hand, reacted so strongly against the Roman Catholic view, that there was little room left in their theology for good works. Bavinck argues that the Reformed view best articulates this tension between active and passive sanctification. He says, “The Reformed […] had no objection to calling good works necessary to salvation provided this did not imply a ‘necessity of causality or merit or effectiveness’ but implied a necessity of presence of the means and ways to obtain eternal salvation.” In the Reformed view, good works are necessary for salvation, because they provide evidence of one’s faith. Good works do not earn merit with God, but rather they prove that God is already at work in one’s life. Bavinck thought that this most aligned with the Scriptures. He comments, the Scriptures “sees no contradiction or conflict between them but rather knits them together as tightly as possible as when it says that, precisely because God works in them both to will and to do, believers must work out their own salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12-13).” Bavinck always sought to read the Bible canonically and holistically. When he found things that were seemingly contradictory, he did not try to solve the problem, but rather to manage the tension.

However, Bavinck goes further, articulating why good works are necessary for salvation, but are not meritorious. He contends that pagans can do many “good” things in the world, but these are merely just virtues bestowed on them through common grace; they are not intrinsically good. He comments on the virtues of pagans: “But this is not to say that they are good in the eyes of God and correspond to the full spiritual sense of his

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43 Bavinck, RD 4, 252.


45 Bavinck, RD 4, 255.
Although, a pagan’s virtues help humanity to flourish, they do not honor God in any real spiritual sense because pagans do not perform these virtues as a result of an acknowledgment of God’s lordship and obedience to his law. Bavinck continues, “The truly spiritually good, the good in the highest sense as it can only exist in the eyes of God, can in the nature of the case be accomplished only by those who know and love God and, moved by that love keep his commandments, that is, by those who truly believe.” Belief in and knowledge of God is necessary for a person’s works to be truly good. The gift must come before the works.

He goes on to explain that good works are distinctly Christian when they are a result of faith, rather than self-righteousness. Faith-filled people will seek to do good works because they know that God is real and that he has joined them to Jesus Christ. It is only in faith that the believer will not do good works to earn merit with God, but rather will do them in complete dependence upon God:

Faith breaks all self-reliance and fastens on to God’s promise. It allows the law to stand in all its grandeur and refuses to lower the moral ideal, but also refrains from any attempt, by observing it, to find life and peace; it seizes upon God’s mercy and relies on the righteousness and holiness accomplished in Christ on behalf of humans. It fosters humility, dependence, and trusts and grants comfort, peace, and joy through the Holy Spirit; it generates gratitude in our hearts for the benefits received and incites us to do good works.

The benefits of Christ that are received by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit generate within Christians the desire to live lives marked by good works. Not for the sake of merit before God, but because they have been changed, renewed, washed, and sanctified.

Bavinck is sure to situate the good works done by the believer in the Ten Commandments, but he also argues that the believer will be led by

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46 Bavinck, RD 4, 257.
47 Bavinck, RD 4, 257.
48 Bavinck, RD 4, 257-58.
their conscience as to how these good works will actuate themselves in their lives. The faith-filled believer will seek to follow the Ten Commandments because this is God’s revealed law, but they will have to be creative in how they go about doing this because the Scriptures do not give a verse for every situation in life. Therefore, one believer’s good works will not look the same as every other believer’s works. Bavinck says the law “comprises universal norms, great principles, that leave a lot of room for individual application and summon every believer to examine what in a given situation would for them be the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2).”

Allowing each believer to examine their own lives and, in all wisdom and discernment, to determine what good works the Lord has for them, requires a deep understanding of freedom in Christ. Bavinck comments, “Since the moral law is not a code of articles we merely have to look up in order, from moment to moment, to know exactly what we must do, there is in its domain a freedom that may not be curbed by human ordinances but must—precisely to safeguard the character of the moral life—be recognized and maintained.” Although human nature tries to control everyone and bring people into uniformity, Bavinck’s vision of the Christian’s individual freedom, to faithfully determine what God has given for them to do, will require a laying hold of the importance of the diversity in the body of Christ. Christianity is unified in Christ but is diverse in its expressions and works of faith.

**Organic Sanctification**

In Bavinck’s account of sanctification, he uses the word “organic” to describe how the sanctifying process takes place within the believer. The term “organism” comes up on a consistent basis in Bavinck’s theology. In fact, it is one of his central theological motifs. Bavinck argues that the organic motif finds its foundation in the essence of the triune God, in God ad intra. God is unity-in-diversity ad intra because he is three persons, but one God. The Bible says all things are “from him, through him, and to

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him,” and therefore, all things relate back to this three-in-one God. Furthermore, Bavinck thinks all of creation is marked by this unity-in-diversity found in God. When referring to this unity-in-diversity that is found in creation, Bavinck uses the language of organic or organism. In James Eglinton’s book, *Trinity and Organism*, he says, “Bavinck’s theology of Creator as Trinity necessitates the conceptualization of creation as organism: Trinity *ad intra* leads to organism *ad extra.*” Creator and creation are intrinsically linked in Bavinck’s theology. For Bavinck, all things have their beginning in the Trinity.

Organism is the best metaphor that Bavinck could find to describe how God makes himself known in his general revelation. Bavinck defines this “organism” with four main points. First, the general revelation of God is marked by unity-in-diversity. The logic for this is as follows: God is triune and therefore God is unity-in-diversity. He is three persons, but one God. The created universe is God’s general revelation and because all things are from God, they must reflect God in some way. The unity-in-diversity that is found throughout the universe is the way in which God reflects himself. Organism is the best metaphor to describe this unity-in-diversity because an organism is one thing but is made up of many different parts. Therefore, Trinity *ad intra* requires organism *ad extra*. Eglinton comments, “Consciously Trinitarian thinkers see life in the light of the Triune God. Organic thinking begins by seeing the universe as the general revelation of God’s Trinity.” The first part of this definition rests on the premise that the entire universe must reflect God as Trinity. If this premise is false, then Bavinck’s argument will quickly crumble.

Second, in Bavinck’s definition of organism, unity must come prior to diversity. The world is one before it is many. Eglinton explains, “God creates a singular cosmos. Having spoken time and space into being, he then works to fill this single cosmos with diversity: distinguishing the earth from the celestial bodies, separating land from sea and creating different

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52 Rom. 11:36.


54 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68.

55 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68.
species of animals.” There is order in the way in which God created the world. Out of unity comes diversity, but neither the unity nor the diversity ever overshadows the other. Bavinck affirms that in creation “there is the most profuse diversity and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity.”

Third, Bavinck’s defines the organic as “the Organism’s shared life is orchestrated by a common idea.” This idea is not an abstract notion, but is intrinsically essential to something being organic. Bavinck says God as “the supreme good and ultimate goal of all things, is pursued and desired by all things in their measure and manner.” An organism is made up of many parts that are working as one in order to pursue and desire God.

Finally, Bavinck defines the organic as having a “teleological definiteness.” The telos of the organism is the glory of God. What brings glory to God is that the organism lives in the tension of its unity and diversity. The unity does not overshadow the diversity or vice versa. Bavinck says, “Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches.” The goal of maintaining this unity-in-diversity flows from Bavinck’s understanding of the Godhead. He believes that God is perfectly unity-in-diversity at all times and the two never become blurred or confused.

In his doctrine of sanctification, Bavinck uses the organic metaphor to defend the Reformed view of sanctification against the Methodist view of perfectionism. For Bavinck, the Methodists had separated “sanctification and sealing from justification and faith” because they thought that a

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56 Eglinton, Trinity and Organism, 68.
57 Bavinck. RD 2, 436.
58 Eglinton, Trinity and Organism, 69.
59 Bavinck, RD. 2, 436.
60 Eglinton, Trinity and Organism, 69.
61 Bavinck, RD 2, 436.
62 Bavinck, RD 4, 263.
person is first justified and then later experiences the benefit of sanctification. Although, this may not seem alarming at first, Bavinck saw this as the splitting up of the person of Jesus Christ. Bavinck argues that in the believer’s union with the person of Christ, they receive all of Christ, not just a part of him. He says that the Methodist view “overlooks this weighty truth of Christ’s unity and indivisibility. Christ himself in his own person by faith and from the beginning is our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification, our redemption.”⁶³ Although Christ’s gives a diverse set of benefits to his church, he never gives just one or two. To receive a part of Christ, requires the reception of the whole of Christ.⁶⁴

This organic view of sanctification also does not allow for an understanding of faith as a two-step process. The Methodist, whom Bavinck opposed, thought that a believer is justified by faith, but then has another “special” act of faith in which they receive the benefit of sanctification. Bavinck, however, thought that this separates faith into two parts: passive and then active. He asserts, “For from the very beginning, even where in justification it is considered from a passive perspective, faith is a living and active faith, which immediately appropriates the whole Christ.”⁶⁵ Faith grows out of an organic process. All it takes is a childlike faith to receive Christ, but as time goes on believers grow in their walk with the Lord and continue to be further joined to Christ. Bavinck says, “Sanctification, accordingly, both from the divine and the human side, is an organic process. The more Christ indwells us, the more we are strengthened in faith; and the more our faith increases, the more Christ communicates himself to us.”⁶⁶ As believers are sanctified, they become joined to Christ in a deeper and perfect way. They are never without the whole person of Christ, but they become more intimately connected with him as they grow up in him.

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⁶³ Bavinck, RD 4, 264.

⁶⁴ The author does not intend this to be a modern-day representation of Methodist theology. This is an example of how Bavinck understood Methodist theology in his own day.

⁶⁵ Bavinck, RD 4, 264.

⁶⁶ Bavinck, RD 4, 264.
Sanctification is also organic in that there is a diverse group of people being sanctified, but they are all sanctified toward the same goal, that is God himself. As all things are in, through, and for God, so all things find their end or goal in God. Bavinck comments, “The final goal of moral conduct can be found only in God, who is the origin and hence also the final goal of all things, the supreme good that encompasses all goods, the Eternal One to whom all finite things return.” In Bavinck’s view, God is the basis for all morality. The Christian does not just seek to do good works for the sake of humanity, but ultimately for the sake of God. Bavinck argues that atheistic, philosophical ethics has no foundation as to why people should pursue morality. He says, “Philosophical ethics, which, as a consequence of its rejection of all revelation, cannot find any principle and norm for moral conduct, is also unable to indicate the final goal toward which all human conduct must be oriented.” Sanctification, ethics, and morality must be grounded in who God is. Apart from this goal, these things have no ultimate meaning.

Bavinck’s organic sanctification helps further understand the gift and reward of sanctification. Although the believer may read Scripture and see the reality of gift and reward, how they receive a reward they do not deserve may not make sense. Bavinck acknowledges that the obedience of even the saintliest of people is only a small fraction of the obedience God requires. Therefore, Bavinck argues that by understanding sanctification as organic will keep gift and reward interconnected, so that out of the gift, the reward also comes. He says, “The imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance, which is kept for us in heaven, is not a wage paid out to employees in proportion to what they have earned but a reward that the Father in heaven grants to his children out of sheer grace.” The gift of sanctification is from grace, but so is the reward. The ability to live in any way that honors or glorifies God is because God has allowed it through his grace.

