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Editorial Office & Subscription Services:
 SBTS Box 832
 2825 Lexington Rd.
 Louisville, KY 40280
 (800) 626-5525, x4413
Editorial E-Mail: journaloffice@sbts.edu

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Editorial: Reading and Applying the Book of Exodus Today

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

As the old adage goes, the three rules of real estate are summed up in three words: location, location, location. By analogy, we can say that the three rules of biblical hermeneutics are also summed up in three words: context, context, context. To read and apply the Bible correctly, it is crucial that we always ask ourselves: What is the context of this text?

But more needs to be said. In asking, “What is the context of this text?” it is also important to remind ourselves that correct biblical interpretation cannot simply begin and end with a text’s immediate context, as important as that is. Given the fact that Scripture, like God’s plan of redemption, has not come to us all at once, but, instead, has progressively come over time, we must learn to read every biblical text in light of the entire canon of Scripture. In other words, if we are going to interpret Scripture correctly and not simply read biblical books in an isolated fashion, we must learn to read the “parts” in terms of the “whole” and vice versa, otherwise we will fail to interpret Scripture accurately.

In contemporary idiom, the discipline which best helps us read Scripture in its overall context is “biblical theology.” At its heart, biblical theology is the discipline which seeks to understand the whole Bible by carefully interpreting biblical texts in light of the entire canon, taking into consideration the progressive nature of God’s redemptive plan and revelation of himself through human authors. That is

why biblical theology, rightly understood, seeks to examine the unfolding nature of God’s plan as it thinks through the relationship between *before* and *after* in God’s plan, along the Bible’s own storyline. In this light, as we read Scripture, it is helpful to think of interpreting biblical books according to three horizons: textual, epochal, and canonical.

The textual horizon involves reading texts in light of their immediate context, which is normally associated with grammatical-historical exegesis. The epochal horizon goes one step further and seeks to think through where the text is placed in the unfolding plan of God. Lastly, the canonical horizon reads the book in light of the fullness of revelation that has now come in Christ. At the canonical level, we must pay careful attention to how the storyline of Scripture develops and how the particular book we are reading fits into the larger canonical presentation. Why is this important to stress? For this simple reason: unless we learn to read Scripture this way we will not only read Scripture as merely a series of unconnected segments without an overall plan, purpose, and goal, which will simply lead us to misunderstand the Bible and undercut the glory of our Lord Jesus, we will also fail to understand the divine intention of the text.

With all of this in mind, this edition of *SBJT* is devoted to understanding better the book of Exodus. Our primary goal is to help our readers interpret this impor-

tant book both in its immediate context as well as its place in the overall plan of God. It goes without saying that the book of Exodus is an important book in the Bible's overall storyline. In many ways it is a hinge book that not only introduces us to the nation of Israel, but it does so by placing them within the stream of God's glorious work of creation, the disastrous effects of the Fall, and God's gracious purposes of redemption for this world centered in the promises given to Abraham of a great name, seed, and land (Gen 12:1-3). Abraham, as presented in Genesis, is crucial since he is the one who is the means by which God will reverse the effects of sin and judgment begun in Genesis 3, and restore us and creation to its rightful role and purpose. As a result of the disobedience of Adam—our covenantal head—sin and death have entered God's good world. But thankfully, God has chosen not to leave us to ourselves. He has graciously promised that his purposes for creation and the human race will continue through his provision of a Redeemer, the seed of the woman, to bring us back to him and ultimately to restore the old creation. This promise, first given to Noah, is passed on through Abraham, by God's own gracious calling and election of him. Through Abraham, and his seed, blessing will come to the nations. In this way, Abraham emerges within Genesis as the answer to the plight of all humankind. But it is not only in Abraham that God's promises are realized, it is also in his progeny, Isaac, Jacob, and the nation of Israel. In fact, God's calling and establishing his covenant with Israel—that which is unpacked for us in the book of Exodus—is in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and his seed (see Exod 3:6). God did not set his love on Israel because

they were better or more numerous than the nations (Deut 7:7). Neither was it for their righteousness that they were given the land of Canaan. The basis for God's calling of Israel was not to be found in them but in God's sovereign choice and covenant loyalty to Abraham (Exod 19:4; Deut 7:8). Israel, then, which serves as a kind of new Adam, will be the means by which God will bring about a resolution of the sin and death caused by the first Adam. Israel, as a nation, is the agent and means God will use to achieve the wider purposes of the Abrahamic covenant that will ultimately lead us to Christ.

Now it is in the book of Exodus that this storyline of Genesis is unpacked and developed. To understand this book aright is to understand more of God's unfolding drama of redemption, and ultimately to learn better where we fit into that plan, now that Christ has come. It is in this book, with the establishment of Israel in the exodus and the inauguration of the old covenant, that many of the typological structures and building blocks of God's redemptive plan are laid out before us—e.g., priesthood, sacrifice, tabernacle, etc.—which, as redemptive history unfolds, ultimately point beyond themselves to the coming of our Lord.

In a variety of ways, all of our articles are attempting to help us understand Exodus afresh. Some articles are seeking to place the book within its larger historical context, while others are laying out the overall theology of the book, but all of the articles combined have the goal of enabling Christians today better to read and apply Exodus for the good of the church, and for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is my prayer that this edition of *SBJT* will lead to that end.

Exodus and Biblical Theology: On Moving into the Neighborhood with a New Name

Stephen G. Dempster

Stephen G. Dempster is Professor of Religious Studies and Stuart E. Murray Chair of Christian Studies at Atlantic Baptist University in New Brunswick, Canada, where he teaches Old Testament, Ancient Near Eastern History, and Hebrew. He has published a number of scholarly articles and is the author of *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (InterVarsity, 2003) in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series.

“To know God’s name is to know his purpose for all mankind from the beginning to the end.”¹

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14a, *The Message*).

Introduction: The Importance of the Exodus

The story of the Exodus is the central salvation event in the Old Testament. The account of the liberation of a band of Hebrew slaves from horrific oppression in Egypt is the event that shaped virtually everything in the biblical imagination. One scholar remarks, “There are over 120 explicit Old Testament references to the Exodus in law, narrative, prophecy and psalm, and it is difficult to exaggerate its importance.”² Another writes, “This act of God, the leading of Israel out of Egypt—from Israel’s point of view, the march out of Egypt, the Exodus, is the determinative event in Israel’s history for all time to come.”³ In many ways it provided the ground floor of that imagination for the majority of ancient Israelites, for thinking not only about faith but history, the future, nationhood, law, and ethics. It shaped the essential grammar that articulated Israel’s language of experience. “To go down” would often have negative connotations while “to go up” had positive associations. The first book of the Hebrew Bible presents the descent into Egypt (Gen 37-50).⁴ The last word of

that Bible is the verb “to go up” (2 Chron 36:23).⁵ A short Israelite creed could be reduced in essentials to the words: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage” (Exod 20:1). This language could even be used to interpret Abraham’s much earlier departure from Mesopotamia (Gen 15:6). Because Yahweh was the God of the Exodus, this meant that he must have been the God who brought up Abraham from Ur, and even returned Jacob from Haran.⁶ Similarly, Exodus language becomes the grammar used to express future salvation. Whether it is Hosea speaking of Israel going up from the land (Hos 1:11 [2:2 MT]), Isaiah of leading the people through the sea again (Isa 11:15), Micah of Yahweh leading an exodus of crippled and outcasts (Mic 4:6-7), Jeremiah of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31-34.), the Exodus language of salvation is the way Israel construed its understanding of the future. Moreover, the language of worship and praise begun on the other side of the Red Sea by Miriam and Moses lived on many generations later in Israel’s worship at the sanctuary. Israel was never to forget that it was a redeemed people, and that their God was the one who split the sea (Ps 66:6; 74:13-14; 77:16-20; 78:13, 53; 106:9-11, 22; 114:3, 5; 136:13-15).⁷ This gave them hope in time of despair and praise in time of celebration.

Culturally, the Exodus changed how

Israel even thought about time. Its new year began on the note of a celebration of the divine presence (Exod 40:17) and Exodus liberation (Exod 12:6). From this temporal orientation, other major celebrations were marked, the Feast of Unleavened Bread following Passover (Exod 12:16-20); The Feast of Weeks coinciding with the giving of the Law at Sinai, fifty days after Passover (Exod 19:1; 23:16); and the Feast of Booths, remembering the time in the wilderness (Lev 23:40-43). Even the weekly orientation became based on Exodus salvation, its weekly relief from work becoming a way of institutionalizing the Exodus salvation for Israelites, foreign residents, animals, and even land (Deut 5:12-15). The Exodus became the first event that was used to date the construction of Israel's Solomonic temple; the first record of era dating begins with the Exodus (1 Kgs 6:1). Israel's legal traditions and institutions also have Exodus origins. The Exodus was viewed as the great indicative that provided the basis for the great imperative: "I am Yahweh your God who brought you up from Egypt, the house of bondage" (indicative). Therefore, "have no other gods before me" (imperative). Ethics and Law were rooted in salvation from oppression, which in turn was rooted in the character of God. The Exodus was nothing less than one of the events that shaped ancient Israel's worldview, and made it essentially a foreigner in the ancient world.⁸ Finally, the great event marked the presence of God in a new way in the world. Astonishingly, the goal of the Exodus was that the great Creator and Redeemer of his people would come and live with them, as it were, "move permanently into their neighborhood,"⁹ and bring a bit of heaven to earth.¹⁰ The book of Exodus finishes with the powerful

image of the glory of God completely filling the tabernacle, the first down payment of a future glory-filled earth in which God would be all in all (Exod 40:34). But all of these events are a consequence of the great revelation of the divine name to Moses, a name that summarized in a word God's purpose for mankind from beginning to end.¹¹

But it is not only Israelites and Jews whose worldview was shaped by the Exodus. Christians too inherited this new vision of the world. They had the same Bible as their Jewish counterparts. In the developing New Testament, Exodus language is pervasive. Herod's brutal murder of the infants in the district of Bethlehem echoes the slaughter of the Israelite newborns in Egypt (Matt 2:16-18). Jesus' descent into Egypt and exodus from it as a child mirrors early Israel's experience (Matt 2:13-15). His depiction as a new Moses giving his new commandments from the Mount is in both continuity and contrast with the old Moses at Sinai (Matthew 5-7).¹² His feeding of the crowds in the wilderness with bread shows that he is the ultimate manna come down from heaven (John 6:35). His last supper recalls the original Passover and his words of institution regarding the blood of the covenant deliberately recall Moses' words to the Israelites when sealing the Sinai covenant (Matt 26:28, cf. Exod 24:8). His entire life and ministry is viewed as the antitype of the tabernacle built at Sinai: The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood and we beheld his glory—not the old glory of the cloud filling the tent—but "the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, NIV; cf. Exod 34:5). Those who dwell in the midst of this tabernacle, leave with a face set on fire by the divine

presence, just like Moses (2 Cor 3; cf. Exod 34:29-35). In the apocalyptic scenario with which the Bible closes, the judgment that falls upon the world is essentially a great amplification of the plagues that afflicted Egypt (Revelation 8-18; 15-18.). This end-time judgment is followed by the most dramatic depiction of salvation in the entire Bible that brings to a final culmination the covenantal words first enunciated in Exodus:

I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea. I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband. I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: *“Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God* (Rev 21:1-3; cf. Exod 6:7, *The Message*).

Again all of this comes as a consequence of the revelation of the divine name, which comprehended in its laconic form the saving purpose of God from beginning to end. Fittingly, it is this name in its Greek form that is given to Jesus after the salvation that he has accomplished. And the neighborhood of Jesus has become the entire universe (Phil 2:9-11).¹³

So an understanding of the Exodus is absolutely critical for an understanding of an ancient Israelite and Christian worldview and essential for understanding and probing the theology of the Bible as it unfolds historically. Without this Exodus grammar it becomes virtually impossible to understand the language of the Bible.¹⁴ In order to understand this syntax more completely and become more fluent in the language of the Scripture, a closer look at this text is in order—a text in which the covenant name of God is first revealed.

Exodus and Interpretive Impasses

There are three hermeneutical “dead-ends” that need to be avoided in dealing with these stories: (1) Often, Old Testament theologies and history books about ancient Israel begin with the Exodus as the first of God’s mighty acts with Israel and then proceed to rehearse the other mighty acts: wilderness provision, conquest, kingship, and liberation from exile.¹⁵ In this view, it is as if Israel’s existence began in Egypt; and the Exodus was the pivotal event that not only created Israel but also wrenched it from its mythical past and started it on a historical trajectory.¹⁶ But this overlooks the fact that the Exodus story is part of a larger biblical narrative—it does not begin the biblical narrative but is the continuation of a narrative that precedes it. In other words, the story of Israel is part of a world Story, with cosmic implications.¹⁷ (2) The second impasse isolates the book from both its preceding and subsequent contexts, and thus it becomes a paradigm for how oppressed peoples can think about their plight and how to solve it,¹⁸ or becomes a devotional aid that helps individuals trust in God when going through difficult times.¹⁹ While there is much in this book that deals with oppression, to view the Exodus as simply a political manifesto or as a devotional guide is to ignore its larger context. That larger context shows that in many ways Israel needs far more than just a political and economic salvation or spiritual guidance. (3) A third error supposes that the book is nothing more than a fictitious statement of the past, that the events narrated in it are simply literary creations, or retrojections of later events in Israel’s life.²⁰ The claim that an ancient society whose entire worldview was shaped by such stories would intentionally have

fabricated them sounds very much like a retrojection of later western ideas into the biblical record. I cannot consider the evidence for such a position, but suffice it to say that theology and history do not have to be at odds with each other. The Exodus is theological historiography but this does not mean that it is not history. For an economic and political history of ancient Israel, the name of the Pharaoh of the Exodus would be important and the names of two Hebrew mid-wives would be unimportant, but for the biblical historian the reverse is the case.²¹ This does not mean that one is historically true and the other is not; it just indicates a different perspective. From a theological point of view, everything looks different.

The First Paragraph—The Story of Exodus in the Context of the Story of Scripture

Although the book of Exodus has its own literary integrity, it will not let the reader or hearer forget that it is part of an ongoing larger story. Its first paragraph begins with the conjunction “and,” which connects it with the previous book of Genesis.²² The content of the first paragraph of Exodus (1:1-7) recalls leading themes and vocabulary of the larger biblical story. The mention of the seventy members of Jacob’s family in Egypt recalls their descent in the previous Joseph story (Gen 46:8ff) and the seventy nations of the world in the great table of nations of Genesis 10. The fact that Jacob’s children all came from his “thigh,” recalls the broken and blessed Jacob,²³ who was renamed Israel at Peniel, the one who fought God and lived to tell about it (Exod 1:5; Gen 32). He was crippled but blessed: out of that crippled thigh had come a large family. The conclusion of the paragraph in which the family has mul-

tiplied prolifically and filled the country of Egypt echoes a number of important texts in Genesis: (1) God’s charge to the human race in Genesis 1 to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:26-28). (2) God’s promise to Abram of a numerous progeny that would eventually bless the world, reversing the curse and restoring the world to its pristine glory (Gen 12:1-3; 13:15-16; 15:4-5). The first promise to Abram is strategically placed (Gen 12:1-3), beginning a new national history of Israel (Gen 12-50) after the primal universal history (Gen 1-11), which chronicles a world under curse and judgment because of human rebellion and autonomy. Thus, it is clear that somehow Abram and his seed carry in their genes the secret of universal blessing. The fate of the universe is wrapped up with the faith obedience of this budding octogenarian and his virtual septuagenarian wife, who leave Ur on the dusty Mesopotamian roads on a journey to only God knows where (Gen 12:4-5).

Thus, as Exodus opens, we are introduced to a story that is part of a larger story, which is indeed the story of the world. A family of seventy individuals that have gone down to Egypt and who have multiplied prolifically have a mission to the world. They are part of a new creation, a creation that is going to bring about universal blessing to a world in dire need. But there are two other texts in the larger story that are extremely important and provide needed background to the Exodus story. Immediately after the curse on the world is introduced in Genesis, a promise is made of a woman’s seed that will crush the head of the seed of the Serpent, and essentially restore humanity and the world to its lost glory (Gen 3:15). This text assumes a struggle to the death between two opposing forces. Thus,

it is no accident that there is a constant focus on descendants in the narrative of Genesis, with patriarchal wives having barren wombs. Miraculously these barren wombs get blessed, which indicates that God is at work in the patriarchal families, overcoming one “inconceivable” obstacle after another with his divine intent to bless the world. But it is implied that there will be many more obstacles to overcome. Imbedded in Abram’s blessing is the point that there will be those who will seek to destroy him and that some day his seed will possess the gates of his enemies (Gen 12:2; 22:17). Thus, as Exodus opens with a world of blessing for the Israelites, there are ominous clouds on the horizon.

The clouds become more ominous when another text in Genesis is considered. During a covenant making ceremony, God promises Abram the land of Canaan but the actual procurement of the land will be delayed 400 years (Gen 15:9-17). During that time his progeny will endure oppression in a foreign land for a long time, after which their oppressors would be judged and his family would return to the land of promise. The prediction is confirmed by a theophany of fire moving through a gauntlet of ritually slaughtered animals, the most powerful self-curse imaginable if the promise was broken. Thus, as one considers the opening paragraph of Exodus, one finds oneself in the literary calm before the storm.

Exodus—The Larger Structure: Deliverance, Covenant, Presence²⁴

The rest of the book of Exodus itself can be divided into three major sections. The first section presents the Egyptian storm breaking in all of its power upon the nascent nation of Israel. This is found in chapters 1:1-15:21. The storm breaks

by chapter 15 in which Israel has passed through the tempest and reached the other side in the sunlight of a new day—a day of *deliverance*. The narrative prose signals this climax by being transformed into poetry to celebrate the divine deliverance (15:1-18). The Song at the Sea is Israel’s new song of celebration and it is a salvation song concluding with the people dwelling with God on his holy mountain (15:17). The next division leads to this mountain of God, Sinai, where God makes a new *covenant* with the nation with universal implications (15:22-24:18). This covenant itself puts the very words of God in unmediated form at the very literary heart of the book of Exodus (20:1-17). These ten words thundering from Sinai precipitate a new storm in which Israel cannot endure the immediate presence of God. The thunder and lightning and earthquake evoked by the divine presence terrify the Israelites. The covenant resolves this difficulty with sacrifice and the appointment of Moses as a mediator of the divine word. After the covenant is ratified, this section concludes with representatives of the nation communing with God on his holy mountain, even experiencing a divine vision during a festal meal (24:9-10). The final division (25:1-40:38) establishes the theme of the divine *presence* taking up residence with the people as their king, as it details the instructions for building a tabernacle being given to Moses on the mountain (25-31) and their implementation by the people (35-40) followed by the descent of the divine presence from the mountain into the tent. But this long section is not without its own storm either (32-34). The covenant is barely ratified when it is broken by the people. The people may be out of Egypt but Egypt remains in their heart. When God threatens annihila-

tion, Moses intercedes successfully and the covenant is renewed. It is because of Mosaic mediation and divine mercy that Exodus can close on a note of the divine presence descending from the mountain and filling the tabernacle and dwelling with the people. Heaven has “touched down” on planet earth, the anticipation of a day when complete union will eventually occur.

It is during the three storms that some of the most profound theology found in the entire Bible occurs—the revelation and identity of the nature of God through his name. First there is the revelation of the divine name in which the name “Yahweh” is first revealed during the Egyptian storm, then during the storm at Sinai, the holiness of that name is discovered and its consequences (20:1-18) and finally during that third storm provoked by the sin of Israel, the meaning of that name is unpacked in unparalleled fashion in the Old Testament with profound implications for the history of Israel and the world (34:5-6). The significance of the revelation of the divine name for biblical theology cannot be exaggerated, for as Brevard Childs has remarked, “To know God’s name is to know his purpose for all mankind from the beginning to the end.”²⁵

(1) Deliverance (Exodus 1:1-15:21)

The Egyptian storm begins after the book’s introduction (1:1-7) with the announcement that there is a new Egyptian dynasty that does not remember the blessing that the Israelites brought to Egypt (1:8). This new dynasty is afraid that the burgeoning Israelite population will become a political and military threat. In fact verse 9 is significant for being the first place in the Bible that Jacob’s family is regarded as a nation (a people), a trib-

ute to the divine blessing. But oppressive measures are taken to counteract this blessing and reduce the population by forcing them to build monumental construction projects for the regime. Those measures are counter-productive as the divine blessing only increases (1:12). The regime then resorts to clandestine genocide but when this policy fails because of civil disobedience on the part of Hebrew midwives, the sinister genocidal policy comes out in the open: every newborn Hebrew male is to be thrown into the Nile (1:22).

In this opening chapter the cosmic struggle between the seed of the Serpent and the seed of the woman becomes explicit. The Serpent wishes to destroy, oppress, enslave, and prevent divine blessing. This struggle remains hidden in the world’s story but occasionally comes to light during times of great crisis, such as when the murder of all but one of the Davidic king’s family by Jezebel’s daughter seems to jeopardize the Davidic covenant (2 Kgs 11:1), or when the Jews are threatened with extinction in the book of Esther, or when Herod’s forces try to murder the baby Jesus (Matt 2:16-18) or when a great dragon tries to kill the Messianic newborn of a woman, the woman herself, and the rest of her offspring (Revelation 12). It is clear that that the serpent receives a fatal blow from that Messianic son’s death and resurrection, but it does not experience its complete demise until believers put it under foot and the new heaven and new earth arrive, when death is abolished forever.

In the midst of the horrific genocide in Egypt, a child is born that is preserved from the holocaust. Moses is saved from the water and will eventually save his people from the water.²⁶ Again women

play a part in this cosmic struggle, giving birth to the boy (Jochebed), preserving the boy (Miriam), saving the boy (Egyptian princess), nursing the boy (Jochebed), and raising the boy in an Egyptian court (princess). Years later when the young prince tries to take things into his own hands by ending the oppression of a particular Hebrew slave through killing an Egyptian, he is forced to flee into the desert. There he “saves” some Midianite women from oppression (2:17). Here is the first reference to the theologically “loaded” verb “to save” being used in the Bible, a presage of Moses’ later role for Israel.

During Moses’ exile, the oppression of his people in Egypt continues and this leads to the first explicit note by the narrator that the time of deliverance is at hand. God has not forgotten his covenant of blessing with the patriarchs (and its universal implications): “The Israelites groaned as a result of their bondage and cried out. Their cry from their bondage ascended to *God*. *God* heard their groaning. *God* remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *God* saw the children of Israel. *God* knew” (2:23b-25). By repeating the noun “God” as the main actor in this brief paragraph, the narrator indicates that the One who has been lurking in the background during the events of the opening chapters of Exodus is about to take center stage. The covenant has not been forgotten.

Thus chapter 3 begins with Moses shepherding a flock near the mountain of God and experiencing a theophany in the fiery bush, from which is issued a call to deliver God’s people from Egypt. When Moses pleads inability, God assures him of the divine presence: I am/will be with you (3:12; אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ). Moses then asks what he should say to the people.

He is told to tell them that the God of their fathers has sent for them. This is not enough for the reluctant emissary, so he asks for the divine name and is given it: “I am/will be who I am/will be” (3:14; אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה). Clearly this is a further amplification and intensification of the assurance of the divine presence that Moses has already received. The point is that God’s name means that he is the one who truly is there for his people, one who is committed to his covenant and his plan for the world. Just as he has promised to be with Moses to deliver, He will “move into their neighborhood” so to speak and deliver them! The rest of the chapter illustrates this. God is going to bring the people up from Egypt and settle them in a land of milk and honey (3:16-17).

Because the divine name is a verb conjugated in the first person, it is changed to the third person (Yahweh, “he is/will be”) when spoken by Israelites. In another text, God mentions the significance of this revelation in order to assure Moses, whose initial attempts to lead out of Egypt have met with failure. This new name means nothing less than a new chapter in the history of God’s relationship with his people.²⁷ The meaning of the name is unpacked further to assure Moses:

God spoke to Moses, “*I am Yahweh*. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by (the name) El-Shaddai. But (by the name) *Yahweh* I was not known unto them. I have both established my covenant with them to give to them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojourning, and heard the groaning of the Israelites who have been oppressed by the Egyptians. I have remembered my covenant. Therefore tell the Israelites, *I am Yahweh*: I will bring you out from under the heavy burdens of the Egyptians. I will deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with outstretched arm and with

great acts of judgement. I will take you to me for a people. I will be to you for God. *You will know that I am Yahweh your God who delivers you from the burdens of Egypt.* I will bring you to a land which I promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I will give it you as an inheritance. *I am Yahweh* (6:2-8, RSV).²⁸

The presentation formula “I am Yahweh” begins and ends this pivotal speech.²⁹ To hear the name “Yahweh” means a new state of affairs for the Israelites (2-3). Yahweh is committed to the covenant. Then this means that Yahweh is going to act to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage with great power, and live with them in covenant relationship. Finally, this will result in the gift of the land as a fulfillment of the promise to the fathers. This passage further elucidates the earlier quote: “to know God’s name is to know his purpose for mankind from beginning to end.” Here it means clearly the salvation and flourishing of the people of God, who will live in harmony with their Creator and Savior.

Coinciding with a declaration of the identity of God to the Israelites is a declaration of the identity of Israel. They are Yahweh’s special people, to whom he is committed to help and save. But they can also be called Yahweh’s firstborn son (4:22). The idea of a firstborn son is a child who has a special relationship to the father, one who is in a privileged position of authority and intimacy (cf. Deut 21:15-17).

As the narrative develops, Moses confronts Pharaoh with the ultimatum to let Yahweh’s people go. Pharaoh retorts, “Who is Yahweh that I should listen to him to let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh and I certainly will not release Israel” (5:2).³⁰ The rest of the plague narratives are the answer to his question. Pharaoh,

Egypt, and the rest of the world receive an education in what Yahweh’s name means.³¹ He will do anything, including taking Egypt apart piece by piece, to bring about the salvation of his people. He is moving into the Egyptian neighborhood, and it will never be the same!

- The Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh when I stretch out my hand over Egypt and bring up the Israelites from their midst (7:5).
- By this you will know that I am Yahweh when I strike the waters of the Nile with the rod in my hand and they turn to blood! (7:17).
- So that you may know that there is no one like Yahweh our God, the frogs will depart from you and from your houses and from your servants and from your people (8:10-11 [MT 8:6-7]).
- I will distinguish in that day the land of Goshen (from the rest of Egypt) where my people live so that there will be no locusts there so that you may know that I am Yahweh in the midst of the land (8:22 [MT 8:18]).
- That you might know that there is no God like me in all the earth ... for I have appointed you [Pharaoh] to show you my power in order to declare my name in all the earth (9:14-16).
- When I spread out my hands to Yahweh, the thundering will cease that you might know that the earth belongs to Yahweh (9:29).
- In order that you will declare in the ears of your children and grandchildren how I treated the Egyptians and I placed my signs in their midst and you will know that I am Yahweh (10:2).
- In the middle of the night I will go out in the middle of Egypt and every first born will die ... so that you may know that Yahweh distinguishes between Egypt and Israel (11:4-7).

Clearly all these texts serve to clarify powerfully the meaning of Yahweh’s

name. He is the Creator God, the owner of all the earth, who is committed to his covenant with his distinctive people. The plagues and Pharaoh's intransigence become a means by which the entire world will learn about Yahweh's reputation and his commitment to his people.

The plagues culminate in the Passover event, which results in the death of the firstborn throughout Egypt. Israelites are spared this catastrophe when they smear the blood of a firstborn slaughtered goat or lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their dwellings. This is the second time in the larger storyline that a firstborn son is spared by the spilling of sacrificial blood (cf. Genesis 22). The narrative awaits a time when such a son will not be so fortunate, but whose spilled blood will save the world, not just a nation.

The importance of the Passover event in the text is emphasized. It forms the climax of the plagues. The previous nine catastrophes are divided into a trio of triads, each increasing in severity. But before the climactic Passover event occurs, the suspense is heightened by a protracted delay in which the longest chapter in Exodus presents the stipulations for the Passover (12:1-28). As Fox observes, "the narrator leaves the realm of storytelling and enters that of ritual."³²

When the hammer blows of judgment finally fall on Egypt, Israel experiences liberation, but the euphoria of the liberation is short lived. The Egyptians change their minds about liberating their captives and pursue them in the desert. And it is at the Reed Sea that the Egyptian army finally comes to know Yahweh, as Pharaoh and his soldiers experience a watery grave, while Yahweh's firstborn son sings a salvation song on the other side of the shore (14:4, 14), having passed through on

dry ground. The salvation song celebrates Yahweh's power and his wondrous name. Ten times the name is used in this song, one of which is the first short form, "Yah," recorded in Scripture. It is clear why. Yahweh has no equal: He has cast horse and rider into the sea (15:1.4); he is a man of war (15:3); his right hand has shattered the enemy (15:6); the blast of his anger consumed them like chaff (15:7); the waters drew back from his breath and became like a wall (15:8); the depths congealed in the heart of the sea (15:8). Consequently, Yahweh is incomparable among the gods. And thus the first part of Exodus comes to an end. Yahweh has been true to his name. He has *delivered* his people and promises to bring them and plant them in the mountain of his inheritance, where he will live with them as their great king forever!

(2) Covenant (Exodus 15:22-24:18)

The next few chapters begin on a negative note as Yahweh leads his people to the mountain of Sinai, where he first appeared to Moses. The desert journey to Mount Sinai is not marked by the euphoria of the Exodus but by grumbling and complaining because of lack of water (15:22-27; 17:1-7) and food (16). An ambush by Amalekite raiders does not help the languishing spirits (17:8-16), but Israel learns that God can provide in the desert journey just as he had provided at the Sea. Yahweh is his name. Just before the people's arrival at the mountain of fire, Moses is reunited with his family, thus recalling Moses' family situation before his call at the burning bush. The life of Moses is being reenacted on a larger scale.³³

At Sinai, the burning bush at the foot of the mountain now becomes an entire mountain of smoke as God appears before

the people in a fiery storm, announcing to them that he has delivered them from Egypt and brought them to himself (19:1-4). Here in this statement is an anticipated goal of the covenant that God and his people would be together. For the first time in the biblical story, there is a nation encountering the Creator, who cares passionately for them. The little family of Abraham and Sarah through whom universal blessing was promised has now become a great nation whom God directly addresses. This encounter at Sinai will take up the rest of the book of Exodus, all of the book of Leviticus and a good portion of the book of Numbers. In order to see this in perspective, it should be noted that in the larger complex of the Torah which comprises the first five books of the Bible, there are sixty-eight chapters before Sinai (Genesis 1 – Exodus 18) and fifty-nine chapters after it (Numbers 11 – Deuteronomy 34), while the Sinai context accounts for fifty-eight chapters (Exodus 19 – Numbers 10)! Or to put it in chronological terms, the narrative before Sinai comprises thousands of years, the narrative after Sinai to the border of Canaan comprises forty years, while the Sinai material comprises approximately ten months!

While this encounter is absolutely central to the biblical story,³⁴ it is clearly a further development of the covenant with the patriarchs, who were elected not just so that they and their families would be blessed with a private relationship with God but that this blessing might flow through them to the whole world.³⁵

At the beginning of Israel's history, then, is the fundamental fact that it has been made for the benefit of the world. Israel's calling is fundamentally missiological, its purpose for existence the restoration of the

world to its pre-Edenic state. Genesis 12:1-3 is thus "the aetiology of all Israelite aetiologies" showing that "the ultimate purpose of redemption which God will bring about in Israel is that of bridging the gulf between God and the entire human race."³⁶

Now the story has moved to another level: the family has become a nation, delivered from incredible opposition and oppression, has had the Creator's heart disclosed to them in the gift of His name, and now stands before Him on Mount Sinai. Israel is presented with the covenant in the following words:

Now, if you truly obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be to me a special treasure out of all the peoples of the earth, because all the earth belongs to me. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (19:5-6).

This text stresses that obedience to the covenant will lead to a unique relation to Yahweh and a unique relation to the rest of the nations. On the one hand Israel will become Yahweh's special treasure, having a special valued relationship to Yahweh out of all the peoples of the earth. This word "special treasure" means a personal article of movable property with an immense value. Thus, David donates a valuable personal treasure to the temple (1 Chron 29:3). Such a valuable treasure is virtually the prerogative of the wealthy—kings (Ecc. 2:8). Israel will become such a treasure to Yahweh—it will become his very own (cf. Ps 135:4).

If these verbal analogies may help one explain what this term means, a conceptual parallel in the general context is particularly useful. When the regulations for the high priest are made, who would represent the people of Israel, he is required to wear a breastplate upon

which are twelve gem stones signifying the twelve tribes. He had to wear these over his heart as a cherished possession when he came before God. In a very real sense these precious gems were his “special treasure.”

Thus, Israel will be Yahweh’s personal treasure taken out of all the peoples of the earth “because all the earth belongs to me.” This explanatory clause emphasizes this contrast between Israel and the nations and the right of Yahweh to make Israel his treasure since he is the owner of the whole world. But the text continues to explain what Yahweh is up to with his choice of Israel. Israel is to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. This concluding part makes clear Israel’s special relationship to the rest of the nations. As a priest represents the people before God and then represents God to the people, Israel is to do the same. Israel is called to be a community of priests whose congregation is nothing less than the globe. The end of the covenant is not Israel’s own salvation but the inclusion of the nations since “all the earth belongs to me.”³⁷ The expression “holy nation” underscores the twofold character of Israel: it is set apart to God, and it is visible as such to the rest of the world. This word becomes an important leitmotif of the Sinai covenant. But the point should not be lost. It is a holy life lived in community that will display God’s name to the world. Israel will essentially be a “shop window” of God to the world.³⁸ In fact if the name of Yahweh signifies

that the God of biblical revelation “is not like any other. And his strangeness is in this. He is with his people. He is for his people. His goodness is not in his great transcendental power nor in his majestic remoteness nor in his demanding tough-

ness but in his readiness to be with and for his people”³⁹

then this means that Yahweh is also committed to the world, and Israel is his instrument to reach it!⁴⁰

Israel quickly agrees to the covenant, once here and twice when it is ratified in chapter 24 (19:8; 24:3, 7). This paves the way for the announcement of the covenant obligations, the content of the promised obedience. When Israel is properly prepared, the divine voice speaks from Sinai directly in their hearing, again a unique occurrence in the larger story of the Bible.

This revelation emphasizes again the divine name. The divine voice begins on the note of the indicative and not the imperative, and it is an indicative of mercy: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (20:1). As Rendtorff remarks, “Here God’s self presentation is expanded by a relative clause in which God’s fundamental saving act towards Israel in leading them out of Egypt is effectively a further definition of the name.”⁴¹

Yahweh is fundamentally the God who is Israel’s God, who responded to their cry and who delivered them from their dismal, desperate plight. It is interesting that this God who brought Israel out of Egypt is the subject of at least six verbs of action in the Exodus narrative, and these key active verbs have to do with strength exercised to rescue his people from forms of death.⁴² Through the imperatives that follow, there is the concern that his people be committed to him with absolute single-hearted loyalty, since he is their God. There is the concern that they be committed to this truth and not live in a world of illusion and fantasy, nor to identify God with his creation but to honor above all his name—

his personal reputation. They are to model God in time by alternating activity and rest. Their weekly pattern relives God's primal pattern at the beginning of time, and thus, there is a concern for *imitatio Dei*. Moreover, their horizontal relationships among each other would be a further expression of this *imitatio Dei* and, thus, an expression of the divine name. Parents, who have mediated the Creator's gift of blessing in giving human life, should be treated with commensurate respect and reverence. Moreover, children, who have received that gift of life, should have that life protected. Those who co-create together should have their deep human bond guarded; respect for persons is to generate respect for their property and also their reputation. Finally, this community is to be a community that does not seek to covet, lust, and possess but, by implication, to give, respect, and love.

This may be regarded as Israel's national constitution—her Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or her Declaration of Dependence. When these commands are worked out in specific applications in an agrarian community, a fundamental insight into the divine is shown. In other words, although God has no image in heaven and on earth, he wishes to represent himself through the model of his people—they image him—this is how God is to be known through the world. The invisible God is to be made visible through the actions by a people that are “up close and personal” to him.

The impact of this revelation absolutely shocks Israel, as the people have been terrified since each “word” resounds with the force of a thunderclap. They cannot endure the storm created by the divine presence in their midst and ask for relief by having Moses relay the divine words

to them after this. Moses then receives an additional revelation oftentimes called the Book of the Covenant (20:22-23:33), which is an expression of the way the previous “ten words” are to be worked out in practice in a particular historical community. If the ten words are the legal policy, the book is the procedure.⁴³ In the introduction to this book, there is focus on proper worship. Even the most precious metals, silver and gold, are banned from representing the divine presence, and the place where his name is to be invoked cannot be defiled by an instrument of violence (sword) or the possibility of sexual immodesty (nakedness) (20:24-26). The altar is to be made from rough, unhewn stones, and a ramp must be made instead of a stairway for the approach of the priest, lest he expose himself.

