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THE CONFESSION OF THE CENTURION IN LUKE 23:47

KENNETH W. YATES

Editor

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Gospel of Luke, Luke tells us that when the centurion at the cross of Christ saw Jesus die, “he glorified God, saying, ‘Certainly this was a righteous man’” (Luke 23:47, NKJV). Both Matthew and Mark say that the centurion proclaimed that Jesus was “the Son of God” (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39). While some maintain that Luke changed the centurion’s confession to make a theological point, there is no need to come to that conclusion. The centurion said both things about Christ. The centurion spent hours at the cross, and without a doubt he said many things, many of which are not even recorded in the Scriptures.

This article will address the centurion’s confession as recorded in Luke’s Gospel. What did the centurion mean by claiming that Christ was “righteous”? How did this confession relate to the purpose of Luke’s Gospel? It is important to recognize that the centurion was a military man. Another military man plays a significant role in telling the reader the purpose of Luke’s Gospel.

II. THE MILITARY AND JESUS’ FIRST SERMON

When talking about the purpose of the Gospel of Luke, we must remember that Luke also wrote the Book of Acts and that the two books go together. Many students and scholars have proposed different purposes for Luke’s two-volume work.¹

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 435; Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke–Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 20–22; James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1996), xi; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the

There is general agreement, however, that one of the purposes of Luke is to show that the gospel goes out to Gentiles. The books are dedicated to a Gentile. After the birth of Jesus, Simeon makes an explicit reference to Gentiles (Luke 2:32). At the beginning and end of both books, Gentiles are included in God's "salvation" (Luke 2:30-32; 24:47; Acts 1:8; 28:28). These *inclusios* bracket Luke's purpose in writing.²

In Luke's writings, not only are Gentiles included in the plan of God, but often these Gentiles will be open to what God is doing in Christ while some Jews are not. This comes out in Jesus' first sermon in the Gospel of Luke. It occurs in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). A Gentile military man is used by the Lord to make this point.

III. NAAMAN AND JESUS' SERMON AT NAZARETH

Bovon says that the first sermon by the Lord in Luke not only occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it also makes a programmatic statement. Nazareth, which represents all of Israel, rejects the message of Jesus from the start.³

This, however, goes too far. In Luke 2:34, Simeon predicted the falling away of Israel. But this falling away is only partial. Simeon also makes it clear that there will be some in the nation who believe. Jesus says that He has come to fulfill Isa 61:1-2 (Luke 4:18-19), and the Isaiah passage indicates success among the Jews (Isa 61:3).⁴ In the examples of Naaman and the widow, however, Luke does indicate that God's plan includes an outreach to Gentiles. The ministries of Elijah and Elisha did not mean that they turned their backs on Israel. It meant that they ministered to outsiders. Their ministries

New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 14. These writers suggest at least eleven purposes.

² Kenneth W. Yates, "Centurions in Luke/Acts" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2014), 88-89; Robert F. O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An Analysis of Luke-Acts* (Wilmington, DE: M Glazier, 1984), 100.

³ François Bovon, *Luke: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 152.

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 1, Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 529, 537.

also provided an OT justification for the mission to the Gentiles that Luke will record in detail in Acts.⁵

If Luke's theology does indeed have as its major emphasis such a mission, it is significant that he chooses Naaman. Luke is the only Gospel writer to mention him. He is not only a Gentile, he is also a military man. In Acts, the impetus for the mission to Gentiles will be the conversion of a Gentile centurion, a military man named Cornelius.

With the example of Naaman, we see that God has reached out to Gentiles in the past. He has revealed Himself to them. This has always been God's plan.⁶ Some of these Gentiles have responded to that revelation. This does not mean that Naaman became a believer in the coming Messiah. The OT does not deal with that issue. It does, however, tell us that Naaman responded to the revelation God gave him. Simply put, Naaman was open to what the prophet of God, Elijah, said to him.⁷

It will be maintained in this article that Naaman foreshadows the centurion at the cross.⁸ The Gentile military man at the cross is also open to what God reveals to him.

IV. THE CENTURION AT THE CROSS (LUKE 23:47)

Not only does Luke differ from Matthew and Mark when recording the words of the centurion at the cross, there are other differences among the Synoptics as well. These differences include the mention of other military personnel, as well as what the centurion sees and hears. As with the case of different statements by the centurion, these differences do not indicate errors or contradictions in the Bible, but they indicate different emphases by the Gospel writers.

⁵ Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "The Story of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19): Implications for Missions Today," *Svensk Missions Tidskrift* 96 (2008): 30.

⁶ Jeffrey S. Siker, "First to the Gentiles: A Literary Analysis of Luke:4:16-30," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 85.