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67 Bavinck, RD 4, 264.

68 Bavinck, RD 4, 264.

69 Bavinck, RD 4, 266.
Getting Practical in Sanctification

Now that Bavinck’s biblical and theological vision for sanctification has been firmly established the question that naturally arises is how Bavinck envisions sanctification to be lived out in the believer’s day-to-day life. In other words, if sanctification is not just a gift, but also a reward, then how does the believer live in such a way as to receive the reward? Bavinck answers questions such as these in terms of ethics: “Ethics tells us what we, as a consequence, have to do for God... in ethics we ascend to God... in ethics we give ourselves to Him... and because of that we love Him.”

Dirk van Keulen writes, “Bavinck prefers the term ‘ethics’ to ‘morality.’ The task of ethics is to describe the birth, growth and revelation of spiritual life (geestelijk leven) in reborn man. In other words, ‘ethics is the scientific description of the realization of the mercy of Christ in our personal human life.’”

Ethics is the way in which Bavinck describes a sanctification that is lived out in the daily life of the believer.

In Bavinck’s ethics, he argues that imitating Christ should be the key and central theme. Becoming a follower of Christ, like the early disciples did, is of utmost importance to Bavinck in coming to a proper understanding of ethics. Eglinton writes, “Bavinck viewed sanctification as centered on the imitation of Christ, which he understood in relation to ethical norms.” This focus on the imitation of Christ interested Bavinck throughout his entire career. Although, different from monasteries, Bavinck believed Christ is the model for the Christian. He did not think the believer needed to imitate as Christ did, but rather to seek to imitate his attributes. Van Keulen says, “For Bavinck, rather, imitating Christ consists in ‘the recognition of Christ as a Mediator.’ Inwardly, Christ must take shape in us. Outwardly, our lives must be shaped in conformity with

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72 Eglinton, Sanctification-as-Ethics, 173.

the life of Christ.” Therefore, the believer should seek to imitate Christ’s humility, righteousness, and meekness, but not necessarily the fact that during Jesus’ ministry, he did not have a home or a bed of his own.

Bavinck was aware that he lived in the nineteenth century and Jesus lived in the first century. Therefore, he knew that imitating Christ would look differently in his day, than it did in Jesus’ day. In his essay, “The Imitation of Christ is Not the Same In Every Age,” John Bolt says, “In his 1918 essay, ‘The Imitation of Christ and Life in the Modern World,’ he insists that the circumstances of Jesus’s own context and that of the first-century church are crucial for a proper reading of the Sermon on the Mount and that different circumstances call for different application.” Bolt describes Bavinck as wrestling with how one is to imitate Christ in the context in which he found himself. Bavinck understood that first century Israel was heavily influenced by paganism, whereas nineteenth century Netherlands was not. Therefore, Bavinck leaned into his understanding of the individual conscience when it came to articulate what it would mean for a person to imitate Christ.

The most important factor for engaging in true ethics is a faith that unites one to Jesus Christ. Apart from being united with the sanctified One, there is no place for sanctification in the person’s life. Eglinton comments, “Consistent with this idea is the assertion that the dogmatician, like the ethicist, must be a godly person in order to imitate Christ. (see Bavinck, RD 1, 43) Sanctification is necessary for dogmatics and ethics alike.” The dogmatician and the ethicist must both be walking by faith in Christ in order to accomplish the task that has been set before them.

Bavinck’s Theology Retrieved

Here we return to a question posed at the beginning of this paper, “How can the church move forward in its understanding of sanctification in such a way that upholds both the integrity of human agency and the

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76 Eglinton, Sanctification-as-Ethics, 177.
work of God through Christ by the Spirit?” Answering this question is key for the evangelical church today to have a proper understanding of the doctrine of sanctification as well as an understanding of ethics that leads to action. Bavinck’s tension between gift and reward strike at the very heart of this question. This tension is applicable in at least three ways: first, the tension of gift and reward keeps God in his proper place. Second, this tension keeps believers humble in all that they do and finally, this tension gives legitimate human agency to believers and prevents them from blaming God for their sin.

Bavinck’s understanding of sanctification as both gift and reward keeps God in his proper place because it makes God the giver of new life in Christ by his Spirit and prevents the believer from having a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. In the evangelical church, today, when someone confesses their sin to a brother or sister, they often get a response that leaves them with a list of things to do, rather than a grace filled conversation about the love of God. The problem with this approach is that it leaves God on the sidelines of the Christian life. God may be a great coach, who give Christians guidelines for playing the game of life, but he never actually gets in the game himself and wins the game on our behalf. Bavinck’s response to the one who confesses their sin is an emphasis on sanctification as a gift and a reward which tells the believer that the only way to grow as a Christian is to completely and utterly depend upon the God who accomplished the whole of salvation for his church. He not only forgave their sins, but he also cleansed, purified, and sanctified them. God is the giver of Christian growth.

The second way that Bavinck’s tension of gift and reward can be applied to the church today is by enabling good works marked by humility. Because God is always the giver of sanctification and the giver of the reward of sanctification, Bavinck reminds his readers that it is out of sheer grace that we are able to participate in the sanctification process at all. Therefore, as Christians seek to do good works in their churches, families, and communities, they have no right to become proud about their contribution. This may seem obvious at first, but the reality is that people can use the good works that God has called them to as a means of inflating their own pride, rather than as a means of glorifying Christ. Receiving the gift and reward of sanctification occurs only by the grace of God and therefore, in response to that grace, the believer should engage in good
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works with all humility while acknowledging that the good they do come not from themselves, but from Christ himself.

Finally, Bavinck’s tension of gift and reward helps to maintain human agency in sanctification and prevents believers from blaming God for their sinful choices. Bavinck has argued that God will reward those who seek to do good works in honor of him. However, this requires actual human agency. Working toward a reward requires that the believer has a real responsibility and ability to do so. It also means that when they do not seek to fulfill the good works that God has for them and instead, choose to act sinfully, then they are the only one to blame. It is possible in a Christian’s struggle against sin to blame God for one’s choices. The logic goes something like this: “I gave into a sin, but I want to change. However, I continue to give into that sin. Consequently, since God is in control of everything, he must not want me to change yet. Therefore, God is the real cause of my sin.” This sort of thinking will take the believer into very dark places, but Bavinck’s tension of gift and reward will enable the believer to know that there is a reward worth fighting for and God has already given us all that we need to receive that reward in Christ by the Spirit.

In conclusion, it is apparent that Herman Bavinck still has much to offer the church today. Although, his tension of gift and reward is the primary focus of retrieval, many other aspects of his doctrine of sanctification can be helpful in articulating one’s own understanding of this doctrine today. Bavinck has a unique ability to discuss sanctification because of his training and thinking in ethics. He was a scholar, but not one interested only in the theoretical; rather a scholar who sought to bring theory and action together in order to help humanity flourish under God’s kingship.

Some questions for further research might include: How is Bavinck’s doctrine of sanctification connected to other aspects of his order of salvation, such as adoption or calling? How does Bavinck’s understanding of Methodism and perfectionism affect his understanding of how much a person can be sanctified in this life? Is he in complete alignment with the Reformed tradition or are there places where he differs? The author hopes that he can continue to study these questions and continue to help the church see that Herman Bavinck is a theologian whom we do not want to forget.
This essay examines the influence of Homer in Gregory of Nyssa’s narration of his sister Macrina’s life and piety. In 2000, Colgate professor of Religion, Georgia Frank wrote an article for the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* specifically focusing on the scar scene in Gregory’s *Life of Macrina*. Frank argues that this scene, a mimesis of Homer’s *Odyssey*, is the substantial identifier of Macrina. Gregory places this moment in his biography, as Frank argues, in order to show Macrina as a “baptized Odysseus,” that is, as a Christian hero, as well as to connect her with other Christian martyrs. The scar scene is a pivotal explication of the identity of Macrina, but the imitation of Homer’s Odysseus as the hidden and revealed hero is not Gregory’s final point to make about his sister. Rather, it is a literary device couched within a larger framework of hiddenness and illumination in God that Gregory wants to get across to his readers. This essay will first look at the transvaluation of Homer by the Gospel writers and early Christian theologians. Then it will look at Gregory of Nyssa’s use of Homer, and specifically how Gregory used Homer to write his *Life of Macrina* and illuminate the hidden person of his sister.

**Homer, Scripture and Early Christianity**

Scholars agree that the first Hellenized Christians were schooled in Greek literature, and especially in Homer. The New Testament writers and first theologians would have known not only the Homeric epics, but also the format and praxis that produced that literature. The apparatus for learning was a certain form of mimicry. The early Christian Gospel writings can be seen as a transvaluation of the Homeric epics. Homer’s literary device of disguise and recognition runs throughout many Hellenic hero stories as well as many Biblical stories. Homer used it in his scar scene, and Gregory uses it in his narration of Macrina’s life and in his own scar scene.

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Disguise and recognition is an important literary device which scholars, going back even as far as Aristotle, comment that Homer used in order to unify his complex plots, especially in the *Odyssey*. Likewise, the Gospels use this motif to unify their narrations.²

The Hellenized Christians of the 4th century were not unaware of this particular symbolism of disguise and recognition, because they were well versed in Homer as well as the Scriptures. Many authors and theologians at the time of the 4th century read and were influenced by Homer when learning rhetoric.³ According to John Taylor, Classics Lecturer at Manchester University in the UK, there has always been a connection between classical and biblical writings. We can see a similarity between the New Testament and specifically Homer’s epics the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Taylor finds that these two particular epics diverge from other stories of that time just as the Gospel writings differ from apocryphal writings. Both Homer’s epics and the Gospels differ from these other writings in that they are further restrained in their handling of the supernatural, and therefore they have a higher potency. Additionally, Taylor states that the extended similes of Homer and those of Jesus’ parables intersect in a way to create a sub-genre of detailed allegory as well as an “insistence on a single point of comparison.”⁴

Another scholar, Dennis R. MacDonald, contends that the Gospel of Mark and Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are clearly related in their style. MacDonald argues that the author of Mark used the *Odyssey* as his primary literary model and specifically used Books 22 and 24 of the *Iliad* to narrate the death and burial of Jesus, even to the degree of word choice and plot detail. MacDonald concludes that Mark is a clear transvaluation of Homer in many ways.⁵

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² John Taylor, “Recognition Scenes in the Odyssey and the Gospels,” in *The Bible and Hellenism*, ed. Thomas L. Thompson, Copenhagen International Seminar (New York: Routledge, 2014), 249. Taylor writes that disguise and recognition “is pervasive in the *Odyssey* and in the Gospels alike, because the texts share basic themes, story-patterns and literary strategies: disguise and secrecy…”

³ Erich Auerbach and Robert Lamberton both discuss this in their works about the influence of Homer on the Roman Empire and on Christians of that time.