A complete analysis of the laws of the Book of the Covenant is impossible here but two points are worthy of note. It is not without significance that the first laws recorded in chapter 21 are intended to provide relief from slavery.⁴⁴ The law of manumission is important because the revelation of the divine name was intended to transform Israelite society. It had once been a band of slaves, but Yahweh had liberated them, and this liberation and redemption was to be institutionalized within their social structure. The importance of this freedom can be seen by the fact that a slave who refuses freedom is to have his ear branded. “The ear which heard at Sinai: ‘You are my servants’ (Lev. 25:42), but nevertheless preferred subjection to men rather than God deserves to be pierced.”⁴⁵

But secondly the motivations added to many of the social laws reveal the values of their covenant Lord. They are to look after the stranger because they were

once strangers in Egypt and their God looked after them—in other words they are to “institutionalize the Exodus” and make the Exodus event a key part of their social welfare strategy.⁴⁶ Refugees must not be oppressed because the Israelites once had the same status in Egypt (23:9). Widows and orphans are similarly not to be oppressed because God will hear their crying out as he heard the crying out of his people under Egyptian oppression (22:20-23). A garment used as collateral for a loan must be returned to the debtor at night since, if it is not, he will cry unto God at night and God will hear his cry “for I am gracious” (20:25-26). Criminals must be punished and the innocent vindicated because this is what God does (23:7). Bribes must not be given since they pervert justice that is against the character of Yahweh (23:8); the sabbatical year will be kept in order that the poor might eat freely during this time, and the Sabbath must be observed for the relief of the hired hands and animals (23:11-12). These motivations clearly display the fundamental intent of these laws and their ideals. They might be summarized as based on the divine character: “I am gracious,” which is directly related to the name Yahweh, and by implication should result in a transformed society by his own treasured people.

Chapter 24 presents the ratification of the covenant in a unique rite. Moses delivers the stipulations of the Book of the Covenant to the people and calls them to obedience. Now having heard the content of their promise to obey and having Moses as a mediator, the people still wholeheartedly agree to obey the stipulations. Sacrifices are offered, and Moses takes half of the blood and spills it on the altar, which represents God. He

then takes the other half, which he has put in bowls, and reads again the stipulations to the people, who then affirm their obedience. At that point, Moses announces that the blood in the bowls is the blood of the covenant that Yahweh has made with the people, and then he sprinkles it over the people. The covenant is ratified and key representatives of Israel bring everything to a climax by ascending the mountain where they sit down and dine at a banquet hosted by Yahweh, without any fear. They are even granted a divine vision. As the blood of the Passover rite protected them from danger, the blood of the covenant rite gives them access to the divine presence without trepidation. The earlier fear has been replaced by ecstatic vision.

By this rite the entire nation enters into a covenant with Yahweh and is consecrated to priestly service. When a formal priesthood is later established in Israel, the members of the priesthood are consecrated to their office by the sacrifice of an animal and some of its blood is sprinkled on the altar and then on the priest’s right ear, right thumb, and right big toe (29:14ff). This allows him to be prepared to serve a holy God and to mediate the divine presence to the community, without in any way being harmed. The blood on these body parts indicates a complete cleansing and removal of sin, which allows access to the divine presence.⁴⁷

Thus, it would seem that this rite is a bond that unites Israel and God, as the blood is sprinkled on the altar and the people. They are now united in blood because of God’s election of them and their pledge of obedience. Israel is now consecrated to its role of priesthood for the nations. It has accepted its task, and now can experience full fellowship with God as indicated by the communal meal of the

elders with God. The pledge of obedience and the shedding of blood have made this possible.

The “blood of the covenant” is implied by the term “to cut a covenant,” which reflects the origins of a ritual. It probably means the resulting blood from “cutting” apart the bodies of sacrificial animals, which is then used to bind the two parties in a blood oath. In other words, this is a graphic symbol of self-curse in the event that the covenant is violated. The stipulations will be kept—or else!⁴⁸

Thus, the second section of the book of Exodus comes to an end on another note of euphoria and elation. Israel has been delivered from oppression to be led to the mountain of God where they might live with him in harmony and shalom under his divine rule. But Israel has now been led to a mountain and has entered into a covenant, with a special role to the nations. The life of obedience to the divine rule will display the divine name to the nations and mediate the divine blessing. Unparalleled access to the divine presence is given as a sign of ultimate covenant blessing. Yahweh has been true to his name.

(3) Presence (Exodus 25:1-40:38)

These chapters may seem tedious to read or hear, but they describe in detail one of the main goals of the covenant—the union of the covenant partners: “they will be my people, and I will be their God.” The nation as a whole is to experience union and not just its representatives on top of the mountain, and this will be their distinguishing mark among the nations of the world. There is going to be no more ascending and descending of the mountain to experience the divine presence, but God is going to take up residence with the

people down below permanently.⁴⁹ The means by which this will take place is now described: the building of a tabernacle. The purpose of this structure is impossible to miss. It occurs at the beginning of the description and near the end:

They will make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them (25:8).

For there I will meet with you to speak with you there. I will meet with you Israelites there and [the tabernacle] will be sanctified by my glory. I will sanctify the tent of meeting, the altar and Aaron and his sons for my priesthood. I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites and become their God. They will know that I am Yahweh their God who brought up from the land of Egypt to make my dwelling in their midst. I am Yahweh their God (29:42b-46).

As Rendtorff points out, “This is an astonishing statement. According to this it is practically the goal of Israel’s being led out of Egypt that God should dwell in the midst of them.”⁵⁰ The name Yahweh might be now glossed “Immanuel.”

The next six chapters meticulously describe how this will happen as Moses is given instructions for the building of the tabernacle. The author seems to linger lovingly over the description of the tabernacle apparatus, beginning with the symbols of the immediate presence of God first, the ark, and proceeding outwards to the outside of the tabernacle and then the installation of the priesthood, culminating with Sabbath legislation. This is done in seven discrete commands, which has not escaped the observation of some scholars. As the world was made in six days culminating with a seventh day of rest, thus the tabernacle is a mini-universe made with six commands and a seventh stressing the obligation of the Sabbath (Ex.

25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12).⁵¹ Garden of Eden imagery is used to denote some of the paraphernalia of the tabernacle. Thus, what is at stake in Israel's tabernacle is a model of a new world with God at the center, living with his people.

When the instructions are completed,⁵² Moses is handed the two tablets of stone representing the heart of the covenant, to bring to the Israelites and to begin the work of building the tabernacle and experiencing the divine presence. At this moment, on the verge of realizing the divine intention of the Exodus, Moses hears the unthinkable—the people have grown tired of waiting for him receiving the instructions on the mountain and have broken the first two commandments. It is as if the tablets have just been freshly chiseled with the obligations when they have been broken. Or to switch the metaphor, if Yahweh and Israel had been married at Sinai, Israel had committed adultery on the wedding night!⁵³ This is Israel's original sin, and it is, thus, a crisis of biblical proportions, almost reminiscent of the ancient flood story where God wiped out the population of the earth while saving Noah and his family.⁵⁴ Indeed it seems that God is willing to make of Moses a new Noah and to start all over with him. But Moses will have none of it. He intercedes for his people on the basis of the covenant and God's international reputation—his name. It is God's honor—his name—that is at stake among the nations with Israel's fate. Consequently, Moses intercedes successfully, and the people are spared. It is this concern for the name of Yahweh that will drive the narrative in the next two chapters.

When Moses descends the mountain, he is carrying the freshly cut tablets of stone. When he sees the idolatry, he shat-

ters them. This vividly depicts the nature of the crisis—the shattering of the stone into a myriad of fragments symbolizes the shattering of the covenant. Judgment and covenant renewal follow, but when Moses ascends the mountain again it is only a partial renewal. Moses has to intercede again when Yahweh withholds his presence from the people—the people can go into the land without God, who will send his angel with them. Moses pleads with God to change his mind, and the reason again has to do with the nations: Israel is not to be like the rest of the nations but its distinctive, its *raison d'être*, is the divine presence among the nations of the world. What good is a patient without a doctor, a spouse without a partner, a priest without God? This is its mark of distinction among the peoples of the world (33:16). And, as Christopher Wright observes, “*And only by Israel being distinct from the nations was there any purpose in being Israel at all or any hope for the nations themselves eventually.*”⁵⁵ Again this crisis is resolved, and Moses now “pushes his luck” as he wishes to have a glimpse of the divine glory—the essence of the divine character, the heart of the divine name.

By this time Moses is a lot bolder than when he first appeared at the burning bush. There he was afraid to look upon God. Since he has gotten to know something of the name of God, Yahweh (“I am who I am”), who liberated his people from Egypt, who made the covenant with them at Sinai, and with whom he has successfully interceded for his people, he wants to press on to see this God. But all he is able to get is a view of the “back” of God and not a full frontal view, since that would result in death. But this view that he receives is absolutely incredible and Yahweh's declaration to him with its

verbal repetition is intended as a further disclosure of the meaning of the divine name (I am/will be who I am/will be). Thus, Moses is told, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (33:19). While this certainly stresses the divine freedom, it is the notes of mercy and grace that are highlighted! These are the first two attributes that occur when the divine name Yahweh is further disclosed:⁵⁶

Yahweh, Yahweh, *God of mercy and grace*, patient, full of covenant love and faithfulness, who keeps covenant love for thousands, who forgives iniquity, rebellion and sin, who will not acquit the guilty and who visits the sins of the fathers upon their children down to the third and fourth generation (34:5-6).

And if this is just the back of God—what must the front be like! That is a lingering question not completely answered in the text. But when Moses hears the revelation, he again pleads forgiveness,⁵⁷ and the commands are renewed signifying the complete renewal of the covenant. This time when Moses descends the mountain, his face is shining. He is the image of God, not the cheap idols that the Israelites made. And he becomes the means by which the people hear the word of God. The crisis is now resolved and the tabernacle can now be built (35-40). In a spirit of incredible change the people demonstrate their forgiveness, willingly supplying more than enough of the materials required to build the tabernacle (36:4). When the tent is finished, the New Year begins and the new relationship with Yahweh dwelling in the people's midst. Exactly one year before, Israel was in bondage in Egypt, and was liberated from that oppression two weeks later. And it was not long after that they were liberated from spiritual

oppression. Now they begin the New Year with the most important reality of all: the divine presence. The divine cloud and fire leave the top at Sinai and now descend, completely filling the new sanctuary, so much so that even the great Moses cannot enter. Now the relationship begins, grounded in covenant and divine condescension. The great question remains: how can this continue? The answer is to be found in the nature of covenant and in the incredible revelation of the divine name found in chapter 34:5-6. Israel is not only bound to this God but is to be a witness to the nations of this God. God has moved into their neighborhood, and it will never be the same.

The Ultimate Exodus

The rest of the Old Testament confirms that truth. The definition of Yahweh's name is that finally God will have his way, despite human disobedience and intractability. And what is that way? When the tabernacle is destroyed because of Israelite sin, a temple is built (1 Sam 3-4; 1 Kgs 6). When the temple is destroyed, he decides to become "flesh and blood and move into the neighborhood" (John 1:14), and he builds a temple made of flesh and blood from every tribe and people, inhabited by the Divine Spirit, a temple which will someday comprise the entire earth (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21).⁵⁸ And if Moses saw the back of God on Sinai, he gets a full frontal view on another mountain with his prophetic accomplice, Elijah (Luke 9:28-36). There they see the face of Jesus shining in all of its glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. And what is Jesus discussing with these prophets? His exodus (Luke 9:31)!⁵⁹ He goes down to "Egypt" and suffers oppression, completely submit-

ting to the penalty of sin and death and, thus, paving the way for the Exodus of all peoples into the glorious liberty of the children of God! This firstborn son's blood is not spared but becomes the blood of the covenant sprinkled on the nations not as self-curse, but as a balm of cleansing, renewal, and forgiveness, binding them to him forever. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him that name which is above every name (Phil 2:9-11)—that name which to know is to know God's purpose for the world from beginning to end!⁶⁰

ENDNOTE)

¹Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 119.

²R. Watts, "Exodus," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. D. Alexander and B. Rosner; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 478.

³Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. David E. Orton; Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2006), 47.

⁴Note the repeated use of the word "to go down" in these chapters: 37:25; 39:1 (2x); 42:2-3, 38; 43:4, 5, 7, 11.

⁵For the order and hermeneutical significance of the Hebrew order of the biblical books see Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 15; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

⁶See D. Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

⁷On these passages and others see Watts, "Exodus," 484.

⁸Sometimes this claim is made in absolute terms as if Israel had no point of contact with its cultural and religious environ-

ment. The old biblical theology movement may have erred in this direction but the point still remains valid. There are fundamental differences between Israel and the nations, which make Israel seem like an alien at times. See, e.g., Peter Gentry's article in this edition of *SBJT* in which he observes that the first four commandments are "absolutely unique" in the ancient world. For older classic biblical theology studies see, e.g., George Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM, 1960). For a modern popularization see Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Anchor Books/Nan A Talese, 1999).

⁹Cf. Lev 26:11: "I'll set up my residence in your neighborhood; I won't avoid or shun you; I'll stroll through your streets. I'll be your God; you'll be my people. I am God, your personal God who rescued you from Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians. I ripped off the harness of your slavery so that you can move about freely" (*The Message*).

¹⁰Ps 78:60: "the tent he established among humanity!" Note also: "[The tabernacle] constitutes a change in the way God is present among them—ongoing rather than occasional; close not distant; on the move, not fixed.... No longer are the people—or their mediator asked to come up to God; God 'comes down' to them. No more trips up the mountain for Moses! God begins a 'descent' that John 1:14 claims comes to a climax in the Incarnation" (Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction To The Old Testament* [2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005]), 133-35.

¹¹Childs, *Exodus*, 119.

¹²Note both the continuity and contrast in the expression, “You heard that it was said.... But I say unto you” (5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

¹³Cf. Stephen G. Dempster, “LORD,” in *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (ed. Craig A. Evans; New York: Routledge, 2007), 375-80.

¹⁴For further examples see conveniently Peter Enns, “Exodus/New Exodus,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 216-18.

¹⁵See, e.g., Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (4th ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, Inc., 1986). See also the sampling of Old Testament theologies in Elmer A. Martens, Ben C. Ollenburger, and Gerhard Hasel, eds., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930-1990*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991).

¹⁶James Barr, “The Meaning of Mythology in Relation to the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 9 (1959): 1-10.

¹⁷One author that repeatedly points out the importance of this truth is John Sailhamer. See, e.g., his work on the Pentateuch: John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). Note also the powerful way this is presented in Christopher Wright’s superb new book. He describes the Bible as “the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories”: Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 47.

¹⁸For further reading see Enrique Dussel, “Exodus as a Paradigm in Liberation Theology,” *Concilium* 189, no. 1 (1987): 83-92; Josiah Young, “Exodus as a Paradigm for Black Theology,” *Concilium* 189, no. 1 (1987): 93-99; Diane Bergant, “Exodus as a Paradigm in Feminist Theology,” *Concilium* 189, no. 1 (1987): 100-06.

¹⁹On the problems with a simple devotional reading in general see N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 32-34.

²⁰Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written & Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

²¹“What is remarkable is that the names of these lowly women are recorded whereas, by contrast, the all-powerful reigning monarch is consistently veiled in anonymity. In this way the biblical narrator expresses his scale of values. All the power of the mighty pharaoh, the outward magnificence of his realm, the dazzling splendor of his court, his colossal monuments—all are illusory, ephemeral, and in the ultimate reckoning, insignificant, and they must crumble into dust because they rest on foundations of empty moral content. Seven times in this brief episode the term ‘midwife’ is repeated, an index of the importance that Scripture places upon the actions of the women in

their defiance of tyranny and their upholding of moral principles” (Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* [New York: Schocken, 1996], 25).

²²See the function of the Hebrew conjunction *waw*, particularly when it appears at the beginning of biblical books. Stephen G. Dempster, “Linguistic Features of Hebrew Narrative: A Discourse Analysis of Narrative from the Classical Period” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1985).

²³For a profound understanding of the Jacob story, as the record of someone who emerged “broken and blessed” in a struggle with God, which ended in “a magnificent defeat” see, Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1985), 10-18.

²⁴I owe this thematic structure to G. Michael Hagan, “Theology of Exodus,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. Walter Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 226-29. Hagan, however, divides the text differently.

²⁵Childs, *Exodus*, 119.

²⁶For the entire story see 2:1-10. For Moses’ experience being recapitulated in the experience of the people of Israel see Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (1st ed.; New York: Schocken, 2000), 253.

²⁷The vexed question of how this can be so, since the name Yahweh has been used frequently in Genesis, has driven scholars to various solutions. The most common one has been the so-called source theory of the Pentateuch in which Exod 6:3

represents the P narrative in which this is the first time the name is used. Thus, this is true for P but not for J (cf. Gen 4:26). However, most modern scholars strive for an integrated reading of the text and suggest that this is the first time the real meaning of the name has been disclosed to the Israelites. For an in depth treatment of the problem see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 5-78.

²⁸For a profound theology of the Old Testament that expands on the themes found in 5:22-6:8, see Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (3d ed.; N. Richland Hills, TX: D. & F. Scott, 1997).

²⁹For the classic study on this formula, see Walther Zimmerli, *I Am Yahweh* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982) 1-28.

³⁰Translations are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.

³¹On the phrase "the education of Pharaoh" and the following section I am greatly indebted to Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 93-94. Wright describes the following texts and others as "the curriculum of Pharaoh's education."

³²Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 312. This would be like inserting Paul's instructions for the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:17-34) into the Last Supper narrative in the Gospels.

³³See n. 26 above.

³⁴See in particular the insightful essay by Peter Gentry in this edition of *SBJT*.

³⁵"The covenant at Sinai is a specific

covenant within the context of the Abrahamic covenant" (Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991], 209 [emphasis in original]).

³⁶Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 73. The quotation within the quote is that of Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 65. For a complete misunderstanding of election as "the ultimate anti-humanistic idea," see Jeremy Cott, "The Biblical Problem of Election," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984): 224. For a response to this view, which is virtually a concession, see John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 53-74.

³⁷Blessing and salvation are not just primarily to Israel but through Israel (cf. Ps 67). This statement was inspired by N. T. Wright in a public lecture when he remarked, "Salvation is not to the church but through the church."

³⁸"The whole history of Israel ... is intended to be the shop window for the knowledge of God in all the earth" (Wright, *The Mission of God*, 127).

³⁹Brueggeman as cited in Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 110.

⁴⁰Some scholars would construe the last part of Exod 19:5 with verse 6: "Because all the earth is mine, so you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This stresses Israel's universal mission even more. See Fretheim, *Exodus*,

212. Wright points out a chiasmic relationship in the structure with the focus on the nations at the center of the chiasm. See Wright, *The Mission of God*, 255. The text is probably more naturally understood as an explanatory clause attached to the end of verse 5. For a list of possible readings see the recent, superb study by John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Textual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 54-60. Davies himself does not believe that the mission to the nations is emphasized in the immediate context. Priesthood simply implies access to the divine presence, a fact that is confirmed in 24:9-11. While this is no doubt true, the larger narrative context, which implies a divine mission to the world for Israel (Gen 12:1-3) as well as the general understanding of priests as representatives, would seem to imply mission. As the priests within Israel represented Israel, so Israel as a collective priesthood represented the nations. As the priest would bless the people and place the divine name upon them, so Israel was to bless the nations and invest them with the divine name (Psalm 67).

⁴¹Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 596 (emphasis added).

⁴²Walter Brueggemann, *Theology Of The Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 173-76.

⁴³George Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17, no. 2 (1954): 26-46.

⁴⁴Mendenhall, "Biblical Law."

- ⁴⁵Tosephta, *Baba Kamma* VII, 5. Cited in Childs, *Exodus*, 469.
- ⁴⁶“[R]eference to the Exodus suggests that the theological intention of the Ten Commandments is to institutionalize the Exodus: to establish perspectives, procedures, policies and institutions that will generate Exodus-like social relationships... [These are] policies to create a society that practices Yahweh’s justice and not pharaoh’s injustice, and to establish neighborly well-being instead of coercion, fear and exploitation.” (Brueggemann, *Theology Of The Old Testament*, 184).
- ⁴⁷A similar rite occurs in the cleansing of a leper (Lev 14:14, 25). When a leper is deemed clean by the priest, the blood from a sacrifice is daubed on his ear, thumb, and toe, thus indicating complete cleansing from the impurity of the disease. The leper can now enter the community once again and be returned to the full privileges of a member of the community, including of course fellowship and worship.
- ⁴⁸E. Kutsch, “*krt* to cut off,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; trans. Mark E. Biddle; 3 vols.; Hendrickson: Peabody, MA), 2:635-37.
- ⁴⁹Birch, *Theological Introduction*, 133-35.
- ⁵⁰Rendtorff, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 65.
- ⁵¹For a complete development of these thoughts see the comprehensive work by G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).
- ⁵²The following description is based on Exodus 32-34.
- ⁵³R. W. L. Moberly, “Exodus, Book of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 214.
- ⁵⁴R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 22; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1983).
- ⁵⁵Wright, *The Mission of God*, 335 (emphasis in original).
- ⁵⁶And, thus, these first two qualities in Exod 34:5 are in chiasmic relationship with the two qualities mentioned in 33:19.
- ⁵⁷Thus showing that he does not take forgiveness for granted. The last part of the description of Yahweh’s attributes shows that this should never happen. Grace can never imply license! Grace is always costly. The revelation of the New Testament shows in fact how costly it can be.
- ⁵⁸See further Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 201-68.
- ⁵⁹Note that the Greek word used for departure is ἐξοδόν.
- ⁶⁰Childs, *Exodus*, 119. On the significance of the title LORD and its relation to the name Yahweh, see Dempster, “LORD,” 375-80.

Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology

Graham A. Cole

Graham A. Cole is Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Prior to joining the TEDS faculty, Dr. Cole was for ten years principal of Ridley College, University of Melbourne, Australia, where he lectured in philosophy, systematic theology, ethics, and apologetics. He has contributed numerous articles to books and periodicals. Dr. Cole is the author of *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Crossway, 2007) and *Engaging with the Holy Spirit: Real Questions, Practical Answers* (Crossway, 2008).

Introduction

We were created to worship the living God. According to Jesus, the Father seeks such worship (John 4:23). There is no higher calling. Indeed, it is a firm biblical principle that we become in character like the object of our worship. However, in a fallen world, this calling can be distorted. The key is the nature of the God or gods we adore. If we worship the living God of biblical revelation then we will image him. If we worship idols we will image them: “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Ps 115:8). A. W. Tozer wrote in his work on the attributes of God,

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.... The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.¹

Tozer saw the importance of a right characterization of God and he knew also that the Scriptures are the key, because the Scriptures are nothing less than God’s self-revelation.

To use John Calvin’s classic image, the Scriptures are like glasses that bring God into focus. Calvin argued,

Just as old or bleary eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips. Not only does he teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows himself as the God upon whom they are to look.²

In Old Testament times, that coming into focus in general terms is nowhere more evident than in the theophany on Sinai as described in the book of Exodus. In particular, it is Exodus 34, which especially brings the living God into sharper relief—albeit not in such a way as to leave mystery behind.³ After all, Moses will only be able to see God’s back. The face of God must not be seen (Exod 33:23).

Judaism has long recognized Exodus 34—in particular the revelation of the divine name in Exod 34:6-7 and its presentation of the so called “Thirteen Attributes”—as the nearest thing to a systematic statement of the being and attributes of God in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ According to Benno Jacob, “They have

been a leitmotif of the Jewish penitential prayers since that time and form the foundation of the countless *s'li-hot* composed through centuries. The repentant people of Israel have used these thoughts to plead to HIM with complete contrition, ardor, and zeal.⁵ How exactly thirteen attributes or *middôth* (“measures”) are derived convincingly from Exod 34:6-7 requires quite a feat of exegetical imagination.⁶

A great theologian of the Reformation period who recognized the importance of the *middôth* was John Calvin. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he argues that “the attributes of God according to Scripture agree with those known in his creatures”—in other words, communicable attributes—and chooses Exod 34:6-7 to do so. He writes,

Indeed, in certain passages clearer descriptions are set forth for us, wherein his true appearance is exhibited, to be seen as in an image. For when Moses described the image, he obviously meant to tell briefly whatever was right for men to know about him. “Jehovah,” he says, “Jehovah, a merciful and gracious God, patient and of much compassion, and true, who keepest mercy for thousands, who takest away iniquity and transgression ... in whose presence the innocent will not be innocent, who visitest the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children.” Here let us observe that his eternity and his self-existence are announced by that wonderful name twice repeated. Thereupon his powers are mentioned, by which he is shown to us not as he is in himself, but as he is toward us: so that this recognition of him consists more in living experience than in vain and highflown speculation. Now we hear the same powers enumerated there that we have noted as shining in heaven and earth: kindness, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth. For power and might are contained under the title *Elohim*.⁷

Paul Helm rightly maintains, “Calvin’s comments in the *Institutes* on this passage constitute a fundamental locus of his exposition of the divine nature.”⁸

My brief then is to explore a pivotal part of the theophany on Sinai—namely, Exod 34:6-7—and its implications for constructing an evangelical doctrine of God.⁹ To do so, I will first examine what it is to develop our doctrine of God evangelically; next, consider Exod 34:5-8 in particular in context; then relate the passage to the discussions of the doctrine of God in some standard evangelical systematic theologies (Erickson and Grudem) and to the discipline of Biblical Theology.¹⁰ Penultimate, I will argue for the importance of the discipline of Biblical Theology and finally offer a summation.

One final introductory note: for the purposes of this exploration from this point on I will use the term *middôth* to refer to the set of descriptors of God found in Exod 34:6-7.

Developing The Doctrine of God Evangelically

In my first year of theological college, I remember meeting an evangelical friend who was studying at another place. To be ordained in his denomination he had no choice but to do so. His seminary was liberal, mine evangelical. He lamented that he had just completed a semester course on the doctrine of God. The Bible was not opened once, but Paul Tillich’s first volume of systematic theology was opened constantly. His experience contrasted starkly with my own. In my college, Scripture was foundational and normative.

For the evangelical, his or her doctrine of Scripture flows out of submission to the lordship of Christ. Christology and bibli-

ology are inextricably linked. How can the disciple have a different view of Scripture to that of the Master? Jesus' own view of Scripture is clearly portrayed in his debate with the Sadducees over the resurrection (Matt 22:23-33). They tested him with a conundrum about a woman who lost husband after husband. Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Jesus' response is definitive. The Sadducees had erred formally and materially. Formally, they were showing their ignorance of Scripture in doing theology, and, materially, there was a specific Scripture in the canon they embraced that undermined the premise of their argument. They denied the resurrection, but the text from Exod 3:6 which Jesus quotes—"I am (*egō eimi*) the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—presupposes life after death in relation to God (Matt 22:32). Jesus argues from this text that "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt 22:32). Instructively, in contrast to the pluralism of our day, the Jesus of the canonical Gospels thought that there could be truth or error in theology.

If the incarnate Master lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, so too ought the disciple. Consequently an evangelical way of doing theology is predicated upon a high view of Scripture. By "evangelical" in this context I mean, therefore, the epistemic claim that the doctrine of God ought to be based on this high view of the Scriptures as the infallible (will not mislead) and inerrant (teaches no error) Word of God—albeit in human words (more anon.).¹¹ And, with this claim, there is a further one that Scripture as special revelation is normative for Christian belief, values, and practices. Scripture constitutes the norm of norms (*norma normans*). Other norms

do operate in doing theology—tradition, reason, and experience—but they are subservient to Scripture as normed norms (*norma normata*). This is the heart of the Reformers' view of *sola Scriptura*—not that Scripture is the only norm operating, but in any clash between authorities Scripture is the final court of appeal.¹² If a doctrine is in any way textless it ought to be unconvincing.

What, then, does Exodus 34 have to say to us normatively about God?

God Proclaims His Name: Exodus 34:5-8

Let's begin with the background to the passage. By the time the reader reaches Exodus 34 much has already been encountered in the narrative. God has heard the cries of his oppressed people and rescued them from Pharaoh through his covenant agent Moses (Exodus 1-15). His grumbling people have made their way to Sinai. On the way the Lord has met their survival needs. He has provided water, manna, and quail (Exodus 15-17). Moreover, the Lord has gone victoriously to war again for them against the Amelakites (Exodus 17). Jethro's visit has led to a redistribution of Moses's workload as judge (Exodus 18). At Sinai the people have been awed by the dramatic theophany (Exodus 19). The Ten Commandments have been announced to Israel (Exodus 20). After the revelation of this apodictic law has come that of casuistic law (Exodus 21-23). The covenant has been confirmed (Exodus 24). Moses has gone up the mountain into the cloud forty days and nights during which time the details of the tabernacle have been revealed to him (Exodus 25-31). However, during this time Israel has become impatient with Moses' absence. They have prevailed upon Aaron to provide tangible

gods to worship, and so, while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Torah on the tablets of stone from God, Israel below was making and worshipping an idol (Exodus 32). R. W. L. Moberly comments, "Israel's impatient making of the golden calf is presented as, in effect, a breaking of the first of the two commandments, and while Israel is still at the mountain of God; it is rather like committing adultery on one's wedding night."¹³ Angered by their folly, the Lord has declared that he would start afresh with only Moses and his family. But Moses has interceded on Israel's behalf with considerable *chutzpah*. The Lord then has judged rebellious Israel with a plague (Exodus 32). However, he also has answered Moses' plea that he persevere with Israel (Exodus 32).

Just before our key passage, we find in Exodus 33 that Moses has met with God outside the camp in the tent of meeting. The Lord had in effect withdrawn his presence from his people and declared that he would not go with Israel to the land flowing with milk and honey. Moses, again with considerable *chutzpah*, has reminded YHWH that Israel is his people. The Lord has promised that his presence would go with them (Exod 33:17), but only after Moses has argued for it (Exod 33:15-16). At first the Lord promised only to go with Moses and give Moses rest (Exod 33:14).

Moses has wanted to know more deeply the God who had first revealed his name to him at the burning bush (cf. Exodus 3 and 33:13). YHWH identified himself there as "I am Who I am" or "I will be what I will be" (Exod 3:14). According to Brevard Childs, God is saying that the subsequent events of history will pour content into the name. He maintains, "The content of his name

is filled by what he does (Ex. 3:14), and Israel experiences God's identity through revelation and not by clever discovery."¹⁴ Now having journeyed to Sinai, Moses wanted to know more. As Maimonides suggests, "The phrasing 'Shew me now thy ways and I shall know thee' indicates that God is known by His attributes: if one knows the WAYS one knows Him."¹⁵ Moses has asked the Lord to show him his glory (Exod 33:18). The divine response is instructive,

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Exod 33:19-20).¹⁶

Moses wanted glory. He wanted to see the majesty of God. Instead God gave him goodness.¹⁷ God's glory lies in his goodness, not his might, and that goodness is seen expressed in sovereign grace and mercy.

We now turn to our key passage.¹⁸ At divine behest, Moses chisels out two stone tablets. YHWH will write afresh the Ten Commandments on them once Moses returns to the top of the mountain. What happens next is one of the singular revelatory moments in the canonical presentation.

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod 34:5-7).

The only appropriate response to such a revelation of the divine nature is the one Moses adopts: “And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped” (Exod 34:8). This is the protocol one adopts in the presence of overwhelming greatness, indeed goodness.

Significantly Moses does more than simply acknowledge the Lord in worship. He is quick to turn the self-revelation of God into the platform for prayer to God. He wants further reassurance that the Lord will truly go with Israel. Prayer is no leap in the dark but a response to the God who has declared what he is truly like. Israel has sinned and had proven to be a stiff-necked people (Exod 33:3). And without the divine presence, Israel is at risk as it journeys to the land of promise. The Lord had just declared himself to be a gracious and forgiving God, and so Moses prays: “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance” (Exod 34:9). Moses in effect, echoes the *middôth* at numerous points in idea and language: “favor,” “pardon,” “iniquity,” and “sin.” This is a feature of the biblical practice of prayer. What God reveals about his might and character, whether in words, or by deeds of creation, or deeds of redemption are turned into the grounds for praise or petition by the supplicant.

The divine name has been proclaimed. Moses has responded fittingly, as he should. The question remains, however, as to precisely what YHWH has declared about his own nature. A brief adumbration will need to suffice:

- The Lord is merciful (“compassionate,” NIV). Pierre Berthoud offers this nuanced comment: “The term *rahûm* lays the empha-

sis on God’s deep appreciation and understanding of the misery and suffering of the creation including man.”¹⁹ For example, YHWH accedes to Moses’ plea (Exod 32:12b-14).

- The Lord is gracious (*hannûn*). For example, earlier in the Torah his graciousness is exhibited in the gift of family and prosperity that he gave to Jacob (Gen 33:5, 11).
- The Lord is slow to anger. He is patient towards even the grumbling. Laney captures the idea well: “It is as if He takes a long deep breath as He deals with sin and holds His anger in abeyance.”²⁰ For example, the divine patience with Israel on its grumbling way to Sinai (Exod 15:22-17:7)
- The Lord abounds in steadfast love (*hêsed*) and faithfulness (*emet*). His love is persistent because it is grounded in his covenant loyalty. It is no passing fancy. The Lord also abounds in faithfulness. His Word is to be relied upon. For example, he honors his promise to Abraham and remembers—that is to say, acts on—his covenant obligations (Exod 2:23-25; 32:12b-14).²¹
- The Lord is forgiving. He is prepared to forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin. This cluster, which appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, covers the three core sins of humanity outside of Eden (e.g., see Ps 51:1-2; Dan 9:24).²²
- The Lord by no means clears the guilty. God’s forgiving character is not to be presumed upon.²³ Unrepentant sin will not go unpunished. Walter Kaiser comments, “But his grace is balanced, for ‘he does not leave the guilty unpunished.’ The other side of our merciful and loving God is his justice and righteousness. Woe to them who reject God’s grace!”²⁴
- The Lord visits the iniquity of one generation on the next. Sin has consequences. To go against the moral grain of the universe has repercussions. As Wayne

Grudem suggests in his note on the passage, "This statement shows the horrible nature of sin in the way it has effects far beyond the individual sinner, also harming those around the sinner and harming future generations as well."²⁵ For example, think of the troubles in David's house after his sin with Bathsheba, which included the death of the baby and arguably a factor in Ahithophel's revolt against David. Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather and the baby's great-grandfather (cf. 2 Sam 12:14-18 and 2 Sam 16-17).

Exodus 34:6-7 and Systematic Theology

Both Millard J. Erickson's *Christian Theology* and Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* are widely used texts by evangelicals and rightly so.²⁶ How do these respected theologians discuss the doctrine of God and what role, if any, do the *middôth* of Exod 34:6-7 play in their presentations?

Erickson devotes part three of his work to the topic of "What God Is Like."²⁷ In this part he canvases the attributes of God. He makes the excellent point from the start that "[t]he doctrine of God is the central point of the rest of theology. One's view of God might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which one's theology is constructed and life is lived."²⁸ He offers a modification—at least in terminology—of one of the traditional ways of dividing the attributes of God. Instead of discussing the natural and moral attributes of God he delineates the "attributes of greatness" and the "attributes of goodness."

First, Erickson discusses the attributes of greatness (akin to God's natural attributes). These include spirituality, personality, life, infinity and constancy.²⁹ The last of these is somewhat question begging

since Erickson argues that constancy shows itself in these terms: "Thus, God is ever faithful to his covenant with Abraham, for example." And again, "What we are dealing with here [in this section] is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised."³⁰ This sounds more like a moral attribute than a natural one. Immutability would have been a better descriptor.

Next, Erickson in a separate chapter deals with the attributes of goodness (akin to God's moral attributes). These include moral purity, integrity and love.³¹ A subset of God's love is God's grace. In this part of the discussion is one of his two references to Exodus 34 in the entire work.³² It figures in a comparison with Paul's claim in Eph 1:5-8 concerning God's grace. Both Exod 34:6 and Eph 1:5-8 speak of the grace of God. Therefore, that ancient heretic Marcion, for example, was wrong to pitch one testament against the other. On the very next page, in discussing God's persistence, Erickson again refers to Exod 34:6, as a reference to the divine love: God is slow to anger.³³ The *middôth* per se are not in view.

Like Erickson, in his discussion of the doctrine of God, Grudem divides the attributes of God into two classes. He rightly observes, "When we come to talk about the character of God, we realize that we cannot say everything the Bible teaches us about God's character at once. We need some way to decide which aspect of God's character to discuss first, which aspect to discuss second, and so forth."³⁴ Unlike Erickson, Grudem works with the widely accepted dichotomy of incommunicable and communicable attributes.

Grudem first deals with the incommunicable attributes. These are attributes

that indicate how God is different from us. These include independence, unchangeableness, eternity, omnipresence, and unity.³⁵ There is one curious feature of his discussion. He argues, “Not one of the incommunicable attributes of God is completely without some likeness in the character of human beings.”³⁶ Independence (aseity), however, is surely an attribute that is uniquely God’s own by definition. God’s existence depends on nothing outside of God. Thus, for example, the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is an act of generosity not necessity.