In the *Odyssey*, the scar is the only identifier and sign of Odysseus’ true identity while he is disguised as a beggar. Once the scar illuminates his true self to others, he immediately insists on silence from those others in order to stay hidden from his enemies, and until that time that he chooses for himself to be revealed. The parallels for this motif can be seen in the Gospel of Mark. Instead of a scar being an identifier, it is Jesus’ miracles and prophecy, all of which put him in mortal danger. When demons or other humans recognize that he is God, he urges them to stay quiet and keep his identity hidden.\(^6\)

For certain, MacDonald’s claim can be deemed controversial and is not without its critics. Yet, some of the comparisons he makes cannot be denied. For instance, Mark’s Jesus has qualities of Homer’s Odysseus as a suffering hero. Also, Jesus’ disciples are similar to Odysseus’ incompetent and inferior companions. Other correspondences include that of both heroes returning to their homes to find them taken over by murderous counterparts that “devour the houses of widows.” Both heroes defy negative supernatural forces, visit other dead iconic figures, and prophesy about themselves. Both Odysseus and Jesus are anointed by a woman, both eat last suppers with their cohorts before visiting the underworld, and both resurrect. In Homer and Mark the storms are stilled, they walk on water, provide meals for thousands on the seashore, and there are scenes of monsters dwelling in caves. Furthermore, Mark parallels Homer to portray Jesus’ disciples in negative tones: incompetent, greedy, cowardly, and traitorous.\(^7\) None of this is to say that Mark plagiarized Homer’s writings. Rather, the author of the Gospel of Mark transvalued Homer’s epics by writing about Jesus as a righteous God rather than a pagan and mortal hero.

Interestingly, when Homer inserts the scar scene in the *Odyssey*, it can be said that it is in order to interrupt the story and calm any tension the reader may have just at the point when Odysseus’ disguise is about to be

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\(^6\) MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 46. MacDonald says about these scenes in Mark, “Jesus possesses superhuman powers that function as signs of his identity, but herein lies their danger… Jesus’ miracles were signs that rendered him vulnerable to discovery by his enemies. Throughout the Gospel, then, Jesus maintained secrecy concerning his identity…by sheer necessity.”

\(^7\) MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 3.
illuminated. Additionally, Homer’s insertion at this point demonstrates his style of presenting not what the characters are thinking or feeling, but allowing the ever-presence of time to lead the reader there. The philologist, Erich Auerbach, called this Homer’s “simply narrated reality” and compares that to Biblical narratives, such as the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Auerbach sees a correlation in that the biblical authors also use a “simply narrated “reality” not with an ever-present scene, but with an ever-present higher truth. Within the Gospel narratives, Auerbach says:

It was the story of Christ, with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy, which had conquered the classical rule of styles… In this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself, but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now.

Outside of the Bible, scholars agree that the first known imitation of Homer is not until the late 3rd century. Imitation of Homer’s meter in the Iliad can be evinced in the Vision of Dorotheus. This poem stylistically reflects the Iliad while transvaluing the text to a higher morality. Later authors include Apollinarius of Laodicea, all three Cappadocian Fathers —with Basil referencing a reliance on Homer— and Empress Eudocia, who wrote her centos in an ingenious fashion. Certainly, Christian theologians were using Homer all along.

Publicly, there was a wide range of consent and dissent to the use and mimicry of Homer, ranging from open hostility to mild indifference like that of Basil. Even as Homer was absorbed into early Christian theology,

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over time the poet was not overtly advertised as a leaned-upon source for style. Even so, Basil does declare “with approval the opinion that ‘the whole of Homer’s poetry is praise of virtue,’” basically endorsing the selective use of Homeric passages and themes deemed morally righteous.\textsuperscript{13}

Also of note, in the \textit{Odyssey}, and in the Gospels, disguise and recognition happens often within the context of hospitality. In Homer’s scar scene, recognition happens during Odysseus’ foot washing by his servant. Biblically, we see this hospitality theme play out in several stories. For instance, we have the disguised angelic visitors to Abraham at Mamre in Genesis 18. This can also be witnessed in the woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears in Luke 7. This theme of hospitality and recognition is “central” in Luke’s narration of the supper at Emmaus, and more specifically on the way to that supper.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Gregory of Nyssa’s Use of Homer to Explicate Macrina}

The literary motif of disguise and recognition as found in Homer, was one that Gregory used in more than one of his writings. As a Biblical scholar and learned rhetorician, Gregory was well aware of the significance of this theme. Notably, Gregory used this disguise and recognition motif to explicate Origen’s ransom theory. Usher notes Gregory’s consciousness of the theological import of the disguise and recognition motif when he writes:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{13} Lamberton, \textit{Homer the Theologian}, 243.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} John Taylor, “Recognition Scenes in the \textit{Odyssey} and the Gospels,” 255-256. Taylor explains this heightened importance in this Biblical scene saying, “Recognition linked to revelatory narrative and hospitality is central to Luke’s story of the supper at Emmaus. Towards evening, on the day when the women have found the empty tomb, two of the followers of Jesus (as yet unbelieving) set out for the village of Emmaus. As they discuss what has happened, Jesus draws near and walks with them: ‘But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.’… And so, like Odysseus among the Phaeacians, Jesus is told a story (albeit distorts and incomplete) about himself…Recognition and miraculous departure are closely connected almost simultaneous…Like Odysseus in Scherie, Jesus takes over as a more informed and authoritative narrator of his own story… The two companions only now learn the true sense of familiar passages of Scripture… The two are shown a new trajectory in and from the Scriptures, and the reader likewise sees a pattern…”
\end{quote}
The ‘ransom theory’ of redemption... was a topos among Christian teachers and theologians. Origen speaks of Jesus making an exchange of his own life with the Devil for the souls of men and women, a bargain that the Devil was unable to enforce (Kelly 1977:185-6). In explaining why the Devil would agree to such a deal in the first place Gregory of Nyssa puts his finger on the symbolism of recognition and disguise in the Centos scene.15

Gregory was evidently well aware of the biblical and theological uses of this motif, even discussing the use of disguise and recognition by God in order to deceive the Devil.

Gregory uses the Homeric motif of disguise and recognition continually in Life of Macrina. Georgia Frank, mentioned in the introduction of this paper, writes about Gregory’s familiarity with it, “... Why is the reader made to see what Macrina carefully hid from the gaze of others... The Homeric hero may seem out of place in any saint’s life, a genre defined by imitation of biblical heroes... [Even so] Gregory saw fit to remember his sister as Odysseus in this [scar] episode.”16 More importantly, even as Gregory probably used the framework of Homer’s Odysseus to narrate Macrina’s character, considering Gregory’s career and the centrality of Christianity in his and his sister’s lives, he certainly also had in mind the narratives of the Bible when explicating the mystical person of Macrina.

This theme of disguise and recognition runs throughout Gregory’s biography of his sister, and culminates with the scar episode. Disguise and recognition help the reader to understand that Macrina was not only a

15 M. D. Usher, Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia, Greek Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 123-124. Attached to this quote, Usher also cites from J.N.D. Kelly’s work Early Christian Doctrine. 5th Edition, (London: A&C Black). On pages 185-6, 382, Kelly paraphrases Gregory’s argument, “Since the Fall placed man in the power of the Devil...the Devil had a right to adequate compensation if he were to surrender him, and for God to have exercised force majeure would have been unfair and tyrannical. So He offered him the man Jesus as a ransom. When Satan saw Him, born as He was of a virgin and renowned as a worker of miracles, he decided that the exchange was to his advantage. What he failed to realize was that the outward covering of human flesh concealed the immortal Godhead.”

16 Frank, “Macrina’s Scar,” 513.
baptized Odysseus, but also one that was steeped in mystical union with God. Anna M. Silvas speaks to this in her introduction of the *Life of Macrina* noting, “During [Gregory’s] conversation with Olympius, Macrina was in the forefront of Gregory’s mind and they soon turned to the subject of her remarkable life – remarkable that is in the highest terms of Christian ascetic and spiritual endeavor.”\(^{17}\) Gregory begins the whole narration of Macrina’s life by acknowledging that it is a hidden life, and that he needs to illumine the world about this beacon of Christian virtue. He writes, “Whereupon you were convinced that it would be a benefit if the story of her noble qualities were told, because then such a life would not be forgotten with the passage of time, and she who had raised herself by philosophy to the highest summit of human virtue would not have passed by ineffectually, veiled in silence.”\(^{18}\)

As stated above, Gregory begins his biography of Macrina by writing that he needs to tell her story so that it would not be “passed by ineffectually,” thus implying that even after her death she is hidden to the world. As the narrative continues, the reader is gradually drawn into the knowledge of Macrina’s hidden life in God as Gregory unveils who she is through the telling of specific episodes of the saint’s life. As do Homer and the Biblical authors, Gregory presents each episode as an ever-present reality, pointing to less of a temporal reality and more to an eternal reality.

The first major episode Gregory reveals is Macrina’s birth along with her secret name, and thus her true vocation. Right at the beginning of her life, Macrina is identified as a regenerated Thecla through a dream her mother has in the throes of childbirth. Gregory writes:

> And one in majesty of form and aspect beyond the human appeared and addressed the child she was carrying by the name of ‘Thecla’… such then was her secret name. But it seems to me that


\(^{18}\) Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 1.5 as found in Anna M. Silvas and Gregory of Nyssa, *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God*, 110. Going forward, when quoting from Gregory’s *Life of Macrina*, I will be using the English text of Anna M. Silvas, which she translated and configured using the prior work of Virginia Woods Callahan and also Pierre Maraval. See Silvas’ “Sources of the Text” in the introductory chapter, and further pages 93-101 for detailed information on her translation.
the apparition spoke that way not so much to guide the mother in the giving of a name, as to foretell the life of the girl.19

Much can be said about what Gregory meant by connecting his sister with Thecla, but this paper will only focus on the motif of hiddenness and recognition of Macrina’s true identity. Gregory’s implication is that Macrina’s identity is that of “dedication of [Macrina’s] virginity to the Lord culminating in communion with God through her role as a teacher of the word of God and a leader of others.”20

Throughout the text, Gregory reveals Macrina’s virtuous and certain faith through the various stories of tragedy and loss and how Macrina’s grief was hidden. For instance, Gregory writes of the various deaths the family had to endure: first their brother Naucratius, then their mother, Emmelia, and later followed by the death of their brother Basil. Each episode saw one or another family member fall apart in grief, but Gregory speaks of Macrina as standing firm in her faith and attachment to God so that she can detach from her grief and emotionally hold up her various family members. When Naucratius dies in a tragic accident, Emmelia falls apart. Gregory writes of Macrina:

It was now that the virtue of the Macrina was displayed. Opposing reason to passion, she both kept herself from collapse and became the stay of her mother’s weakness, raising her up again from the abyss of grief. Through her own firmness and unyielding spirit she taught her mother’s soul to be brave. . . The lofty and noble soul of the virgin was then more manifest than ever. . . rising superior to nature, raised up her mother together with herself by her reasonings, and placed her beyond passion, guiding her by her own example to steadfastness and courage. . . to rejoice at the blessings she saw before her.21

19 Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina, 3.2, as found in Silvas, Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God, 112.

20 Silvas and Gregory of Nyssa, Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God, 19.

21 Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina, 12.1 and 12.5, as found in Silvas, Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God, 120, 121.
Here Gregory is revealing his sister, using the words “displayed” and “manifest.”

Later, when Gregory is remembering and missing Basil after his death, discussing this with Macrina – on her deathbed, no doubt – instead of joining in with Gregory, Macrina distracts him from his grief by enjoining him into a discussion that very well may have led to Gregory’s later treatise, *On the Soul and Resurrection*. Gregory remembers the moment:

> When the memory of the great Basil arose. . . my soul drooped, my face fell dejected, and the tears streamed from my eyes. But so far was she in sharing the despondency affecting us that she made the memory of the saint a starting point for the higher philosophy… It almost seemed to me that my soul was elevated by her words above human nature and set down through the guidance of her discourse within the heavenly sanctuary.\(^{22}\)

This scene comes at a time when Macrina is disguising her own physical suffering on her deathbed. Gregory sets up the moment of grief and conversation by writing, “To avoid bringing despondency to my soul she endeavored to suppress her groans and made a great effort somehow to conceal the difficulty she had in breathing.”\(^{23}\) Gregory writes of this moment in order to reveal Macrina as a suffering Job of the Bible, writing, “It was some such case that I saw in the great Macrina… her mind unimpaired in the contemplation of the higher things, in no way hindered by her great weakness.”\(^{24}\) Macrina is revealed in her actual concealment.

As Macrina’s imminent death draws near, Gregory becomes more and more aware of who exactly his sister is: a holy bride of Christ. Earlier in the story, near the beginning, Gregory detailed her betrothal to a cousin, who eventually died before they married. With audacity and strength of resolve, as Gregory tells us, Macrina convinced her parents not to betroth


her to another, for she presented herself as a widow who would be united with her betrothed husband in heaven:

So when the decision, which had been made for her, was cut off by the young man’s death, she designated her father’s decision a marriage, as if what had been decided upon had already taken place, and she resolved from then on to remain by herself. And indeed her decision was more firmly fixed than might have been expected at her age. For when her parents brought her proposals of marriage... she would say that it was out of order and unlawful not to be loyal to the marriage that had been authorized once and for all for her by her father and to be put under pressure to consider another; since by nature marriage is but once only. ... she insisted that he who had been joined to her by her parents’ decision had not died, but that in her judgment he was alive to God... and was away on a journey, not dead, and that it was out of order not to keep faith with one’s bridegroom who had gone abroad.\textsuperscript{25}

This particular scene is a parallel with Odysseus’ wife in the \textit{Iliad} when Penelope waits for Odysseus and does not give in to the suitors that would like to countenance him as dead. When this story of Macrina’s is told early in the \textit{Life}, Gregory does no more revealing of who she is. However, later upon her deathbed, it is clearly illuminated that Macrina has not remained unmarried and a virgin for that long-awaited earthly husband, but rather for her true husband, Christ. Gregory writes, “Much of the day had now passed, and the sun was declining towards the west, but her eagerness did not decline. No, the nearer she approached her exodus, the more clearly she discerned the beauty of the Bridegroom and the more eagerly she hastened to the one for whom she longed.”\textsuperscript{26}

The other revelation that Gregory gives the reader is that Macrina is a suffering martyr. On the way to see his ailing sister, three times he has a dream in which he is holding the glowing bones of martyrs. He cannot understand this dream until he has the theological conversation with


\textsuperscript{26} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life of Macrina}, 25.1, as found in Silvas, \textit{Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God}. 133.
Macrina. Then he connects the dream with her, “...for what I had seen seemed to disclose to me in the event the riddle of my dream. The sight that had confronted me as truly the remains of a holy martyr, remains which had died to sin but which shone with the indwelling grace of the Spirit...” Again, Gregory uses language of the disguise and recognition motif: “disclose” and “shone.”

Even as he seems to be illuminated, he is still slow to see. Just after the above scene, Gregory writes that “we did not realize” when describing that Macrina was about to die. He writes that she hid so well her dying, even as she was actually dying, through her aspect and words: “...inspired in some way by what appeared before it, thought she might have escaped the common nature [death]. Accordingly, it seemed to me that she was then making manifest to those present that divine and pure love of the unseen Bridegroom which she had nourished secretly in the inmost recesses of her soul...”

Even as Gregory was not seeing what was right in front of his eyes, his sister was in full knowledge of it, and was drawing ever closer to God: “The sun was declining towards the west, but her eagerness did not decline... withdrawing from converse with us, she spoke from then on to God in prayer... so that we scarcely heard what she said... and was heard by [God].

Once Macrina died, Gregory takes a detour into the scar scene, where ultimately and finally Macrina’s identity is fully illuminated for him and for the reader. As Gregory is preparing Macrina’s body for burial with Vetiana, another nun helping out, Gregory writes of that moment, “‘Do not let a


very great wonder accomplished by this holy woman pass by unrecorded’ [Vetiana] said. . . Laying bare part of the breast she said: ‘Do you see this slight, faint mark below the skin. . . ’ As she spoke she brought the lamp nearer the place she was showing me.”

At this pivotal moment, and even as Vetiana is physically illuminating the scene with her lamp, Gregory is still not recognizing the significance of the scar to Macrina’s identity.

This is similar in many ways to Homer’s tale of Odysseus as a disguised beggar, although, Odysseus steps back out of the light to keep the scar and his identity hidden. Here, Gregory has the scar illuminated for him and still does not recognize the underlying message.

Similarly, Biblically, we can identify this story with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. In this story, Jesus is in plain sight of the two men He is walking and conversing with, and He is illuminating who He is with His body and words, and yet they do not recognize Him.

Here again Macrina’s story speaks to the theme of disguise and recognition. In Gregory’s narration of Macrina’s scar, he writes, “‘What is to be wondered at,’ I said, ‘if the body is pricked here with some faint mark?’” Vetiana has to tell the full story of Macrina’s tumor and “self” healing. In her early life, Macrina had the tumor but would not see a doctor because she did not want to “bare her body before ‘the eyes of others.’” Instead of revealing her body and tumor, the story states that one evening Macrina lay prostrate before the altar of God and wept so profusely that her tears mixed with the dirt on the floor to form into a mud. She applied this to her tumor. The next day, when her mother again beseeched Macrina to go see a doctor, Macrina took her mother’s hand into her clothing and asked her to make the sign of the cross on the tumor. At this point the

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33 Georgia Frank, “Macrina’s Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina,*” 512.
tumor is discovered to have miraculously healed. All that is left is the scar, a sign of God’s healing.  

What is the significance of this story being told to Gregory and to the reader at this particular point? It is a distraction from the story at hand, just as Homer did with Odysseus’ scar scene in the *Odyssey*. The distraction here is a distraction from the death and burial of Macrina. Vetiana reveals this episode of Macrina’s scar after her death even as Macrina hid it from public knowledge throughout her whole life. Frank discusses this distraction writing; “What for so long went undetected was now in plain sight... Gregory can insert Macrina into a long tradition of saintly wounded... Moreover, the scar’s permanence also marks Macrina’s continuing progress toward a resurrection body, a movement signaled in Gregory’s dream in which he held radiant relics.”

It all comes together as Gregory dresses Macrina in his robe, then covers her body with her mother’s cloak, in order to hide her beauty from onlookers. However, Macrina’s identity can no longer be hid. Her body glows right through the cloak in virtuous and holy radiance. “Yet even in the dark robe it shone, the divine power having added, I think, this grace to the body, so that, exactly as I had seen in the dream, a radiance seemed to shine forth from her beauty.” Just as Christ’s resurrected self is recognized by the apostles before He ascended to the Father, and just as Odysseus is finally recognized by his scar, so now, as Gregory’s narrative ends, he and the reader are fully illuminated about this “lofty and noble soul of the virgin.”

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35 Georgia Frank, “Macrina’s Scar,” 514.


Conclusion

Silvas suggests that Gregory’s *Life of Macrina* is an exercise in mystagogy. When looking at it through the lens of the Homeric and Biblical motif of disguise and recognition, it certainly has that sense. Macrina’s hidden and mystical identity is slowly being drawn out in this biography, so that the reader, along with Gregory, finally comes to understand the true nature and holiness of this saint and bride of Christ. Silvas compares Gregory’s narration to a liturgy, where there is a certain “progression from the earth bound to the supremely sacred, a gradual broaching of thresholds until access to the innermost shrine in finally gained. . .the life of the virgin as portrayed is a gradual progression towards divine communion.”38 This gradual “access to the innermost shrine” is a steady progression through ever-present anecdotes about Macrina’s life, from hiddenness to revelation.

Frank finds that the apex of the story is the scar scene because it shows Macrina as a suffering hero. Frank connects this with Homer’s Odysseus and finds that this is Gregory’s motivation for telling this story. When the entire account of Macrina’s life is taken as one whole, including the detail of the scar scene, what jumps out as Gregory’s final motivation is to show Macrina as a life hid in Christ. His use of the theme of disguise and recognition runs consistently throughout the entire narration and is the point on which the scar scene itself turns. Gregory’s use of the motif of disguise and recognition is a shared style of many Christian authors in the early Church, a connection found between Scripture, Homer and theologians.

BEING OF TIME: A LITURGICAL LONGING

Ruan Bessa da Silveira

In this essay, I argue that Book 11 of Confessions offers a distinctive way of inhabiting time by means of what I term liturgical longings: desires formed in the believer in and over time by means of rhythmic religious practice. This way of navigating time is appropriative to Augustine’s understanding of the church as a community of pilgrims journeying towards the City of God. More importantly than offering an answer to the question ‘what is time?’, Augustine offers an answer to the question ‘what time is it?’ Pilgrimage becomes the time to long, the means by which God enlarges the soul that shall filled.

Heuristically, Book 11 has been interpreted in three ways: comparatively, philosophically, and theologically. Common amongst these approaches is their failure to consider the context of the church and the role of liturgy in Augustine’s reflections. Though listening to what he


2 Bear in mind that this is not a “clear-cut” distinction, rather a loose grid to situate different accounts. For examples of comparative approaches, see Callahan, Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy, 149-87; also Richard Sorabji, Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 29-32. For examples of philosophical approaches, see Ricœur, Time and Narrative, 5-30; see also Algis Mickunas, “Self-Identity and Time” in Augustine for the Philosophers: the Rhetor of Hippo, the Confessions, and the Continentials. Studies in Rhetoric and Religion. Vol. 16. ed. Calvin L. Troup (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 107-26. Finally, for examples of theological approaches, see Christopher J. Thompson, “The theological dimension of Time in Confessions XI,” in Augustine: presbyter factus sum. Collectanea Augustiniana, ed. Earl C. Muller, Joseph Lienhard, and Roland J. Teske (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 187-93. Some of guiding questions in these accounts are: does Augustine provide a definition of time? Is his account psychological and subjectivist and hence time an invention of one’s mind? Is time an objective reality as well? How many meanings does the word “time” have and what is the relationship between them? Is there a contradiction of meanings in Augustine’s use of the word distentio? What is the relationship between time and eternity?