In two further chapters, Grudem expounds the communicable attributes of God. These indicate how God is like us in his being, in mental and moral attributes, in will and excellence. They include attributes describing God’s being (spirituality and invisibility), mental attributes (knowledge, wisdom, and truthfulness), moral attributes (goodness, love, mercy, holiness, peace, righteousness, jealousy, and wrath), attributes of purpose (will, freedom, and omnipotence), and summary attributes (perfection, blessedness, beauty, and glory).³⁷ In chapter 12 Grudem has his only reference to the *middôth* of Exod 34:6-7: the Scripture memory passage.³⁸ Otherwise the *middôth* per se plays no role in his doctrine of God.

Exodus 34:6-7 and Biblical Theology

In the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Brian S. Rosner’s provides a first rate definition of Biblical Theology:

To sum up, biblical theology may be defined as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible’s teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight

of the Bible’s overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.³⁹

In the light of Rosner’s definition, how is Exod 34:6-7 to be placed in “the Bible’s overarching narrative”?

Canonically speaking, our passage is located within the framework of the promise to Abraham and the covenant that God made with the patriarch (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-21). It is on the basis of this covenant that God acts to rescue Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exod 2:23-24). Furthermore, he identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Exod 3:6). The Mosaic covenant in fact nestles within the more fundamental Abrahamic one. The Abrahamic covenant is unconditional, whereas the Mosaic one is conditional. The Abrahamic covenant is royal grant-like, whereas the Mosaic one is suzerainty treaty like.⁴⁰

With regard to Exod 34:6-7, each of the *middôth* either has an earlier Old Testament story behind it—either found in Genesis or Exodus—or is illustrated by a later Old Testament story or passage.⁴¹ Laney expresses the point admirably:

The importance of Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundation for biblical theology is evidenced by the fact that this statement is repeated many times in the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 103:8, 17; 145:8; Jer. 32:18-19; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2). Echoes of this self-revelation also appear in Deuteronomy 5:9-10; 1 Kings 3:6; Lamentations 3:32; Daniel 9:4; and Nahum 1:3. The biblical writers clearly regarded Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundational statement about God.⁴²

He also rightly observes, “Strangely, this great passage has received little attention from systematic theologians and I might add and neither has the way

it ramifies through the rest of the Old Testament canon."⁴³

Space limitations forbid an extended examination of each of the anticipations or repetitions of the *middôth* or its echoes. However, one later canonical restatement of the *middôth* will usefully serve as a more extended case in point: namely, the book of Jonah. Jonah is particularly interesting because, like Joel, there is an important addition to the list.

Whenever I lecture on the doctrine of God and refer to Jonah's knowledge of the *middôth*, I ask the class how many of them have heard a sermon on the book that explains Jonah's flight to Tarshish as motivated by fear of the Ninevites. Typically a goodly number have. The application is about our need to heed the call of God and not be afraid of the opposition. But exegesis shows that the meaning lies elsewhere. Jonah's problem was that he knew all too well the revealed character of God. He knew the *middôth* as the following passage shows:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jonah 3:10-4:4, emphasis added).

The echoes of the *middôth* are plain: "gracious," "merciful," "slow to anger," and "abounding in steadfast love." The interesting addition is "and relenting of disaster."

Has Jonah, as a prophet much later than Moses, expanded the list in the light of God's dealings with Israel post Sinai? Joel likewise extends the list (Joel 2:13).⁴⁴

Thus far we have explored how Exod 34:6-7 informs the Old Testament. However, the exploration cannot end there. As Rosner avers, Biblical Theology has a "Christocentric focus." And so to the luminous figure of Christ we must turn. By "the luminous figure of Christ" I don't mean as critically reconstructed or deconstructed by a certain kind of scholarship, but to the Christ as canonically presented or to the "Jesus of Testimony" to use Richard Bauckham's helpful phrase, and to "the theophanic character of the history of Jesus."⁴⁵

The Gospel of John reveals that in the new era theophany gives way to Christophany. The God who cannot be seen is definitively "exegeted" by the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ, the Son (cf. John 1:18; 5:37; and 14:5-9). But Christophany does not leave the *middôth* behind, but rather embodies them. The Prologue of John is a good example. As Andreas J. Köstenberger correctly contends, "The reference in 1:14 to Jesus taking up residence among God's people resulting in the revelation of God's glory ... also harks back to OT references to the manifestation of the presence and glory (*kābōd*) of God, be it theophanies, the tabernacles, or the temple."⁴⁶ The first OT Scripture he cites is from the Sinai theophany Exod 33:22, namely, Moses request to see YHWH's glory. And he surely is right to argue that John 1:14 and 17 which speak of Jesus as "full of grace and truth" "in all probability harks back to the phrase 'loving-kindness [*hesed*] and truth [*ēmet*]' in Exod. 34:6."⁴⁷ Again Köstenberger is our guide: "In its original context this joint expression

refers to God's covenant faithfulness to His people Israel. John's message found ultimate expression in the sending of God's one-of-a-kind Son (1:14,18)."⁴⁸

Why Systematic Theology Needs Biblical Theology

As we have seen in the presentations both of Erickson and Grudem, the *middôth* per se do not figure and yet as we have seen, the *middôth* is integral to the canonical portrayal of God's character (*hashem*) both Old Testament and New. How, then, would Biblical Theology be of help to the systematic theologian? As previously argued, methodologically, a biblical theology predicated on a high view of Scripture works with the entire canon (*tota Scriptura*) by placing texts in their contexts in their literary units in their books in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history. Thus, Biblical Theology is methodologically prior to Systematic Theology. It helps the systematician both avoid simplistic proof texting (*dicta probantia*) and remain sensitive to the narrative drive of Scripture.

To be fair, the structures of most systematic theologies do preserve the overarching narrative of Scripture, as do the classic creeds (Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian). Like Scripture and like the creeds, they move from the Maker of Heaven and Earth to the world to come. However, that narrative structure can be hard to detect because of the need for systematic theologies rightly to interact with discussions of the past (e.g., Augustine versus Pelagius on sin) and issues of the present (e.g., the claim by some feminist theologians that the cross represents divine child abuse) and by discussing prolegomena matters (e.g., sources for theology, theological method, and so forth).

Most importantly Biblical Theology can help the systematician in articulating the doctrine of God in such a way as to get the biblical accents right. In this way, Geerhardus Vos's observation gets some real purchase: "Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish."⁴⁹ For example, you would never know, from reading whether Erickson, Grudem, or others, how important the *middôth* are for knowing God as God has chosen to make his nature known. The revelation of the name (*hashem*) of course is more than the offering of a convenient designation. Rather in the canon the divine name refers to the very nature of God. As Charles H. H. Scobie argues, "God's name is an expression of his essential nature."⁵⁰ The God of biblical revelation wants to proclaim his moral attributes in the first instance. Erickson is on sound ground to work with this category. However, like Grudem, he places the moral attributes—in Grudem's case the communicable attributes—second in presentation: goodness comes after greatness. Not so on Sinai. The revelation of the divine graciousness and mercy on Sinai is of a piece with the Genesis account where blessing is first, cursing is second (cf. Gen 2:3; 3:14-19), and, as we saw in John's Prologue, with the incarnation, grace comes through Jesus Christ (John 1:14-17). Moreover, in this same Gospel we see that Christ came, in the first instance, not to condemn the world but to save it, even though he is the eschatological judge, and those who remain in darkness will ultimately be held accountable (cf. John 3:17; 12:47; 5:24-27).

However, it is not only a matter of rightly ordering the systematic discussion. There is the question of weighting the discussion. Perhaps a theological

primer like I. H. Marshall's *Pocket Guide To Christian Beliefs* shows a suggestive way forward—albeit undeveloped, since only a primer. His chapter on the nature of God provides an example. When discussing God as Trinity he cites a large passage of Scripture, rather than a single verse (Eph 1:3-14).⁵¹ Strangely, though, the Ephesians passage plays no real role in what follows. What would a systematic theology look like that worked not with individual proof texts only but with the great landmark passages of Scripture like Exodus 34 that are integral to the way God has elected to self reveal? On this approach, for example, the discussion of the incarnation might be anchored in a lengthy discussion of John 1:1-18, carefully understood as a prologue to the theology of John as a whole and then considered in the sweep of the canon with a sensitivity to the fact that such a passage does not belong to former times when God spoke to the forefathers by the prophets but in these last days when he has spoken through his Son as Hebrews makes plain (Heb 1:1-2). Such a method better exhibits the analogy of Scripture (*analogia scripturae* or in some traditions *analogia fidei*), whereby Scripture is compared with Scripture, Scripture interprets Scripture, and plain Scripture interprets more obscure or difficult portions of Scripture. The classic alternative would simply use brackets with Scriptural proof texts (*dicta probantia*) listed in them to buttress the points being made. For example, in the incarnation, the Second Person of the Godhead assumed human nature without abandoning deity (John 1:14 and so forth). The traditional proof texting method needs to be complemented by a Biblical Theology that provides the landmark biblical passages as well. Karl Barth is methodologically helpful on this point,

despite an inadequate bibliography. His unfinished *Church Dogmatics* contains not only 15,000 biblical references but around 2,000 small print exegetical discourses as well.⁵² Herbert Hartwell comments, “[I]n Barth’s view . . . the task of theology is the expository presentation of that revelation on the basis of a theological exegesis of the content of the Bible.”⁵³

Richard Lints is an evangelical theologian who is sensitive to the need for Biblical Theology to shape a systematic theology. In his *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomena to Evangelical Theology*, he devotes much of the last part of the work to the subject.⁵⁴ In this part he considers the theological nature of the Bible, the move from the biblical text to a theological framework, and the move from that framework to a theological vision. He rightly argues that “The dominant themes of the biblical text ought to be the dominant themes of the theological framework” and that “the simple insight that the Scriptures have a ‘story-like’ character will be important.”⁵⁵ In fact, the premise he adopts for the book is “that systematic theology must be structurally dependent on biblical theology and hence would need to undergo a major change from its traditional categories of presentation.”⁵⁶

Conclusion

The *middôth* of Exodus 34 are integral to the knowledge of God and not incidental to the canonical plotline. This is who God is, which his prior and subsequent acts illustrate, and which Biblical Theology as a method displays. Doing is predicated on being. This is his name proclaimed. We saw how it is echoed in every part of the Hebrew Bible and has its instantiation in Jesus himself. It is the basis for biblical prayer. It explains why God spared repen-

tant Ninevah much to Jonah's disappointment. In contradistinction, we also saw that two standard evangelical systematic theologies—those of Erickson and Grudem—present the nature of God in such a way as to make the *middôth* incidental. This lack of due emphasis raises acutely the question of how systematic theology ought to use Scripture to construct a doctrine of God. In doing theology, alongside the classic proof texting method—which is still needed for brevity's sake—a place at the table needs to be given to a way of reading Scripture that locates a text in its context in its literary unit in its book in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history. This way of reading Scripture is at the heart of Biblical Theology as a discipline. As Richard Lints suggests, "Biblical theology and systematic theology are mutually enriching, they do not compete."⁵⁷ I would only add "and exegesis must lie at the heart of both."

ENDNOTES

¹A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (London: James Clarke, 1965), 9.

²John Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion (The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection)*, Rio, WI: Ages Software, 2002), 1:6:1 (CD-Rom version).

³Geerhardus Vos, (*Redemptive History And Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* [ed. Richard Gaffin Jr.; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2001], 431) describes Exod 34:6-7 as one of "four classic statements, where the Torah rises to the height of a description of the character of God." The others he cites are Exod 20:5-6; Num 14:8; and Deut 7:9-10.

⁴For example, see Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of the Perplexed* (trans. Chaim Rabin; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 71-77. Maimonides's dates are

1135-1204. For a contemporary Jewish view see Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Exodus," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 189.

⁵Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (trans. Walter Jacob in association with Yaakov Elman; Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV, 1992), 985 (emphasis in original).

⁶See, for example, "Selichot – Brief Explanation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" ([accessed 3 March 2008]. Online: <http://www.ou.org/chagim/elul/selichotattrib.htm>), which maintains that the first mention of the Name (Yahweh) is the attribute of mercy shown before a person sins, whilst the second mention of the Name (*hashem*) refers to another attribute of mercy, one shown to the sinner after sin.

⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:10:2. Paul Helm drew my attention to Calvin on this point in his slightly revised John Murray Lecture delivered at the Highland Theological College, entitled "John Calvin—What's the Big Idea?" [accessed 28 April 2008]. Online: <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com>.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Brevard S. Childs comments, "[T]he God of the Old Testament has a name by which he lets himself be known. The decisive passage is Ex. 34:5-6" (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 354).

¹⁰As a convention I will adopt Biblical Theology with capitals for the discipline, that is a particular reading strategy for engaging Scripture. Many refer to any way of doing theology that is grounded in a high view of Scripture as biblical theology. To avoid possible confusion, if I refer to any of the latter I will use

lower case.

¹¹I am aware that there are evangelicals who do not affirm a view of Scripture as high as this and that conservative representatives of other traditions would likewise embrace Scripture as the Word of God—albeit with a longer canon (e.g., Roman Catholic and Orthodox).

¹²See my “Thinking Theologically,” *Reformed Theological Review* 48, no. 2 (1989); and my “*Sola Scriptura*: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Churchman* 104, no. 1 (1990).

¹³R. W. L. Moberly, “Exodus, Book of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 214. Moberly also draws interesting parallels between Exodus 32-34 and Genesis 6-9, especially between the figures of faithful Noah and faithful Moses (215).

¹⁴Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 355.

¹⁵Maimonides, *The Guide*, 72 (emphasis in original). This verse (Exod 33:13) contains an important epistemic principle. To know a person one needs to be exposed to their ways: that is to say, the characteristic behaviors of a person. This usually takes some time or exposure to stories that narrate those behaviors. It is not enough merely to know that God exists. One needs to know the moral disposition of the God who exists. Herein lies the genius of the “storied” nature of biblical revelation. See my article “God, Doctrine of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 259-263.

¹⁶All biblical quotations are from

the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise stated.

¹⁷J. Carl Laney has misread John I. Durham on this point. Laney maintains, “Durham suggests that ‘goodness (טוב) here may imply the “beauty” of the Lord and so it anticipated a theophany” (“God’s Self-Revelation In Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 [2001]: 39-40).

However, Durham is expounding someone else’s view which he goes on to critique: “[W]hat he gives to Moses is quite specifically *not* the *sight* of his beauty, his glory, his Presence—that, indeed, he pointedly denies. What he gives rather is a *description*, and at that, a description not of how he *looks* but how he *is*” (J. I. Durham, *Exodus* [Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word: Dallas, 2002], CD-Rom version [emphases in original]).

¹⁸For an illuminating study of the passage see R. W. L. Moberly, *At The Mountain Of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983).

¹⁹Pierre Berhoud, “The Compassion of God: Exodus 34:5-9 in the light of Exodus 32-34,” in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 163.

²⁰Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation In Exodus 34:6-8,” 46.

²¹Divine remembering is not referring to a divine memory lapse but is idiomatic for God acting. He remembered Noah, he remembered Israel, and Jesus promises to remember the thief on the cross (cf. Gen 8:1; Exod 2:24; and Luke 23:42).

²²With regard to the multiplicity of terms, at least fifty, denoting “sin” in the Old Testament, Henri Blocher describes transgression, sin, and iniquity as “[t]hree of the most important” (“Sin,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 782).

²³This point is well made by R. W. L. Moberly, “How May We Speak Of God? A Reconsideration Of The Nature Of Biblical Theology,” *Tyn-dale Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (2002): 200.

²⁴Walter Kaiser Jr., “Exodus,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

²⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 209.

²⁶The tone of my comments on Erickson and Grudem ought not to be exaggerated. Both works are immensely useful, and I recommend both to my own students.

²⁷Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), chapters 12 and 13 are the relevant ones. This is the unabridged, one volume edition.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 263.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 267-81.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 278-79.

³¹In discussing God’s integrity, Erickson has a subsection on God’s faithfulness which shows itself in the fact that “God keeps all his promises” (*ibid.*, 291). As we have seen, however, he makes a similar claim under the head of God’s constancy. Which is it then? Is promise keeping an expression of the attri-

- bute of greatness or an attribute of goodness?
- ³²Ibid., 295.
- ³³Ibid., 296.
- ³⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 156.
- ³⁵Ibid., 160-80.
- ³⁶Ibid., 157.
- ³⁷Ibid., chapters 12 and 13.
- ³⁸Ibid., 209.
- ³⁹B. S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 10.
- ⁴⁰See the excellent discussion of the differences between royal grant covenants and suzerainty treaties in Michael S. Horton, *God Of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 41-43.
- ⁴¹For the exegesis of Exod 34:6-8, I am indebted to J. Carl Laney's helpful article ("God's Self-Revelation In Exodus 34:6-8"). Laney independently covers some of the same ground as this present article, especially with regard to Grudem and Erickson, and I warmly commend it.
- ⁴²Ibid., 36.
- ⁴³Ibid.
- ⁴⁴Jeremiah 18:7-10 provides the principle behind divine relenting and best explains the divine consistency in not judging Ninevah as had originally been promised.
- ⁴⁵Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), chapter 18, esp. 500.
- ⁴⁶Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2007), 422.
- ⁴⁷Ibid.
- ⁴⁸Ibid.
- ⁴⁹Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History*, 24.
- ⁵⁰Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways Of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108 (emphasis in original). Moses Maimonides took a different view. As Maimonides commentator Julius Guttman rightly observes, "According to Maimonides these [the *Middoth*] do in reality not apply to the essence of God but to His works, which indicate by attributing to God that quality which in man would produce corresponding activities. The thirteen Dispositions which were revealed to Moses are then to be interpreted in this sense" (Maimonides, *The Guide*, 210). Maimonides position is deeply influenced by Greek philosophy at this point and leaves one in deepest agnosticism as to what God is really like.
- ⁵¹I. Howard Marshall, *A Pocket Guide To Christian Beliefs*, (3d ed.; London: InterVarsity, 1990), 39-42.
- ⁵²These statistics are found in Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 94-95. Some of the more significant exegetical portions can be found collected in *Karl Barth: Preaching Through the Christian Year* (ed. John McTavish and Harold Wells; trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978).
- ⁵³Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1964), 15.
- ⁵⁴Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomena to Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), chapters 7-9.
- ⁵⁵Ibid., 271 and 274, respectively.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., 271 n. 17. I have attempted to make a start on such a project in a work on the Holy Spirit that utilizes not just systematic theology and biblical commentaries but also biblical theologies: *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine Of The Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). On method, also see my article "God, doctrine of," 259-63.
- ⁵⁷Richard Lints, "Thinking Systematically about Theology," *Modern Reformation* (January/February, 2003), 28.

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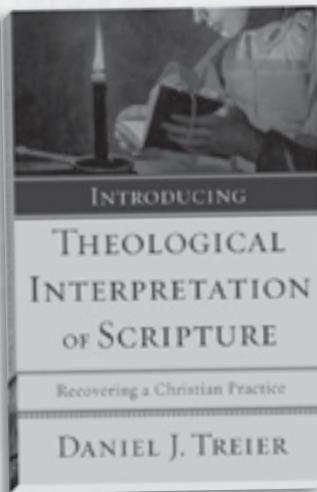
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Peter J. Gentry is Professor of Old Testament Interpretation and Director of the Hexapla Institute at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served on the faculty of Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College and also taught at the University of Toronto, Heritage Theological Seminary, and Tyndale Seminary. Dr. Gentry is the author of many articles and book reviews and is currently preparing a critical text of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes for the Göttingen Septuagint.

Introduction

Central to the Book of Exodus—and indeed to the entire Pentateuch—is the covenant made between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai comprised in chapters 19-24. The eighteen chapters preceding describe the release of Israel from bondage and slavery in Egypt and the journey through the wilderness to Sinai. Chapters 25-40 are devoted to the construction of a place of worship as the appropriate recognition of the divine kingship established through the covenant.

A much bigger claim, however, can be made for Exodus 19-24. The “Book of the Covenant,” as Moses himself entitles this unit (Exod 24:7), along with the Book of Deuteronomy as an addition or supplement (28:69 MT, 29:01 EVV), forms the heart of the old covenant. And it is in the interpretation of the content and relation of this covenant to the new covenant that is the basis of all the major divisions among Christians—i.e., all denominational differences derive ultimately from different understandings of the relation of the covenant at Sinai to ourselves today.

This brief exposition of Exodus 19-24 bases accurate exposition of this text on (1) closer attention to the larger literary structure, (2) exegesis based on the cultural, historical, and linguistic setting of the text, and (3) consideration of the larger story of scripture (metanarrative) and explicit indications of how this text fits within this larger story. Where and how Exodus 19-24 fits into the larger story of Scripture will be briefly detailed at both beginning and end of the present study—

framing all analysis of the covenant at Sinai as bookends.² In between, attention will be given to the literary structure of Exodus 19-24, and afterwards exegesis will be focused on the divine purpose of the covenant in Exod 19:5-6, the first four of the Ten Commandments, and the ceremony of covenant ratification in Exod 24:1-11.

Exodus 19-24 within the Larger Story of Scripture

The biblical narrative begins with a creator God who is the maker of our world and indeed, the entire universe. We humans are the crowning achievement of his creative work. There is a difference, moreover, between humans and animals, in fact, between us and all other creatures: we alone have been made as the image of this creator God and given special tasks to perform on behalf of the Creator.

According to Gen 1:26-28, the divine image defines human life, both ontologically and functionally, in terms of a covenant relationship with the creator God on the one hand, and with the creation on the other. The former may be captured by the term sonship and is implied by Gen 5:1-3:

By juxtaposing the divine creation of Adam in the image of God and the subsequent human creation of Seth in the image of Adam, the transmission of the image of God through this genealogical line is implied, as well as the link between sonship and the image of God. As Seth is a son of Adam, so Adam is a son of God. Language is being stretched here as a literal son of God is certainly not in view, but nonetheless

the writer is using an analogy to make a point.³

The latter relationship, i.e., between humans and the creation, may be reflected in the terms kingship and servanthood. As Randall Garr has shown, it is interesting to note that in the Ninth Century Aramaic Tell Fakhariyeh Inscription, *šalmā'* ("image") refers to the king's majestic power and rule in relation to his subjects, while *d^emûthā'* ("likeness") refers to the king's petitionary role and relation to the deity.⁴ Thus, the ancient Near Eastern data confirm, correspond to, and illustrate precisely the terms used in the biblical text. Furthermore, as Gen 2:4-25 shows, the Adamic son is like a priest in a garden sanctuary. He must first learn the ways of God in order to exercise the rule of God as God himself would.⁵ The biblical narrative, then, is focused at the start on establishing the rule of God through covenant relationship: *kingdom through covenant*.

However, the first humans rebelled against the creator God. As a result, there is chaos, discord, and death in the creation at every level. The destructive path chosen by the first humans led to a downward spiral of corruption and violence until divine intervention was required. God judged the human race by a flood and made a new beginning with Noah and his family. Noah is presented in the narrative as a new Adam. As soon as the dry land appears out of the chaos of the floodwaters, Noah is placed there and commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:1); i.e., he is given Adam's commission or mandate. The correspondence to Genesis 1 is striking. Eventually, however, the family of Noah end up in the same chaos and corruption as the family of the first Adam. With the Tower of Babel, the

nations are lost and scattered over the face of the earth.

So, God made another new start, this time with Abraham. Abraham and his family, called Israel, is another Adam, who will be God's true humanity. God makes great promises to Abraham in chapter 12. These promises are enshrined eventually in a covenant made with him and his descendants in chapters 15 and 17. Space permits here only a brief consideration of how God's promises to Abraham carry forward the focus on kingdom through covenant.

The call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 consists of two commands (*go* in 12:1 and *be a blessing* in 12:2). Each command is followed by three promises. The first promise is "I will make you into a great nation", and the last promise is "all the clans / families of the earth will be blessed in you" (12:1, 3). We need to pay attention to the terms used here to describe both the people of God and the other peoples of the world. God promises to make Abram into a great *nation*; this is the word *gôy* in Hebrew. The other people groups of the world are called *clans* or *families*; here the Hebrew term is *mišpāhâ*.

First consider the term *gôy* or nation. It is highly unusual for this term to be applied to the people of God. There is in the language of the Old Testament a completely consistent usage: the word *'am* is almost always reserved for Israel. It is a *kinship* term which expresses effectively the closeness of the family/marriage relationship between God and Israel established by the covenant made at Sinai (Exodus 24). On the other hand, the word *gôy* is the standard term for the communities or other societies in the world excluding Israel. So consistent is this use, that when we see something different, we

need to ask why. For example, a few cases are found where the term *gôy* is applied to Israel in a pejorative sense. Sometimes Israel is called “nation” and not “people” because the author may wish to communicate that because of her wickedness she is behaving as if she were not the people of God. Her actions and attitudes indicate she is like those communities who have no special status as the chosen people of God (e.g., Judg 2:20).

Why, then, in Genesis 12 does God speak of Abram becoming a great *gôy* or nation? The basic meaning of *gôy* is an *organized* community of people having *governmental, political, and social structure*. This contrasts with the fact that the other *nations* are derogatorily termed *mišpāḥâ* in Genesis 12. This word refers to an amorphous kin group larger than an extended family and smaller than a tribe.

The background of Genesis 12 is chapters 10 and 11. There we have the history of Babel (Genesis 11), where we see a complete confidence and naïve optimism about human achievement and effort. Man is at the centre of his world, and he can achieve anything. This philosophy comes under divine judgment in Genesis 11 and results in the nations being lost and scattered over the face of the earth (Gen 11:9 and chapter 10). By contrast, Genesis 12 presents us with a political structure brought into being by the word of God, with God at the center and God as the governmental head and rule of that community. In other words, we have the Kingdom of God brought into being by covenant (between God and Abram). The author’s choice of terms emphasizes that the family of Abram is a real kingdom with eternal power and significance, while the so-called kingdoms of this world have no lasting power or significance.

The word in Hellenistic Greek which best conveys this meaning is the term *polis*, normally translated “city.” In our modern world we tend to think of cities as great centers of dense population in contrast to rural areas which by definition are sparsely populated. In the first century, however, in contrast to our culture, the term “city” conveyed the idea of an organized community with governmental headship and appropriate political and social structure—what we normally convey by the English word *state*. Thus, the promises of God to Abraham really did entail the *city of God* as the author to the Hebrews puts it, accurately explaining for his readers the meaning of Genesis 12. Abraham was to go to a country God would indicate to him and reside there—even if as an alien and a stranger: he was awaiting “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

Thus, Abraham, and Israel, have inherited an Adamic role.⁶ Yahweh refers to the nation as his *son* in Exod 4:22-23. The divine purpose in the covenant established between God and Israel at Sinai is unfolded in Exod 19:3-6. As a kingdom of priests they will function to make the ways of God known to the nations and also bring the nations into a right relationship to God. Israel will display to the rest of the world within its covenant community the kind of relationships, first to God and then to one another and to the physical world, that God intended originally for all of humanity. In fact, through Abraham’s family, God purposes and plans to bring blessing to all the nations of the world. In this way, through the family of Abraham, through Israel, his last Adam, he will bring about a resolution of the sin and death caused by the first Adam.

Since Israel is located geographically on the one and only communications link between the great superpowers of the ancient world (Egypt and Mesopotamia), in this position she will show the nations how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in a truly human way, and how to be faithful stewards of the earth's resources. This is the meaning of Israel's sonship.

The promises of God to Abraham focused on two things: descendants and land. When we come to the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, which constitute the Mosaic Covenant or Covenant with Israel, we have the fulfillment of these promises. First, God has greatly increased the descendants of Abraham so that they are innumerable, like the sand upon the seashore or the stars of the night sky. Second, he has given the land of Canaan to them.

God's plan and purpose, however, have not changed. He wants to bless the descendants of Abraham and, through them, all the nations. In fact, his plan is to restore his broken and ruined creation through Israel. As they come out of Egypt and before they enter the land, God makes an agreement with Israel. The purpose of this agreement or covenant is to enable them to enjoy the blessings he wants to give them and be the blessing to the other nations. This covenant will show them how to be his true humanity. It will direct, guide, and lead them to have a right relationship with God and a right relationship with everyone else in the covenant community. It will also teach them how to have a right relationship to all the creation, to be good stewards of the earth's resources. We might say, then, that the Mosaic Covenant is given at this time to administer the fulfillment of the

divine promises to Abraham and to the nation as a whole, and through them to the entire world.

Excursus: Labelling Covenants

This article is entitled "the Covenant at Sinai," but what is the biblical terminology? From the point of view of the New Testament—i.e., Latinized English for "new covenant"—it is called the "old covenant" in 2 Cor 3:14 (and compare v. 15). Hebrews 8 and 9 also use the term "first" for this covenant. In the Old Testament, however, it is commonly called the Torah (Law) or the Law of Moses (Exod 24:12).

In Scripture, covenants are normally named according to the human partner. The covenant in Genesis 6-9 is between God and Noah. This is expanded to include his family and, through them, all of humanity. It is fair to call this "the covenant with Noah." The covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 is called the "covenant with Abram" in Gen 15:18. Since it is passed directly on to Isaac and Jacob, it is called the covenant with Isaac and also the covenant with Jacob in Lev 26:42. Later we find the term "the covenant with the fathers" (Deut 4:31) referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We can conveniently and legitimately call it the "covenant with Abram/Abraham." The covenant made at Sinai is simply called "the book of the covenant" in Exod 24:7. In Exod 34:27 this same covenant is with Moses and with Israel. Hence some scholars have called it the Mosaic Covenant. It could just as well be called the Israelite Covenant or Covenant with Israel. In any case, it is never called the Sinai Covenant in Scripture, and it is more in accordance with the pattern of Scripture to name it according to the human partner. Later, when God makes a covenant with David, it is called

just that, his “Covenant with David” (2 Chr 13:5, 21:7, Ps 89:3, Jer 33:21). Finally God makes what is called a “New Covenant” in Jer 31:31.

The Literary Structure of Exodus 19–24

One of the reasons why both popular and scholarly discussions of the relation between the Old Testament and the New have resulted in a variety of theological disputes is directly due to a failure to consider properly the literary shape of this text. Instead what is foisted upon the text is a framework or structure it does not clearly indicate or possess.

| | |
|--|-------|
| Outline of Exodus 19-40 | |
| (1) The Background | 19 |
| (2) The Ten Words | 20 |
| (3) The Judgments | 21-23 |
| (4) The Ceremony of Covenant Ratification | 24 |
| (5) Worship—the Recognition of Divine Kingship | 25-40 |

The broad outline and shape of the text is indicated by headings and the use of specific terms. At the heart of the text are two sections: (1) the “Ten Words” in chapter 20 and (2) the “Judgments” (or “Laws” / “Ordinances”) in chapters 21-23. These are the actual headings in the text. Exodus 20:1 introduces the matter simply: “And God spoke all these words.” While Christians commonly refer to this section as the “Ten Commandments,” the commands which form the basis of the covenant are simply referred to as the “Ten Words” in Exod 34:28 and Deut 4:13, 10:4. The precise expression, “the Ten Commandments” occurs nowhere in the Old Testament, although in a general way the Ten Words are included when reference is made to the commands of Yahweh. They are frequently referred to as commandments in the New Testament (Matthew 5; 19:18, 19;

Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Rom 13:9; 7:7, 8; 1 Tim 1:9, 10), and that is why the preferred term today is the Ten Commandments. So, in regard to the structure of the text, first we have “the Words,” then the “Judgments” in chapters 21-23.

However, it is not only the headings but also the contents that clearly distinguish the two sections. The Ten Words are presented as absolute commands or prohibitions, usually in the second person singular. They are general injunctions not related to a specific social situation. They could be described as prescriptive law since no fines or punishments are specified. As an example, “You (singular) shall not steal!” The construction *lô’* + imperfect in Hebrew is durative and non-specific. You shall not steal today, not tomorrow, not this week, not this month, not this year—as a general rule, never. By contrast, the Judgments are presented as case laws. These are court decisions functioning as precedents. They are normally in the format of conditional sentences. Here the fundamental principles embodied in the Ten Words are applied in particular to a specific social context. They could be described as descriptive law since they impose fines and punishments. As an example, Exod 21:28-32 addresses the case where a bull gores a human and looks at whether this was the animal’s habit or not. So chapter 20 and chapters 21-23 constitute specific sections of the covenant simply labelled “the words” and “the Judgments.”

Commandments: The Ten Words (Exod 20:1; 34:28; Deut 4:13)

- Absolute commands usually second person singular prohibition
- General injunctions not related to a specific social situation
- Prescriptive law—no fines or punishments mentioned

Ordinances (“Judgments” – KJV; “Laws” – NIV)

- Case decisions, case laws, judicial precedents
- The fundamental principles embodied in the Ten Commandments are applied in particular to a specific social context
- Descriptive law imposing fines and punishments (usually in the form of “if... then” statements or conditional sentences)

These two distinct sections to the covenant are clearly referred to in chapter 24, where the covenant ratification ceremony is described. Carefully note the particular terms used in vv. 1-8 of chapter 24 as follows. Exodus 24:1, according to the clause pattern and the topic, connects and directly follows 20:21 and 22. In vv. 21-26 of chapter 20 and vv. 1-2 of chapter 24 Yahweh speaks to Moses from the cloud on Mt. Sinai and gives instructions concerning altars and who will ascend the mountain for the covenant ratification meal. In 24:3 Moses comes and gives a report to the people: “And Moses came and reported to the people all the words and all the Judgments, and all the people responded with one voice, ‘All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do.’” Note that Moses reported “all the words” and “all the Judgments.” These two terms clearly refer to the Ten Words in chapter 20:2-17 and the Judgments in chapters 21-23. When the people say, “All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do,” the term “the words” is an abbreviated form of the expression “all the words and all the Judgments” occurring earlier in the verse. Similarly, in the next verse, 24:4, we read, “And Moses wrote all the words of Yahweh.” Here, again, “the words of Yahweh” is a short way of saying, “the words and the Judgments.”

The shortening of long titles is typical in this culture. Much later, the Hebrew canon, whose full title is “the Law and the Prophets and the Writings” may be simply shortened to “the Law.” For example, Paul states that he is quoting from “the Law” and then cites a passage from Isaiah (1 Cor 14:21). So “Law” must be short for “Law and Prophets.” Alternatively, since “the Judgments” are simply unfolding “the ten words” in practical situations, the expression “the words” in 24:3 and 4 may refer to the whole (words and Judgments) by specifying just “the words.” So the two parts or sections of the covenant are written down by Moses. And this is called “the book of the covenant” in 24:7.

Chapters 19 and 24 form the bookends to this “book of the covenant.” At the beginning, chapter 19 provides the setting in space and time, the divine purpose of the covenant, and the preparation of the people for the revelation of Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. At the end, chapter 24 describes the ceremony of covenant ratification. Following this chapters 25-40 describe the construction of a place of worship showing the proper response to the divine kingship established among the people by means of the covenant.

The shape and structure of Exodus 19-24, then, is clearly marked in the text. Chapters 20-23 constitute “the Book of the Covenant” consisting of “the Words” (chapter 20) and “the Judgments” (chapters 21-23). Chapters 19 and 24 frame the Book of the Covenant as bookends, with chapter 19 providing the background and setting and chapter 24 describing the ceremony of covenant ratification.

As has been noted for some time, the structure of this text is parallel in broad outline to the form and structure of international treaties in the ancient Near

Eastern culture of the fifteenth - thirteenth centuries B.C. Parallels between the Book of Deuteronomy and the Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties are more striking than between the Book of the Covenant in Exodus and the Hittite Treaties, but the parallels are noteworthy nonetheless. International treaties followed a specific form: (1) Preamble (author identification), (2) History of Past Relationship Between the Parties, (3) Basic Stipulation, (4) Detailed Stipulations, (5) Document Clause, (6) Witnesses, (7) Blessings and Curses. A chart portrays how “the Book of the Covenant” broadly conforms to this pattern:

| Structure of the Covenant in Exodus | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| (1) | Preamble | 20:1 |
| (2) | Historical Prologue | 20:2 |
| (3) | Stipulations | |
| | (a) Basic | 20:3-17 |
| | (b) Detailed | 21-23 |
| (4) | Document Clause | 24 |

Unlike Deuteronomy, the “Blessings and Curses” section is absent here. Nonetheless, the commands are enshrined in what would have been clearly recognized at the time as a covenant or treaty form. The implications of this form for proper theological understanding will be developed later. This much is clear: the covenant is formulated as a suzerain-vassal treaty in order to define God as Father and King, and Israel as obedient son in a relationship of loyal love, obedience, and trust. This is confirmed by the fact that the epiphany on Mount Sinai is heralded by the blowing of a trumpet (Exod 19:16, 19, 20:18), a clear signal in Israel for the accession and coming of a king (2 Sam 15:10; 1 Kgs 1:34, 39, 41; 2 Kgs 9:13).⁷ Space permits now only a brief analysis of the divine purpose of the covenant as given in Exodus 19, a summary treatment of

the Ten Words, and a consideration of the ceremony of covenant ratification and its significance before the implications for Christian theology are spelled out.

Selected Exegesis of the Covenant at Sinai

The Divine Purpose of the Covenant (Exod 19:5-6)

As already stated, chapter 19 provides the background to the Book of the Covenant and acts as a bookend on the opening side of the covenant document. Israel arrives at Mount Sinai in her travels through the desert to the Promised Land. Central to the chapter is the flurry of movement by Moses going up and down the mountain. Three sequences of up and down dominate the section: (1) 19:3 (up) and 19:7 (down), (2) 19:8 (up) and 19:14 (down), and (3) 19:20 (up) and 19:25 (down). These three sequences form the boundaries of three sections within the chapter delimiting (1) the divine purpose of the covenant, (2) the preparation of the people to meet Yahweh and receive his revelation and Torah,⁸ and (3) the actual epiphany of God on the mountain. The literary structure of the chapter, then, is as follows:

| Literary Structure of Exodus 19 | | |
|---------------------------------|--|----------|
| (1) | The Setting in Time and Space | 19:1-2 |
| (2) | The Divine Purpose in the Covenant | 19:3-8 |
| (3) | The Human Preparation for the Covenant | 19:9-15 |
| (4) | The Revelation of Yahweh at Sinai | 19:16-25 |

The constant ascending and descending provides a vivid portrayal of the distance between the people and God and the need for a mediator. It then emphasizes the miracle of a covenant relationship of love, loyalty, and trust between

parties such as these.⁹

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession, for the whole earth is mine. You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD (Exod 19:3-8, NIV).

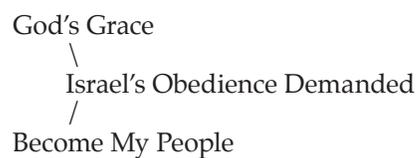
After the place and time in history is specified, vv. 3-8 detail the purpose of the covenant from God's point of view. What we have in these verses is a proposal of the covenant in a nutshell: (1) verse 4 describes the past history of relationship between the two covenant partners, (2) vv. 5-6 propose a relationship of complete loyalty and obedience of Israel as a vassal to Yahweh as the great king and promise certain blessings, and (3) in vv. 7-8 the people agree to the proposal. Thus, even in this covenant proposal in vv. 3-8 the form and structure corresponds to the formula of ancient Near Eastern covenants and treaties.

Verse 4 is a marvellous encapsulation of the past relationship between the people and Yahweh using the imagery of being carried out of trouble on the wings of an eagle: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." This brief statement summarizes the abject condition of the people

in slavery in Egypt and the signs and wonders performed by Yahweh both in the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea that delivered and freed them from slavery. It also speaks of the way in which God had directed them through the mazes and mirages of the desert using a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. This form of leadership also protected them from extreme heat by day and cold by night. Every day bread rained from heaven for their nourishment and water gushed from the rock to satisfy their thirst. Our culture today can picture this from the movie world in the miraculous rescue of Gandalf by the eagles in the *Lord of the Rings*. God had protected the people and provided for them during the difficult desert journey, bearing them on eagles' wings, so to speak, and had so arranged their itinerary as to bring them to himself, that is, to the place already prepared as a meeting place between God and men, to Sinai, the mountain of God (Exod 3:1).

Verses 5-6 are constructed in the form of a conditional sentence: "if you do this ... then you will be ... and you will be..." The protasis or "if clause" specifies absolute obedience to the covenant stipulations. The apodosis or "then clause" defines the result in terms of relationship to Yahweh: they will belong to him in two ways (1) as a king's treasure, and (2) as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Before explaining the meaning of the terms defining the divine goal in the covenant relationship, the relation of vv. 5-6 to v. 4 must be stressed. Perhaps a diagram may be used to picture this:



Verse 4 shows that the motivation for concluding and keeping a covenant with Yahweh is sovereign grace. The creator God has chosen to display favor and kindness to Israel and has acted in history to redeem them and make them his people. A lot of misunderstanding has been caused by comparing the old covenant to the new in terms of “law” and “grace.” This text is clear: the old covenant is based upon grace and grace motivates the keeping of the covenant just as we find in the new covenant. God had protected the people and provided for them during the difficult desert journey, bearing them on eagles’ wings, so to speak, and had so arranged their itinerary as to bring them to himself, that is, to Sinai, the mountain of God. This teaches, then, that the basis for the covenant from the point of view of the human partner was confidence and trust in Yahweh as established by the events of the Exodus and gratitude to Yahweh. What is unlike the new covenant is that covenant keeping depends on Israel’s promise to obey.

Verses 5 and 6, then, describe the purpose, from God’s point of view, for which the covenant was given to the people and the nature of the relationship between God and Israel that will result from ratifying the covenant proposed by Yahweh.

Personal Treasure

The first purpose of the covenant is that these chosen, redeemed people might become God’s own possession and private treasure. The word in Hebrew that is translated “possession” is the same word used in 1 Chron 29:3 for King David’s own private cache or vault of gold and silver, his personal store of all things precious and valuable.¹⁰ If we were to travel back in time to the ancient Near East, we would

find at capital cities such as Hattusa (Boğazkale, Turkey) and Ugarit (Syria) the rich treasure-vaults of the kings. It is difficult for us to imagine since we have no monarchy such as the monarchs of Europe in the nineteenth century. Perhaps something comparable today would be the Crown Jewels in London. A causal clause¹¹ explains that the whole world belongs to Yahweh. In one sense, the king is owner or possessor of the entire country, but in addition to this, he may also have a personal treasure. The whole world is like a ring on God’s hand, and his chosen people are the jewel in that ring.

Kingdom of Priests

Although some expositions consider the meaning of “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” separately, in a real sense they should be taken together. The text clearly divides the goal of the covenant relationship into two statements. The first is supported by an explanation or reason. A second statement combines the phrases “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” either as a hendiadys or at least as an expression similar to Hebrew poetry where a pair of parallel lines is employed to consider a topic from two slightly variant but similar viewpoints to create a full-orbed perspective on some proposition. These phrases will be explained here, each in turn, but with the meaning of the other phrase kept in mind.

First, consider the phrase “kingdom of priests” found in this text. The full sentence is “You will belong to me as a kingdom of priests” (*tihyû lî mamleket kôhⁿnîm*). The *lamed* preposition in the phrase *lî* clearly indicates possession.¹² The Hebrew word “kingdom” may refer to the domain or realm which is ruled, or to the exercise of kingly rule and sover-

eignty.¹³ The phrase “kingdom of priests,” therefore, could mean a domain of priests whom God rules or, alternatively, the exercise of royal office by those who are in fact priests. It is difficult to decide since the *lamed* preposition suggests the former reading while the term “priests” modifying “kingdom” suggests the latter. The function of a priest is to bring others into the presence of God. Perhaps both meanings are intended so that both the relationship between God and Israel and the relationship between Israel and the world is indicated. The ambiguity serves the theme “kingdom through covenant.”

We see, then, that Israel, the last Adam, will belong to God as a people under his rule and will exercise royal rule by spending time in the worship of God so necessary for the task of ruling for God and under God, and by bringing the nations into the divine presence. They would be a people completely devoted to the service of God. The rite of circumcision as practiced in Israel is an excellent illustration of this. Probably the background for understanding circumcision is Egypt, where only the aristocracy, the highest order of priests and the noblest warriors along with the Pharaoh and his family were circumcised, because only they were completely devoted to the service of the gods.¹⁴ In Deut 10:16 the command to Israel, “circumcise your hearts,” is an exposition of the earlier command “to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good” (NASB). Thus, circumcision is an apt expression for the idea: be completely devoted to Yahweh.

In *Dominion and Dynasty*, Stephen

Dempster analyzes the phrase “kingdom of priests” in a similar way:

The final phrase designates Israel as a particular type of kingdom. Instead of being a kingdom of a particular king, it will be a kingdom marked by priesthood; that is service of God on behalf of people and *vice versa*. It will be “a kingdom run not by politicians depending upon strength and connivance but by priests depending upon faith in Yahweh, a servant nation instead of a ruling nation.” Israel will thus redefine the meaning of dominion—service. This will be its distinctive task, its distinguishing characteristic among the world of nations.¹⁵

Holy Nation

The parallel phrase to “kingdom of priests” is “holy nation” (*gôy qādôš* in Hebrew). As already mentioned, this phrase is not necessarily identical in meaning to “kingdom of priests” but both phrases function as a pair, like parallel lines in Hebrew poetry to paint a three-dimensional picture in one’s mind.

The term *gôy* or nation is the parallel term to kingdom. It is an economic, political, and social structure in which a final governmental headship operates. It therefore clearly reminds us of Gen 12:2 as explained earlier. This is the City of God, the Kingdom of God. In fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, Israel, by virtue of the Mosaic Covenant, will provide under the direct rule of God a model of God’s rule over human life which is the divine aim for the entire world.

“Nation” is modified by the adjective “holy.” What is a “holy” nation? Unfortunately, the term holy is one that is not very well understood by the church today. Definitions commonly given are “pure” or “set apart.” Such definitions are erroneous because the meaning is determined by etymology rather than usage, and the

etymology is completely speculative. The idea that “holy” means “set apart” can be traced to the influence of Baudissin who proposed in 1878 that the root of “holy” in Hebrew, i.e., *qdš*, is derived from *qd-* “to cut.”¹⁶ Extensive research recently done by a French evangelical scholar, Claude-Bernard Costecalde, has cast better light on the meaning of this term since his analysis was based on the way the word is used rather than on hypothetical origins.¹⁷ Costecalde’s study examined all occurrences in the Old Testament and in ancient Near Eastern literature of the same time (e.g., Akkadian and Ugaritic). Not surprisingly, he discovered that the biblical meaning was similar to that in the languages of the cultures surrounding Israel. The basic meaning is not “separated,” but rather “consecrated to” or “devoted to.” This is also the basic meaning of ἅγιος, the counterpart in Greek.¹⁸

Noteworthy is the passage in Exodus 3 where Moses encounters Yahweh in the burning bush and is asked to remove his sandals because he is standing on “holy ground.” This is the first instance in the Old Testament of the root *qdš* in either an adjectival or noun form. In the narrative, Moses is commanded to stay away from the bush, from the place from which God speaks, and not from the holy ground. There is nothing inaccessible or set apart about the holy ground. Moreover, his fright and shock come from a revelation of God, and not from the holiness of the place. The “holy ground” (Exod 3:5) encompasses a larger space than just the bush from which God speaks and is equivalent to “the mountain of God” in 3:1. The act of removing one’s sandals, like the act of the nearest relative in Ruth 4:7, is a ceremony or rite of de-possession well-known in the culture of that time. Moses

must acknowledge that this ground belongs to God and enter into an attitude of consecration. Thus, rather than marking an item as set apart, “holy” ground is ground prepared, consecrated, or devoted to the meeting of God and man.

A holy nation, then, is one prepared and consecrated for fellowship with God and one completely devoted to him. Instructions in the Pentateuch are often supported by the statement from Yahweh, “for I am holy.” Such statements show that complete devotion to God on the part of Israel would show itself in two ways: (1) identifying with his ethics and morality, and (2) sharing his concern for the broken in the community. The commands and instructions in Leviticus 19 and 20 are bounded by the claim that Yahweh is holy (19:2; 20:26) and include concern against mistreating the alien and the poor, the blind and the deaf. In the Judgments of the Book of the Covenant, some instructions relate to the oppression of orphans and widows (Exod 22:23). God was concerned about the rights of the slave (e.g., Exod 21:2-11) and the disenfranchised in society. Over the past thirty years, we have heard the strident voice of the feminist, of the anti-nuclear protest, and of the gay-rights movement. But God hears the voice of those who are broken in body, in economy, and in spirit. If we are in covenant relationship with Him, we must, like Him, hear the voice that is too weak to cry out.

God also jealously protects what is devoted to Him. His anger flares when his holiness is violated, as in the case of Uzzah (2 Sam 6:7), who extended his hand to touch the Ark of the Covenant. As also in Psalm 2, when the kings and princes of the earth gather to touch the Anointed of the Lord, he flares out in anger to protect

his King. As in the case of Paul in the New Testament, who in persecuting the church was reaching up to heaven as it were and to shake his rebellious fist at Jesus, the Anointed One (= the Christ), and slap him in the face, and it resulted in his calling himself the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15).

Explanation of the terms “personal treasure,” “kingdom of priests,” and “holy nation,” then, shows the goal and purpose for Israel. Although the language is different from that of Gen 1:26-28 and Gen 12:1-3, we can clearly see that the covenant at Sinai achieves and administers in the Iron Age, through the nation as a whole, the purposes of the promises given to Abraham. God is establishing his kingdom through covenant. The covenant entails relationship with God on the one hand and relationship with the world on the other hand. Israel will model to the world what it means to have a relationship with God, what it means to treat each other in a genuinely human way, and how to be good stewards of the earth’s resources. As priests, they will mediate the blessings of God to the world and be used to bring the rest of the world to know God.

Christopher J. H. Wright observes that Exod 19:5-6 has a chiasmic structure as follows:

Now then, if you really obey my voice and keep my covenant,
 A you will be for me a special personal possession
 B among all the peoples;
 B’ for indeed to me belongs the whole earth
 A’ but you, you will be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.¹⁹

Wright states,

After the initial conditional clause

(the first line), there is a chiasmic structure of four phrases, in which the two central lines portray God’s universal ownership of the world and its nations, while the two outer lines express his particular role for Israel. This structure also makes clear that the double phrase “priestly kingdom and holy nation” stands in apposition to “personal possession.”... The *status* is to be a special treasured possession. The *role* is to be a priestly and holy community in the midst of the nations.²⁰

The literary structure as explained by Wright re-enforces the exposition here of Israel’s covenant relationship with God and with the world that takes up the sonship and kingship of the divine image in Genesis 1.

The new covenant succeeds where the old covenant failed. The purposes of the Mosaic Covenant are now being fulfilled in the church. The Apostle Peter calls the church God’s “special treasure,” a “kingdom of priests,” and a “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9-10). God has forged both Jews and non-Jews into his new [Adam] humanity according to Eph 2:15.

The Ten Words (Exodus 20)

A brief explanation of the Ten Words will make plain the claim made repeatedly that the Mosaic Covenant entails a right relationship to God and social justice in human relationships. Some general observations on the Ten Words are fundamental to a proper understanding of this Covenant.

The Ten Words form the heart of the covenant between God and Israel at Sinai. The Book of the Covenant, as we have seen, consists of the Ten Words and the Judgments. The former constitute the basic and fundamental requirements of the covenant, the latter are detailed stipulations based on the Ten Words

which apply them in practical ways to specific social situations, and draw out and nuance their meaning in various contingencies and circumstances.

Attention has already been drawn to the fact that the earliest tradition in the biblical text refers to them as the “Ten Words” (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4) and not, e.g., as the “Ten Commandments” as we now know them. There is, in fact, a particular reason for this and for why there are precisely ten instructions. A connection is being made between the covenant at Sinai and the creation. In the creation narrative, God creates the universe by simply speaking, by his word. In the Hebrew Text, the verb *wayyōmer*, “and he [= God] said” occurs ten times. In a very real way, the entire creation depends or hangs upon the word of God. Here, the Book of the Covenant is what forges Israel into a nation. It is her national constitution, so to speak. And it is also Ten Words that brings about the birth of the nation. Like the creation, Israel as a nation hangs upon the Ten Words for her very being.

Although the biblical text tells us that there are Ten Words, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant traditions have differed in enumerating them. This is due in large measure to the fact that the repetition of the Ten Words in Deuteronomy 5 entail some slight variations in the text, doubtless due to further reflection on the part of Moses, and yields, therefore, a different construal of the whole. The focus here is on Exod 20:3-17 where a clear structure in the text divides the Ten Words into four commands defining Israel’s relationship to Yahweh and six commands dealing with human interpersonal relationships within the covenant community. They define a genuinely human way to treat

each other.

Note in particular that a reason or rationale is given for keeping the first four commands introduced by *kî* = “because” or “for” (20:5, 6, 11). One reason is supplied after commands one and two, and one each after the third and fourth commands. This is a hint, structurally, to consider the first four commands in pairs.

No reason or rationale is given for keeping the last six commands. These entail the basic and inalienable rights of every human and have been recognized by the customs and laws of every society.²¹ These “laws” can be paralleled in law codes from other societies in the ancient Near East:

| Law Codes of the Ancient Near East | |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| The Laws of Ur-Nammu | 2050 B.C. |
| The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar | 1850 B.C. |
| The Laws of Eshnunna | c. 1800 B.C. |
| The Code of Hammurapi | c. 1700 B.C. |
| The Middle Assyrian Laws | c. 1100 B.C. |
| The Old Hittite Laws | 1280 B.C. |

Although the Ten Words expresses these laws negatively, they could also be expressed positively in terms in the inalienable rights of every human person:

- Thou shalt not murder = the right of every person to their own life
- Thou shalt not commit adultery = the right of every person to their own home
- Thou shalt not steal = the right of every person to their own property
- Thou shalt not bear false witness = the right of every person to their own reputation

No society can endure that does not respect the basic inalienable rights of every human person. Since the last six commands can be paralleled in the law codes of other societies in the ancient Near East and were well known to the Israelites, no rationale for keeping them

need be supplied in the text. The first four commands, however, as Andrew and Stamm have argued, are unparalleled in the ancient Near East.²² Certainly the command to worship only one God, the command not to construct or worship idols, and the command to observe the Sabbath are absolutely unique. In fact, the seventh day in Mesopotamia was considered unlucky. These commands constitute a new revelation, and God graciously supplies a rationale for keeping them so that Israel may grasp an adequate motivation for following a practice that was hitherto unprecedented.

The question must also be raised as to why the commands are given as prohibitions and why they are formulated in the Second Person Singular. Why not express them positively as inalienable rights? Why not indicate by a second person plural that they are addressed to all? The reason for this is simple. God wants each and every individual person to think first of the inalienable rights of the other person and not first about their own inalienable rights. This explains both the negative formulation and the second person singular.

Right from the start and all throughout the history of Israel, attempts were made to boil down, digest, and summarize the instructions of the covenant—both the many judgments that elaborate the Ten Words in practical situations as well as the Ten Words themselves. For example, Leviticus 18-20 contains a collection of instructions that develop further in particular the last six of the Ten Words. It is interesting to note that at the mid- and end-points of chapter 19 we find the instruction “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (vv. 18, 34).²³ Jesus and other rabbis of the first century demon-

strated exegetical insight to observe that this was a summary statement of the various instructions in this section of Leviticus and indeed of the last portion of the Ten Words that they elaborate. Later on, the prophets and poets used two pairs of words as summaries of the Torah. One is the pair “lovingkindness and truth” and another is “justice and righteousness.” Each pair of words is a hendiadys—communicating a single idea through two words. The first pair speaks of faithful loyal love and the second speaks of social justice. These are attempts to boil down the covenant stipulations into a single sound bite. They are important because they show that the instructions represent faithful love as well as social justice in human inter-relationships.

Space permits in this brief treatment of the Mosaic Covenant a short explanation of each of the first four of the Ten Words as these have been more troublesome for Christians to understand than the last six.

First Command: No Other Gods Before Me

Some scholars and traditions have construed the first of the Ten Words as verses 2 and 3. Yet the fact that the covenant is broadly structured according to a Hittite treaty demonstrates plainly that v. 2, in which Yahweh states, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out from the Land of Egypt, from the house of slaves,” is, in fact, the historical prologue of the treaty so that the first command is just v. 3: “You shall have no other gods before me.” In both Roman Catholic and Lutheran interpretive traditions, the command in v. 3 and the command in v. 4 (“You shall not make for yourself an idol”) are counted as one command while the command against coveting is separated into two:

“you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” and “you shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” As Bruce Waltke notes, “according to the latter construction, the first commandment condemns false worship and the tenth commandment distinguishes wife from property.”²⁴

The interpretation of the Reformers and the creeds following in this tradition construe the text to mean we should not have any other gods before the Lord, i.e., in preference to the Lord. Thus the prohibition is understood in terms of priorities. According to the Westminster Confession, God must be the highest priority in our attitudes, thoughts, words, and ways. Others have interpreted the prohibition philosophically and argued that the main point is to establish absolute monotheism and rule out the existence of other deities.

The command, however, does appear to acknowledge the existence of other gods. In courses taught in the history of religion at universities in the western world, the suggestion is frequently made that at an earlier stage of the history of Israel, the people were henotheists—that is, they believed in the existence of many gods but consciously chose to worship only one. At a later point in the development of Israel’s religion, henotheism gave way to monotheism, i.e., the belief that there *is* only one god.

Bruce Waltke alleviates this problem by distinguishing between religious command and theological statements:

For theological statements of whether other gods exist, we turn to Deuteronomy 4:39: “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.” Furthermore, Deuteronomy 32:17-21 identifies idol worship as bowing down to demons. Verse 17 reads,

“They sacrificed to demons, which are not God [*lō’-^olōhīm*, “no-God”].” These declarative sentences serve as foundations for theological beliefs and doctrines.

On the other hand, religious commands deal with subjective reality. The truth is, regardless of the existence of other gods, human beings create and worship what is “no-God” (1 Cor. 8:4-8). As stated above, Calvin noted that the human heart is a perpetual idol factory. Thus, rather than tacitly assuming the existence of other gods, the commandment assumes the depravity of the human race to create and worship their own gods. The religious command reflects the reality of the human situation but does not serve as a theological statement. Other passages teach monotheism.²⁵

This distinction is extremely helpful, but, nonetheless, assumes the exegesis in terms of priorities is correct. Yet this exegesis is difficult to maintain. As John Walton notes,

the focus on God as the highest priority is as far back as the LXX, which translated the Hebrew *‘l pny* (“before me”) with the Greek preposition *plēn*, “except.” However, if Hebrew meant to say “except” there were several ways to do this (e.g., *‘ak* or *raq*). Similarly, if the Hebrew had intended to express priority, it could have used language such as that found in Deut 4:12 or Isa 45:21.²⁶

In an exhaustive study of the use of the preposition *‘l pny*- (“before”) plus personal object in the Hebrew Bible, Walton shows that the meaning is consistently spatial. The linguistic data, then, demand that a spatial sense be considered as the main option.

In the past, students of the text have avoided this interpretation because they could not understand how it could make any sense. Data from the ancient Near Eastern culture now illuminate how a spatial sense is eminently suitable. In the cul-

ture of the ancient Near East at this time, the gods operated within a pantheon, a divine assembly. John Walton argues that the first commandment is distinguishing Yahweh from this common understanding of deity in the ancient world and his analysis is worth citing in full:

[W]hen the first commandment prohibits other gods in the presence of Yahweh, it is ruling out the concept that He operates within a pantheon, a divine assembly, or with a consort. J. Bottéro compares this system to that of a king at the head of the state with his family and functionaries around him operating in a structured hierarchy.²⁷

Having this image as background suggests that the Israelites were not to imagine any other gods in the presence of Yahweh. Scholars could have arrived at this meaning by simple lexical study, but without the benefit of the ancient Near Eastern material, the results of the lexical study made no sense to interpreters. Consequently, they devised alternative explanations, even though when the prepositional combination that occurs in the Hebrew text takes a personal object the meaning is consistently spatial. Using comparative cultural information, we have recovered a neglected sense of the text that was there all the time.

In view of the information provided from outside the Bible, this spatial sense gains credibility. In the ancient Near East the gods operated within pantheons and decisions were made in the divine assembly. Furthermore, the principal deities typically had consorts. For the gods life was a community experience. The destinies of the gods were decreed in assembly, as were the destinies of kings, cities, temples and people. The business of the gods was carried out in the presence of other gods. Lowell Handy helpfully summarizes this system as a hierarchy of authoritative deities and active deities.

The highest authority in the pantheon was responsible for ordering and maintaining earth and cosmos but was not

actively engaged in the actual work necessary to maintain the universe. The next lower level of deities performed this function. Serving under the authority of those who actually owned the universe, the active gods were expected to perform in a way that would enable the cosmos to operate smoothly. Each of the gods at this level of the pantheon had a specific sphere of authority over which to exert his or her control. Ideally, all the gods were to perform their duties in a way that would keep the universe functioning perfectly in the manner desired by the highest authority. Yet the gods, like human beings, are portrayed as having weaknesses and rivalries that kept the cosmos from operating smoothly.²⁸

Accordingly, by a comparative interpretation of the first commandment the Israelites were not to construe Yahweh as operating within a community of gods. Nor were they to imagine Him functioning as the head of a pantheon surrounded by a divine assembly, or having a consort. In short, He works alone. The concept of a pantheon/divine assembly assumed a distribution of power among many divine beings. The first commandment declared simply and unequivocally that Yahweh's authority was absolute. Divine power was not distributed among other deities or limited by the will of the assembly.

The point of the prohibition of the worship of any other gods "besides" Yahweh was to ensure that Israel's perception of divinity was to be distinct from the peoples around them. This text is readily misunderstood if the interpreter is not aware of the notions being rejected. According to this revised interpretation, the purpose of the first commandment was not simply to promote monolatry; it served the monotheistic agenda another way. Although this text does not explicitly deny the existence of other gods, it does remove them from the presence of Yahweh.

If Yahweh does not share power, authority, or jurisdiction with them, they are not gods in any meaningful sense of the word.²⁹ Thus, the first commandment does not insist on the non-existence of other gods; only that they are powerless. In so doing it disenfranchises them, not merely by declaring that they should not be worshiped; it leaves them with no status worthy of worship.³⁰

In the progressive revealing and unfolding of God in history and Scripture, the completed canon shows that God has revealed himself completely and fully in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Our lives, our service and work, our worship must recognize his authority alone. This disenfranchises all gods and idols worshipped in our culture. There is no one else for whom I am living my life than for Jesus Christ.

Second Command: No Images / Idols

The second of the Ten Words is as follows: "You shall not make for yourself an image and form which is in the heaven above and which is in the earth below and which is in the waters under the earth." As John Walton notes, popular prohibition of images has been influenced significantly by four factors: (1) Jewish interpretation, (2) controversies over icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, (3) statues of saints in the Roman Catholic tradition, and (4) debate over what constitutes art from a Christian perspective. In classical Jewish and Muslim traditions, the second command led to a prohibition of the representation of any living creature. Christian interpretation up to the nineteenth century was dominated by the idea that since God was invisible and transcendent he could not be contained in an image. Others have spiritualized the text reducing

idols to anything to which we devote our energy, money, and worth as deity.³¹

Such misunderstandings of the second command are due to a couple of factors. First is ignorance of the ancient Near Eastern ideas concerning the nature and role of idols. Walton classifies ancient Near Eastern thinking about idols into three categories.

One category is the manufacture of images. In the ancient Near Eastern mindset, only the god could approve and initiate the manufacturing process. At the end of the process, special ceremonies and rituals, in particular the mouth-opening ritual, allowed the god to inhabit the image and permitted the image to drink, eat food, and smell incense.³²

A second category concerns the use of the image. Walton notes that "in the ancient world all formal and public worship revolved around the image."³³ Thus the image involved mediation. It mediated revelation from the deity to the people and also mediated worship by the people of the deity as they brought clothes, drink, and food to honour it.

A third category has to do with ancient Near Eastern perceptions concerning the function and nature of images. According to Walton,

as a result of the induction ritual the material image was animated by the divine essence. Therefore, from now on it did not simply represent the deity, but also manifested its presence. However, this does not mean that the image had thereby been deified. The deity was the reality that was embodied in the image.³⁴

Misunderstanding of the second command is due not only to ignorance of the ancient Near Eastern culture and worldview, but also to faulty analysis of the grammar of this text. Let us con-

sider closely the exact text of the second of the Ten Words in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Below the Hebrew text is provided as well as the translations of the KJV and NIV.

Exod 20:4:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה

KJV: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing.

NIV: You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything.

Deut 5:8:

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל כָּל-תְּמוּנָה

KJV: Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing.

NIV: You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything.

The translation of the KJV represents early Jewish rabbinic understanding, no doubt mediated through the Latin Vulgate of Jerome. This is the way orthodox Jews today understand the text and also the way in which Muslims have consistently understood the text. If we believe in the analogy of Scripture, however, where we interpret the unclear by the clear, this cannot be the correct meaning of this text.

The original text in Hebrew actually conjoins the objects of the verb with *waw*, a copulative coordinating conjunction that always means “and.” A series of alternative clauses may be joined by *waw*, but this does not mean that *waw* has the same value as “or” in English.³⁵ Hebrew does have a conjunction “or,” i.e., *’ô* and it could have been used here to designate the alternative possibility. The text in Exod 20:4 is difficult, but the early rabbinic understanding does not follow the norms of grammar in Hebrew. Note that the parallel text in Deuteronomy does not have the conjunction *waw*, but employs instead a construct phrase: “a carved image / idol of any form.” Certainly the

rendering by “or” is contrary to the syntax here. It seems that interpretive traditions have molded Deut 5:8 to suit their understanding of Exod 20:4.

Given the analogy of Scripture, since the grammar of the text in Deut 5:8 is clearer, a better approach is to use the clearer text to interpret the unclear in Exod 20:4. The construction in Exod 20:4 could be understood as a hendiadys, a common figure of speech in Hebrew literature where one idea is communicated by two nouns or verbs joined by “and.” The first notable example in the Bible is Gen 3:16. The Hebrew text has “I will greatly increase your pain and your pregnancy.” This does not mean an increase of pain on the one hand and pregnancy on the other. The next sentence goes on to explain, “In pain you will bring forth children.” So the earlier expression must mean “pain in pregnancy”—an example of a hendiadys. In Exod 20:4 “a carved image and any form” must, therefore, in the light of Deut 5:8 mean “a carved image/idol in any form.” This is the approach taken by the NIV and is one that accurately follows the grammar of the Hebrew language and uses the clear meaning of one text to assist the interpretation of the other rather than impose the faulty interpretation of Exodus on the clear text in Deuteronomy.

Accurate exegesis of the second command, then, shows that this text has nothing to do with art or the representation of aspects of the created order with images. Rather, the command has to do with images used as mediators of the presence or revelation of deity from god to human or mediation of the worship of people to the deity. As Walton observes, “the prohibition of images excluded in particular that sort of worship that understood cultic rituals to meet the needs of the deity through the image.”³⁶

Third Command: Do Not Misuse the Name of God

Popular misunderstanding also exists concerning the third of the Ten Words: "You shall not lift up the name of Yahweh your God worthlessly [*laššāw*]." Once again, better knowledge of both cultural setting and linguistic data can improve our understanding of this text.

First, the basic import of this instruction is not related to the use of God's name idly in blasphemy, minced oaths, or profanity. This is certainly inappropriate and respect and reverence for the divine name is enjoined in Deut 28:58.

Second, the traditional view has focused on false oaths, as Bruce Waltke notes:

[T]he operative word is *šāw'* (KJV, "in vain"; cf. Lev. 24:15)... *Šāw'* is used in biblical Hebrew in several ways: to denote to be false or deceitful with respect to speaking (Deut. 5:20 in reference to being a false witness against a neighbour; Exod 23:1 in reference to a false report or rumor); with respect to being false in worship (Isa. 1:13, which discusses a false tribute to God where the people hold to a form of worship, but their heart is not there); and with respect to being false in prophecy (Ezek. 13:3-7, which refers to false prophets who claim to have seen a vision, but there is no reality to what they have seen). Herbert Huffmon argues from both biblical and extrabiblical evidence that the commandment prohibits false or frivolous swearing. "The focus is on not making God an accomplice, as it were to one's falseness, whether of intent or of performance."³⁷

Thus, according to analysis of the linguistic data, the command has to do with lifting up the name of God falsely or worthlessly. But this does not provide a full picture.

Third, in order to get a valid under-

standing, the results from the study of the linguistic data must be set within the context of the ancient Near Eastern culture. As Walton points out, this depends upon a careful definition of magic, the world in which the false or proper use of names occurs.³⁸ In the ancient Near East and also in the Greco-Roman world there was no demarcating line between religion and magic. Later, influence from the medieval church and the Enlightenment resulted in distinguishing the two. In the past, however, interpreters have not appreciated how names were used in the framework of magic and power.

G. Frantz-Szabó offers a comprehensive and helpful definition of magic in the context of invoking supernatural powers:

[Magic] is a reasoned system of techniques for influencing the gods and other supernatural powers that can be taught and learned. ... Magic is a praxis, indeed a science, that through established and for the most part empirical means seeks to alter or maintain earthly circumstances, or even call them forth anew. Magic not only manipulates occult forces but also endeavors to master the higher supernatural power with which religion is concerned.³⁹

The name of God represents and sums up his entire character and person. To use that name brings his person and his power into a particular situation. When we use his name for something that is contrary to who he is, contrary to his character, we lift it up to a lie. Walton observes that "the name is equivalent to the identity of the deity, and the divine identity can be commandeered for illicit use. The problem of identity theft is widely recognized today."⁴⁰ In Ps 139:19ff. David disassociates himself in the strongest of terms from fellow Israelites who want him to join them in a scheme to murder someone and are

doing this using the name of Yahweh. Misusing the name of God occurs among Christians today when someone says, “the Lord led me to do such and such a thing,” when we know from Scripture that this is not according to the revealed will of God.

Fourth Command: Keep the Sabbath

The fourth of the Ten Words is a positive injunction to observe the Sabbath. The importance of this injunction is indicated by its length—it is the longest of the Ten Words. For several decades in the twentieth century, scholars attempted to find precursors to the Israelite Sabbath in the nations surrounding them. This effort was entirely unsuccessful. The Hebrew *šabbāt* is not connected to the Babylonian *šabbatu*, which is the fifteenth day of the month. Moreover the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of certain months in the Babylonian calendar were considered unlucky. Nonetheless, the concept of divine rest is well attested in ancient Near Eastern texts and the cultural context can cast great light on interpretation of the fourth command.

Six aspects of the notion of divine rest in the ancient Near East drawn mainly from the great epics such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* are delineated by Walton.⁴¹ These can be briefly summarised as follows: (1) in the ancient epics, the divine rest was disturbed by rebellion; (2) divine rest was achieved after conflict; (3) divine rest was achieved after acts of creation establishing order; (4) divine rest was achieved in the temple; (5) divine rest was characterized by ongoing rule and stability; and (6) divine rest was achieved by the gods by creating people to do their work.

There are both similarities and dif-

ferences between the biblical command to observe the Sabbath and the cultural context of the ancient Near East. We need to attend carefully to the linguistic data in the relevant texts. In Exod 20:8-11, the Israelites are commanded to remember the Sabbath Day to consecrate it. In the Old Testament, the notion of remembering is not merely mental recall, it entails acts in space and time based on keeping something at the front of one’s mind. Israel is to consecrate the Sabbath; it is a commemorative event that belongs to Yahweh and is to be devoted to Him. Both humans—free or slaves, citizens or resident aliens—and animals are to cease from the business and labour ordinarily undertaken to provide for our own life and sustenance. It is an act of faith acknowledging Yahweh as the creator and giver of life and as the one who rules our lives.

The biblical viewpoint is fundamentally different from the ancient Near Eastern perspectives, in spite of many parallels on the surface. Walton states,

[I]n the Old Testament people work for their own benefit and provision, rather than to meet the needs of God or to do his work for Him. When commanded to share the rest of God on the Sabbath, it is not to participate in it per se, but to recognize His work of bringing and maintaining order. God’s rest symbolizes His control over the cosmos, which His people recognize whenever they yield to Him the day they could have used to provide for themselves.⁴²

On the other hand, the parallel between the ancient Near Eastern building of temples for divine rest and the biblical creation narrative culminating in divine rest is valid. The framework of the account of creation in the Bible strongly suggests that the cosmos is constructed as a sanctuary / temple in which God may take

up His rest.

Discussion of this command brings us right into the middle of the problem of the relationship between the old covenant and the new, a matter which cannot be adequately discussed here. Nonetheless, a few comments on the Sabbath are in order.

First, we must note that the Sabbath was the sign between Yahweh and Israel of the old covenant, as is clearly stated in Exod 31:12-18. Covenants often have a physical sign associated with them. The rainbow was given as a physical sign of God's promise in his covenant with Noah. Circumcision was commanded as a physical sign in the body of every male in Israel as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Similarly, the Sabbath is stipulated as a permanent sign between Yahweh and Israel that the creator God who created the world in six days and then rested has consecrated them to himself.

Second, as we compare the old covenant and the new covenant, the self-identity of the people of the Lord in the old covenant was that of children, while the self-identity of the people of the Lord in the new covenant is that of mature adults (Gal 3:24, 25). The external forms and shadows of the old covenant have been done away now that the reality has come in Christ (Col 2:16, 17).

Now of what does the Sabbath speak? Let us notice at once that in the two texts in the Old Testament where we have the Ten Words, the reason given for the Sabbath in one text is different from the reason given in the other text. In Exodus, the reason is given in 20:11. God's work of creation was complete, it was finished; they could add nothing to it. They were invited to enter his rest and enjoy his work. Hebrews applies this notion to the

work of Christ. We cannot do anything to add to the work of Jesus Christ. We are simply to enjoy it.