3 Rowan Williams is probably the exception here. See Rowan Williams, On Augustine (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1-24.
says about time, there seems to be little attention to how he says it. I take my cue from James Wetzel who points out that Augustine “is not a philosopher who happens also to pray, but a philosopher who philosophizes by praying.” Put otherwise, Augustine reflects liturgically and this in turn has implications to how one reads Book 11. The Bishop of Hippo has no interest in time per se; he is dealing with God and the soul, with Scripture and creation, the relationship between Word and words and how he does it matters.

Taking all above said earlier, I point out and illustrate how Augustine finds himself in the midst of a tensed experience as a being of time in the first part of this essay. On one hand, he is stretched out in distraction and pulled apart. On the other, he is extended in reach and concentration. Those are not mutually exclusive ways of experiencing time but rather perspectives always mingled together. To make this experience more concrete, I showcase it with the two episodes of grief of the Confessions, one in Book 4 over a friends’ death, the other in Book 9 over Monica’s death and with Augustine’s reflections about time in Book 11. In the

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4 Obviously, this is not say that authors are paying no attention to how Augustine says things; Simply that it is not the primary focus. For an account that purposefully does it though, see Calvin L. Troup, Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Augustine’s Confessions (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999). Especially ch. 3.


8 Christopher Thompson argues that Augustine’s main concern is to assert the primacy of the Word of God by situating the doctrine of creation and the created order within it and “it is Augustine’s insistence on the primacy of the Word which serves as the backdrop for the more overt discussions about time and its characteristics”. Thompson, “The theological dimension of Time in Confessions XI,” 189.

9 That is no novelty. Paul Ricœur and Andrea Nightingale, for instance, treat this tension as the opposition between intentio and distentio animi.
second part, I link this experience of time with the *modus operandi* of Book 11. I propose that Augustine’s struggle with the problem of time is embedded in at least three liturgical actions: the reading Scripture, confessing, and seeking the good of others. I conclude that these liturgical actions can foster longings that prompts and teaches how to navigate time.

**Being of Time: A Tensed Experience**

In Book 11 Augustine gathers at the least nuances of what “being of time” means. It can refer to (1) the sort of thing that time is, (2) to the things that are subjected to time and finally (3) to the human experience of time. This article focuses on this third nuance. Augustine, as a being of time, is found in a tensed experience between two poles: distraction and concentration.

‘Because of your mercy is more than lives’ (Ps 62.4) see how my *life is a distension* in several directions. ‘Your right hand upheld me’ (Ps. 17:36; 62:9) in my Lord, the Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many, who *live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things*; so ‘I might apprehend him in whom also I am apprehended’ (Phil. 3:12-14), and leaving behind the old days I might be gathered to follow the One, ‘forgetting the past’ and

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10 Augustine argued that God created time and hence that it could not be considered a principle coeternal with God. Only the Incarnate son, the Word of God is co-eternal. See Augustine, *Conf.* 11.13.15. There is no agreement between comments if Augustine ever offered a definition of time and if it would stand up to scrutiny. See Wetzel, “Time after Augustine,” 342.

11 Being of time can also refer to what is subjected to time. Augustine defended that eternity belonged to God alone. Curiously though, although for Augustine all creatures are mutable not all of them are temporal. The heaven of heavens, the holy communion of spiritual beings and formless matter are mutable yet outside of time. Humans, though, are not only mutable and changeable but through and through subjected to time. See Augustine, *Conf.* 11.1.1 and 12.12.15. See also Kennedy, “Book Eleven: The *Confessions* as Eschatological Narrative,” 170. Humans, though, are not only mutable and changeable but through and through subjected to time. Callahan argues that “time, therefore, is in the soul, *but the soul is not in time*, because its attention always remains attention and never becomes memory”. Callahan, *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy*, 181. This is another point of discussion. Does Augustine want to transcend and escape temporality? This question lies beyond the scope of this essay but indeed is an interesting one.
moving not towards those future things which are transitory but to the ‘things which are before’ me, not stretched out in distraction but extended in reach, not by being pulled apart but by concentration. So I pursue the prize of the high calling where I ‘may hear the voice of praise’ and ‘contemplate your delight’ (Ps. 25:7; 26:4) which neither comes nor goes. But now ‘my years pass in groans’ (Ps. 30:11) and you, Lord, are my consolation. You are my eternal father, but I am scattered in time whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces the road to self-understanding seems blocked. This is the pole of distraction. Nevertheless, another tone and color permeate the text. Augustine can leave past things behind so things that are ‘before’ him can be embraced. It is an experience marked by a present mercy and consolation from God. Finally, eschatologically oriented, “until that day,” lived in light of the future contemplation and apprehension of God. This is the pole of concentration. Below the two scenes of grief in the Confessions as well as on Augustine’s reflections about time in Book 11 illustrate this tensed condition.

**Stretching and Extending in Grief**

In *Augustine and the “Problem” of Time*13, Genevieve Lloyd already noted that the episodes of grief in the *Confessions* (over a friend’s death in Book 4 and over Monica’s death in Book 9) are two ways of dealing with time. In Book 4, Augustine says that grief had darkened his heart.14 He mourned in time and over time and common places like his hometown suddenly felt estranged to him.15 He passed his time in sorrow, unhappiness, and

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12 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.29.39. (emphasis added)


14 Augustine, *Conf.* 4.4.9.

15 Augustine, *Conf.* 4.4.9.
restlessness; Augustine confessed: “I had become to myself a vast problem.”\(^\text{16}\) For moment time even seemed to act as a healing agent, for his ‘wounds were less painful’\(^\text{17}\) yet time would only bring about new sorrows to replace the one over his friend’s death.\(^\text{18}\)

Augustine seems clear and honest about the underlying issue here. Problematically, he loved things of time as if they were eternal. As he puts it: “I had poured out my soul on the sand by loving a person sure to die as if he would never die.”\(^\text{19}\) Note that time is wasted as sand in water. For Augustine those emotions he felt about his friend’s death were flawed.\(^\text{20}\)

Now, as mentioned, being stretched and extending in time are always and already mingled. Therefore, note how allusions to an extended way of experiencing time already surface in Book 4. “Happy is the person who loves you (Tobit 13:18). and his friend in you, and his enemy because of you (Matt 5:44)”\(^\text{21}\) because “though left alone, he loses none dear to him; for all are dear in the one who cannot be lost.”\(^\text{22}\) Augustine is saying that when things are loved in and for God, although time passes, time is not wasted, and those things are somehow kept.

This leads to the second episode of grief, in Book 9 over Monica’s death. From a simple allusion in Book 4, the extended way of experiencing time now takes the upper hand and is fully sketched. Lloyd comments that “in the second episode the destructive passage of time is framed by the soul’s journey toward eternity. Memory of what he has lost is no longer a source of misery but a delight in the life that held the seeds of

\(^{16}\) Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 4.4.9.

\(^{17}\) Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 4.4.9.


\(^{19}\) Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 4.8.13.

\(^{20}\) Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 4.6.11.


\(^{22}\) Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 4.9.15.
transformation into contact with the eternal.”\textsuperscript{23} So, in light of eternity, losing someone is not measured by morning alone. What Augustine stated in Book 4 about loving a friend in God is actually experienced in Book 9 due to his conversion in Book 8. Augustine can now say, “I had no desire for earthly goods to be multiplied, nor to devour time and to be devoured by it.”\textsuperscript{24} He is no longer seeking to be consumed by time or consume time in grief as with his friend’s death.

Yet again, these experiences of time are always mingled together. So although Augustine has no desire to waste or be wasted by grief, he asks: “Why then did I suffer sharp pains of inward grief”\textsuperscript{25} after his mother passed away? To which he answers: “It must have been the fresh wound caused by the break in habit formed by our living together, a very affectionate and precious bond suddenly turned apart.”\textsuperscript{26} In other words, it is the power that habit - liturgy - and communal life - church - have on the body and how time is experienced.

He continues: “I was reproaching the softness of my feelings and was holding back the torrent of sadness. It yielded a little to my efforts, but then again its attack swept over me.”\textsuperscript{27} Augustine is trying to deal with grief differently than in Book 4, which means he is trying to navigate time differently. He prays that God would heal his pain but to no avail.\textsuperscript{28} He takes a bath and still feels the same. Finally, he reads and then rest.\textsuperscript{29}

Sure, Augustine went to bed and slept. Nevertheless, Augustine writes in layers and rest means more than closing one’s eyes and going to sleep. Recall that Confessions is a book about a soul in search for rest. After waking

\textsuperscript{23} Lloyd, “Augustine and the “Problem” of Time,” 43. (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{24} Augustine, Conf. 9.4.10.

\textsuperscript{25} Augustine, Conf. 9.12.30.

\textsuperscript{26} Augustine, Conf. 9.12.30.

\textsuperscript{27} Augustine, Conf. 9.12.31.

\textsuperscript{28} Augustine, Conf. 9.12.32.

\textsuperscript{29} Augustine, Conf. 9.12.32.
up, a verse of hymn about rest written by Ambrose comes to Augustine’s mind. He comments that “from then on, little by little, I was brought back to my old feelings about your handmaid [...] of which I was suddenly deprived.”\textsuperscript{30} Those feelings can be interpreted as the positive counterpart of the flawed feeling from Book 4.

These two episodes of grief aimed at illustrating the tensed experience of being at once stretched and extended in reach as the two sides of the dynamics of being of time. Nevertheless, the same interplay between stretching and extending in time may be found through the lens of reflection in Book 11.

\textbf{Stretching and Extending in Reflection}

As Augustine ponders about time he is bombarded by a multiplicity of thoughts. Andrea Nightingale suggests that:

his repeated references (and commands) to himself to pay attention and ignore all distractions in Confessions 11 reminds us that his ordinary experience of time involves a multitude of sensations, impressions, memories, expectations, emotions, and roving thoughts. He thus shows the reader that he, the author, is trying to block out lived time as he steps back to analyze and represent temporality.\textsuperscript{31}

Yet Augustine seems to suggest that such blocking out is not an option: “I confess to you, Lord, that I still do not know what time is, and I further confess to you, Lord, that as I say this I know myself to be conditioned by time”\textsuperscript{32}. Put otherwise, reflecting about time inevitably takes time. After a series of interrogations on the topic\textsuperscript{33}, he bursts out in prayer: “Allow me Lord, to take my investigation further. My hope, let not my attention be


\textsuperscript{31} Andrea Nightinggale, \textit{Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 96. (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{32} Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 11.24.32.

\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Augustine, \textit{Conf.} 11.17.22.
distracted.”

Why? For God is the one who enables him to experience time as an extension in reach as alluded to in 11.29.39.

What is it that distract Augustine though? The answer emerges later on. After further reflecting, he is compelled to stop again: “So it is in you, my mind, that I measure periods of time. Do not distract me; that is, do not allow yourself to be distracted by the hubbub of the impressions being made upon you.” Therefore, the distractions are connected with the very impressions made upon his mind through reflection.

There are at least two possible ways of looking at this. On one hand, the impressions themselves are the cause of the distraction. On the other hand, the impressions do not cause the distraction, but rather demonstrate how one can respond to them. One can either be completely absorbed by them or one can grapple with them with intentio. Nightingale explains that “intentio works against distractions and interruptions and, for brief a period, can reduce the feeling of being scattered and torn apart in time.” Intentio is a temporary bracketing of distractions. Gerhart B. Ladner remarks in similar fashion: being of time may be “a distraction from eternity” but also “an occasion for the righting of one’s intention toward eternity.”