In Deut 5:15, a different reason is given for the Sabbath. The people of Israel must remember that they were slaves in Egypt and God brought them out of slavery, so they should give their slaves a chance to rest as they do on the Sabbath. Paul, in Col 1:12-14, speaks as do many authors of the New Testament of the work of the Lord Jesus as a new Exodus. Egypt is a picture or symbol of the world; Pharaoh is a symbol of Satan, and their slavery is a symbol of our enslavement to our passion and pride from which Christ has redeemed us in his death on the cross. Jesus is the new Joshua who will lead those people connected to him by the new covenant to enter and enjoy God's Sabbath rest.

Summary

The first four commands in the Ten Words can be construed as two pairs. John Walton's summary is helpful in grasping their function and intent:⁴³

Commandments 1 and 2
Yahweh's mode of operating in the two realms (divine and human):

- Commandment 1 concerns how Yahweh was *not* to be perceived as operating in the divine realm—no distribution of authority to other divinities.
- Commandment 2 concerns how Yahweh was *not* to be perceived as operating in the human realm—no iconographic mediator of his presence, revelation, or worship offered to him.

Commandments 3 and 4
Yahweh's exercise of power:

- Commandment 3 concerns how Yahweh's power / authority was *not* to be perceived—people were to recognize it by refraining from attempts to control it.

- Commandment 4 concerns how Yahweh's power/authority *was* to be perceived —people were to recognize it by refraining from attempts to control their own lives on the Sabbath.

The Ceremony of Covenant Ratification (Exod 24:1-11)

Two episodes dominate Exodus 24. The ceremony of covenant ratification is described in vv. 1-11. In vv. 12-18, Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive instructions on how Israel is to worship God.

The ceremony of covenant ratification is significant for our understanding of the Sinai Covenant. First, Moses reports to the people the Ten Words and the Judgments who, as in Exod 19:7-8, agree to the covenant. Then Moses commits the Words and Judgments to writing in a document referred to in v. 8 as “the Book of the Covenant.” Early in the morning he builds an altar and erects twelve pillars. Presumably the altar represents Yahweh, for we are clearly told that the twelve stone stelae represent the people, i.e., the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses has assistants from the twelve tribes offer burnt offerings and fellowship/peace offerings. Moses collects the blood from the bulls sacrificed and pours half on the altar. Next he reads the Book of the Covenant, and the people vow to obey and practice the covenant stipulations. Then he scatters/tosses the other half of the blood on the people. In reality he may have actually sprinkled the blood on the pillars that represented the people.

Concerning the blood tossed on the people, Bruce Waltke states, “The latter is called the ‘blood of the covenant’ because it effects the covenant relationship by cleansing the recipients from sin.”⁴⁴ This interpretation may appear plausible, but

in this instance is not sustained by the evidence from the text. Fellowship offerings can be for an expression of thanksgiving or offered as the result of a vow according to Lev 7:12-18. The latter is appropriate since covenant making entails vows. The offering in Exodus 24 is not specified as a sin or reparation sacrifice, nor is the verb “sprinkled” used as is normal for offerings for sin. The blood is applied to the altar representing Yahweh as well as to the people and certainly he does not need to be cleansed from sin. Instead, the ceremony indicates the meaning. Half of the blood is put on Yahweh and half of the blood is put on the people. In between these two symbolic acts is the reading of the Book of the Covenant and the vow of the people to keep its stipulations. The symbolism is that the one blood joins the two parties.⁴⁵ What is most similar to the ceremony of Exodus 24 is a wedding. Two people who are not related by blood are by virtue of the covenant of marriage now closer than any other kin relation. It is by virtue of the covenant at Sinai that Yahweh becomes the *gō’el*, i.e., the nearest relative, and that Israel becomes not just a nation, but a “people,” i.e., a kinship term specifying relationship to the Lord.

This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that a party representing the people ascends the mountain and eats a meal. Examples of eating a communal meal to conclude a covenant are numerous.⁴⁶ This ancient Near Eastern and biblical practice is the basis for banquets at weddings today.

The Covenant at Sinai within the Larger Story: The Significance of the Form

The form of the covenant as given in Exodus and Deuteronomy is impor-

tant for a proper understanding of the Mosaic Covenant and foundational for correlating the old covenant with the new. The form and literary structure in both Exodus and Deuteronomy shows the following points:

(1) The Ten Commandments are foundational to the Ordinances and conversely, the Ordinances or Case Laws apply and extend the Ten Commandments in a practical way to all areas of life. Nonetheless, one cannot take the Ten Commandments as “eternal” and the Ordinances as “temporal” for both sections together constitute the agreement or covenant made between God and Israel.

(2) It is common to categorize and classify the laws as (a) moral, (b) civil, and (c) ceremonial, but this classification is foreign to the material and imposed upon it from the outside rather than arising from the material and being clearly marked by the literary structure of the text. In fact, the ceremonial, civil, and moral laws are all mixed together, not only in the Judgments or ordinances, but in the Ten Words as well (the Sabbath may be properly classified as ceremonial). Those who claim the distinction between ceremonial, civil, and moral law do so because they want to affirm that the ceremonial (and in some cases, civil) laws no longer apply but the moral laws are eternal. Unfortunately, John Frame in his new and magisterial work on *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* and Bruce Waltke in his equally magisterial *An Old Testament Theology* perpetuate this tradition.⁴⁷ This is an inaccurate representation of Scripture at this point. Exodus 24 clearly indicates that the Book of the Covenant consists of the Ten Words and the Judgments, and this is the Covenant (both Ten Words and Judgments) that Jesus declares he has completely fulfilled

(Matt 5:17) and that Hebrews declares is now made obsolete by the new covenant (Heb 8:13). What we can say to represent accurately the teaching of Scripture is that the righteousness of God codified, enshrined, and encapsulated in the old covenant has not changed and that this same righteousness is now codified and enshrined in the new.⁴⁸

(3) When one compares Exodus and Deuteronomy with contemporary documents from the ancient Near East in both content and form two features are without parallel: (a) In content the biblical documents are identical to ancient Near Eastern law codes, but do not have the form of a law code. (b) In form the biblical documents are identical to ancient Near Eastern covenants or international treaties, but not in content. This is extremely instructive. God desires to rule in the midst of his people as king. He wants to direct, guide, and instruct their lives and lifestyle. Yet he wants to do this in the context of a relationship of love, loyalty, and trust. This is completely different from Greek and Roman law codes or ancient Near Eastern law codes. They represent an impersonal code of conduct binding on all citizens and enforced by penalties from a controlling authority. We should always remember that Torah, by contrast, means personal “instruction” from God as Father and King of his people rather than just “law” so that a term like “covenantal instruction” might be more useful.

Our view of the old covenant is enhanced not only by accurate exegesis which properly attends to the cultural context and language of the text, but also allows the text to inform us of its own literary structure and considers the place of the text in the larger story. The biblical theological framework is especially

important because there we come to see the Ten Commandments not merely as fundamental requirements determining divine-human and human-human relationships as moral principles, but we come to view them as the foundation of true social justice and the basis of what it means to be a son or daughter of God, an Adamic figure, i.e., truly and genuinely human.

ENDNOTES

¹I am grateful to the following for constructive criticism and proofing of my work: Barbara Gentry, John Meade, and Jason Parry.

²The Covenant in Genesis 1-2 and the Covenant with Noah in Genesis 6-9 have been discussed in greater detail in Peter J. Gentry, "Kingdom Through Covenant: Humanity as the Divine Image," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 12, no. 1 (2008): 16-42.

³S. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 58-59.

⁴W. Randall Garr, "'Image' and 'Likeness' in the Inscription from Tell Fakhariyeh," *Israel Exploration Journal* 50, nos. 3-4 (2003): 227-34.

⁵See Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *"I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood"* (ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399-404; William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 24-25; and M. Hutter, "Adam als Gärtner und König (Gen. 2:8, 15)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 30 (1985): 258-62.

⁶Exod 15:17 shows that Canaan becomes for Israel what the garden sanctuary was

for Adam.

⁷H. Ringgren, "שׂוֹפָר šôpar," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (15 vols.; ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 14:541-42.

⁸The Hebrew word *torâ* simply means "direction" or "instruction."

⁹There is a contrast here between the covenant at Sinai and the covenant at Creation. In Eden, the man dwells on the mountain and walks with God without a mediator. I am indebted to John Meade for this insight.

¹⁰Hebrew *s^egullâ* occurs only in Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; 1 Chron 29:3; Mal 3:17; Ps 135:4; and Eccl 2:8. All occurrences refer back to Exod 19:5; except 1 Chron 29:3 and Eccl 2:8 which are valuable to show the concrete, ordinary use of the word.

¹¹Some would employ the term "explanatory" or "evidential" as the use is not strictly causal. See A. Aejmelaesus, "Function and Interpretation of ׀ in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 2 (1986): 193-209.

¹²See the majestic treatment by E. Jenni, *Die hebräischen Präpositionen, Band 3: Die Präposition Lamed* (Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 2000), 23-25, 54-57, 77.

¹³See F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907; repr., 1953).

¹⁴See John Meade, "The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel," *Adorare Mente* 1 (Spring 2008): 14-29. Online: <http://adoraremente.sbts.edu>.

¹⁵Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 101-02. The quotation is taken from J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 263.

- ¹⁶W. W. Baudissin, "Der Begriff der Heiligkeit im Alten Testament" in *Studien zu semitischen Religionsgeschichte* (by W. W. Baudissin; Teil 2; Leipzig: Grunow, 1878), 1-142.
- ¹⁷Claude-Bernard Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1986). Unfortunately, for North America, this work is in French and, therefore, not widely known in the evangelical world.
- ¹⁸See H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed. with revised supplement; Oxford: Oxford University, 1996), who give as the fundamental meaning, "devoted to the gods."
- ¹⁹Translation by Christopher J. H. Wright in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 255.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 255-56 (emphasis in original).
- ²¹See C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1943).
- ²²Johann J. Stamm and Maurice E. Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (Studies in Biblical Theology; Second Series 2; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1967). I have not carefully researched whether or not the command concerning misuse of the divine name is found in other ancient Near Eastern societies.
- ²³The command means "to provide assistance" or "be useful" to one's neighbor. See A. Malamat, "'You Shall Love Your Neighbour as Yourself': A Case of Misinterpretation," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Blum, C. Macholz, and E. W. Stegemann; Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1990), 111-15.
- ²⁴Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 411. The exposition here shows clearly the difference between "having no other gods before Yahweh" and "not making an idolatrous image" whereas "coveting a neighbor's wife" and "coveting a neighbor's house" are not as distinct notions. Therefore the Jewish and Reformed division is followed here.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 415-16.
- ²⁶John Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention? Archaeology, Ancient Civilizations, and the Bible* (ed. Daniel I. Block; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008), 306.
- ²⁷J. Bottéro, "Intelligence and the Technical Function of Power: Enki/Ea," in *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 232-50; the citation is found on p. 233.
- ²⁸Lowell Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 97.
- ²⁹The significance of this notion may be extended if we attach to it the idea that in the ancient Near East something was not considered to exist if it had not been assigned a name, a place, or a function. See discussion in J. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 87-97.
- ³⁰Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 306-309. This is close to the view of Christopher Wright, who says, "The fundamental thrust of the verse is not Yahweh's sole deity, but Yahweh's sole sovereignty over Israel" (*Deuteronomy* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996], 68).
- ³¹*Ibid.*, 309-313.
- ³²*Ibid.*
- ³³Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 311.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, 312.
- ³⁵Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.
- ³⁶Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 313.
- ³⁷Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 419.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, 316.
- ³⁹G. Frantz-Szabó, "Hittite Witchcraft and Divination," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 2007.
- ⁴⁰John Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 318.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*, 319-22.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, 322.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, 323.
- ⁴⁴Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 435.
- ⁴⁵Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; trans. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:43, 156-157.
- ⁴⁶Examples of a communal meal as a covenant ratification: Gen 31:44, 54; 2 Sam 3:12-13, 20. The accession of a king involved a covenant (2 Sam 3:21; 5:3 = 1 Chr 11:3; Jer 34:8-18) and communal meal as ratification (1

Sam 11:15; 1 Kgs 1:9, 25; 3:15).

⁴⁷John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 213-17. Frame states, “the distinction [moral, ceremonial and civil law in the Westminster Confession] is a good one, in a rough-and-ready way” (213). Later he admits that “the laws of the Pentateuch are not clearly labeled as moral, civil, or ceremonial” (214). In the end, he struggles to provide clear criteria to show what is and what is not applicable for Christians today from the old covenant. Also see Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 434, 436.

⁴⁸Waltke does say that the Ten Words are an expression of the character and heart of God (see *Old Testament Theology*, 413), but his approach does not provide a biblical criterion for determining how the old covenant applies to us today. *As a code*, including the Ten Words, it does not apply. The righteousness enshrined in this code, however, is the same that is now enshrined for us in the new covenant.

Israel in Slavery and Slavery in Israel

D. Jeffrey Mooney

D. Jeffrey Mooney is Assistant Professor of Christian Studies at California Baptist University in Riverside, California. He also serves as Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church Norco in Norco, California. Dr. Mooney received his Ph.D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

C. J. H. Wright notes that most epics of national origin were elaborate ethnic myths meant to inspire worship of the nation's ancestral past. By contrast, Israel openly recorded that they emerged from state-imposed slavery that became increasingly difficult and inhumane.¹ Consequently, their post-liberation legislation seems consistent with the reality of being *former* slaves. This truth produced a certain tension within Israel. On the one hand, they accepted the *status quo* reality of slavery. On the other hand, their legislation produced a covenant-subversiveness² that emphasized the ideal of personal freedom. A canonical reading reveals that the biblical writers considered slavery a historical reality that sets the canonical stage for God's revelation of Himself through His sustaining, redeeming, and shaping Israel both as a nation and as a community of faith. Further, a deepened awareness of slavery in Exodus yields a better understanding of Israel's liberation and legislation, which are both central to the history of redemption.

Coming to Terms with Slavery in Exodus

The primary Hebrew root used most often to denote slavery is עִבַד.³ The verb עִבַד occurs 317 times in the Old Testament and typically means "to serve."⁴ The nominal form of the root appears over twice as often as the verbal form (over 800 times).⁵ Like the verbal form, more often than not, the term indicates a "servant."⁶ However, the substantive may also mean "slave, subject, official, or vassal." It can

also refer to the follower/ servant of a particular god.⁷ Throughout Exodus, Moses predominately uses the term עִבַד for slave talk. When עִבַד means "slave,"⁸ Moses distinguishes it from שָׂכִיר, "servant"⁹ and at times sets it in correspondence with the feminine form אִמָּה, meaning "female servant."¹⁰ As with other common terms in the biblical text, context determines which reference Moses was making. The context of עִבַד in Exodus grants the reader clarity as to the two distinct meanings that the single root holds in the same book.

עִבַד appears in two major pericopes within Exodus, chapters 1-12 and the Covenant Regulations in 20:22-23:33. When using עִבַד within the first twelve chapters of Exodus, there is little doubt that Moses is referring to enslavement, not servanthood of the Hebrews (1:8-21). In Exod 1:13-14 Moses states that the Egyptians made the sons of Israel "work as slaves" (ESV). However, the Masoretic Text conveys a more difficult portrait of the Israelite's lot. עִבַד denotes the various and harsh "labors" that Egypt had imposed onto Israel (1:14). The form again appears in Exod 6:5, preceded by the preposition בְּ translated as "bondage" or "enslavement." This occurrence emerges in the context of the promise to the fathers. The reference to the promise emphasizes not only their prisoner status, "bondage," but their landlessness.¹¹ Exodus 9:20-21 references the Egyptian's personal slaves, which, by contrast, highlights the "prisoner of war" type slave that Israel has become. Moreover, note that in this passage the Egyptians treat the Israelites

as livestock—as goes the livestock so goes the slave. In the regulations for the Passover (Exod 12:44), the term is clearly balanced against the “hired servant” (שָׂכִיר). The term is attached to the term “man” rendering “slave-man.” This occurrence is the only appearance of this particular construction.

Within the Covenant Regulations (Exod 20:22-23:33), there is a marked change in the usage of the term עֶבֶד. In chapters 1-12 the term is synonymous with affliction, backbreaking work, and property status. In the Covenant Regulations, the term appears in Israelite legislation with a new hue. The term refers to people of unequal status but equal personhood. It is institutionalized in a different sense than that of Egypt, whether the Old Kingdom slave, attached to the land and homes of their owner forever or the eighteenth-dynasty prisoner of war slave paradigm the Israelites experienced. This term now signifies individuals whose dignity is to be guarded and whose release must be eventually secured. In regard to the past point, the law of manumission begins in Exodus 21. The phrase עֶבֶד עֶבֶר occurs only here in this passage. The debate that surrounds the term עֶבֶר is beyond the scope of the current project. There seems to be enough evidence to take the term as a pejorative ethnic derivation that applies to “outsiders” in general and Israelites in particular. Of the thirty occurrences of the term, it is applied to Israel to contrast them with the Egyptians (Gen 39:14; 41:12; 43:32; Exod 1:15; 2:1, 6; 3:18) or with the Philistines (1 Sam 4:6; 13:3; 14:11, etc.). Exodus 21:1 seems to indicate that the term became coterminous with “Israelite.”¹² The Hebrew slave is freed by his owner after six years of servitude. However, the nature of freedom seems

qualified. If he wants to retain his wife whom he acquired while in slavery he must stay.¹³ The text notes that the slave may stay out of love for his wife and master. Childs asserts that this occurrence of “love” should not be romanticized.¹⁴ However, that argument only makes sense if the master would have been the only one mentioned. The slave wife appears alongside the owner, however, and thus provides a definite filial tone to the possibly emancipated slave’s decision.¹⁵

As mentioned above, the biblical writers use the corresponding terms עֶבֶד and אִמָּה. The normal rendering of אִמָּה is “female slave.” The term conveys not only the slave’s gender but her concubine status with respect to her master (Gen 21:10, 12, 13; Lev 25:6). While not being able to go free as the male slaves—which would not have been ideal for her in the first place—she is afforded rights within the larger familial structure. There are three scenarios that threaten her status as an אִמָּה. First, she may not please her master who has designated her to this status for himself (21:8). In this case, she must be ransomed by her family / people. Second, the אִמָּה may be designated for the owner’s son (21:9). In this case, she is to be treated as a daughter, with all rights and privileges afforded her. Third, the owner may take another wife (21:10). In this final case, she still maintains full marital rights.

Concerning the possible bodily injuries that a slave might incur, both terms, עֶבֶד and אִמָּה appear in Exod 21:20-32. The loss of dignity and the removal of oppression appear front and center here. In 21:26, עֶבֶד balances the occurrence of the term in 21:20. The latter context displays the *status quo* concept of inferior status. The former occurrence examined alongside 21:32 helps convey the tension within

Israelite legislature of the slave as inferior in social status but equal in personage and extends dignity toward all slaves for any bodily injury. Childs notes that a slave is not freed because of property damage but because he is an oppressed human being.¹⁶ If a male or female slave is gored by an ox and does not die, the ox still dies just as in the case of the free man or woman and the minor male or female (21:29-31). The gravity of the punishment is different due to the social status of the slave over against the free person. This element is consistent with the Ancient Near East (ANE) policy of slaves as socially inferior to the free. However, the concept of personhood also appears here in contrast to similar legislation just below. In 21:33-36, the writer deals with similar scenarios, but with animals. Thus, the ox that falls prey to the goring ox costs his owner money, not blood, even of the goring ox. Thus, the עֶבֶד is not as cattle (cf. the Egyptian perspective above). The slave is treated as a person both in the arrangement of the legislation and the treatment within the legislation.

Thus, in Exodus, with respect to chapters 1-12, the עֶבֶד denoted the institutionally afflicted individual that worked on state managed building projects. Concerning the עֶבֶד in the Covenant Regulations, he is an individual who lacks the status of the free man but not the dignity of personhood as the free man. The above findings gain clarity under a historical and canonical analysis of slavery in Exodus.

Israel in Slavery: A Historical Analysis

Concerning the oppression of the Hebrew people, even some of the most critical scholars have recognized how well the biblical narrative fits the Egyptian

setting, and many have also affirmed that the nature of the biblical story demands at least some actual event in Israel's past. For example, Sir Allan Gardiner, one of the leading Egyptologists of the last century as well as a rigid historical critic of the biblical testimony, asserted the following:

[That] Israel *was in Egypt* under one form [of oppression] or another no historian could possibly doubt; a legend of such tenacity representing the early fortunes of a peoples under so unfavorable an aspect could not have arisen save as a reflection, however much distorted, of real occurrences.¹⁷

The epigraphic data found in Egyptian inscriptions and annals details a significant influx of Semitic peoples between the eighteenth dynasty and the accession of Ramses II.¹⁸ Significantly more than finding Semitic names as far south as Thebes (in Deir el-Medineh) during the Empire Period,¹⁹ the portrait of the age aligns closely with the picture of Israelite slavery found in Exodus. Brickmaking²⁰ seems to be a verified act of slave labor that included unattainable quotas set by a two-tiered Egyptian administration including the mention of "stick-wielding" taskmasters ready to "encourage" the apathetic. There is also evidence of Semitic peoples clearly involved with state-sponsored building projects and worker requests for time off for worship of one's personal deity. I will address each of these in turn.

The third millennium witnessed no support of state-enforced labor in Egypt. A land-bound serfdom existed in Egypt during this time.²¹ Foreigners were typically immigrants, slave tribute from local rulers, prisoners of war, or slaves purchased through merchants. They characteristically functioned in the service of households or in temple employment.

This scene changed during the New Kingdom. This sudden turn in occupation parallels Egypt's new policy of wider border control during this period of time.²² For 350 years, Egypt waged military campaigns in Canaan and Syria that resulted in large numbers of Semites being transported from their countries to Egypt.²³ The most notable example of this appears in the tomb chapel of the vizier Rekhmire (ca. 1450), where one may observe foreign slaves making bricks for state-sponsored building projects²⁴ under the watching eyes of their rod-bearing overseers.²⁵ Kitchen cites numerous accounts of quotas being set for the workers and recorded afterwards,²⁶ including a letter from a rather annoyed Egyptian official stating that "There are no [men] here to make bricks, and no straw in the district either."²⁷

In the second millennium slave labor was pervasively state labor. Not only does one find evidence of this in the tomb chapel scene of Rekhmire, but also in other inscriptions throughout Egypt. Kitchen notes that Ramses II gave no thought to forcibly conscripting foreigners for state sponsored projects. He commands grain rations for both his soldiers as well as the "Apiru-folk"²⁸ during a building project for one of his namesake projects, the "Temple of Ramses II Beloved of Ma'at."²⁹ The practical administrative structure of these projects seemed to look like the two-tiered model found in Exodus. On the top tier was Egyptian overseers and below them a foreman, typically an ethnic native to the slaves, set over the workers but under the Egyptians.³⁰

Exodus records that Moses petitioned Pharaoh to allow the slaves time off for worship (Exod 5:1-4). Egyptian documentation of the thirteenth and twelfth

centuries in particular portrays a similar landscape. Kitchen notes that very detailed work records demonstrate that an individual or entire crew could be absent for several days for worship. While the reasons provided in the registers vary, they include the phrase that a man might be able "to make an offering to his god."³¹

Straw-based brickmaking, a two-tiered Egyptians administration, a "prisoner of war" type slavery for Semitic peoples, and requests for cultic holidays seem to have existed in both Egyptian history and Israel's Scriptures. Thus, one may argue that the Egyptian historical landscape reflected the same social and historical backdrop as Moses presents, which, in turn, provides the reader with an accurate historical portrait of Israel's period of slavery.

Israel in Slavery: A Canonical Analysis

David Clines argues for the following overarching theme of the Torah:

The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfillment—which implies also the partial non-fulfillment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and a reaffirmation of the primal divine intentions for man.³²

A canonical analysis of the slavery texts in Exodus raises the question, "When Israel read this text as Scripture, how did they understand the notion of slavery within the larger theme of God's promise/fulfillment to the Patriarchs?" Thus, unlike the historical analysis that appears above, canonical analysis exposes the testimony of the biblical writers within the larger metanarrative. As historical

analysis seeks to place the testimony of Israel into its larger ANE context, so canonical analysis seeks to demonstrate that the historical testimony of Israel has been shaped to say something expressly theological about Israel and her God. The testimony of Exodus demonstrates at least three things about Israel and Yahweh. First, slavery in Exodus is always in the context of the Divine Warrior's fear-inspiring power. This reality provides the stage on which God reveals himself and his nature in word, mighty acts of redemption, and promise-fulfillment. Second, slavery demonstrated the frailty of Israel in either affecting its own release from bondage or its subsequent living in light of liberation. Slavery in Israel provides a further canonical point, namely that slave legislation as it is canonically shaped in Exodus serves as a paradigm of liberation, which defines the true nature of the covenant community.

The theme of the Torah provides a dramatic moment in the enslavement of the Hebrew people. The biblical writers clearly denote that the slavery was harsh, institutionalized, without any end in sight, and divinely orchestrated. The book of Exodus commences with an immediate look back to the final Jacob narratives in Genesis (Gen 37:1-2), the Joseph story (Genesis 37-50): "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, *who did not know Joseph*" (Exod 1:8). Further, the Joseph narratives appear within the larger framework of the promise/fulfillment narratives in Genesis. The foretelling of the enslavement of Israel occurs first in Gen 15:12-16:

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not

theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:12-16).

Thus, canonically, the slavery of Abraham's offspring was explicitly known and accomplished by God. Note also that the promise of enslavement takes place in the context of Yahweh's fear-inspiring power. Wenham notes that "deep sleep," "fear," and "darkness"—the latter two which Egypt experienced in the plagues (Exod 10:21-28)—suggested God's awe inspiring activity.³³ Slavery would be the landscape upon which God would work his great act of liberation and display himself as incomparable and peerless among the gods of the ancient world, particularly Egypt. Israel would experience a landless alien status that would spiral further into forced servitude. They would be without land, value, and hope and, they would remain in this condition at the very hand of their Redeemer. The remainder of the slave promise demonstrates that God's promise of affliction and servitude is not without hope. "But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Gen 15:14).

An enslavement-hope mixture appears again in the Joseph narratives (Genesis 37-50). Joseph's presumptive and naïve action in sharing his dreams with his older brothers provides him with the opportunity for world travel. Unfortunately, it is in the form of slavery. The series of crisis-resolution events in the narrative

culminate in one of the Torah's highest statements of God's sovereignty.

But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, *you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.* So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them (Gen 50:19-21).

Joseph's enslavement was meant for the sustenance of the covenant line. Regardless of what his brothers had in mind, God had sovereignly orchestrated Joseph's life to include forced servitude in order to place him in a position to save the lives of his covenant bearing family.

The enslavement of Jacob's family in the book of Exodus is the result of political expediency from the "new" pharaoh, who lacked any impressionable connection to Joseph and perceived Israel as a possible future political threat (1:9-10). It is also the turning point of God working out His providential plan on behalf of the children of Abraham.³⁴

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, *who did not know Joseph.* And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. *So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves* (Exod 1:8-22).

Israel must not have been too mighty, in the sense of actually being able to overpower Egypt, or the Pharaoh would not have been able to forcibly conscript them into service.³⁵ He feared that their numbers were "too mighty" in the sense of a possible *coup* and escape. "Let us deal shrewdly with them" clearly indicates an intentional political maneuver executed under the guise of "mutual respect." Durham understands the entire scenario to be a ruse. The people are not "too mighty" at all. Instead, the Pharaoh uses fear as political justification in turning this large group of foreigners into slaves.³⁶

Three basic levels of ANE culture existed during this time: freemen, slaves, and a semi-free populace. This three-tiered culture maintained three levels of labor: independent labor of free peasants or craftsmen, slave labor, and labor from various semi-free groups. The Egyptians might have suggested a freepeasant/craftsmen type relationship with Israel. Since the text indicates that Israel had neither the will nor the capacity to fight (Exod 13:17), after moving them into place logistically, Egypt would have little resistance assuming a more aggressive posture.

After Pharaoh's murderous response to the rupture of his first idea, he imposes a harsh servitude on Israel. Exodus describes slavery here as the type of exploitive institution that one might equate with the transatlantic slave movement or with the modern slave trade. The Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites includes harsh, backbreaking treatment. This type of oppressive situation appears five times within this paragraph, establishing the character of Israel's slavery. Their work entailed agonizing work hours under any conditions and forced servitude in state sanctioned building projects.

To further define the social position to which Israel had fallen, the Egyptian administration felt safe (even with the “mighty” population) attempting to target the Hebrew children for partial genocide (Exod 1:15-22).

The ongoing institutionalized aspect of Israel’s slavery appears again later in the story.

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew (Exod 2:23-25).

The fact that they groaned because of their slavery after the death of the Pharaoh that enslaved them seems to indicate that their slavery was now officially institutionalized. Where their enslavement was perhaps initially an attempt to curb their growth, reduce the possibility for a *coup*, and make impossible any attempt at escape, their slavery now goes beyond one king with a need for building programs. They are (and possibly always will be) slaves of Egypt. God hears their groaning and rescues them based upon his covenant with their fathers. The divine response to slavery is finally what the reader would expect. Redemption is drawing near!

“Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and *I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I*

will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.’” Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery (Exod 6:6-9).

This pericope occurs after Moses and Aaron first met with Pharaoh. The meeting went badly. Pharaoh repeated his perception of the threat of Israelite numbers and increased the burden and level of harshness on the Israelites due to Moses and Aaron. Their deliverance from slavery appears once again in the context of the covenant with the fathers. Concerning their deliverance from their harsh slavery, God established his national-covenant name and makes the following eight assertions of unprecedented fear-inspiring power (cf. Deut 4:32-40).

- I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and
- I will deliver you from slavery to them, and
- I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.
- I will take you to be my people, and
- I will be your God, and
- You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.
- I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.
- I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.

The promise ties the people specifically to the land. The idea of slavery in Exodus 1-12 is harsh affliction that awaits redemption and land.

To celebrate the resolve and redemptive action of God and to execute his final fear-inspiring assault, he established a feast. The Passover had a limited set of guests: the landless and the slaves. Exodus 12:43ff reads as follows:

And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, *"This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired servant may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you."*

There would be no foreigner or hired servant taking part. The only proper participants of the meal were the covenant people of God, who were also the slaves and slave-friendly peoples within Egypt. Even the one exception, the "stranger that sojourns with you" (Exod 12:48) may be seen as a landless slave type. Those who would sojourn with the slaves would certainly be numbered with the slaves. The feast made sense because it was accomplished on the landscape of forced slavery and the divine assault on the gods of Egypt that resulted in Israel's liberation.

Slavery in Israel: A Historical Analysis

One of the most significant points for the contemporary reader of the Bible and for the student of the ANE is the absolute absence of abolitionism in the ancient world. A slave as someone endowed with

personhood and rights was alien to the laws of the ANE. The primary premise of slavery was that the slave was property. Not only did free people take this perspective for granted, but so did the slave. An old Assyrian proverb sums up the ubiquitous ANE disposition in this way: "A man is the shadow of a god and a slave is the shadow of a man."³⁷

Overall, slavery in the ANE was an extreme form of personal dependence and extra-economic coercion.³⁸ Slaves were dehumanized to a very real degree. They had no means of personal economic mobility or production and were considered a thing to be bought, owned, and sold by their master. Thus, slaves had no rights. They had only duties. Like livestock, they were considered a tradable commodity. They were included in dowries, transferred in inheritances, and deposited as collateral. Examples of this mindset appear in both the Laws of Eshnunna and the laws of Hammurabi.

LE ¶40 – If a man buys a slave, a slave woman, an ox, or any other purchase.³⁹

LH ¶7 – If a man shall purchase silver, gold, a slave, a slave woman, an ox, a sheep, a donkey, or anything else whatsoever.⁴⁰

Complicating matters further, there was no standard for the treatment of slaves in the ANE. Concerning status, the basic cultural architecture of the ANE afforded the slave no more rights than it did any other piece of property. Slave owners placed an insignia on their slaves for the same reason that cattle are branded today, namely to demonstrate and identify ownership. The most frequent mode of insignia was tattooing the name of the owner onto the slave with a hot iron. In Assyria, the slave's ears were sometimes pierced. The Code of Hammurabi allowed

an owner to cut off the ear of a disobedient slave to serve as an example to others within the slave ranks.⁴¹ Hammurabi also presented warnings to those who would mistreat other's "slave-property." If a barber shaved an *abbuttum*⁴² from the head of a slave without the master's consent, the barber's hand would be cut off. Typical of ancient law, the regulation simply assumes a property value onto the slave.

By contrast, the Exodus legislation protected slaves. Women and children received due oversight. A female slave could not be sold to a foreigner (Exod 21:8) and was privy to equal rights of a free woman if adopted or given in marriage (21:9). Child slaves belonged to the slave owner. No children appear in Exodus 21. The text simply states that the man has a wife. Two laws in Exodus in particular protect a slave from his own master: "When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, *he shall be avenged*. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money" (Exodus 21:20-21).⁴³ Both the consistent and subversive nature of Israel's literature, with respect to slaves, appears here. The slave that recovers is not to be avenged due to the fact he/she belongs to the one who struck the slave; "the slave is his money." However, if the slave dies he is avenged as a freeman would be. Avenging a slave in the manner one would a free individual would have been unusual, to say the least, in the ANE.

Another law that chiseled away at the *status quo* concept of slavery in the ANE appears shortly after the above passage. When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, *he shall let the slave go free because of his eye*. If he

knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, *he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth* (Exod 21:26-27). While the mention of the eye could be addressing the impairment of the slave's ability to carry out his/her duty, the mention of the tooth is altogether different. The major risk here is not the slave's duty but his dignity. Slaves in Israel could, by implication, appeal to the judiciary of Israel *against* their own masters. Wright comments that this would have been a unique right in the literature of the ANE.⁴⁴ Job 31:14 seems to corroborate this idea legislated in the Torah. Job states that in all of the legal proceedings brought against him by his own slaves, he had never denied them justice.

The monetary value of a slave or slaves varied from culture to culture and from time to time. Like anything else with market value, the slave's price increased throughout the centuries.⁴⁵ In the third millennium prices were ten to twenty shekels per slave. By the mid second millennium, documentation from Babylon and Mari priced a slave at twenty shekels while Nuzi annals cited a slave at thirty shekels. By late first millennium in Assyria and Neo-Babylon the price of the slave had soared to one hundred and twenty shekels.⁴⁶ In Israel's literature, Abraham, Solomon, and Hosea all purchased slaves.⁴⁷ In Exodus the only purchaser of a slave is God, who metaphorically purchases Israel by defeating the Egyptians (Exod 3:7; 15:16).⁴⁸ The other reference to monetary value is in 21:32, where the gored slave's owner received thirty shekels for the injury his slave incurred. Most notable is the lack of price listings in the Covenant Regulations. It further corroborates that Moses wants to display the tension between personhood and

social status.

Slaves often ran away in the ancient world. It was standard throughout almost the entire ANE when a fugitive slave was apprehended to incarcerate him/her and return him/her back to his/her owner. Examples can be seen from the Laws of Eshnunna.

LE ¶52 – A slave or a slave woman who has entered the main city gate of Eshnunna in the safekeeping of only a foreign envoy shall be made to bear fetters, shackles, or a slave hairlock and is thereby kept safe for his owner.⁴⁹

The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar obligates an individual who finds a slave to return them within one month to his/her master or pay twenty-five shekels of silver to the owner. Even more harsh treatment appears in the Code of Hammurabi, where one who either steals or conceals a fugitive slave is subject to the death penalty: “If a man should enable a palace slave, a palace slave woman, a commoner’s slave, or a commoner’s slave woman to leave through the main city-gate, he shall be killed” (LH ¶15).⁵⁰ One may find softer but similar legislation in the Laws of Eshnunna: “If a man should be seized with a stolen slave or a stolen slave woman, a slave shall lead a slave, a slave woman shall lead a slave woman” (LE ¶49).⁵¹

In contrast to the surrounding *status quo* stands legislation in Deuteronomy, which states that, if one found a runaway slave, one was not obligated to return him to his master but to protect him:

*You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.*⁵²

The slave received protection from the community, chose for himself the town in which he wished to hide or live, and experienced justice within the community. The Israelite was then to comply with his request. While the contemporary ANE legal codes not only imposed severe penalties on runaway slaves but also on those who harbored them, Israel’s law diametrically opposed such behavior and encouraged the liberation of the slaves. One might presume that a runaway slave was fleeing from an abusive master; such was not tolerated in the codes of Israel.⁵³

Every ancient culture had manumission laws for slavery. The rights to free a slave belonged solely to the slave’s owner. There are documents as early as the third dynasty in Ur that contain accounts of the manumission of slaves.⁵⁴ There were a number of ways that one might release a slave. G. R. Driver and J. Miles record a rather common formula from Ur. Manumission took place before a magistrate, was officially documented, and precluded contest from the original owner.⁵⁵ The manner in which one was to release his slave is not detailed in the Book of the Covenant. However, contrasted with their ancient counterparts, Exodus contends that the slave may only serve for six years before his covenant mandated release: “When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing” (Exod 21:2). The Sabbath pattern is striking. As Israel experienced the Sabbath of God’s provision and power first in Exodus 16 and commemorated it every week, they would treat their slaves with this idea of provision and power in mind. Though they were landless they still experienced provision and hope. Each time a slave was released, Israel provided a display of God’s redemptive power and

future hope.⁵⁶

In sum, slave legislation in the Book of the Covenant bore both the *status quo* mark of the ANE and the covenant-subversive mark of relationship with Yahweh. Their laws were in some ways typical of the culture and demonstrated that Israel's slave legislation was integral to a second millennium B.C. provenance. They had laws commenting on status, monetary value, runaways, and the manumission of slaves. However, there are distinctions that reveal the God of Israel and His subversive legislation. He exercises power and provision on behalf of Israel and extols his "covenant-subversive community" shaping concepts of righteousness and justice. The historical slave-master relationship in Israel is best stated later in Israel's history.

Slavery in Israel: A Canonical Analysis

The above discussion concerning Israel's legislation demonstrated that Exodus 21 slave laws were comparable to the legislation of its time yet differed at various junctures. They provide for the slave's dignity, and, while no abolition statement appears within the text, there is evidence of an understanding of the parity that exists between slave, semi-free, and free. It is important to note that these laws were given at the Sinai theophany after the most unprecedented demonstration of raw divine power the ANE had ever witnessed, i.e., the Exodus. These laws assume the need for further revelation of Yahweh and provide intentional community shaping for Israel. A canonical analysis of the slave laws raises at least the following three questions. First, why do the slave laws begin the Book of the Covenant? Second, when comparing and con-

trasting the slave legislation of Leviticus and Deuteronomy what do the differences tell us about slavery in Exodus? Third, how do the law codes function within the larger framework of the partially fulfilled promises to the patriarchs?

The immediate context of the slave laws appears as follows:

- Altar Laws (20:22-26)
- Slave Manumission Law (21:2-11)
- Capital Offenses (21:12-17)
- Laws Regulating Damage to the Body (21:18-36)
- Laws Regulating Damage to Property (21:27-22:16)
- Miscellaneous Cultic and Social Regulations (22:17-30)
- Laws Regulating Court Protocol (23:1-9)
- Cultic Calendar (23:10-19)
- Epilogue (23:20-33)

Phillips argues that the canonical placement of the manumission slave laws at the front of the covenant code asserts a "statement of belief about the true nature of Israelite society: it should be made up of free men."⁵⁷ For Moses, the new social and economic reality (namely that of desert sojourners) summons many humanitarian provisions concerning widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor. Within those bounds, the slave legislation stands out as preeminent among humanitarian laws (21:2-11, 20-21, 26-27, 32). Economic situations might force an Israelite to renounce his true heritage, but his ultimate identity is not bound up in slavery but divinely orchestrated freedom.⁵⁸ The shape of Exodus 21 demonstrates the priority of manumission of Israelite slaves over the other modes of slave laws. By including the law of the gored slave in 21:32, Moses further distances the perception of the slave as less than human. This placement emphasizes a trajectory that Leviticus

and Deuteronomy further strengthen and define.

The larger canonical shape of the Torah substantiates the subversive idea of personal freedom within the covenant community. Canonically, Leviticus and Deuteronomy follow the Exodus codes. Tigay rightly notes that the overall structure of the Deuteronomic codes could easily indicate their dependence upon the codes like those found in Exodus.⁵⁹ A brief glance at the contrasts within the codes might serve to demonstrate this continuity.

In Deuteronomy, “your brother” seems to equal both male and female slaves. In Exodus, there is a clear distinction between the male slave, who is released on the seventh year of servitude, and the female slave, who was not released with the male servants. Exodus insures that the master must release the slave with no strings attached; “in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.” In Deuteronomy, the legislation is more elaborate for the master. The text insists that the owner “shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress.”⁶⁰

Both Exodus and Deuteronomy contain self-enslavement clauses within the instruction for manumission. The slave desires to stay in his current situation in Exodus because of his love for “his master, his wife, and his children.” The motive for the slave to stay with his master in Deuteronomy emerges from the relationship he has with his “master and his household” and the secure economic status the master provides for him. Tigay rightly notes that, while these pieces of legislation are different, they are not in conflict with one another.

Recognizing its place in the larger

pericope, one might tie the legislative motivation back to the prologue of the code itself (20:1). However, in Exodus 21 no immediate motive for the treatment of slaves appears. Within the Deuteronomic legislation, the motive clause is Israel’s history as slaves—a history that must generate both liberation (v. 18) and liberality (vv. 12-14).⁶¹ This idea occurs elsewhere in the comparison between Exodus and Deuteronomy. In the reshaping of the “ten words,” Deuteronomy makes Israel’s slave origin the motive for Sabbath keeping (Deut 5:15.). In Exodus the motive for keeping the Sabbath lies in the fact that the God of Israel’s liberation is the resting Creator of the world (Exod 20:8-11). Each piece of legislation finds its premise on a previous act of God. Furthermore, Exodus legislation stands deep in the shadow of the exodus-liberation, which was unprecedented in the ancient world, giving the writer of Exodus no cause for having to bring it to memory.

While an obvious connection between Exodus and Deuteronomy exists, scholars have long noted the seeming discontinuity with both books presented in Leviticus. Though both Exodus and Deuteronomy assume the ownership of the Hebrew slave, Leviticus seems to prohibit it. While the scope of this project does not include a full analysis of the Leviticus passage and its relationship to Exodus and Deuteronomy, a few points may be made in order to justify our canonical analysis.

The laws in Leviticus presuppose the existing laws in Exodus and supplement them.⁶² The following distinctions may be made between the Leviticus passage and the Exodus and Deuteronomy legislation. First, the individual is sold or sells himself⁶³ due to impoverishment. Second, as Schenker and Chirichigno suggest, this

individual is the *paterfamilias*.⁶⁴ Neither the Exodus nor Deuteronomic legislation mentions that the slave is married with children. The Leviticus code explicitly cites the man as both husband and father (25:41; cf. 54). Third, there is a distinct change in the time allotted for the slave. In both Exodus and Deuteronomy the slave serves six years and then he is freed along with his wife if he has one. The *paterfamilias*-slave serves until the year of Jubilee. Schenker has noted that the reason for this change is the amount of investment that the purchaser has to make to integrate an entire family into his household. This family could be quite large and, with respect to the Leviticus legislation, would be treated as servants not slaves. Thus, the investment the purchaser made was substantial and primarily for the *paterfamilias*-slave and his family, who have descended into destitution. Thus, the Leviticus code supplements the Exodus legislation by codifying the treatment of a *paterfamilias*-slave in the context of Jubilee.

Thus, the canonical placement of the manumission laws in Exod 21:2-11 demonstrates the propensity of Israel to identify themselves as free people. The ideal finds further substantiation and elaboration in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15. In the first passage, Moses strongly militates against enslavement of the *paterfamilias*. In the second, a legitimate expansion of the Exodus codes occurs that includes the release of the female slave along with the male upon entrance into the land, which is what their liberation naturally leads toward.⁶⁵ This Exodus liberation-paradigm occurs in the shadow of the great exodus-liberation from Egypt and the Sinai theophany, perhaps the two most explicit fear-inspiring events within the bounds of the Old Testament.

Exodus and the Modern Trade

Slavery, while illegal in every country still thrives as it did in ancient times but in a horrible new way. There are an estimated 44 million people enslaved today.⁶⁶ Tragic scenarios such as the Maddie McCann story remind us of the vicious nature of the modern trade. Such situations demand answers from Christians who take the biblical text seriously.

There are several points to keep in mind when considering the modern slave trade in light of the book of Exodus. First, Exodus, even with its critical affirmation of the institution of ancient slavery, does not support the current trade. The social architecture of the ANE is drastically different than our contemporary world. Our cultural architecture not only renders slavery unnecessary but also repulsive.

Second, and by extension, the architecture of slavery is altogether different today. While slavery was not the first choice for any ancient individual, it could be a better alternative than being destitute. By stark contrast, the current slave trade is not characterized by the humane disposition of Israel's perspective in Exodus. The Hebrew Scriptures preserve the preciousness of the human being and recognize their inherent dignity as image bearers of God. The current slave trade has no such perspective on slaves. The modern slave (who may be well below the age of thirteen years old and forcibly conscripted into any number of heinous acts) has no rights, is stripped of all dignity, and is bludgeoned consistently with the notion that he/she has absolutely no inherent worth. Furthermore, the notion of God, a fiercely just and passionately merciful God, is never an admitted aspect in the modern slave trade. Due to Israel's origins, these ideas were at the core of

both their existence and legislation. The slave owner in Israel rooted his identity in the reality of liberation from slavery, and, therefore, could not correctly perceive a slave in an impersonal manner. They were to be treated with a certain measure of empathy. The modern trade knows no empathy. It is driven by economic brutality and often fueled by raw perversion. There is no sympathetic disposition or personal identity between owner/pimp and slave. The slave amounts to a tradable commodity and nothing more, certainly not human, certainly not as precious image bearers of the one true living God, who redeems and delivers into the land of promise.

Third, given this new architecture for slavery coupled with the lack of abolitionism in the Old Testament, the spirit of the text still presses one toward a modern abolitionist stance. The covenant subversion within Israel's legislation and literature provides the paradigm. Exodus legislation speaks to the value of the person, of the image bearer of God. It contends clearly for the preciousness of human life. Further, with no *status quo* cultural sense of slavery for the impoverished, the modern adherents to Exodus theology should also seek to elevate the status of people within the grip of the modern trade.

Fourth, the legislation in Exodus is written directly to the covenant people concerning their interaction among themselves. Thus, the covenant people who freely reside in America must take seriously the plight of their persecuted brothers and sisters in hostile and restricted nations such as China. Exodus displays them in the context of our redemption, understanding them as precious and valuable, and insists upon their freedom.

Fifth, Exodus displays to the contempo-

rary reader what real freedom is, namely the natural results of the supernatural liberating work of God. Christians must look into a privatized perverse system and speak the truth of the gospel to those in its grip who may never be freed from it. There is freedom even in chains and hope in the midst of hopelessness. No pervert or slave owner can abduct those who are genuinely free. While being a slave to an individual is bitter, it does not match the bitter illusion that master sin imposes upon his victims. While freedom from an owner is sweet and must be demanded in the current trade, freedom from sin and to Christ is sweeter still and must be even more vigorously pursued by covenant people.

ENDNOTE

¹C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 334. Much of my thinking has been shaped by Wright.

²The notion of covenant-subversion is that Israel's subversive disposition toward their surrounding culture is created, shaped, and driven by the covenant relationship with Yahweh.

³The LXX employs δουλεύω as its primary term for "be a slave/servant."

⁴According to Claus Westermann ("עִבַּר," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* [3 vols.; ed. Claus Westerman; trans. Mark E. Biddle; Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1997], 2:183), the verb appears in Hebrew 289 times and in Aramaic twenty-eight times. It pervasively occurs in the qal stem (271 times). Of the remaining forms, it occurs in the niph'al 4 times, the pu'al 2 times, the hiph'il 8 times, and the hoph'al 4 times.

⁵E. Carpenter, "עִבַּר," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (5 vols.; ed. Willem A. VanGe-

meren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 5:306. Aside from its 800 appearances in Hebrew, it also occurs seven times in Aramaic.

⁶See all the pertinent studies: Westermann “עֶבֶד,” 2:182-200; Helmer Ringgren, “עֶבֶד,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (15 vols; ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz Josef Fabry; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10:376-405; and Werner Foerster, “doulos,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (10 vols.; ed. Gerhard Kittel; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:265-283.

⁷Ringgren, “עֶבֶד,” 10:376.

⁸The English term “slave” appears approximately 70 times in the ESV. The vast majority of those times, the translators are translating the word עֶבֶד. Other terms used by the biblical writers are as follows: חֶסֶד (Deut 21:14), שִׁפְחָה (Lev 19:20; Eccl 2:7; Isa 14:2; Jer 34:11, 16), בֶּן בֵּית (Eccl 2:7), and נִס (Lam 1:1).

⁹Lev 25:38.

¹⁰Cf also Jer 34:11 and 16 for correspondence between לִשְׁפָח and לְעֶבֶד.

¹¹The context of the promise to Abraham (Gen 15:13) emphasizes the acquisition of the land after 400 years of afflicted sojourning (landlessness).

¹²See Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 14 for this conclusion.

¹³Childs comments that this particular law was bound to fail in Israel given the nature of marriage in Gen 2:24 and Matt 19:6 (ibid., 468).

¹⁴Ibid., 468-469.

¹⁵I will address this passage further below in conjunction with its parallels in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

¹⁶Ibid., 473.

¹⁷A. Gardiner, “The Geography of the Exodus,” in *Recueil d'études égyptologiques dédiées: la mémoire Jean-François Champollion* (Paris: bibliothèque de l'école des hautes études, 1922), 204-205. Cited in James Karl Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 112. It should be noted that Historical Minimalists such as Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (*David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006]), T. L. Thompson (*Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources* [Leiden: Brill, 1992]), and P. R. Davies (*In Search of “Ancient Israel”* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992]) would certainly disagree with these assertions. Davies summarizes that historical Israel exists only in archaeological remains, that biblical Israel exists only in Scripture, and that “ancient Israel” exists only as an unacceptable amalgam of the first two.

¹⁸William J. Murnane, *The Penguin Guide to Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 1983), 37.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰There was also a ubiquitous understanding of the necessity of straw for legitimate brickmaking

²¹W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Social Life in Ancient Egypt* (London: Constable

and Company, 1923), 23; See also Abd-el-Moshen, *Slavery in Pharaonic Egypt* (Supplement aux Annales Du Service de Antiquities de l' Egypte 18; Paris: L'Organisztion Egypteane Generale du Livre, 1952; repr. 1978), 4, 7, 124.

²²Ibid., 56, This new policy was probably generated by the long awaited expulsion of the Hyksos. See also Abd-el-Moshen, *Slavery in Pharaonic Egypt*, 81; Allan Gardiner, “A Lawsuit Arising from the Purchase of Two Slaves,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 21 (1935): 140-46.

²³Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 247.

²⁴According to Kitchen, the label of the inscription reads as follows: “captures brought-off by his majesty for wok at the Temple of [Amun].” He notes that the official publication of the tomb chapel scene appears in N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes I, II* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of arts, 1943; repr., Arno, 1973), 54-60, 58-60.

²⁵See Exod 1:11-14; 5:1-21.

²⁶Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 248 notes that the Louvre leather scroll records that in Year 5 of Ramses II the “stablemasters” established a quota of 2,000 bricks to be made under them. For the biblical corollary, see Exod 5:8, 13-14, 18-19.

²⁷Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 248. See the mention of straw-based bricks in Exod 5:7, 18.

²⁸On the identification of the ‘apiru, see M. G. Kline, “Hebrews,” in the *New Bible Dictionary* (ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I Packer,

and D. J. Wiseman; 3d ed; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 457-58; N. P. Lemche, "Habiru, Hapiru" and "Hebrew" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; ed. David Noel Freedman; (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3:6-10, 95.

²⁹Kitchen (*On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 249) cites further accounts of Ramses II demanding slaves be brought from as far south as Lybia: "South, west, or northeast in his realm, this pharaoh was prepared to conscript foreigners mercilessly if need be."

³⁰Cf. Exod 5:10-21.

³¹See Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament*, 248. Kitchen provides primary sources on 553 n. 10.

³²See David Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOT Supplement Series 10; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978).

³³Gordon Wenham, *Genesis* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Nelson, 1987), 331. See the clear connection with divine activity and the above imagery in Exodus (Exod 10:21, 22; 14:20; 15:16; 23:27).

³⁴Childs (*Exodus*, 12) notes that the same tension in the Joseph narrative exists here, namely, the outworking of God's good will for His people versus the evil schemes of the new Pharaoh.

³⁵John Durham, *Exodus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 7.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷As cited in Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 337.

³⁸Muhammed A Dandamayev, "Slavery," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:58-59. There were three main social segments: freemen, slaves, semi-

free populace. Within this construct existed three main types of labor: independent labor of free peasants or craftsmen, slave labor, and labor from various semi-free groups.

³⁹Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (2d ed.; SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 65.

⁴⁰Ibid., 82.

⁴¹Ibid., 122: "If an *awilu's* slave should strike the cheek of a member of the *awilu* class, they shall cut off his ear" (LH ¶205).

⁴²Apparently a removable mark placed on the shaved head of a slave in Babylon.

⁴³The plain meaning of this verb is that the guilty party is liable to death themselves *via* the legal community. Thus, in this case the master was to be charged on behalf of the slave, who had no family. The other option is that the owner is to be avenged for killing his own slave, which makes no more sense than the proverbial man who begs the court for mercy due to the fact that he is an orphan after killing his parents.

⁴⁴Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 335.

⁴⁵See S. S. Bartchy, "Slavery," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols.; ed. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:541 for a more detailed discussion.

⁴⁶See Isaac Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria, and Palestine, from the Third Millennium to the End of the First Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1949), 117-55 for a full discussion.

⁴⁷Gen 17:23; Eccl 2:7; Hos 3:2 respectively.

⁴⁸Cf. 2 Peter 2:1.

⁴⁹Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 67.

⁵⁰Ibid., 84.

⁵¹Ibid, 70. Roth claims that the possible meaning of this text is that the guilty party in whose possession the slave is found shall return the slave and in addition provide another of equal value.

⁵²Deut 23:15-16.

⁵³It should be noted that scholars dispute the idea of the slave's identity in this text. Some assert that this only has the foreigner running to Israel in mind. Others state that the slave can be either. Context would suggest the latter, which would include Israelite slaves running from vicious masters. This idea is clearly the background for Paul's discussion concerning Onesimus and his owner in the book of Philemon.

⁵⁴Dandamayev, "Slavery," 6:61.

⁵⁵G. R. Driver and J. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws: 1. Legal Commentary* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon University, 1968), 1:221-230. For a detailed discussion concerning manumission see Dandamayev, "Slavery," 6:59-73; Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East*.

⁵⁶Deuteronomy elaborates upon this law and adds the female slaves along with male slaves for the seven year release, and Leviticus seems hostile to the idea of owning Israelite slaves altogether. See below the comparison of the three Torah manumission laws.

⁵⁷A. Phillips, "The Laws of Slavery:

Exodus 21:2-11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (1984): 62.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jerusalem Publication Society, 1966), 466.

⁶⁰Phillips, "The Laws of Slavery," 54; N. P. Lemche ("The Hebrew Slave: Comments on the Slave Law of Exodus XXI 2-11," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 [1975]: 137) notes the expansion of the legislation.

⁶¹Phillips ("Slave Law") notes that the Exodus is not cited in Deuteronomy. A fair question would be, "Does it have to be cited?" It would be the elephant in the room in a slave legislation discussion. Based upon the Sabbath law comparison, Exodus theology finds its impetus in creation theology. Following the hermeneutic of Exodus 15 (from land to land), Deuteronomic theology is rightly rooted in the precedent set in Exodus.

⁶²For a thorough discussion on the canonical shape of Leviticus 25 as both presupposing the laws of Exodus and preceding the laws of Deuteronomy, see S. Japhet, "The Relationship between the Legal Corpora in the Pentateuch in Light of Manumission Laws," in *Studies in the Bible* (Scripta Hierosolymitana, 31; ed. S. Japhet; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 63-89; G. C. Chirichigno (*Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, [JSOTSupp, 141; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993], 342-43) asserts that the three manumission laws in Exod 21:2-6; Lev 25:39-53; and Deut 15:12-18 are properly shaped in the final form of the canon (Exodus precedes

Leviticus, and Leviticus precedes Deuteronomy) and express a coherent system of debt-slavery that differentiates the release of debt-slaves according to the severity of their debt. See A. Schenker, "The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves: The Road from Exodus to Leviticus," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78 (1998): 23-41, for a detailed discussion of Chirichigno's arguments.

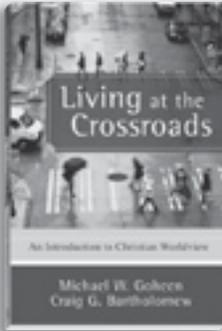
⁶³See A. Schenker ("The Biblical Legislation of the Release of Slaves," 23-41) for the discussion on the term *mkr* as a *niph'al* reflexive or passive.

⁶⁴Schenker, "The Release of Slaves," 27; G.C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, 335-36.

⁶⁵The most obvious textual testimony to this idea in Exodus is chapter 15, where the reader encounters the redemption song of Israel that treats the redemptive work of God in two phases. First, he has "thrown the horse and rider into the sea" overthrowing Pharaoh in holy war. Second, he delivers Israel into the good land.

⁶⁶www.freetheslaves.com.

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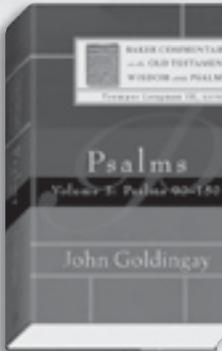
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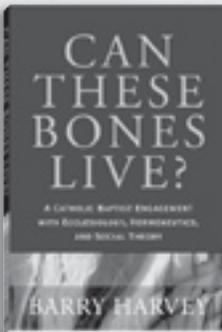
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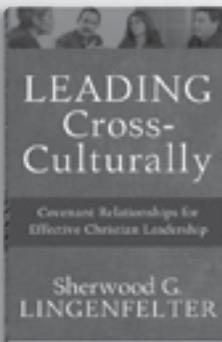
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Dating the Exodus

T. J. Betts

T. J. Betts is Assistant Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is a fourth generation Baptist minister and has pastored fourteen churches in Ohio and Indiana. Dr. Betts is the author of *Ezekiel The Priest: A Custodian Of Tora* (Peter Lang, 2005).

Probably one of the most controversial and hotly debated subjects pertaining to biblical chronology is the dating of the Exodus. Basically, most biblical historians are divided between what are called the late date¹ and the early date² of the Exodus. Most proponents of the late date believe the biblical and archaeological data discovered so far indicate the Exodus happened in the thirteenth century B.C. sometime around 1267 B.C. in the nineteenth dynasty, twenty years into the reign of Pharaoh Ramesses II (1279-1213 B.C.).³ Most proponents of the early date of the Exodus argue it happened during the eighteenth dynasty in the fifteenth century B.C. about 1447/46 B.C. The following is an overview of major arguments pertaining to both sides of the debate.

The Debated Texts

Exodus 1:11

Exodus 1:11 is a key passage in the debate. It states, "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Rameses." Many have equated the city of Rameses with the city of Pi-Ramesses. According to Kitchen, Seti I initially built a summer palace at its location, then Ramesses II built the vast store-city of Exodus 1:11.⁴ Pi-Ramesses was located at modern-day Qantir near Faqus and is called Tell el-Dabva. Hoffmeier suggests Ramesses II probably commenced work on Pi-Ramesses about 1270 B.C., but he recognizes that construction on this site predates Ramesses II at least to the time of Horemheb (1323-1295 B.C.),

meaning the oppression of the Hebrews may have begun a number of decades before Ramesses II came to the throne.⁵ Ramesses II finished the construction of the city naming it after himself. It is inconceivable that the city could have been named after a pharaoh who did not even exist. Therefore, it is impossible for the Exodus to have happened before a pharaoh named Ramesses was on the throne. Furthermore, the majority of archaeological discoveries along with inscriptional references to geographical locations from this site appear to come from the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C. and not the fifteenth century B.C.⁶

Much debate has risen over this understanding of the store city of Rameses by those who advocate the early date of the Exodus. First, archaeologists have discovered an eighteenth dynasty citadel at the location of Tell el-Dabva. West of the citadel they located what might have been a temple. About 150 meters south of the location excavators found a large storage building containing pottery dating to the Late Bronze I period. North of the citadel they discovered a number of Minoan frescoes from the same period.⁷ Shea says those who have argued against the early date of the Exodus because there has been no evidence of an eighteenth dynasty presence at Tell el-Dabva must lay that argument to rest.⁸

Second, Robert I. Vasholz questions the notion that a pharaoh would indeed name cities which "were basically depots for the storage of supplies and taxes paid in terms of foodstuffs" after himself.⁹ He

argues that Egyptian records of cities from the old, middle, and new kingdoms reveal that pharaohs did not name cities they built or rebuilt after themselves. Instead, they tended to name cities after their gods. For instance, during the new kingdom period, Menfe (also known as Memphis) was renamed to Hitpuah, which means “spirit of [the god] Ptah.”¹⁰ Furthermore, a number of pharaohs had names that came from their gods. Rameses means “begotten by Ra.” Ra was a sun god and was also a primary god in Egypt. Vasholz concedes the possibility that Rameses II could be that one exception of a pharaoh who named a city after himself.¹¹ However, if he is indeed correct, then it would suggest the possibility that Rameses II of the nineteenth dynasty got his name in much the same way the city of Rameses got its name some two centuries earlier; both were named after Ra at different times.

Third, convinced of the early date, Wood believes the name Rameses in Exod 1:11 is an editorial updating of an earlier name that went out of use.¹² Kitchen allows for editorial updating with the term Rameses in Gen 47:11 but not in Exod 1:11.¹³ Hoffmeier argues against such an updating because it fails to fit the normal pattern of editorial glossing of names in the Old Testament. Typically, both the earlier name and the later name occur together with a formula connecting the old name with the new name, or the new name is accompanied by an explanatory clause.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Wood demonstrates there are number of occurrences where a name that has been changed appears without any formula or explanation in the Old Testament.¹⁵

Dyer says that those who hold to the late date of the Exodus have failed to

prove the case concerning Rameses in at least one of two ways. First, though they are convinced of it, they have failed to demonstrate that the Rameses of Exod 1:11 was indeed the city Pi-Rameses built by Rameses II. They have made an assumption based on the similarity of the names. Second, even if they are the same cities, advocates of the late date have failed to show that the events of Exod 1:11 happened during the time of Rameses II. Dyer believes basing the date of the Exodus on the similarity of names fails to be a compelling argument.¹⁶

Merrill argues,

it is by no means certain that the city of Rameses was named after the Pharaoh of that name. In fact, Genesis 47:11 states that Jacob and his family settled in the land of Rameses when they entered Egypt in the nineteenth century; unless we postulate an anachronism, for which there is not the slightest proof, we must conclude that there was an area by that name before there was ever a Pharaoh Rameses. It could well be that there had been an ancient Ramesside dynasty long ages before and the Ramessides of the Nineteenth Dynasty were named for them, the city also having taken this name. In any case, there is no need to assume that the mention of the city of Rameses proves that the Exodus must have taken place during the reign of Rameses II.¹⁷

1 Kings 6:1

First Kings 6:1 is another important text concerning the date of the Exodus. It says, “In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the LORD.” Solomon reigned from 971/970 – 931/930 B.C.¹⁸ Therefore, according to this passage, Solomon began building the temple

in 967/966 B.C. Taking the number four hundred and eighty literally would then point to 1447/1446 B.C. as the date of the Exodus. Obviously, 1 Kgs 6:1 is a major text for proponents of the early date to argue their case. In fact, on the surface it seems to be an open and closed case.

However, advocates of the late date emphasize the importance of understanding how the biblical writers used numbers. Hoffmeier addresses the issue:

the culture and conventions of the penman's milieu must be borne in mind when addressing the question of how to interpret numbers. Such a view of Scripture encourages the researcher to investigate seriously how large numbers were used and understood among Israel's neighbors. A literal understanding of certain large numbers may not always be correct if the authorial intent was not literal. Such a misplaced literalism would be a "misinterpretation" of Scripture's meaning.¹⁹

Proponents of the late date believe the number 480 should be understood to represent twelve generations made up of periods of forty years each.²⁰ Actually, these generations are best understood to have lasted twenty-five years each. Therefore, 12 x 25, or 300 years, is a more reasonable actual number for the time elapsed between the building of the temple and the Exodus. This calculation means the Exodus happened about 1267 B.C. during the reign of Ramesses II.²¹

Most supporters of the late date contend that the number forty should be taken symbolically in 1 Kgs 6:1. They observe that numbers in the Bible were used for purposes other than just precise counting. In fact, several numbers in Scripture "are used symbolically, are stylized for other purposes than simple counting, or are approximate numbers based on different cultural ways of reck-

oning time than just counting years."²² Bratcher says that there are several groups of numbers that perform certain roles in Scripture. For instance, the number three often denotes a short period of time or extent without intending to be specific (Jonah 1:17; 3:3). The number seven often symbolizes completion (Gen 2:2; 29; Matt 15:35). The number twelve symbolizes community and wholeness (Gen 35:22; Jud 19:29). And the number forty is a "schematized number used for a generation or simply an unspecified long period of time" (Gen 7:4; Exod 16:35). Furthermore, Bratcher points out how multiples of these numbers appear in the Scripture, such as seventy or seventy-seven (Gen 4:24; Matt 18:22), one hundred twenty (Gen 6:3), one hundred forty-four (Deut 34:7), one hundred and forty-four thousand (Rev 14:1), four hundred (Gen 15:3), four thousand (1 Sam 4:2), forty thousand (Josh 4:13; 1 Kgs 4:26), and four hundred thousand (Josh 20:2).²³ Understanding this use of numbers has led many scholars to believe the 480 years of 1 Kgs 6:1 should be taken symbolically.

Hoffmeier has suggested that perhaps prevalent use of the number forty in the Old Testament originated with the Israelite wandering in the wilderness; from there it possibly took on symbolic meaning throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Hoffmeier continues,

There are obvious cases where the number 40 is extremely difficult to interpret literally. For example, Moses is said to have been on Mt. Sinai to receive the law 40 days and 40 nights and during the period "he neither ate bread nor drank water" (Exod 34:28; cf. Deut 9:9,18,25). No human could last 40 days without water. Consequently, this verse forces us to accept either the 40 days or the complete fasting literally, but not both. Outside of the Bible,

the number 40 also has symbolic meaning. Consider the statement by the king Mesha in his famous stele. He declared that "Omri had taken possession of the whole la[n]d of Medeba, and lived there (in) his days half the days of his son, forty years." According to 1 Kgs 16:23, Omri reigned 12 years, and to Ahab 22 years are credited (1 Kgs 16:29). Mesha claims to have liberated his land from Israelite dominance half-way through Ahab's 22 years, meaning that the 40 year period actually was no more than 23 years.

Passages like these, and the use of the number 40 with such regularity, suggests that the number may symbolize an undisclosed period of time--an approximate number. Consequently, trying to reconstruct history and to establish dates involving the number 40 is indeed challenging. Then, too, it is undeniable that 480 does correspond to "12 times 40," and therefore one should not lightly dismiss the possible symbolic nature of the number.²⁴

Alternative understandings of these passages where one understands the number forty literally might be discussed at another time, but for the sake of this discussion, Hoffmeier clearly demonstrates the line of reasoning pertaining to 1 Kgs 1:6 given by many who contend for the late date of the Exodus.

There are a couple of issues concerning the notion that the number 480 is derived from the number of generations between the time of Solomon and the Exodus. First, nowhere in the Bible does it communicate that forty years is the ideal or full generation. Second, 1 Chron 6:33-37 indicates there were eighteen generations from the time of Korah, the instigator who raised a rebellion against Moses (Numbers 16), to the time of Heman, a musician from the time of David. If one adds one more generation to get to Solomon's time, then there were nineteen generations from the

time of the Exodus to the time of Solomon. Following the logic of Hoffmeier and Kitchen who say twenty-five years is a reasonable span for an actual generation, nineteen generations multiplied by twenty-five years yields the number 475 years, a number that coincides well with the 480 years of 1 Kgs 1:6.²⁵ Other genealogies giving the generations from the time of Moses to the time of Solomon appear to be "truncated." The genealogy of 1 Chron 6:3-10 showing the generations of the high priests from Aaron to Azariah indicates there were fourteen high priests from the time of Moses to the time of Solomon.²⁶

Furthermore, what appears in 1 Kgs 1:6 is the number, four hundred and eighty, not twelve and forty. Applying the numbers twelve and forty as stock numbers found in this verse may be reading into the text something that is not really there.²⁷ Also, this number is couched in a verse that gives very specific information about the date of the building of the temple. Given its context, it seems reasonable to read all of the information literally. When the context and genre of a text should be taken literally, then it is logical to take all of its constituent parts literally.

Umberto Cassuto's lectures, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, raise another interesting point for one trying to understand 1 Kgs 1:6. Cassuto's study gave attention to the biblical writers' use of numbers in the Old Testament. He determined that the order in which numbers are given in the Old Testament are an indication of how the biblical authors intended the numbers to be understood. Cassuto observed that compound numbers appear in two different ways: sometimes the ones precede the tens, the tens precede the hundreds, and the hundreds precede the thousands;

in other instances the thousands precede the hundreds, the hundreds precede the tens, and the tens precede the ones. For example, one may find *eighty and four hundred* or one may find *four hundred and eighty*. Cassuto writes,

This is the principal rule: when the Bible gives us technical or statistical data and the like, it frequently prefers the ascending order, since the tendency to exactness in these instances causes the smaller numbers to be given precedence and prominence. On the other hand, when a solitary number occurs in a narrative passage or in a poem or in a speech and so forth, the numbers are invariably arranged, save in a few cases where special circumstances operate, according to the more natural and spontaneous order, to wit, the descending order. This is a fundamental rule governing the use of the numerals in Hebrew.²⁸

While one often finds “In the four hundred and eightieth year” in English translations of 1 Kgs 6:1, the number appears “in the eightieth year and four hundredth year” in the Masoretic Text. According to Cassuto, this ascending order would indicate a “technical or statistical” number in order to show “the tendency to exactness.” Up to this point, no proponent of the late date of the Exodus has provided a response to Cassuto’s study as applied to 1 Kgs 1:6.

Judges 11:26

The final Scriptural text for consideration concerning the Exodus is Judg 11:26. This verse is located in a message Jephthah sent to the king of Ammon in order to persuade the king to discontinue his aggression against the Israelites living in the Transjordan. The Ammonites were attempting to retake some of the land that Israel had taken when Moses had led his people there. As Jephthah was contending

with the Ammonites over land he said, “For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn’t you retake them during that time?” Jephthah was appealing to the idea of “squatter’s rights,” that is, since Israel had been in the land for three hundred years, there was no reason to give it back to the Ammonites now. Even though it is impossible to know the exact date of Jephthah, most scholars estimate his dealings with the Ammonites happened sometime from 1130 to 1073 B.C.²⁹ Therefore, if the Israelites had been in the land for 300 years that would mean they had been there since between 1430 and 1373 B.C., a time that well fits an early date of the Exodus. In fact, the number of years given thus far in Judges for the cycles of oppression and peace comes to 301 years, not counting the Ammonite oppression Jephthah was fighting.

Nevertheless, some scholars object to this understanding of Judg 11:26. Bratcher observes that the context of Jephthah’s speech suggests that the number is not intended to be precise but rather a general reference to an extended span of time. Also, the narrator of the text portrays Jephthah as one who probably would have had little access to historical records in order to speak with such precision, and if the narrator had access to the information and wanted to convey chronological details, then it is odd that the rest of passage is void of any other historical details. Therefore, one may assume the narrator had something else in mind rather than precision in dating as his main concern. Moreover, Bratcher states the meager evidence and tenuous nature of understanding the specific chronology of the judges makes trying to do so nearly impossible

because the conclusions are compromised by inadequate data.³⁰

Some say that the “300 years” is a gloss.³¹ R. G. Boling argues the number of years is intended to be an “exact figure” but that it is a secondary insertion.³² Either way, it could still support the either date of the Exodus. Kitchen discounts Jephthah’s claim also. Confident of his chronology of Jephthah’s activities in 1073 B.C., concerning the number three hundred he says,

At roughly 1070, that would place that occupation at about 1370, which in itself makes no sense whatsoever on any current date of the exodus 40 years before, whether in 1447, 1260/1250, or any time in between. Brave fellow that he was, Jephthah was a roughneck, an outcast, and not exactly the kind of man who would scruple first to take a Ph.D. in local chronology at some ancient university of the Yarmuk before making strident claims to the Ammonite ruler. What we have is nothing more than the report of a brave but ignorant man’s bold bluster in favor of his people, not a mathematical precise chronological datum. So it can offer us no practical help. It is in the same class as other statements that biblical writers may well report accurately but which they would not necessarily expect readers to believe.³³

Therefore, according to Kitchen, the biblical writers were accurate in recording what Jephthah said, but what Jephthah said was inaccurate. Either he was ignorant of the facts or perhaps he intentionally lied about them in order to make the case for his own people, certainly not the last time a leader would have done so.