34 Augustine, Conf. 11.18.23. (emphasis added)

35 Augustine, Conf. 11.27.36. It is interesting to note that at this time he addresses himself.

36 With that said, it seems as if one can rationally decide how to navigate in time yet Monica’s death episode is insightful here. Augustine wants to be extended in time instead of being scattered in it yet without his assent, those flawed feelings and thoughts and all sorts of things simply seem to break loose on him. Here the role of body is crucial and Nightingale is quite helpful here too. “As he [Augustine] suggests, continence - which enables him to control his bodily urges - works against the dispersed and perverse memories that distract him from God. He cannot simply use his mind or memory to worship God: he must train both his mind and his body in this pursuit. Controlling sensual argues allows him to keep God in his mind or memory while remembering and confessing his perverse acts and urges foster his ascetic bodily practices.” Nightingale, Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body, 70.

37 Nightingale, Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body, 99. (emphasis added)

Both poles of this mingled experience have a common feature though: they help Augustine to get insights about himself. On one hand, by feeling scattered and distended in time, he better reads his condition as a fallen creature. On the other, by extending in reach he recalls not only the image of God in humanity but that even if humans had never fallen away, they would never be God. So precisely by failing to be always extending in reach and concentrating, he ends up being successful in showing that to long liturgically is how the believer should inhabit time. John Cavadini aptly puts it:

The ascent is successful, to an extent, but in its very success, in fact because of its success, it fails; because the “light” is glimpsed, Augustine “falls away”. It is too bright for Augustine’s weakness, and, as in the visions in Book VII and at Ostia, Augustine is left with longing, not fulfillment. [Emphasis mine]

Fulfillment then becomes to the “until that Day.” For now it is by and through longing that one must journey on and it is the liturgical mode of reflection of Book 11 that describes and illustrates those longings.

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39 An important question here is: For Augustine, is distraction and stretching in time a result of human falseness?

40 This is even more clear at the end of Book 11. He envisions a mind able to fully know the past and the future, the same way that he knows a memorized psalm. That mind would be surely impressive and miraculous but still God knows not like that. God knows in an even more wonderful and mysterious way.

41 The Vision at Ostia is the perfect example: “And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. And we sighed and left the first fruits of the Spirit (Rom 8:23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending,” Augustine, Conf. 9.10.24. (emphasis added)

Longing for Scripture: Eternity, Time and Self-knowledge

It was suggested above that “intentio directs and concentrates the mind but cannot overcome distention or integrate the psyche.” In other words, the experience of “being of time” is and will always be a tensed, one of now but not yet. This is so for “only God will gather together and unify the psyche at the end of time. On earth, humans use intentio as a way to stay focused on God and on activities that support this orientation.” The reading of Scripture is one of these liturgical activities.

As already stated, Augustine interests lie not in time per se but rather searching for its significance to faith life. His reflections about time are framed by a longing to understand Scripture. This longing is seems to be at various places at the beginning of Book 11. He writes: “for a long time I’ve been burning to mediate in your law (Ps 38:4)” and to teach it faithfully as well. “May your Scriptures be my pure delight, so that I am not deceived by them and do not lead others stray in interpreting them”. Thinking about time is to meditate on Scripture for him.

So how does Augustine extend in reach by longing to understand Scripture? Bouncing back and forth between 11.2.3, 11.2.4 and 11.29.39 hints at the answer.

O, Lord, bring me to perfection (Ps 16:5) and reveal to me the meaning of these pages. See, your voice is my joy, your voice is better than the wealth of pleasures (Ps 118:22). Grant what I love; for I love it, and that love was your gift. Do not desert your gifts and do not despise your plant as it thirsts. Let me confess to you what I find in your books. ‘Let me hear the voice of praise’ (Ps. 25:7) and drink you, and let me consider ‘wonderful things out of your law’ (Ps 1181.8) - from the beginning

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43 Nightingale, Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body, 99. (emphasis added)

44 Nightingale, Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body, 99. (emphasis added)

45 Augustine, Conf. 11.2.2.

46 Augustine, Conf. 11.2.3. (emphasis added)
in which you made heaven and earth until the perpetual reign with you in your heavenly city. (Rev 5:10; 21:12)\textsuperscript{47}

O Lord. Behold, this is the spring of my desire. See, O Father, look and see—and approve! Let it be pleasing in your mercy's sight that I should find favor in you—that the secret things of your Word may be opened to me when I knock. I beg this of you by our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, the Man of your right hand, the Son of Man; whom you made strong for your purpose as Mediator between you and us [...] I beseech it of you through him who sits at your right hand and makes intercession for us, "in whom are hid all treasures of wisdom and knowledge." It is be I seek in your books.\textsuperscript{48}

‘Your right hand upheld me’ (Ps. 17:36; 62:9) in my Lord, the Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many, who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things; [...] So I ‘pursue the prize of the high calling where I ‘may hear the voice of praise’ and ‘contemplate your delight’ (Ps 25:7; 26:4) which neither comes nor goes.\textsuperscript{49}

Scripture is the ‘hotspot’ where Augustine hears God’s eternal Word by means of transient words. Furthermore, the incarnation is the summit of that experience. In the Son, time and eternity meet and the significance of both are displayed, revealing to Augustine not only the meaning of history from creation to redemption but the meaning of his own journey. In Scripture, Augustine apprehends “him in whom also I am apprehended” (Phil. 3:12-14). Augustine not only hears but also meets the Mediator who prompts him to redeem time, “leaving behind the old days.” As Kennedy comments, “the incarnate Word is the center for understanding Scripture and, through its words, becomes the means for uniting our scattered lives.”\textsuperscript{50} The liturgical action of reading Scripture narrate when and where we are as humans.

\textsuperscript{47} Augustine, Conf. 11.2.3. (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{48} Augustine, Conf. 11.2.4. (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{49} Augustine, Conf. 11.29.39. (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{50} Kennedy, “Book Eleven: The Confessions as Eschatological Narrative,” 173.
Reading Scripture also feeds Augustine’s longing to ‘hear the voice of praise’, to complete the journey. It pushes him and his readers forward in pilgrimage, it extends them in reach. But not only that, it also feeds the very reflection on time precisely by deepening his awareness of the difference between God and creation, that is, the difference between eternity and time. It tells him that he is temporal through and through and yet precisely because the meaning of time does not lie in itself but rather in its reference to eternity, to be temporal is a gift from God.

**Longing for the Family of God: Rebuke, Praise and Confession**

If the discussion of time is framed by the liturgical act of reading Scripture, it is also framed by liturgical acts of love towards the brothers and sisters in Christ. “Why then do I set before you an ordered account of so many things?” Augustine asks at the beginning of Book 11. “It is certainly not through me that you know them. But I am stirring up love for you in myself and in those who read this.” Later on Augustine reaffirms that desire. “Lord my God, hear my prayer (Ps 60:2), may your mercy attend to my longing which burns not for my personal advantage but desires to be of use in love to the brethren.”

As with the reading of Scripture, one may ask again, how does reflecting about time arouse the love God in the church? An answer is suggested at the end of Book 11. As Augustine concludes his reflections, he prays: “Grant them, Lord, to consider carefully what they are saying and to make the discovery that where there is no time, one cannot use the word ‘never.’ To say that God has never done something is to say that there is no time when he did it.” Augustine is rebuking those who ask what God

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51 Even after Ricœur has bracketed the import eternity has on time to argue that isolated from the background of eternity, Augustine’s speculation on time suffices to answer the aporias of the nonbeing of time and the measurement of time, he affirms: “It is incontestable that Augustine’s meditation is indivisibly concerned with eternity and time.” Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 23.

52 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.1.1.

53 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.2.3.

was doing before he made the heavens and earth. Why? Because for him what is at stake here is a misconstrued understanding of God’s nature. Let them therefore see that without the creation no time can exist, and let them cease to speak that vanity (Ps. 143:8). Let them also be extended towards those things which are before (Phil. 3:13) and understand that before all time you are eternal Creator of all time. Notice Augustine’s aim. He desires them to be extended in reach as they come to know God as the eternal Creator of all time. Once again, his reflections on time prompts the church in pilgrimage. By rebuking them, inviting them to praise and make confession, the Bishop is teaching them what it means to navigate time. Just like with his longing for Scripture.

For Augustine, it does matter if one understands eternity as he had already mentioned that in Book 1: “If anyone finds your simultaneity beyond his understanding, it is not for me to explain it. Let him be content to say ‘What is this? (Ex 16:15). Let him rejoice and delight in finding you who are beyond discovery rather than fail to find you by supposing you to be discoverable.” At the end, to confess is not how one finds God rather how one finds oneself already found by God. As Augustine puts it: “Let the person who understands this make confession to you. Let him who fails to understand it make confession to you.” In other words, let one extend in reach.

**Conclusion: Toward Liturgical Longings**

Wetzel points out that Augustine began his meditation on time by speaking of it as a distention into nothingness and at the end he found himself in time’s place. He begs God to note the distension in his life. But that is not the whole story. As the point of reference of all things created, the incarnated Son upholds Augustine’s time, which in turn allows him to move “not towards those future things which are transitory but to

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55 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.30.40. (emphasis mine)

56 Augustine, *Conf.* 1.16.10.


the ‘things which are before’ me, *not stretched out in distraction but extended in reach, not by being pulled apart but by concentration.*" 59 Thus:

[. . .] the note of consolation sounds in his recognition that sin's time is not time but time's absence. He has described time not as he has been given it, but as he has given it up. If the time given up can somehow be got back, then forgiveness is not impossible, just incomprehensible. To look at time through God's eyes is to see life gathered from death, a distention inverted. 60

For Augustine, lost and wasted time remains synonymous to loving the world and the things of the world as end in themselves. A quick glance over Books 1 through 9 of *Confessions* suffices to illustrate that. Augustine gives his time away, scattered in a multiplicity of disoriented desires and longings prompted by disoriented habits. Yet even that time is gathered by God. The conversion scene in Book 8 illustrates this, arousing a set of different longings by each one extends in reach:

‘Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts’ (Rom 12:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled. 61

For Augustine, “our training through the holy longing *advances in the measure that our longings are severed from the love of this world.*” 62 To love the world disproportionally is to devour time and be devoured by it, is to be affectioned by things of time as if they were eternal, as if they were God. This is idolatry.

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60 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.29.39.


In his fourth homily on 1 John, Augustine rhetorically asked his congregation, “what is the promise given us?” to which he answers, “we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” Augustine clearly realizes that it is not time to see as if one had already achieved vision and contemplation of God. But then how should one navigate through time? He answers: “since as yet you cannot see, your work must lie in longing. The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing.” More than answering the question “what is time,” Augustine teaches what time it is.

When the church comes together as a body to worship, it may actually learn from Book 11. Repeating its liturgical movements, the church remembers an historical past and goes forward to an expected future. It narrates time in light of eternity and of the condescending of eternity in time through Christ’s incarnation. Without bypassing brokenness, the church recognizes that sin’s time is still very much present. Alongside Augustine, the church receives encouragement to extend in reach as it reads Scripture, prays for mercy, reflects, rebukes, praises, confesses and begs for completion, knowing that “by withholding the vision God extends the longing, through longing he makes the soul extend, by


66 Williams is on point here: “The question of who or what exactly I am, the nature of self or soul, is to be understood in relation to the story of Christ’s acceptance of the weakness of mortality. If my identity is determined by the inaccessible but unfailing attention of God’s love, the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus is a declaration that this divine attention is in touch with us and transforming us through a particular worldly series of events transmitted by human telling, active in the present through the historical body of the Church. [...] I am changed only when I begin to follow the path of Christ and, by grace, to shape a biography of my own that conforms to the contours of his, embracing mortality and limit in order to receive a life beyond mortality and limit. But this way is made specific and tangible in the community of believers, in the common language and practice of the church,” Williams, *On Augustine*, 12.

extending it he makes room in it.” Augustine’s exhortation to the church is thus timeless: “So, brethren, let us long, because we are to be filled.”

68 Augustine, Fourth Homily: 1 John 2:27-3:8, 1.6.

69 Augustine, Fourth Homily: 1 John 2:27-3:8, 1.6.
THE ROLE OF ROMANS 4 IN THE WHOLE LETTER 
AND THE NARRATIVE SUBSTRUCTURE IN IT

Dawei Shao

Throughout church history, influential theologians like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Karl Barth have found themselves changed because of the book of Romans. However, some scholars still debate the role or purpose of Romans 4, especially Chapter 4. Some see it as an example or biblical proof of the doctrine of justification by faith expounded in the previous chapter.¹ Some see it as a commentary or “midrash” of Torah.² Michael Cranford says, “Paul draws on the figure of Abraham in Romans 4 to argue that it was always God's intention to include Gentiles among his people.”³ Richard B. Hays offers a topological view linking Abraham to Christ:

The relevance of Paul’s appeal to the story of Abraham would lie in the fact that he finds there a precedent within Scripture for the idea that the faithfulness of a single divine-chosen protagonist can bring God's blessing upon “many” whose destiny is figured forth in that protagonist's action. In this respect Abraham serves for Paul not just as an exemplar of Christian believing but also as a topological foreshadowing of Christ, “the one man” (Romans 5:19) through whose obedience “the many were constituted righteous.”⁴


N. T. Wright contends:

Paul has not introduced Abraham as an “example” or “scriptural proof” of a “doctrine” (Kasemann 1980:105), not even as “a decisive test case” (Dunn 1988:199). ... Abraham throughout Romans is the one with whom God made a covenant to rescue the whole world from the Adamic plight of sin and death, a promise now at last fulfilled in the Messiah. This contributes to the larger argument of the letter, which is a vindication of the covenant faithfulness of God, as seen in the powerfully saving gospel of Jesus the Messiah.5

Facing such disagreements, Joshua W. Jipp even argues that “Paul’s argument is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single overarching theme.”6 We need more clues from Romans 4 to further this conversation. One of the possible approaches to discern more clues is the narrative approach.

My thesis is that there is an underlying narrative substructure in Romans 4 which can help us understand the role and purpose of this chapter within the whole letter. With the narrative substructure in mind, we would not easily treat Romans 4 as only an example or proof of Paul’s argument of justification by faith. Against the backdrop of the narrative of creation and fall in Romans 1-3, the narrative of Abraham in Romans 4 serves as an integral part of the narrative of redemption/salvation, which shows clues in the introduction of the letter (Romans 1:1-6) and expands in Roman 3-8. The redemption narrative is followed by a narrative of judgment and consummation. This renders Romans 4 indispensable from the overarching narrative.

The narrative approach emerged between the1960s to 1970s as a new literary critical approach to biblical study, especially of the gospels.7

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Traditionally, scholars would treat epistles, especially Pauline letters, as highly logical discourses. J. C. Beker asserts, "Paul is a man of the proposition, the argument, and the dialogue, not a man of the parable or story." However, ever since Richard Hays published his PhD dissertation, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* in 1981, he provoked great interest in Pauline scholarship with the narrative angle of Pauline theology. In his book, Hays proposes that even with an externally dialectical form, Paul’s letters show discernible internal “narrative substructure” that governs the flow of his discourse. He argues that “Paul’s theological language is grounded in story, and that his letters must be interpreted as theological reflection on the first-order kerygmatic narrative about Jesus.” According to Hays’ view, the narrative approach can shed light on Paul’s theology and offer an optional view on Pauline letters.

Some scholars have different perspectives about the nature or number of biblical narratives, that is, whether there is one grand narrative or several narratives within the Bible. N. T. Wright sees one single story. Ben Witherington finds four micro-stories within one macro-story.

E. Porter (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 421.


D.G. Dunn finds five narratives,\(^\text{13}\) while Francis Watson is not convinced by this new narrative approach at all.\(^\text{14}\) Watson, on one hand, complains about the ambivalence of the term “narrative”, and on the other, admits there are scriptural narratives in Paul’s reinterpreting God’s saving action. He argues that in the Pauline letters the apostle is just trying to point to or restate what God has done through Jesus.\(^\text{15}\) Watson says that does not necessarily mean Paul is making a story, after all Paul was not a storyteller. He also says the gospel is the “definite, unsurpassable divine incursion into the world,” so the vertical nature of the gospel cannot fit into the horizontal human narrative.\(^\text{16}\) Later, Hays writes an article to respond to the criticism and clarify his argument. To Watson, he says that there is no doubt that Paul was not a storyteller, and the form of his letters is apparently discourse, but Paul’s “theology is to be understood as direct commentary upon a soteriological narrative.”\(^\text{17}\) Admitting Watson’s argument that the gospel is a vertical incursion into the world, Hays maintains that “it is still possible to tell the story of this incursion,” and he thinks Paul does so.\(^\text{18}\)

**Allusion in example or part of the narrative?**

As Hays argues, “Romans contains a heavy concentration of scriptural quotations and allusions.”\(^\text{19}\) Some people treat Romans 4 just as an example of justification with the story of Abraham as an allusion from Genesis within the example.\(^\text{20}\) However, the difference between the

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\(^\text{15}\) Watson, “Is There a Story in These Texts ?,” 231-32.

\(^\text{16}\) Watson, “Is There a Story in These Texts ?,” 232.


\(^\text{20}\) Although Longenecker admits that the narrative substructure is evident in Romans
allusion and the narrative substructure is that the allusion is employed to illustrate the argument. It does not convey new ideas nor affect the flow of argument. For example, Paul mentions David’s words in Psalm 32 as an allusion to support the truth that the justified sinners are blessed by God’s grace, but David is not a character in the Paul’s narrative. 21 Even if we skip verses 6-8, the whole chapter still functions. However, this chapter mentions Abraham not as an allusion, but as the main character in the whole narrative: if we skip the narrative of Abraham, we have no any clear answer about why God’s justification in Jesus could apply to Gentiles, and how all nations could benefit from what Jesus has done.

**Definition and Methodology**

Before arguing whether there is a narrative within Paul’s letters, we should first clarify the definition of narrative and narrative substructure. In his analysis of narrative in Galatians, Hays adapts a unique way of defining narrative based on A. J. Greimas. As Jae H. Lee remarks the assumption and feature of this definition:

A. J. Greimas’s technique, which Hays uses for the methodological model, has an assumption that narrative texts are deeply related to the law of syntax. Just as a grammatical sentence is composed of various syntactical elements (e.g. subject, predicate, object, etc.) whose relationship can be diagrammed, Greimas’s model assumes that a narrative has similar elements and tries to clarify their relationship through a diagram of narrative syntax. 22

According to Hays’s actantial model, the story can be divided into three moments: the initial sequence (the start of the story with a task facing problem), the topical sequence (the main character manages to solve the


21 I think if Paul may mention David and imply his connection with Abraham, but the information in Romans 4 about him cannot form a recognizable narrative.

problem), and the final sequence (the task is done with problem solved). Each sequence contains six roles: the sender, the subject, the object, the receiver, the helper, and the opponent. We can fit this chapter’s narrative into Hay’s model:

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Sender (God) → Object (Blessing/righteousness)
Receiver (us)   Subject (Abraham) → Opponent (Doubt)
Helper (Faith) →
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I appreciate Hays’s detailed analysis of the narrative syntax, but it seems that not every narrative falls strictly into that model. Some narratives lack part of the elements in the diagram, and some narratives’ sender is the same as the subject. The model needs improving to be convincing.

Brian Richardson, an English professor at the University of Maryland, maintains, “Currently four basic approaches to the definition of narrative are in use; we designate these as temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional… Of these positions, the most commonly employed are the temporal and causal stances.” Admitting the temporal stances “to be the most widely cited of any definition,” Richardson still thinks the causal stance is preferable, and he gives this definition: “Narrative is representation of a causally related series of events.” Sometimes, however, temporal factors hide in the causal stance. That may be one of the reasons Richardson chose the causal instead of temporal stance in his definition. Unrelated events cannot make narrative even they bear temporal factors. With this in mind, I maintain that this definition is more

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25 Richardson, ”Recent Concepts of Narrative," 170.
comprehensive and inclusive compared with Greimas’s definition which focuses on the structure and syntax of the narrative.

Surely, Romans is not narrative in external form. Longenecker says: “The letter to the Romans, for example, is the longest and most systematic of Paul’s writing and more a comprehensive exposition of the apostle’s message than a letter as such.”

26 Douglas J. Moo contends: “Romans, then, is a tractate letter and has at its heart a general theological argument, or series of arguments.”

27 Romans may not be narrative in its form and appearance, but it is still possible to be narrative in its substructure which acts like bones. Longenecker refers to what Hays claims in his works: “A narrative substructure is not ‘behind’ the text, detachable from it, but ‘beneath’ the text, undergirding it, supporting it, animating it, and giving it coherence, while also constraining its discursive options.”

28 As for our task of finding narrative in biblical text, a model is proposed by Ruth Reese in her treatment of narrative in Peter’s second letter. She focuses mainly on three aspects of narrative: events, time, and narrator’s voice; and a focus supported by many linguistic scholars. Compared with Greimas’s model, the narrator’s voice is a new element. Although not every text shows evidence of a narrator’s voice, many New Testament letters do, including Paul’s. That is a good mark to identify the narrative in his letters. Combining Richardson’s definition and Reese’s suggestion about voice


30 Ruth Anne Reese, “Narrative Method,” 121.
provides a feasible method to identify the narrative substructure in Romans 4 from three aspects: use of voice, characters and events, and the causal and temporal relation of these events.

**Characters and Events in Romans 4**

In Romans 4, the main characters are God, Abraham, Jesus, and us. Also, although scholars discuss the different possibilities of to what “we/us” refers, for the sake of space, we use the common view that the address refers to the recipients of the letter: the Roman believers who are “a Gentile-Christian majority and a Jewish Christian minority”.