Why is it so impossible for the number to be accurate unless one needs it to fit an already established historical reconstruction of events? Would it have even been necessary for Jephthah to have a “Ph.D. in chronology at some ancient university” to have knowledge of the span of time his people had been in the land? Granted, Jephthah probably had little concern for providing the Ammonite king with a “mathematical precise chronological datum.” However, is it reasonable to consider his use of “300 years” to be something like the way most typical Americans would have responded ten to twenty years ago if they had been asked “How old is the United States of America?” Most would have answered “200 years old,” and when they did most people would have understood it to be a reasonable estimation of the span of time in question. There are those Americans who would still give that answer today. Moreover, most Americans, sad to say, have little knowledge of a detailed chronology of American history, but they do have an idea of the length of time the United States has been a nation. Therefore, it is reasonable to conceive that while Jephthah was not trying to give a definitive time of their occupation of the land, he was giving a very close approximation of it. It would not have taken a Ph.D. to have that knowledge. In fact, it would be odd if both the Israelites and Ammonites were ignorant of such information. That is Jephthah’s point. It is reasonable to expect it to have been common knowledge.³⁴ As Davis observes,

It is scarcely possible, however, that Jephthah should make such a blunder in the midst of important international negotiations. His knowledge of the Torah is evident from the context of Chapter 11 of

Judges. It is doubtful that Jephthah could have exaggerated this number as it was used in the argument to the king and have gotten away with it. The King of Ammon had some knowledge of the historical precedence involved in Israel's occupation of the territory of Transjordan (cf. Judg 11:13). Again it would be well to point out that numerical information given in the passage under question does not appear in a poetic section and therefore probably reflects sober fact.³⁵

Archaeological Interests

Having given a look at many of the issues concerning the date of the Exodus in Scripture, now attention should be given to the way scholars use archaeological discoveries to pinpoint the date of the Exodus realizing that archaeological finds provide no more "hard/objective" evidence than does Scripture. Just like any text in the Bible, ancient inscriptions, artifacts, and structures must be interpreted. Interpretations of the same data may sometimes vary quite a bit. One reason for this variance is because of the intricate nature of archaeology. Archaeologists must take into account several issues including the following: (1) topography – the study of the surface features of a region, (2) hydrology – the study of water, its properties, sources, and distribution, (3) stratigraphy – the study of the deposition and relationships of the occupational layers of an archeological site, (4) regional archaeology – the study of the material remains of a geographical area that covers numerous sites, and (5) the tell – a mound consisting of debris from cities built on top of one another on the same site.³⁶ Archaeologists encounter numerous challenges when addressing each of these issues. Another reason for such variance is because it is human nature to look for what one expects to

find. Archaeologists must be careful to avoid allowing presuppositions to influence their interpretations, but doing so is nearly impossible. Therefore, it is important for those of us who study the Scriptures and are interested in archaeology to have an understanding of the role archaeology may play. Archaeology certainly provides an important piece to the puzzle of our attempting to put together all of the events we see in the Bible, but it cannot stand alone.

One may find numerous volumes pertaining to the various discoveries that may have some impact on one's understanding of the date of the Exodus. Therefore, the following is just an overview of some of the major concerns archaeologists have brought to the discussion.

Destruction Layers

Besides the reference to the city of Rameses in Exod 1:11, probably the strongest argument for the late date of the Exodus comes from a number of cities that were in ancient Palestine that indicate their destruction and rebuilding during the thirteenth century B.C. Kitchen and Mitchell observe, "Various Palestinian city-sites show evidence of clear destruction in the second half of the 13th century B.C., which would agree with the onset of the Israelites placed roughly 1240 B.C. onward. Such sites are Tell Beit Mirsim (possibly biblical Debir/Kiriath-sepher), Lachish, Bethel, and Hazor."³⁷ The two biblical cities that have received the most attention are Jericho and Hazor. The Bible describes the complete destruction of both of these cities (Josh 2:1-21; 6:1-27; 11:1-11).

The first city the Israelites defeated as they came into the Promised Land was Jericho. A British archaeologist from the 1930s, John Garstang, concluded that Jer-

icho showed evidence of destruction at the end of the fifteenth century.³⁸ He based his conclusion on a detailed study of the pottery he discovered at the destruction level.³⁹ In the 1950s, Kathleen Kenyon, another renowned British archaeologist, excavated the site and came to a very different understanding of ancient Jericho. Based on her extensive work, she concluded that Jericho actually was destroyed in the middle of the sixteenth century B.C., not at the end of the fifteenth century B.C. Furthermore, after that, she concluded there was no occupation of the site during the fifteenth century.⁴⁰ Most scholars have adopted Kenyon's conclusions. Nonetheless, Wood argues that Kenyon failed to thoroughly study the pottery of the site, yet what she did discover corroborates the biblical account of Jericho and its destruction. In other words, Garstang's study of the pottery was correct after all. According to Wood, the fortification system and evidence of its collapse did not happen in the sixteenth century as Kenyon espoused, but it happened at the end of the fifteenth century B.C., supporting the early date of the Exodus.⁴¹

Hazor is another city at the center of the debate.⁴² It is the largest excavated site in Israel. Hazor was strategically located ten miles north of the Sea of Galilee. According to the biblical writers, it is the only one of three cities captured and destroyed by Joshua and the Israelites (Josh 11:1-11). The other two are Jericho and Ai. Excavations at Hazor have revealed the fifteenth century B.C. city of Hazor (Stratum XV in the upper city and Stratum 2 in the lower city) was destroyed by fire. In the upper city the temple/palace in area A was destroyed and never rebuilt.⁴³ In fact, the heat was so intense, probably fueled by the blustery winds that move across

the area each day, that excavators have discovered where much of the mud brick of the structure melted and then resolidified into the charred bricks that may still be seen today in its reconstruction. Wood argues that Joshua and the Israelites caused this destruction, thus supporting an early date of the Exodus.⁴⁴

Furthermore, excavators have uncovered a destruction layer that dates to the thirteenth century B.C. in Stratum 1a and Stratum XIII. Wood maintains that this destruction level is the result of Deborah and Barak's war over King Jabin of Hazor and his general, Sisera.⁴⁵ However, the Israeli archaeologist overseeing the excavations of Hazor, Amnon Ben-Tor, contends that Joshua is responsible for the destruction levels dating to the thirteenth century B.C. The destruction was so severe that the city was not reinhabited until the time of Solomon in the tenth century B.C.⁴⁶ Yigael Yadin, the Israeli archaeologist who first excavated these stratum attributed the destruction to the Israelites.⁴⁷ Also, Ben-Tor is convinced Israelites were responsible for this destruction because of the mutilated statues of Egyptian and Canaanite gods and kings many of which were decapitated.⁴⁸ Hoffmeier maintains Deborah and Barak could not be responsible for this destruction because the battle they fought with King Jabin and Sisera happened about thirty-five miles south of Hazor (Judg 4:6, 12-13). While the text indicates God "subdued" Jabin and that the Israelites "cut off" or "exterminated" Jabin (Judg 4:23-24), Hoffmeier observes that the text is silent regarding any kind of military action against the city of Hazor itself. He says,

It is hard to believe that the city that was the "head" of all kingdoms of northern Canaan would so thoroughly be devastated by Joshua in

1400 BC and then rise from the ashes to be rebuilt to its peak of prosperity only to be demolished by a much smaller force from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulon (Judg 4:6, 10) under Deborah and Barak.⁴⁹

In his response to Hoffmeier, Wood says,

Judg 5:14-18 indicates that Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir (Manasseh), Zebulon, Issachar, and Naphtali, six northern hill country tribes, participated in the war against Jabin king of Hazor. Furthermore, Hoffmeier denies that there was any military action against Hazor itself by Deborah and Barak, as the battle described in Judges 4 took place at the Kishon River resulted in Jabin being “subdued” (Judg 4:23). Following this, the “Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin” until they “destroyed him” (Judg 4:24). The destruction of Jabin implies the destruction of his capital city Hazor.

These are minor points, however, compared to the major issues facing the 13th-century model which Hoffmeier does not address. That is, if the 1320 BC destruction at Hazor is assigned to Joshua, where is the city that Jabin of Judges 4 ruled, since Hazor was not rebuilt until the time of Solomon.⁵⁰

As already indicated, the advocates of the late date say the destruction levels of numerous cities in the thirteenth century B.C. are evidence of the conquest of the promised land. The Bible only mentions three cities that were destroyed by Joshua, but advocates of the late date say that these cities are representative of the mass destruction wielded by the Israelites throughout the land. Nevertheless, could it be that Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were the only cities destroyed in the conquest? Deut 6:10-12 says,

And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you--

with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Is it logical for people who are conquering a land with the intention of settling in it to destroy the cities they are intending on inhabiting themselves? Moses gives the impression that the Israelites were going to live in the Canaanite cities and houses that the Canaanites had built, not that the Israelites would have to rebuild. The destruction of the three cities mentioned in Joshua each seem to have happened under special circumstances, yet it is reasonable that the Israelite military strategy was to eliminate the inhabitants of the land without destroying their cities, homes, or crops. Moreover, the book of Judges seems to indicate that there was a great deal of conflict happening during that period in ancient Palestine. Could it be that the numerous destruction levels of the thirteenth century B.C. are the remains of those conflicts along with the destruction of Hazor?

Amarna Letters

Excavators have uncovered 382 tablets at Tell el Amarna, which is located about 180 miles south of Cairo.⁵¹ This site was the location of the capital during the reign of the ninth pharaoh in the eighteenth dynasty named Amenhotep IV or Akhenaton, named for the sun god Aten or Aton. The Amarna tablets are significant because they are a collection of diplomatic correspondences. Out of this collection, 106 of the letters were requests from various vassals of Egypt in Canaan

for military aid from the pharaoh in the face of attacks by a group of people called *Hapiru*.⁵² These attacks happened in the early to mid-fourteenth century B.C. The term, *Hapiru*, appears in texts dating from 1750 to 1150 B.C. and was a designation for semi-nomadic peoples who “were in the process of sedentarization, who came from the semi-desert zone and entered civilized regions as strangers . . . they were members of tightly knit tribal units whose allegiance was determined by kinship and who had their own system of law.”⁵³ Astour says the Amarna tablets indicate the *Hapiru* “acted in large armed units which were not only engaged in plundering raids but were also seizing for themselves towns and parts of the lands under Egyptian rule.”⁵⁴ He continues, “History shows that whenever one finds independent armed bands, these were always ethnically homogeneous.”⁵⁵ While not all *Hapiru* attacking cities in Palestine were Hebrews, some proponents of the early date believe that some of the *Hapiru* mentioned in the letters were references to Hebrews.⁵⁶ From the perspective of the Canaanites the Hebrews would have fit the description of *Hapiru*.

Probably the best argument against equating the Israelites with the any of the *Hapiru* comes from Hoffmeier. He points out that one of the Amarna tablets indicates that the king of Hazor was an ally of the *Hapiru* as they attacked Tyre.⁵⁷ This observation raises two issues for an early date of the Exodus. First, the books of Joshua and Judges indicate that the Israelites and the inhabitants of Hazor were anything but allies. Second, if the Israelites had come into the land in ca. 1400 B.C., then how could the king of Hazor be waging war on other city-states in northern Palestine if Joshua and the

Israelites had just destroyed the city? In response to the first issue, the *Hapiru* who were allies with Hazor obviously were not Israelites. Once again, “*Hapiru*” is a generic as well as derogatory term that was given to these semi-nomadic peoples causing unrest in settled areas. Not all *Hapiru* were Israelites, but some may have been called this by the Canaanites who certainly would not have been concerned with making any distinction between these groups as they were conquering Canaanite settlements. The second issue assumes it was impossible for Hazor to rebuild within forty to fifty years. However, the books of Joshua and Judges suggest it did regardless of which date of the Exodus one takes. Another possibility is that the *Hapiru* appeared after the initial conquest led by Joshua. They would have been among those who oppressed Israel during the time of the judges.⁵⁸

Extra-biblical References to Israel

The Merenptah Stele is a monument heralding military campaigns carried out by Pharaoh Merenptah (1237-1227 B.C.). The close of this “Hymn of Victory” contains a passage concerning a campaign that happened early in his reign saying,

Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon
is Gezer;
Yanoam is made as that which does
not exist;
Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.⁵⁹

This inscription is the oldest extra-biblical inscription where scholars agree on the mention of Israel. Most attention has been given to the determinatives (signs in the text that indicate the nature of the accompanying word) that follow the names of the cities and Israel. The determinatives accompanying the cities indicate that they were city-states. The

determinative accompanying Israel indicates that it was a less settled people indicating they were a tribal people without any fixed territorial boundaries, a picture in keeping with the time of the judges.⁶⁰ Since, no other mention of Israel appears prior to ca. 1220 B.C. and Merenptah recognized Israel as only a tribal people instead of a nation, some argue the stele supports a late date.⁶¹ On the other hand, supporters of the early date contend that Merenptah's mention of Israel indicates the Israelites were established enough for Merenptah to boast about having fought Israel, meaning Israel was well-established in Canaan by this time.⁶²

Manfred Görg's publication concerning a column base fragment located in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin has peaked some interest in the debate. Görg has discovered that it preserves three place names that were part of a longer list. The first two names are clearly Ashkelon and Canaan. Görg contends that the third is Israel. The orthography⁶³ suggests this inscription dates to the eighteenth dynasty.⁶⁴ If so, then it would lend support to an early date of the Exodus. Hoffmeier says Görg's reading of "Israel" is "plagued by serious linguistic and orthographic problems which preclude it from being Israel," then he proceeds by addressing "four of the most glaring objections."⁶⁵ In Görg's formal response to Hoffmeier, Görg puts forth his reasons for maintaining the inscription should be read "Israel." What is just as interesting is that Görg says, "My commentary has no relationship to questions about the date of the so-called exodus."⁶⁶ Apparently, Görg has no interest in the debate concerning the Exodus, indicating his objectivity in the matter.

Conclusion

Several more issues surround the debate concerning the date of the Exodus. Was there an Egyptian capital near Goshen during the eighteenth dynasty in the mid-fifteenth century B.C.?⁶⁷ Did Pharaoh actually perish in the Red Sea?⁶⁸ Can one trust the Jubilee's data from the Talmud that seems to indicate the beginning of the conquest happened in 1406 B.C.?⁶⁹ Did the populations in Moab and Edom during the fifteenth century B.C. correspond to biblical descriptions during Israel's trek to Canaan?⁷⁰ The list goes on as does the debate.

So why is it important for evangelicals to concern themselves with what seems to be insignificant compared to other matters concerning Scriptures? It is important because a great many people are abandoning the notion that the Exodus ever really happened.⁷¹ No doubt, the message of the text is preeminent over any chronological issues, but chronological issues naturally arise if we acknowledge the historicity of the text. While evangelicals have no need for extra-biblical evidence to uphold our conviction pertaining to the message, inspiration, and authority of Scripture, we should be committed to upholding the truth before a skeptical and unbelieving world. Evangelicals do not need to prove the veracity of the bible, yet apologetics is an important aspect of contending for the faith. Our chronological understanding of events before the Exodus and after the Exodus until Israel's monarchy is largely dependant upon our understanding of the date of the Exodus. As Wood states, "If we are looking in the wrong century for evidence to support the biblical account of the exodus, clearly we will not find any evidence!"⁷²

Both sides of the debate raise serious

questions concerning the date of the Exodus. If Moses had recorded the name of the pharaoh there would be no debate. However, during that time it was customary for people to call the Egyptian monarch "Pharaoh." Until stronger evidence points to the contrary, the mid-fifteenth century B.C. appears to be the most probable date for the Exodus.

ENDNOTES

¹The following are some well-known proponents of the late date of the exodus: Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 40-43; John Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical, 2000), 27-29; Richard Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 139-43; James K. Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus? A Response to Bryant Wood," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2008): 225-47; K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1966), 57-69; idem, *The Bible in Its World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 75-79; idem, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 307-09; Alan Millard (archeological notes), *Picture Archive of the Bible* (ed. Caroline Masom and Pat Alexander; Tring, Herts, England: Lion Books, 1987), 22.

²The following are some well-known proponents of the early date of the exodus: Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *A History of Israel from the Bronze Age Through The Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 104-11; idem, *Exodus*, in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 288-91; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament*

Israel (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 66-75; Bryant Wood, "The Rise and Fall of the 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 475-89; idem, "The Biblical Date for the Exodus is 1446 BC: A Response to James Hoffmeier," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2008): 249-58; idem, "From Ramesses to Shiloh: Archaeological Discoveries Bearing on the Exodus-Judges Period" in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 256-62; William H. Shea, "The Date of the Exodus," in *Giving the Sense*, 236-55.

³Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 236.

⁴Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 256.

⁵Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 233.

⁶Ibid., 234-35.

⁷M. Bietak, *Avaris and PiRamesse: Archaeological Exploration in the Eastern Nile Delta* (Wheeler Lecture for 1979; Oxford: Oxford University, 1981), 67-79.

⁸Shea, "The Date of the Exodus," 249.

⁹Robert I. Vasholz, "On the Dating of the Exodus," *Presbyterion* 32 (2006): 111.

¹⁰Ibid., 112.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Wood, "The 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 479. Wood gives several examples, such as Bethel in Gen 28:19, used proleptically in Gen 12:8 and 13:3, and Dan, named by the Danites in Judg 18:29 but used proleptically in Gen 14:14.

¹³Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 354

¹⁴Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 233.

- ¹⁵Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 250-51.
- ¹⁶Charles H. Dyer, "The Date of the Exodus Reexamined," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 3 (1983): 226.
- ¹⁷Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 107.
- ¹⁸Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 83.
- ¹⁹Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 235-36.
- ²⁰Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 307.
- ²¹Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 236.
- ²²Dennis Bratcher, "The Date of the Exodus: The Historical Study of Scripture," n.p. [cited 25 August 2008]. Online: <http://www.cresourcei.org/exodusdate.html>.
- ²³Ibid.
- ²⁴Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 237. See R. D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austell *1 & 2 Kings*, in vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 181, for a discussion of the events taking forty literally.
- ²⁵I would like to thank my colleague Peter Gentry for pointing out this passage to me and its significance to this discussion; cf. Wood, "The 13th Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 486-86.
- ²⁶Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 253.
- ²⁷Dyer, "The Date of the Exodus Reexamined," 235.
- ²⁸Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1961), 52.
- ²⁹John J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1981), 103; Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 148; Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 207.
- ³⁰Bratcher, "The Date of the Exodus."
- ³¹J. Hughes, *Secrets of the Times: Myth and History in Biblical Chronology* (JSOTSup 66; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); R. G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 204.
- ³²Boling, *Judges*, 204.
- ³³Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 209.
- ³⁴I am always amazed at how we moderns portray the ancients as so ignorant. The more I study ancient near Eastern cultures the more I am amazed at how much they did know.
- ³⁵John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1971), 31.
- ³⁶See John D. Currid, *Doing Archaeology in the Land of the Bible: A Basic Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) for an excellent introduction to Palestinian Archaeology; for further reading see Joel F. Drinkard, Gerald L. Mattingly, and J. Maxwell Mill, *Benchmarks in Time and Culture* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).
- ³⁷Kenneth A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, "Chronology," in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3 vol.; ed. J. D. Douglas; Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1980), 1:275.
- ³⁸John Garstang, "Jericho and the Biblical Story," in *Wonders of the Past* (ed. J. A. Hammerton; New York: Wise, 1937), 1222.
- ³⁹John Garstang, "Jericho: City and Necropolis, Fourth Report," *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 21 (1934): 118-30.
- ⁴⁰Kathleen Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (London: Ernest Benn, 1957), 262; idem, "Jericho," in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (ed. D. Winton Thomas; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 265-67; idem, *The Bible in Recent Archaeology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 33-37.
- ⁴¹Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 262-63.
- ⁴²I had the privilege of participating in the 2006 excavations at Hazor.
- ⁴³Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 268.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., 268.
- ⁴⁵Wood, "The 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 487-88.
- ⁴⁶Amnon Ben-Tor, "The Fall of Canaanite Hazor—The 'Who' and 'When' Questions," in *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition, Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries B.C.E* (ed. Semour Gitin, Amihai Mazar, and Ephraim Stern; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998), 456-67.
- ⁴⁷Yigael Yadin, "The Fourth Season of Excavation at Hazor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 22 (February, 1959): 9.
- ⁴⁸Ben-Tor, "The Fall of Canaanite Hazor," 456, 465.
- ⁴⁹Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 244.
- ⁵⁰Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 256.
- ⁵¹For a detailed study see Y. Goren, Y. I. Finkelstein, and N. Na'aman, *Inscribed in Clay - Provenance Study of the Amarna Tablets and Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Tel Aviv: Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of

- Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, 2004).
- ⁵²Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 269.
- ⁵³Michael C. Astour, "The Hapiru in the Amarna Texts: Basic Points of Controversy," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 31 (1999): 41.
- ⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 31.
- ⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁵⁶Kaiser, *A History of Israel from the Bronze Age Through The Jewish Wars*, 109-11; Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 102-108; Wood, "The 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 489.
- ⁵⁷Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 245.
- ⁵⁸Meredith Kline, "The Ha-Bi-Ru—Kin or Foe of Israel?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1957): 54-61.
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Sermon: You Cannot Serve Both God and Mummy: Pharaoh Hunger and the Draw of a Golden-Calf Spirituality (Exodus 32:1-35)¹

Russell D. Moore

Russell D. Moore is Senior Vice President for Academic Administration and Dean of the School of Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also serves as Associate Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics. He also serves as a preaching pastor at Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, where he ministers weekly. Dr. Moore is the Executive Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement and a Senior Editor of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*. He is the author of *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Crossway, 2004).

Their little eyes widened as they pressed their faces to the glass. The room was dark, except for a single light shining on the shriveled corpse in front of them. There the thing was, mouth open, eyes still and dead. Their voices quivered as they asked two questions. The first, “Dad, what is it?” I replied, “She’s a mummy.” The second, “Dad can we go now?”

We walked out the doors of the room—the museum here on the campus of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was late on a Friday night, after a new student orientation event and I was walking back to my office with my two six year-old sons. Benjamin asked a third set of questions, with his voice cracking: “Dad, why do you have a mummy at your work? Aren’t you scared to be here?”

I reassured them that, of course, I wasn’t scared. Mummies aren’t real—at least, not real in the way we’re accustomed to seeing them in the black-and-white horror films. Mummies are dead. They can’t hurt anyone. Despite the fact that these boys kept looking over their shoulders, I told them, “One can’t be chased by a mummy.”

But is that entirely true?

The text in front of us is a very familiar passage to those of us who’ve followed Christ for any length of time. The people of Israel are dancing around a golden

calf. We instinctively know this is wrong. We know this is idolatry. We know it kindles the anger of Israel’s God. What we miss is that this is no one-time incident. Instead, the entire Bible points back to this incident—repeatedly—as a paradigm of rebellion.

This act of worshipping a cow is exactly what the Apostle Paul tells us is true of all people in all places everywhere—a pattern of turning away from the Creator and toward the creature, even to the image of a beast (Rom 1:18-25).

The horror of this account is even worse than the brute fact of idolatry. Our brother Stephen, right before he was pelted to death with rocks, preaches something very interesting about this incident. He says that even after Israel had seen God’s work on their behalf—in the defeat of Pharaoh and the deliverance from the Egyptian empire—the people of Israel turned their back on God’s prophet Moses. They, Stephen preaches, “thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt” (Acts 7:39).

When the Israelites dance before this thing, they are doing more than simply rebelling against their God. They are becoming affectionally Egyptian—again.

The Israelites complain to Moses, asking if he had brought them out to the wilderness to kill them. They recall how

Pharaoh had given them food and springs of water. And when Moses is gone for a while, they remember something else Pharaoh had given them: visible gods.

There are very few people in Christian churches who have ever danced in worship around a cow statue. But the Scripture warns us that our forefathers and foremothers weren't especially aberrant. There remains before all of us, everywhere, a pull toward a golden calf spirituality. Israel was delivered from slavery—and so were we. The Pharaoh hunger that led them to disaster is persistent in our own lives and ministries. If we're not careful we'll find ourselves—like them—longing for the power of a mummy.

The Pull to a Christless God

When Moses goes up to the mountain to pray before Israel's God, the people gather around Aaron to negotiate with him. One can hear even in the way they are speaking a profound ingratitude. "Up," they say to Aaron, "And make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Exod 32:1).

Moses? Was it Moses who brought them up out of the land of Egypt? It was Yahweh who poured out the plagues, who split the seas, who drowned the army. The people though speak as though it were by the power of the flesh that they were delivered. God turns this same language back toward Moses when he says, "*Your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:7). In there is an indictment. These people don't see themselves as redeemed. They don't bow the knee in gratitude. They are, as Paul puts it, those who refuse to give thanks (Rom 1:21).

The posture of ingratitude is seen even

in the way they make this idol. This calf is formed, after all, by their jewelry. But where does this jewelry come from? The gold is from Egypt. They have it only because the Lord gave them favor in the sight of their masters, so they were able to plunder their captors (Exod 11:2-3). Aaron is taking the very spoils of war God had granted them and turning it into an arsenal against the One who gave it in the first place.

Their problem isn't just ingratitude, but also fear. The Israelites aren't looking for a ceremony. They instruct Aaron to "make us gods who shall go before us" (Exod 32:1). They are echoing—in a perverted sort of way—God's own promise to them. Yahweh had told them he would go before them to fight off their enemies, to bring them into the land of promise.

Here the people stand—outside the land of Egypt but not yet in the land of promise—and they are afraid. They are seeking a god who will fight for them, a god who will satisfy their needs, a god who will give them good. Because they don't see it by faith, they decide to force it by sight. Because they don't believe in a good, wise, powerful God, they decide to create one.

In addition to this ingratitude and fear is self-deception. After all, the Israelites don't say to themselves, "Let us worship Baal" or "Let us worship Ra." They speak as though they are worshipping Yahweh. Aaron even speaks of the calf thing in this way, commemorating it with "a feast to the Lord" (Exod 32:5). The people believe themselves to be worshipping the God who has delivered them from Pharaoh's Egypt, but they want to worship him after the pattern they've seen in Pharaoh's Egypt. And they are able to convince themselves this is the way it ought to be.

Most of us have a hard time seeing ourselves in the picture of ancient Middle Easterners howling around a cultic statue. But there we are. The Scripture tells us there will always be scoffers among us, right up until the last days, asking the question, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (2 Pet 3:3-4). The walk of faith is so difficult and the walk of sight so easy. The way of the Spirit is so frightful, and the way of the flesh so comfortable.

Faced with the prospect of a wilderness journey, the Israelites looked backward. Back in Egypt, they reasoned, we had all the gods, all the food, all the protection we needed. As they stand in the land outside the land, they find themselves looking back at Egypt, back toward gods who could be created and formed, guaranteed to be visible and tangible, guaranteed to ward off fears and fill stomachs. So they try to replicate it.

The Israelites want what we want—a life without questions, a life that can be manipulated toward the end we desire. Don’t you hear the echo of our idolatrous ancestors in your own grumbling? Do you think you would have the life you really need if only the two strips on the pregnancy test would line up or if only that acceptance letter would come in the mail or if only your ministry would succeed the way your peers’ ministries have? It is easy to seek to manipulate and order your life and affections around these things, forsaking everything else until you get it. You’re longing for some thing—for some thing. You can place this at the forefront of your mind, even calling it “Jesus,” but deep down you know better.

Here in this text, the Israelites stand and worship the work of their own hands. They have what they want: something tangible before them, something they

can feel and point to and say, “This is our God.” Moreover, they can control this. They can conveniently turn their heads away from it when they wish. They can move it about where they want. They can control its sight of them, and thus its oversight of them. This golden calf seems more real to them than their invisible, often hiding God.

In the exact same way, there are those today—even among us—whose driving force is their own ambition, their own pleasure. It’s what is most real to them. This leads to idolatry, and idolatry leads to destruction. The persistent temptation before us is to rather have a calf than a Christ, a Pharaoh than a Father.

The Pull to a Christless Intercession

On display here in this text are two very different priesthoods. Aaron melts the gold. He forms the calf. When Moses returns to confront him, Aaron hides in a fashion reminiscent of Adam in Eden. “Mistakes were made,” he replies. “Moses, you know these people. They kept grumbling so I gathered their stuff together. I melted it down—and how was I supposed to know it would come out on the other end as a calf!” Aaron presents himself not as a craftsman but as a spectator—like the amazed man who sees the outline of the Virgin Mary in his grilled cheese sandwich.

This evasion, though, doesn’t succeed. God repeatedly tells us in this text—all the way to verse 25—that “the people broke loose.” Why? It’s because Aaron let them. When God speaks of the calf he names it “the calf Aaron had made” (Exod 32:35). This thing bears Aaron’s name, and Aaron’s responsibility.

Aaron stands as a priest before the people, and he responds to their appe-

tites—deceiving himself that he’s actually doing the service of God. Aaron takes the worship of God and uses it to manipulate the people—just as Pharaoh did. Just as Pharaoh used gods, and even proclaimed himself to be one of them, to secure loyalty and veneration, Aaron uses the sacred things of God to secure his own tranquility.

As new covenant believers, this danger now applies to all of us. We are, after all, now the promised “kingdom of priests” (Rev 5:11; Exod 19:6). Don’t we follow this tragic Aaronic path when we deceitfully twist our language to get some desired end? It’s easy to be the kind of priest who gossips or lies. It’s easier to protect ourselves than to seek to deny ourselves to edify one another. Aaron certainly believes this to be the case. But in so doing, he images Pharaoh and not Jesus.

As the people dance, though, this text points us to another priesthood. It tells us of Moses as he stands before a furious God, a God who vows to come down and wipe out his people. Moses stands before his God and pleads. He pleads with God to remember that he has delivered this people. He pleads with God not to give the Egyptians further ammunition for their propaganda campaign. He pleads with God, above all, to remember his covenant with Abraham. Moses intercedes for the people, and God’s wrath is turned back.

Moses here is a pattern, a pattern for exactly the kind of life every follower of Christ is now living.

Jesus, our high priest, intercedes for us right now, as One greater than both Aaron and Moses. Jesus, the Book of Hebrews tells us, is praying for us even now, present with his own blood, before the Father. And in Christ the wrath of God is permanently turned aside on our behalf.

We come before God as rebels and law-breakers—exactly the same as our forebears. But when we pray we are praying with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. He is praying with us, and we pray in his name. God hears us then not because we have any meritorious reason to be heard, but because God always hears the voice of his beloved Son. Jesus’ priesthood averts us from disaster—because God keeps his covenant promises to his Christ.

How many of us can see the beginnings of a golden calf spirituality in our own prayerlessness? I wonder how many of us would rather spend a day at the beach or before a television screen than an afternoon on our faces praying before our God? I wonder how many of us would rather preach and teach than to stand in the very presence of God, with Christ, and plead for his power?

The Pull to a Christless Judgment

As Moses and Joshua come down from the mountain, they hear a commotion. It sounds like a victory party. Then it sounds like the wailing of the defeated. Finally, though, it sounds to Joshua like neither triumph nor tragedy, but just a party.

When Moses sees the cultic worship taking place, he throws down the tablets of the Law, the very Word of God. He grinds up the calf and pours its ashes in water. Moses then makes an earring smoothie, as it were, and forces it down the throats of the people.

God then brings judgment on his people—and notice how he does so. God has Moses gather the sons of Levi and instruct them to kill their brothers and companions. God judges the people of Israel exactly the way he judged Pharaoh and Egypt—by causing them to lose their brothers and sons. God sends

plagues on the people—just like he did with Pharaoh and Egypt. God treats them exactly how they've asked to be treated. They turn their hearts to Pharaoh and align themselves with that old pyramid system. So God comes to them as he did to the Pharaoh they wish to serve—with judgment.

God shows his people then that they fear the wrong thing—just as Pharaoh had. Pharaoh feared the Israelites when they began to multiply. They were a threat to his political power. Pharaoh feared his enemies, and used idols to keep them at bay. What Pharaoh did not fear was God.

The Israelites fear starvation. They fear warfare. They fear isolation. But they don't fear their God.

Isn't this so often true of us? Isn't fear-mongering so easy among us—fear of everything from Hillary Clinton to Hollywood? How many of you have an almost crippling fear of failure in ministry? You don't want to be embarrassed in front of your family or friends—maybe the ones who said you were insane for going into the ministry in the first place. I wonder, though, how many of us actually tremble in holy, reverent fear before a God who will one day expose every thought, feeling, inclination, word, and affection before his face?

God brings judgment because the issue, ultimately, isn't a cow. The issue is Christ. God is preparing these people to have the visible God they so earnestly desire. God is moving these people toward the fullness of time, a time in which they will have an Immanuel—God with us—a God in the flesh whom they can touch with their hands. But they'll not touch the smoothed-over gold they've graven out themselves. They'll touch instead the scabbed-over hole in the side of an abdomen.

These people want a priest to stand and intercede before them, but on their own terms. They want a god to save them from judgment and give them their daily bread, but, again, on their own terms. They fail to recognize that this doesn't come by "the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

We see our Christ Jesus foreshadowed in the desperation of Moses, who stands before God and pleads that God would blot him out of the book of life in order that the people may be saved. God refuses to do this. Why? It's because, as we'll see later in this Book of Exodus, Moses is himself a sinner. God is moving toward another Prophet, another Priest, who indeed will be blotted out of the presence of God. He will cry out, "My God, my God, have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:45-46). God is preparing his people for a Christ.

When the Israelites turn toward this golden calf, they're not just turning away from some abstract idea of true worship. They are turning away from Jesus.

This remains a persistent danger, even—maybe especially—for those of us called to Christian ministry. Remember the rich young ruler. He wanted the right thing—eternal life, the inheritance promised. What he did not want was Christ (Mark 10:17-22). There is a way of reading Christian Scripture and a way of carrying out Christian ministry that employs a golden calf hermeneutic. Just as the Israelites said all the right things about the wrong god, it is possible for us to preach theologically pristine and practically on-target sermons that evade Jesus. It is possible to counsel people in ways that bypass Christ. It is possible to have devotional exercises that make one more spiritual but further away from the Savior.

I wonder how many of us today are just

like these Israelites: ungrateful, fearful, prayerless. I wonder how many of us are slinking toward our own golden calf, that object of our own hedonistic idolatry. I wonder how many of us have turned our hearts back to that Pharaoh-behind-the-Pharaoh—the prince of the power of this air—from whom we were delivered.

The Israelites seemed to be safe. Pharaoh was no longer chasing them. His troops were drowned. And yet, the Pharaoh in their own hearts, their own imaginations, was indeed still chasing them. Pharaoh could no longer draft them into hard labor. He could no longer kill their children. But he was still there. And the people could become just like him.

That's the danger for you and for me. There's always that pull to the flesh, to the appetites. We can always make ourselves think our golden calf is noble, even divine. We claw to get that corner office, in the guise of "providing for my family." We baptize thousands—but secretly in order to see our name printed in the denominational newspaper. We want to find a kind of stability, a life that can be manipulated for our own tranquility. In this kind of life, we proclaim that we'd rather have a calf than a Christ, a Pharaoh than a Father.

The Spirit, though, pulls us in the opposite direction. He points us away from our own hands. He draws us away from our craving to see and to feel, pointing us instead to Jesus. He reminds us of the invisible promise—and the invisible judgment—to come. He reminds us that we cannot serve both God and mummy.

ENDNOTES

¹This sermon is a version of a message preached in chapel at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on January 31, 2008.

Book Reviews

Christians at the Cross: Finding Hope in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. By N. T. Wright. Ijamsville, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2007, xvi + 79 pp., \$10.95

This book derives from a series of sermons that N. T. Wright preached at the Church of the Ascension, Easington Colliery, during Holy Week in March 2007. Easington Colliery, a small town in England, has suffered over the years: a devastating underground explosion in 1951 killed 83 people, and then the mines themselves were shut down in 1993. The town has not recovered from that economic blow, and it is still reeling socially, morally, and spiritually.

Wright's sermons were intended to bring the message of the cross and resurrection to a community that had lost hope. Anyone familiar with Wright's work would expect the sermons to be creative and fascinating, and Wright does not disappoint. His sermons here have a verve and dynamism that carry the reader along.

Several things particularly struck me in reading the book. First, Wright captures the theme that the love of God is displayed in the cross. The cross signifies that God in Jesus has come to make things right. Something has gone horribly wrong with the world, but the cross shows us that God loves us and cares about our plight. Wright reminds the church at Easington Colliery—and us—that we can bring our pain and shattered hopes to the cross.

Second, Wright rightfully locates the story of Jesus within the story of Israel. What took place at the cross was not just a transaction. It is part of a grand narrative—part of God's plan to reclaim the world for his glory.

Third, Wright does not give pat answers. He admits that he does not have a blueprint that can solve the problems of the town. The cross of Christ reminds us that the way is not invariably easy. Sometimes we suffer as Christians in agonizing ways.

Fourth, the sermons offer hope. The resurrection of Jesus reminds us that death is not the last word. We can be sure that we will ultimately triumph. Nor is the resurrection merely a "spiritual" reality. Jesus was truly and physically raised from the dead, and we too will be raised physically with him.

Fifth, Wright emphasizes that the resurrection represents God's "yes" to creation. As Christians we are not to retreat from the world but work to change it, for we proclaim the joyful news that Jesus is Lord.

Are there any weaknesses in the book? Three different things stood out to me, but they are all related to the same issue. First, one of the central themes in Jesus' preaching was the call to repentance and faith. Wright rightly offers comfort to the church, but Jesus also emphasized the sins of those in Israel (yes, even when speaking to those who were already religious). Hence, he called on Israel to repent, to take up their cross and follow him, to turn away

from all other gods, and to believe in the gospel. That theme is quite muted in Wright's sermons.

The second weakness is related to the first. Wright pays much more attention to our responsibility to further God's work in this world than he does to the need to put one's faith in Jesus. He agrees that the latter is necessary, but he stresses the former. Of course the Christian life is about more than "getting saved." We have work to do in this world after we believe. Nevertheless, it would seem that Easter week sermons would be a prime occasion to call upon one's hearers to believe in the gospel; and yet a strong call to faith is lacking from this book. Wright seems to assume that all his hearers are already Christians. Wright should emphasize conversion more and call his readers (and hearers) to repentance and faith, especially since the church in England is shrinking and evangelism is such a crying need in Britain.

Third, Wright clearly believes that Jesus bore our sins as our substitute. Still, he scarcely emphasizes the awful judgment and wrath that we deserve as sinners—a wrath that is turned away by the cross of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:25-26; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9). Wright focuses on the love of God, but he does not say much about his holiness. Yet it is when we see God's dazzling holiness that his love shines all the brighter.

We can be grateful for some of the themes sounded in this book. Still,

the lack of urgency about our need to repent and believe in the gospel is a blind-spot in Wright. Any pastor who preaches during Easter week must make it a first priority to preach the good news of Christ crucified and risen and call upon sinners to repent and to put their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Wright's failure to do this during Easter week is something pastors should not imitate.

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Thomas R. Schreiner

Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church. By N. T. Wright. New York: HarperCollins, 2008, 352 pages, \$24.95.

N. T. Wright is one of the most talented writers among New Testament scholars today. In this book he presents his understanding of what the Scriptures teach about heaven, the resurrection, and the church's mission.

What is heaven after all? Wright contends that too many Christians have a Platonic idea of heaven. They conceive of it in ethereal terms, as if we float in a bodiless state in some transcendent realm. Indeed, most Christians think of heaven as "up there," and as separated from the earth. What the Scriptures teach, however, is that heaven will come to earth. The Scriptures do not say, according to Wright, that we will "go to heaven when we die," but that heaven will come to earth, that the earth upon which we live will be

transformed, and that we will enjoy the new creation.

Wright's understanding of the Christian hope is predicated upon the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. *Surprised by Hope* therefore summarizes Wright's older, massive, and outstanding book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. What is important to see here is that the resurrection is irreducibly physical. People in the ancient world believed in spirits, ghosts, and the like, but they did not confuse things like these with the idea of a resurrection. Also, Wright does not simply accept the resurrection by faith, since the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is incredibly strong. No, we cannot prove beyond a shadow of doubt that Christ was raised. Still, his physical resurrection fits most suitably with the evidence of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to Wright's thesis, for Christ's resurrection is tied to the future resurrection of believers. Hence, the future that awaits believers cannot be described as a spiritual existence in heaven. Rather, heaven will be on a new earth where believers will continue the bodily existence they enjoy in this world, but with bodies that are transformed by the Holy Spirit.

And what is the payoff for the church's mission in the present? Wright emphasizes over and over that our life in this world makes a difference. We do not simply wait to go to heaven when we die. We are called upon to engage this world, to work for justice in the political realm, to exercise our artistic gifts as

creatures made in God's image, and to evangelize the lost.

How should we assess *Surprised by Hope*? Wright's fundamental thesis here is correct. Heaven will be on a new earth, and therefore it must not be regarded as floating in some kind of spiritual never-land. We look forward to our future resurrection, and to the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. Wright's defense of the resurrection of Christ, defended more fully in his major book on the topic, is the finest treatment I have read on the subject. Wright does affirm the intermediate state, but he rightly stresses that the future hope of believers is the resurrection. Furthermore, Wright is on target in saying that we are to strive for justice, truth, and beauty in this world. Some believers have said that this world is destined for destruction, and hence only focus on the salvation of the lost.

Yet there are some significant problems with the book. Surely some believers have mistakenly thought that heaven was only spiritual, but many (most of those I know) do not conceive of heaven in this way. We could say that Wright exaggerates his thesis to make his point. Well and good. Still, he is excessively critical of the phrase "go to heaven." After all, we have a number of statements in Scripture about entering (going to!) the kingdom in the future (e.g., Matt 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23-24; Mark 9:47; 10:15; John 3:5; Acts 14:22). Scripture also speaks of heaven as a realm above and separate from us (Matt 6:1, 9, 10, 20; 18:10; Luke 24:51; John 1:51; Acts 1:10; 2 Cor 12:2; Col. 1:5;

1 Pet 1:4). That does not, to be sure, communicate that our future destiny is non-physical, but it does stress that it is a realm separate from our present existence. Yes, Wright is correct in saying that heaven will be a transformed earth, and that heaven will come, so to speak, to this world. But since the Scriptures also speak of us “entering” the kingdom; since they speak of heaven as a world above and beyond us; and since the new creation is not yet here in its fullness, I don’t believe it’s wrong to say that we will “go there,” as long as we recognize that this is just one of the ways to express the reality that awaits us. In fact, Wright’s protests against using the phrase “go to heaven” betray an overly literal understanding on his part. Hence, against Wright, the hymn *Away in the Manger* does not contradict Scripture when it asks God to “fit us for heaven, to live with thee there” (22).

As noted above, Wright often emphasizes that our work in this world is important. Christians ought not to think that their work in politics, economics, business, art, and so forth is insignificant. There has been a kind of pietism that has denigrated such work. Still, it isn’t clear that forgiving third world debt is a moral obligation on the same level as abolishing slavery. Wright too confidently dismisses all who disagree with him on this matter, sweeping away any objections with rhetorical statements. Moral claims in the public sphere must be advanced by careful reasoning, and Wright does not provide arguments to support his conclusions. Perhaps in the future he

will tackle the matter with reasoned public discourse instead of dicta from above.

Wright commends evangelism as part of our work as believers, but he clearly emphasizes being engaged in the political sphere. Surely Wright has his emphases backwards here. The Scriptures teach that only those who believe in Jesus Christ and repent of their sins will enjoy the new creation. Isn’t the most important thing for human beings, therefore, to gain acceptance into this new creation? Aren’t there great artists and gifted politicians who have improved our life in this world (for which we are all thankful), and yet who will not be part of the new creation because they have rejected the gospel? Moreover, while Wright correctly affirms that everything done in this world matters, there is also discontinuity between this world and the next. The curse of Genesis 3 will not be lifted until Jesus comes again. Our work in this world is provisional and always touched by the curse. The invention of the car solved a pollution problem in the streets caused by horses, but no one foresaw that it would cause pollution problems of its own.

All this is to say that the call for Christians to evangelize remains more pressing than any call to work in the political sphere, even though all our work in this world is significant. Wright emphasizes that the good news of the gospel is that Jesus is Lord, but, as John Piper has pointed out, this isn’t good news if you’re still a rebel against God; its terrifying news. The New Testament is permeated with the message that we must

turn from our sins and put our faith in Christ. Wright does not disagree with the need to do so, but he seems to be most excited about our work in the political and social sphere.

I could perhaps understand why Wright would stress social concerns if England’s churches were full and thriving—as if almost everyone was a believer. But what is curious is that England’s churches are empty, and unbelief is common. It seems that a bishop in these circumstances would vigorously call upon the church to evangelize, and would emphasize the need to put one’s faith in Jesus Christ and to turn from one’s sins. I don’t see that urgency in Wright’s writing, and therefore he veers from the message of Jesus and the apostles.

I would also mention some bits and pieces of the book that call out for comment, even if I don’t have space here to interact with them here in detail. For instance, Wright contends that Jesus never spoke about his return. He defends this claim in other works, but it’s a controversial point. Here I simply want to register my disagreement with his exegesis.

Also, Wright correctly says that justification by faith and judgment according to works do not conflict (140), but he gives us no help in seeing how these two themes fit together. Readers would be helped in knowing *how* the two themes cohere. Putting these truths together wrongly can lead to a final curse (Gal 1:8-9), and hence Wright must be clearer in explaining the gospel in his exposition.

The section on purgatory is nicely done, showing that purgatory is absent from the biblical witness.

But Wright falls into inconsistency when he endorses praying for the dead since this practice is not found in the Scriptures (172). He does rightfully rule out invoking the saints for assistance.

Contrary to Wright, Jesus' statements about *gehenna* do not refer to the judgment of A.D. 70, though I cannot defend this argument here. Nor do I think Wright is correct in saying that judgment is a minor theme in the letters. The theme is pervasive in them, but, again, that would take too long to defend here.

Too often Wright prosecutes his case by caricaturing a view and then introducing his own view as the solution. Hence, he rightly rejects the notion that hell is a torture chamber, but his own view of hell seems to be shorn of any notion that God punishes those who refuse to believe in Christ. Wright argues that those in hell lose the divine image, and this may well be part of the picture. Nevertheless, many texts speak of God's active punishment of the wicked. Since Wright summarizes his view and does not engage in detailed exegesis, I assume he would offer a different interpretation of the relevant texts. Still, it's difficult to see how God's active punishment of the wicked can be denied (e.g., Rom 2:8-9, 16; 2 Thess 1:8-9, etc.).

Wright appeals to many because he is brilliant and fascinating, and some of what he says is helpful. Nevertheless, his failure to emphasize the centrality of the gospel is troubling, and pastors who find his work illuminating need to be careful that they do not veer away from their central

task of proclaiming the good news to a lost generation.

(This review was originally published by 9 Marks, www.9marks.org. Reprinted with permission.)

Thomas R. Schreiner

The Drama of Doctrine a Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology. By K. J. Vanhoozer. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 493 pp. \$39.95 paper.

Scripture is more than a set of propositions. It is a divine speech-act with an intended effect. This proper and healthy understanding of the biblical text guides Vanhoozer's proposal that the aim and task of theology is to further the "performance" of the drama of the biblical narrative in the life of the church. The attempt to develop a hermeneutical theology that accounts for the effect of Scripture in life while neither jettisoning the primacy of Scripture nor the cognitive, propositional dimension of biblical revelation is by all means to be welcomed. Even if one must be conscious of the limits of speech-act theory, it is entirely justified and appropriate to appeal to it, as Vanhoozer does, in developing a theology of Scripture that moves beyond a bare propositionalism. We must truly appreciate Vanhoozer's project, especially in its primary concerns.

Nevertheless, the model of dramatic performance that forms the basis of his work leads in various ways to questionable outcomes. One of the most fundamental of these is the manner in which Vanhoozer

understands the perlocutionary force of the Scriptures. The Scriptures perform their work in us, but in what way do they do so? In his *analogia dramatis* Vanhoozer presupposes an essentially active role for the human being—not only for the hearer of Scripture, but also for the speaking theologian—"Theatrical beholding overcomes the theory/praxis dichotomy, then, *when it insists on audience participation.*" (16, emphasis in original). The theologian is to serve as the dramaturge—the expert advisor on the performance of a dramatic script—who provides creative insight into how to bridge the gap between the text and performance, between past and present, between *scientia* and *sapientia*, between knowledge and practical understanding. Informed by the theologian and empowered by the Spirit, the congregation performs the text.

Underlying this approach is the view that the humanity is related to God through a covenant or series of covenants (137, n. 70), which despite the element of promise that they contain, lay obligations upon the human being (50-52, 136-137). From Vanhoozer's perspective, that is true not only for the Sinai covenant, but also the new covenant, which is nothing but the old covenant in a different key (e.g., 21-23, 115-150, 301). Here problems arise. The location of "promise" within the larger structure of covenantal requirements and demands obscures the distinct, unconditional words of promise given in Scripture. Thus, for example, in describing the place of "promise" within the context of "covenant," Vanhoozer urges that

“the covenant is personal-relational before it is legal-political” (107). Unless, however, this “personal-relational” dimension of “covenant” is bound to a distinct *word* of promise (“My child, your sins are forgiven you!” Mk 2:5) it remains undefined and diffuse, and threatens to become dependent on some inward quality of the human being: either a sense of dependence or a disposition for action. In response one must counter: promise is itself “legal-political” in nature, just as in the Scriptures all that is “personal-relational” is fully and entirely verbal.

But Vanhoozer does not see the matter so, or at least obscures it. With him “promise” comes to us en clothed in covenant, in a sort of inversion of Calvin’s *totus lex*. By virtue of this understanding and the guiding paradigm of an *analogia dramatis*, the performance of the divine drama becomes nearly—if not entirely—a performance *in us*. Indeed, for Vanhoozer, it becomes *our performance*, even if it is ultimately the performance of the sovereign God. But to the extent that *our performance* of the drama stands at the center of interest—and this is substantially the case in Vanhoozer’s work—we lose from view the true drama of Scripture, the *stupendum duellum* in the cross and resurrection of Christ where God triumphs over sin, death, and the devil for us. The real performance of Scripture is not properly a performance in us, but one which has been completed without reserve *extra nos*. Vanhoozer himself speaks of the history of Jesus Christ as the “perfection and completion” of the

“whole theo-drama” (388). Nevertheless, he is also able to say that “the Scripture remains incomplete” in that it calls for “performance” (101). The two irreconcilable thoughts sit uneasily side-by-side in his work. Of course, the assertion that God’s work has been completed outside of us does not all imply that God has no work to perform in us, or that we have no work to perform. The divine performance that has been completed and set before our eyes *for us* in the crucified and risen Christ—and in which we ourselves have been included—must yet be performed *in us*. God’s work does not exclude our work, but sets us free for it *by placing and keeping it within its proper limit*. And our actions are not only limited, but are also—so long as we are in this body and life—flawed and finally perverse. It is the action of Another that *in sheer grace* carries the drama through. This relation may be profoundly paradoxical, but it is nevertheless clear and comprehensible. In Vanhoozer’s approach to the atonement, however, the relation between the divine performance and our own remains obscure. He unequivocally affirms the ultimate and fundamental character of “the penal substitution view” of the atonement, while at the same time conceiving of it as “relational restoration” (387). What sort of relationship exists, however, between these two views of the atonement? The ideas again sit uneasily side-by-side. The understanding of the atonement as penal substitution remains intact. But is it essential to Vanhoozer’s presentation of the divine drama? He affirms that

Jesus’ death did not take God by surprise (388). Yet he also characterizes the event as God’s “improvising with a canonical script.” In this sense, “the cross was God’s creative response to a new situation” that nevertheless is in keeping with what had gone before (388). The affirmation of the newness and the wonder of the cross are to be appreciated. Yet one must wonder if Vanhoozer’s model of drama and improvisation does not lead him astray. The dramatic, covenantal plan upon which God creatively improvises remains in place as the fundamental story-line. The cross appears as a happy blip in an otherwise straight line of development in which God and his purposes remain calculable and visible. As an improvisation (and a good one at that), the cross becomes integrated into God’s purpose, but does not appear essential to the divine drama. Or at least, Vanhoozer does not tell us how it is so. What is of fundamental importance to him is that *we find our roles*. Here one must say: either the story of Christ determines our understanding of “story” or our construction of story, storyline, and drama (so popular among evangelicals these days) determines our understanding of Christ and, therefore, of God.

That the place of the substitutionary understanding of the atonement remains underdefined for Vanhoozer is reflected then in the overwhelming priority he gives to the “redemptive relational” conception of the atonement. This understanding of the atonement, guided by the metaphor of dramatic performance, is largely what the book is about—and tellingly

appears in Vanhoozer's characterization of the Lord's Supper. Just as he embraces the understanding of the atonement as an act of penal substitution, Vanhoozer clearly and decisively affirms the priority of Christ over the church. But his interest is so focussed on the communication of Christ to the church and on the participation of the church in Christ, that the abiding distinction between Christ and the church—the distinction between the strong and loving bridegroom and the poor harlot whom he saves—goes missing at the most decisive points of his presentation. He urges that between the understanding of the Supper as a mass and the understanding of it as a memorial stands the third option of understanding "the church as *mimesis* of the body of Christ" (409). The celebration and enactment of the Supper is not lacking in this proposal—liturgy after all is one dimension of the church's actions—but Vanhoozer's views the drama as centered upon the church that *signifies* Christ and thus by the Spirit is drawn into "the ongoing theo-dramatic action" (412). Indeed, for Vanhoozer, the church itself is sacrament (408). At this point he almost certainly is thinking not only of its liturgical acts, but also of its life in the world (408). The thought stands remarkably close to Bonhoeffer's likewise sacramental view of the church as "Christ existing in community"—which likewise fails to distinguish properly between Christ and the church. It also approximates the churchly dimension of Barth's *Church and State*, which bears the same weakness.

To the extent, however, that the work of God in Christ is *extended* into the life and work of the church rather than *announced* to it as an effective word from without, the uniqueness of the dramatic action of God the Creator is lost. The promises of God have their "yes" not in us, but in the crucified and risen Christ—as Bonhoeffer himself reflects in one of his healthier moments. The work of the Creator remains inimitable, Jesus' new commandment notwithstanding. The call to be God's co-worker is never a call to be a co-creator. God alone remains author *and* performer of drama, a drama that he displays through the apostles before the audience of the world and angels. In this drama, we are not in the first instance actors, but those acted upon. The Christian life is neither contemplation nor action, but—said with Luther—it is faith understood as *vita passiva*: life received as a gift from God. Here our actions are not dismissed but *defined* in their secondary place. It is not we who fulfill the Law, but the Law—weak as it is—is fulfilled in us by Another.

Although he does not forget the history of Adam, the abstractness of the dramatic metaphor leads Vanhoozer to forget that Adam's tragic drama is also *our* drama, recapitulated in sorrow, sickness and death, and in the destructiveness of sin. There is no neutral place on this earth between wrath and grace. Deliverance from our past (which is always with us) is much more than our discovering our role in a drama, or responding "rightly to God's cognitive and covenantal contact"

with us (301). Romans 12:1-2 calls for something far greater than the acquisition of a new world-view, even if the text generally is preached that way. We require deliverance from ourselves, a deliverance that comes to us again and again solely from the word and work of the Creator, who pronounces the forgiveness of *our* sins and promises our resurrection. Only in this way does the Gospel set us free from our past, grant us a future and a hope, and set us in service in the present. As Paul makes clear, Christian obedience—our participation in the divine drama—is nothing other than the resurrection from the dead projected into the present, an event which daily must be grasped as such.

Our identity is not to be found in the roles that we play. The attempt to make it so is to risk losing our self in our multiple tasks or to play the hypocrite—a term derived from the Greek theater. At the risk of sounding like a Bonhoeffer fan (which I am not), it is worth pointing to his remarkable poem of self-doubt and faith, "Wer bin ich?" ("Who am I?"): the roles we play are always uncertain and tainted with our sin. Thank God our identity lies in Christ!

The one who lives by faith, does not live by sight. Neither the Scriptures, nor our lives, nor human history run the predictable course of a continuous storyline. Israel's history is largely a history of regress from brilliant moments of grace—as is also the case for the history of the church up to the present moment. Nor are God's acts of mercy and deliverance predictable, even if evangelicals are

tempted to pretend that they are so. We are not permitted to forget the history of Job, nor God's inexplicable hiding of his face—Luther's *deus absconditus*—upon which Paul in hope against all hope builds the soaring conclusion of Romans 8. We *hear* of the immeasurably happy end of all things in the gospel, including our freedom from sin and death, *but we do not yet see it*, nor can we track and chart it in some redemptive-historical scheme. The real drama of doctrine and of salvation is the unfathomable love of the Creator in unsearchable ways of mercy and judgment. This drama, which has come to fulfillment in Jesus, now is taking place in the whole creation and, therefore, also in us mere human creatures. Paul thus sings his praise at the conclusion of Romans 11. The drama advances not in the clear vision of a storyline, but in the groaning of the Spirit who reaches out for us toward an unseen hope. In this drama, we remain those called to stand and see the Lord's work—as did Israel at the Red Sea—without any diminishing of our duties or the final removal of our sorrows. If this is so, our work includes joining the song of the apostle and the *lyric* of the psalms (of which genre Vanhoozer remains suspicious)—the “little Bible within the Bible.” Israel sang God's praises at the shore of the sea. Shall not we Christians sing? The Apocalypse surely sees our song as our final role in the divine drama.

The true weight of the gospel as “God's saving power,” as the *effective* Word of God that performs what it says, does not come to expression in Vanhoozer's proposal. Not what we

do with the Scripture, but what the Scripture does with us is of fundamental importance. It is perhaps not without significance that Aristotle's conception of theater as *mimesis* with its intention of empathetic effect on the audience implicitly stands in the background of Vanhoozer's work, and that the role of the dramaturge with its task of overcoming historical distance, which especially G. E. Lessing furthered plays such a large role in it. It is not the Aristotelian theory of drama that Vanhoozer offers in his proposal, nor does he overlook the promissory dimension of Scripture entirely. He does, however, subordinate the category of promise to the paradigm of imitation and dramatic re-production. *Theology* is thus the “bridge” between the drama of Scripture and the performance of Scripture in life. Correspondingly, according to Vanhoozer, one who serves as a theologian in a public way—whether as an academic or as a pastor—is called to be a “dramaturge,” that is, one who mediates Scripture to the congregation.

Such a priesthood of the theologian is nowhere to be found in the New Testament. Not even the apostle has a place between Christ and his bride, even if he is father, mother, and more to his churches. His relationship to them is far more intimate than the merely intellectual role of a dramaturge (1 Thess 2:7, 11-12; 2 Cor 12:14). Yet its intimacy by no means renders it mediatorial. The apostle already knows what Robert Jenson articulates concerning Christian preaching, “‘Who hears you hears me’ is not a trope.” (“Luther's Con-

temporary Theological Significance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* [ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003], 278). Like John the Baptist before him, Paul with all his life and word merely points to Christ. So long as his churches continue in faith, he is entirely dispensable (Phil 2:17-18, 4:9; 1 Cor 11:1). The call to imitate the apostle—and thus Christ himself—is an imitation worked by the word (Phil 3:17; 4:9; 1 Cor 4:16-17; 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:7-9). In contrast to the refined role of the dramaturge, the apostle chooses the lowly metaphor of the farmer to describe his theological labors: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused growth, so that neither the one who planted nor the one who watered counts as something, but only the God who causes growth” (1 Cor 3:7-8). “Ruling the church” with the Word demands dirty and sweaty work. But this mere delivery of seed, water, and perhaps some manure remains secondary. We farm hands—mere migrants that we are—are entirely dispensable. God alone remains the true and final author, performer, and dramaturge.

If theology may be understood as a guide for reading Scripture, proper theological instruction must drive us away from all theological schemes and constructions, back into Scripture—there to encounter the living God. This understanding shaped the first Protestant systematic theologies of Melancthon and Calvin. The performance of the drama of Scripture—what the Scriptures call “piety” (*eusebeia*)—is a great mystery that has been revealed in the flesh,

seen by angels, and taken up in glory. This One cannot finally be imitated, but only believed, confessed, and worshipped with body and life. Our place in the divine drama is thus not discovered (especially not by the cleverness of a dramaturge), but given to us through the gospel, no matter that we must apply to it all the wisdom that God grants us. Our roles as God's earthly vessels are more "suffered" than acted. So long as God remains his own interpreter, the *claritas Scripturae* remains, historical distance notwithstanding. As one Reformer reminds us, the Holy Spirit is no skeptic, nor is that which he writes in the hearts of his Christians uncertain. As Paul reminds us, the hand that writes in our hearts is Christ's alone, no matter that he uses earthen vessels to do so. Whatever course the world and the church around us might take in this drama, through the Word the Spirit binds us to the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. According to Peter, it is here that we have been given a fixed and unchanging interpretation of Scripture, a little lamp upon which we are called to fix our gaze until God's epic runs its course and the daystar rises in our hearts. If the Scripture may be understood in this way as "the divine Aeneid" (Vanhoozer's suspicions of the epic genre notwithstanding), we poor beggars dare not touch it, but must—with body and life—worship its course.

Mark A. Seifrid

The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honor of James D. G. Dunn. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 382 pp., \$50.00.

Everyone engaged in serious study of the New Testament has benefited from the work of James D. G. Dunn, recently Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham. Controversial, yet engaging, Dunn's work has spanned many areas of NT and theological investigation, including Pauline studies, pneumatology, Christology, theological method, and NT theology in general, among others. He has made profound and lasting contributions in all these areas. In light of that, the appearance of a *Festschrift* in his honor was an anticipated event, and this volume is no disappointment in terms of its content.

This reviewer found the essays by Robert Morgan, Scot McKnight, Robert Banks, I. Howard Marshall, and Richard Bauckham to be the most engaging, though all twenty-seven essays had something helpful to say. Morgan's chapter on unity and diversity picks up where Dunn's monograph on that topic leaves off. His work will be unsatisfactory to most evangelicals, but it is a helpful piece in ascertaining where non-evangelicals who still have regard for Scripture are headed with that topic. McKnight also leaves those of us who want to affirm his evangelical status as being intact in some doubt. In his chapter, "Covenant and Spirit: The Origins of the New Covenant Hermeneutic," he calls into question the authenticity of the statement in

Luke 22:20, "The cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." McKnight argues that this locution likely originated in the months after Pentecost when the early church had occasion to connect the death of Jesus with Jeremiah 31 (46-47).

Robert Banks has made many positive contributions to our understanding of early church communities in his writings. Here in an essay which clearly gives a higher regard to the historicity of Acts than can be found in the work of the recipient of the *Festschrift*, Banks identifies a work of the Spirit in the Book of Acts that others have given little attention: The guidance of the Apostles in their journeys by the Spirit. He notes that Luke's preface to each of the Pauline journeys "begins with a clear reference to the Spirit" (119). So, even as the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, so that same Spirit led Paul on the way to fulfilling his ministry of carrying the gospel to the Gentiles.

Marshall writes on the Holy Spirit in the Pastoral Epistles and the Apostolic Fathers. He begins with a tacit affirmation of P. N. Harrison's argument that the Pastorals reflect a vocabulary closer to the second century Fathers than to Paul, and thus that the Pastorals are not Pauline (see his commentary on the Pastorals in the International Critical Commentary), a point with which we would not agree. But beyond that, his treatment of the Fathers is helpful, not least so because it demonstrates many affinities of flesh/spirit language between the Fathers and Paul himself, especially in Ignatius. Curi-

ous, indeed! Bauckham's essay on the Spirit in James also is worth careful reading.

There is much in this book that will bother evangelical readers, but also much that is helpful, a sense that many of us have encountered when reading Dunn's own work through the years.

Chad Owen Brand

Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology. By Frank D. Macchia. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, 296 pp., \$29.99.

Frank Macchia, well-known Assemblies of God theologian and professor of theology at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California, has produced a closely-reasoned and well-researched volume on Spirit baptism which is penned on behalf of the global Pentecostal community. Macchia is a great exemplar of the new Pentecostal scholarship. That two-word locution might once have been thought to be an oxymoron, but that is no longer the case, even if it once was. With a D.Theo. from Basel, Macchia is one of the finest theologians in America, with numerous publications under his belt.

Here is an irenic and thoughtful defense of the traditional Pentecostal view on Spirit baptism—that it is generally subsequent to conversion/initiation, and that it is evidenced by tongues. Absent from Macchia's presentation is any sense that this implies Pentecostal spiritual superiority. This reviewer has had the privilege of meeting the author and

has found him to be an engaging and clear communicator.

Two caveats. Though he argues his position well, this reviewer is still unconvinced of the basic Pentecostal thesis with regard to Spirit baptism. Second, his rejection of traditional evangelical views on justification is disturbing (129-40). In a lecture a few years ago at the Society for Pentecostal Studies he made a comment something like, "When I read the Canons of Trent on justification, my heart was strangely warmed." That is a problem. But in these pages, one will discover a very fine work of scholarship in the pneumatic tradition.

Chad Owen Brand

Preaching With Variety: How to Recreate the Dynamics of Biblical Genres. By Jeffrey D. Arthurs. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007, 238 pp., \$15.99 paper.

Jeffrey Arthurs, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Communication at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, believes that a sermon's content should explain and apply the Word of God as it is found in a biblical text, and that a sermon's form should unleash the impact of that text (13). The second part of that belief is the focus of his book, *Preaching With Variety*. In order to explain how preachers can be biblical in how they preach and not just what they preach, Arthurs describes the aspects of certain biblical genres and then explains how preachers can reproduce those aspects in their sermons. In the last seven chapters of the book Arthurs describes the following

genres: psalms, narratives, parables, proverbs, epistles, and apocalyptic literature.

Before getting to those chapters, however, Arthur first makes his case for the importance of preaching with variety. He notes in his introduction that preaching with variety is not the most important of a preaching ministry (that would be glorifying God), but that is nonetheless still important (15-16). The first chapter explains that variety is important because God, who is the Great Communicator, communicates with variety. The Bible is full of different literary forms that communicate in different ways. General revelation in creation also manifests God's creative variety. Preachers ought to emulate God by preaching according to the forms of his revelation. The second chapter gives a second reason why it is important to preach with variety. Preaching ought to be incarnational; it ought to adapt God's truth to a particular culture. Our culture is visual, fast, interactive, leery of authority, and full of different types of listeners and learners. Not only should preachers preach with variety because God communicates that way, but also because it helps people learn God's truth more effectively.

Each of the remaining chapters covers one particular biblical genre (although narrative is treated in two chapters), and each chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section Arthurs defines what the genre is. The second section focuses on the particularities of each genre, explaining how the text communicates and what the text does. For example, in his

chapter on Psalms, Arthurs explains that lyric poems such as the psalms are normally short, have intricate structure, use concrete images, and convey intense emotion. The third section of each chapter is entitled "Try This." Arthurs here give practical suggestions on how preachers can express the form of the biblical text in their sermons. For example, in his chapter on Proverbs, Arthurs offers the following tips: preach observations, not promises; do not preach selfish behavior, humanism, or materialism; preach through units; use your imagination; show as well as tell; turn on the spotlight; make your central idea proverbial; compare and contrast proverbs; borrow the proverb's movement; adopt the teacher's stance; feature women; use some humor; and use homespun language. Each of these suggestions is supported with examples from relevant portions of Scripture. The fourth section of each chapter is a checklist of the main points from the chapter that the preacher can use as a reference tool when putting together his sermon.

The third sections of the chapters are the strongest parts of the book, and worth the purchase price. Arthurs's suggestions are not only practical, but useable. Preachers could easily use this book as a reference when putting together their sermons, incorporating one or two of the suggestions as ways to vary their preaching. No one preacher is likely to use every one of Arthurs's tips, but he offers enough of them for each genre that most preachers will find at least one or two that are

fresh and helpful. The other sections of the chapters, Arthurs's explanations and definitions of the different genres, while necessary for a book of this sort, are nothing new to those who have read standard works on homiletics or hermeneutics. They are good introductions to the different nuances of each genre, but nothing more. For a book of this length, however, this is not a problem, and Arthurs does include footnotes and a bibliography. Arthurs succeeds in explaining why variety in preaching is so important and how preachers can actually accomplish that variety in their sermons. Preachers of all ages and experience, from those beginning in the ministry to those who have preached thousands of sermons, would benefit from many of the suggestions in this book.

Gary L. Shultz Jr.

Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice. By Daniel J. Treier. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008, 221 pp., \$17.99 paper.

One of the vexing aspects of engaging in the conversation about theological interpretation is the problem of definition. Scholars and theologians from varying backgrounds and disciplines are claiming "theological interpretation of Scripture," while employing methods and producing results that span the interpretive grid. In *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Daniel Treier seeks "to tell the story and map the major themes of this movement" and also

"to address some tough questions to clarify its future direction" (11). Treier defines the movement broadly as one that "seeks to reverse the dominance of historical criticism over a churchly reading of the Bible and to redefine the role of hermeneutics in theology" (14).

Treier divides the book into two main sections. In part one, he charts the "catalysts and common themes" of the movement, which include an interest in precritical interpretation (chapter one), the possibility of a "ruled" reading which takes account of Christian doctrine (chapter two), and the role the community plays in discerning and arriving at meaning (chapter three). In part two, Treier delineates the areas where proponents of theological interpretation have sharp disagreements. These differences include the assumptions and positions involved in engaging biblical theology (chapter four), general hermeneutics (chapter five), and various social locations (chapter six). In this section, Treier asks if theological interpretation can bridge the gap between biblical studies and theological reflection, if secular theories of reading and interpretation have any bearing on biblical texts, and if interpreters of Scripture should be mindful of global social contexts.

One notable feature of this book is the analysis of theological interpretation that Treier offers in a concluding chapter. Synthesizing his previous material, Treier asserts that theological interpretation uses the ideas of canon, creed, and culture to engage the Scriptures with and for the church. However, for Treier,

the church does not participate in the theological process merely to take part in an informed discussion about the Bible. Rather, “the ultimate interpretive interest of the church is to know God in a holistic sense” (204). Theological interpretation seeks to utilize all the various “lenses” of literary and theological reflection in order to produce “a coherent vision of who God is and who that calls us to become in Christ” (203). Treier calls this perspective the “widest-angle lens” which puts the task of interpretation into proper focus (203). These perspectives also function as a map that guides the church on its pilgrimage to know and respond rightly to God. To illustrate this practice, Treier provides a sustained case study throughout the book concerning the “Image of God” (*Imago Dei*). In doing this, Treier relates the themes of each chapter to this doctrinal concept, and in the conclusion, he summarizes the role that exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology play in its full explication. For Treier, this “sketch” of theological reflection provides a “pattern for thought” that can guide the interpreter in his pursuit of “prayerful contemplation” (199). Thus, Treier engages in the process of theological interpretation even as he introduces the concepts.

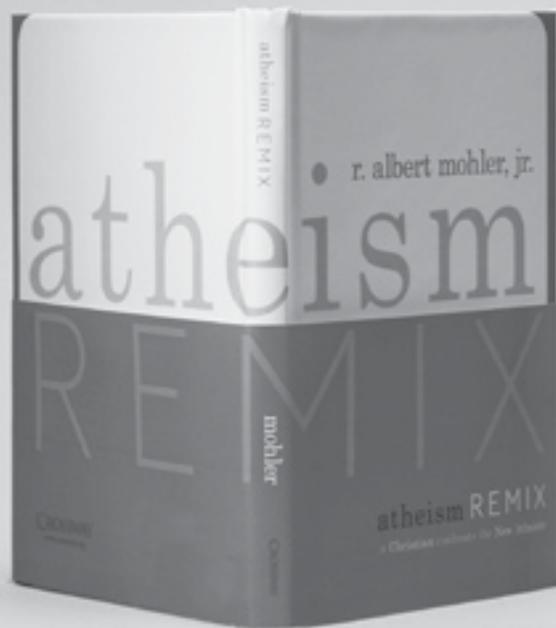
Some readers, though, might object to Treier’s framing of the issues, as even the ordering of an “introduction” involves debatable interpretive decisions. Others may also see a few gaps in the “prehistory” of the movement that Treier develops, though this is likely a

feature of the introductory nature of the work rather than a result of oversight. A further concern relates to the chapter on globalization. Treier recognizes that while the other issues he treats “are frequently addressed at length by advocates of theological exegesis, globalization is not” (157). He quickly moves from this concession to an extended discussion of postcolonial thought and the rise of Pentecostalism in “the global south” (157). Because this emphasis is in some ways unique to Treier, readers would benefit from a more detailed discussion of its relevance and connection to the idea of theological interpretation, especially in light of Treier’s acknowledgement that “this chapter evokes more questions than answers” (182). One also notices Treier’s heavy reliance on the cultural analysis of Philip Jenkins. Nevertheless, Treier’s basic point in this chapter is well taken. As the Bible is being read, cherished, and interpreted in diverse contexts, “non-Western voices can no longer be marginal as they once were. We must listen” (186). This emphasis resonates with Treier’s similar interest in demonstrating the ecumenical benefit of a widespread return to the practice of theological interpretation (20-33).

Through his clear structure and concise content, Treier achieves his aim of providing scholars, students, and pastors with a succinct introduction to this burgeoning movement. The two parts of the book quickly highlight the unity and significant diversity of the movement. Further, while Treier’s primary dialogue partners are the ones at the forefront of the

theological interpretation movement (e.g., Stephen Fowl, Francis Watson, Kevin Vanhoozer), he also interacts with a wide range of related scholarship (e.g., the canonical approach of Brevard Childs and Christopher Seitz). In addition, Treier constantly references the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, thus making his study a fitting companion volume to this other important work in the field. Though *Introducing Theological Interpretation* appears early in the movement, it offers a contribution of definition and direction. To borrow his own metaphors, Treier’s work can function as a set of lenses to bring the contours of this movement into focus and can serve as a roadmap to chart some of the trajectories the church and the academy will need to follow in order to recover the “Christian practice” of theological interpretation of Scripture.

Ched Spellman
Southwestern Baptist
Theological Seminary



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