Events are among the most important parts of a narrative. Events are the actions of the characters. By looking at the actions of the main characters, we can list the events that are mentioned in this chapter:

a) God promised Abraham would have a child (vv. 13, 18)
b) God promised Abraham’s offspring would inherit the world (v.13)
c) God promised Abraham would become father of many nations (vv. 17-18)
d) Abraham had faith in God’s promise (vv. 3, 9, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21)
e) Abraham was justified because of his faith (vv. 2, 5, 9, 11, 22, 23)
f) Abraham was circumcised after his justification (vv. 10-12)
g) Abraham had a child with Sarah even though they were old (vv. 19-21)
h) Jesus died and was resurrected (v. 25)
i) We believe God’s promise about Jesus (v. 24)
j) Abraham becomes the father of ones who believe God promise including Jews and Gentiles (vv. 11-12, 17-18)
k) We share the faith with Abraham (vv. 23-24)
l) We are justified by God like Abraham (vv. 25)
m) The Torah was written to testify that we can be justified by the same faith as Abraham (vv. 23-24)
n) God shows us His promise and plan (vv. 23-24)

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31 Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 13.

32 Even God’s revelation (event n) is not the major line in the narrative, it still serves to explain God’ plan. So we should list it.
Some people may see Paul’s mention of “in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead,” in verse 17a, as a hidden narrative of Abraham believing God could raise Isaac from death. Moo discerns that “it is possible, though perhaps unlikely, that Paul is also thinking of the application of these words to the rescue of Isaac from his near death.” As the whole chapter focuses more on Abraham’s faith about the birth of his offspring, we will not list that as an event.

Although the story of Abraham is important in this narrative, Paul is not simply repeating what had happened in Genesis. Instead, he expands the narrative to current time. He also mentions God’s revelation in history (event m and n). Although Paul was familiar with Abraham from his childhood, his encounter with Jesus changed his way of understanding the Old Testament and the story of Abraham. He reinterprets or retells the salvation history based on the narrative of Jesus. His narrative is not something that he could arbitrarily control or manipulate like narratives from other story-tellers, but rather a narrative in which he now finds himself. It is the grand narrative of salvation history and the gospel which is beyond manipulation of any story-teller. The grand narrative of the gospel is the basic foundation and key to all other narratives in the Bible. It is also the main structure of all Pauline theological writing and argument.

The Temporal and Causal Relationship of the Listed Events

Listing many unrelated events does not make them a narrative. As mentioned above, narrative is defined as “representation of a causally related series of events,” so the events should be related so as to form a

33 Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 281.

34 Paul is also not making a commentary of “Midrash” of Genesis 15 like some scholars say. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 255.

35 Some people criticize the possibility of knowing the grand narrative because “both a comprehensive story of the world and a theory of the universal requires a God’s eye view.” But my reply is that our knowledge of the grand narrative not only from the generalizing or summering the Bible, but from our conviction that the revelation of God is to communicate his plan to us. Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, “Narrative, Multiplicity, and the Letters of Paul,” in The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 364.

36 Richardson, “Recent Concepts of Narrative,” 170.
relevant and connected narrative. The narrative in Romans 4 can be divided into four parts:

1) Abraham’s story (events a to g and j),
2) Jesus’ story (event h)
3) The recipients’ and Paul’s story (events h, i, k, l)
4) God’s revelation story (events m and n).

We can discern their causal and temporal relations among them. For Abraham’s story, we can see that events a to g happened according to a temporal sequence in Genesis. Jesus story and the recipients’ believing (events h, i, k, l) happened according to the temporal sequence in the first century. Abraham becomes father of many nations and his offspring inherits the world (event j) is based on God’s promise (events a to c) and the Gentiles’ believing God’s promise (event i). As N. T. Wright says,

The revealing explanation of what God promised to Abraham, included here almost as a throwaway line, is a clear indication that he already has in view the way in which God’s fulfillment of his promises in Christ and by the Spirit will result in God’s renewed people receiving as their inheritance not merely one piece of territory but the whole restored cosmos.\(^{37}\)

Whether we may disagree about when that happens exactly, (whether to put event j after event g, event I, or after event l), we still agree that it should fill in somewhere among the events. Abraham’s story was written (event m) and happened somewhere between Genesis (time of events a to g) and the New Testament (time of event of h, i, k, l). God’s revelation covers all the events event a to m.

Logically, Abraham’s having a child (event a) is the premise of further promises, namely, blessing the nations and inheriting the world (events b and c). Inheriting the world and blessing the nations share similarities, but they also have different emphases. Events a, b, and c are the content of God’ promise which is the premise of Abraham’s faith and justification

Having a child (event g) in some sense testifies to the credibility of God’s promise (events a, b, c). Events b, c, and f are connected with Abraham’s becoming the father of many nations (event j). Jesus’ death and resurrection (event h) is the premise of our believing (event i). Abraham’s faith (event d) is the model of our faith (events i, k), and his justification (event e) is our model of justification (event l) which is based on God’s promise (events a, b, c). The purpose of God’s commanding prophets to write down the Torah (event m) is to show His promise and plan (event n). All of the events from a to m point to God’s faithful promise (event n). The events are closely woven together in the narrative. As is seen from the above analysis, with a temporal and logical support, the narrative is far more than the doctrine of justification. It involves the unfolding of God’s promise to Abraham in justifying the Gentiles through the faith of the same God. Jesus comes to fulfill God’s promise about inheriting the world and blessing the nations by justifying the Jews and Gentiles who share the same faith with Abraham.

The Voice in Romans 4

Though not part of a general definition of narrative, voice is a useful tool to recognize narrative in Paul’s letters. About the voice in the text, Reese says, “Events are always related from a point of view. The narrator functions as the organizing voice by which the narrative is told.”

As mentioned before, the narrative can be divided into four parts: Abraham’s story, Jesus’ story, the recipients’ and Paul’s story and God’s revelation story. In the first story (events a to g), the main characters are God and Abraham. Even Paul refers to Abraham as his forefather; he is the story’s third-person-narrator. In the second and fourth stories, Paul is also the third-person-narrator instead of a character inside. In the third story, God, the narrator Paul and the recipients are the characters. In this story, we find that Paul uses the first-person plural to include the recipients of the letters. The first-person plural appears six times in this chapter. He has the recipient in view. As the narrator, Paul is trying to provoke the vibrant connection between the recipients and the whole narrative. By

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38 Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 255.

believing Jesus, they are justified the same way as Abraham, and connected with the everlasting God and his faithful promise. God is always faithful and willing to promise and bless. Paul and the recipients are sharing the same God who is the most pivotal character in every story. They are also sharing the same faith with Abraham. In these four stories, Paul uses first person and third person narrator’s voice, but the narrative is a whole one and God is the same God.

**How Does Narrative in Romans 4 Fit into the Whole Narrative in Romans?**

Romans 4 is seen by many as the “example or test case” of Romans 3 on justification, but if we know the narrative substructure beneath the whole theological discourse, we will find Romans 4 fits into the narrative structure of the whole letter. It cannot be reduced to an example of a doctrine. In Romans 1, Paul frequently refers to the creation narrative when he talks about human’s deviation in sins and the evidence of God’s revelation in the universe. Although many scholars see no narrative substructure in Romans, many of them would agree that Romans 1 is closely associated with the creation story in Genesis 1. Then, the narrative of the fall can be found in Paul’s referring to Adam’s story in Romans 5 and the description of the sinful behaviors in Romans 1-3. As a book to explain the gospel, the salvation narrative is present in every chapter. Wright summarizes chapters 3-8 as a narrative of a new exodus and Abraham’s offspring inheriting the world:

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42 I think Moo’s reference to the theme of Romans as “gospel” is better and more inclusive than referring to it as justification of God’s righteousness. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 29.
In Romans 4:13, Paul declares that God’s promise to Abraham and his family was that they should inherit the world....Paul uses this language to describe his larger vision, of the whole world as the inheritance of Abraham’s Jewish-plus-gentile children. Their inheritance will be granted when all of creation experiences its exodus from slavery and shares the freedom of the glory of God’s children (Romans 8:18-25). Romans 8 thus explains what Romans 4 had promised....And Abraham’s family, now defined in terms of Jesus’ messianic death and resurrection, are therefore on their way to inheriting the promise and must not think of going “back to Egypt”, so to speak (Romans 8:12-17). Genesis 15 which Paul expounds in Romans 4, always envisaged Abraham’s family passing through slavery to inheritance (Genesis 15:13-21). Romans 5-8, telling the story of how that was achieved, is thus far more tightly integrated into the flow of the letter than is normally supposed.

Wright not only explicate the connection between 3-4 and 5-8, he also see Romans in the bigger mega-narrative starting from Genesis. Abraham, Israel, and Jesus are the primary characters in this narrative. God promises to Abraham that his offspring will inherit the world and bless the nations. According to God’s promise the Israelites went down to Egypt and left there at the set time. Later, the Israelites failed. They did not live up to this promise. At the right time, Jesus came, went down to death, and was raised from the dead. He not only fulfills God’s promise to Abraham, but also restores the whole creation that is contaminated by Adam’s fall. Anyone that belongs to him will inherit the new world with him. In the whole letter Abraham appears nine times with seven times in chapter 4. Abraham is one of the most important characters in the salvation narrative, so we cannot see him just as an example of the justification. God’s promise is also the main background of Israel’s and Jesus’ narrative. In verse 13, when Paul talks that God’s promise of Abraham’s offspring will inherit the world, he surely is talking about not the fallen and sinful world in chapters 1-3, but the redeemed and restored world in 8:18-25. For the end of the salvation narrative, Paul also refers to the narrative of judgment and consummation in 8:18; 11:25-26; 14:11-1; and 16:20. Under the background of the grand narrative of creation, fall, redemption and

consummation, we find the narrative in Romans 4 to be an indispensable part of the redemption narrative. It is God’s promise to Abraham that links the redemption narrative together.

Conclusion

With the new method we have used, we find the characters, events, and the causal and temporal relationship of them in Romans 4. We also find that Paul used third person to narrate the story of Abraham, and Jesus’ story, but he used first person to narrate the recipients’ and his story of justification by faith. We can conclude that though Romans 4 seemingly appears to be a theological argument, the narrative substructure under it still can be found. Talking about the narrative approach, R. N. Longenecker says: “However evaluated with regard to these particular matters, the importance of a narrative approach for the study of Paul’s letters has become increasingly evident.” Actually, it helps to know more about Paul’s way of thinking in the whole letter. The narrative substructure acts like the bones to support and govern the flow of the thinking. Instead of moving from one theological point of the argument to another to build a systematic theology, Paul is moving within the narrative, and the narrative behind the text decides the flow of the argument. In the whole letter, he bases his argument on the structure of the narrative of creation, fall, salvation, restoration, and consummation. Instead of being an example of the doctrine of justification, Romans 4 is the key point of explaining the promise of Abraham to inherit and bless the world within the narrative of salvation. Jesus came according to that promise, and he also fulfills the whole promise. Romans 3-8 (or even the whole letter) weave together to unfold the salvation narrative: what God has done in Jesus has undone what Adam did, and God is restoring the fallen world into a renewed world in Christ with His people through His promise.

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Last Update: December 2017