⁷ Yates, "Centurions," 152-57.

⁸ In fact, he foreshadows all the centurions in Luke's writings: the centurion at Capernaum (Luke 7:1ff); the centurion at the cross; Cornelius (Acts 10); and Julius (Acts 27). All were Gentile military men.

A. Military Personnel at the Cross

One difference among the Synoptic accounts is that Matthew includes other soldiers in the reaction of the centurion when Jesus died. This is the most natural understanding of the phrase “those who were watching Jesus *with him* (i.e., the centurion; *hoi met’ autou tērountes ton Iēsoun*, Matt 27:54). Both Mark and Luke single out the centurion as the only one that makes a statement related to Jesus’ death. Whereas Matthew does not make a distinction between the centurion and the common soldier, Mark and Luke do. The most likely reason for this is that Mark and Luke use the centurion as an example of theological points they want to make.

In the case of Mark, the centurion acts as a foil to the twelve disciples. The disciples are blind to the requirements of discipleship, and Mark paints a negative picture of them. Mark uses minor characters such as blind Bartimaeus and the centurion to demonstrate the blindness of the disciples in these areas. The centurion understands that Jesus is the Son of God, even though He is dying on the cross. The disciples were blind to the requirements of suffering in discipleship and had abandoned Jesus. The centurion unknowingly states discipleship truths that the disciples do not understand, although he is an unbeliever. He is thus an outstanding foil for them.⁹

Like Mark, Luke singles out the centurion. It will be argued that he also uses the centurion as an individual who makes a theological point.

B. Events at the Cross

The confession of the centurion comes at the end of a number of events. All three Synoptics mention that the veil of the Temple was

⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 425; J. F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark’s Gospel*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 102, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 129; J. F. Williams, “Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark’s Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 336; Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989), 142; Francis J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 150-51.

torn in two at the death of Jesus. The centurion does not see this event. However, there are other events he does observe.

The most dramatic event is that even though it was the middle of the day, it turned dark for three hours (Luke 23:44). Bock states that this darkness reflects an eschatological motif related to the judgment associated with the Day of the Lord in Joel 2, as well as a contrast to the light Christ brought into the world.¹⁰ It is extremely unlikely, however, that the centurion understood the possible OT allusions of the darkness.

Grández points out that the exegete can understand the darkness as a physical reality or a symbolic one, but in any event, there is a theological content.¹¹ He lists eight possible views. An unbelieving pagan who believes in divine power could understand three of them because they are not associated with the Biblical record. These three are that the darkness represents the mourning of nature before the death of a great man, the intervention of God, and the anger of God.¹² The centurion is an example of such a pagan.

The event that immediately precedes the confession by the centurion is Jesus' prayer (Luke 23:46). The centurion hears Jesus quote this prayer from Ps 31:5. The Psalm records the anguish of a righteous sufferer who trusts in God. God will deliver such a person (Ps 31:1-4). The centurion hears Jesus submit to death on the cross while leaving vindication to God.¹³

Brown points out that in both Matthew's and Mark's accounts, the last words of Jesus speak of abandonment by God (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). In Luke, Jesus' last words express trust and confidence in God.¹⁴

Marshall makes the point that the prayer of Jesus is a picture of peacefulness in the midst of the ominous signs that accompany his death. In addition, the loud cry of Jesus at His death (23:46) was

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1858.

¹¹ Rufino M. Grández, "Las tinieblas en la muerte de Jesus," *Estudios Biblicos* 47 (1989): 216.

¹² *Ibid.*, 217. He commends Moo for his conclusions on the topic. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 342-43.

¹³ Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, 1862.

¹⁴ Raymond E. Brown, "The Passion According to Luke," *Worship* 60 (1986): 8.

unusual for a man who dies from crucifixion.¹⁵ This centurion, who probably previously supervised numerous crucifixions, had never seen these things. The loud cry showed that He did not die of exhaustion, as one would expect. The prayer showed that He was in control when He died.¹⁶ Such a prayer also showed that this man had a supreme dedication to His god.¹⁷ He dies willingly and under composure.

After the crucifixion began, Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who crucified Him. He bases this forgiveness on the fact that those who did it were ignorant of what their actions involved (Luke 23:34). There is a textual problem involving its inclusion. Many early manuscripts omit the prayer. However, there is ample external evidence for its inclusion.¹⁸

If the prayer is original, the centurion saw a part of Jesus' character. He prayed for those who crucified him. He was merciful. This was the case whether he prayed for the Jews or the Roman soldiers who crucified him.

C. The Meaning of *Ta Genomena* (“What Happened”)

Luke tells the reader that when the centurion saw what happened, he made his confession. Mark does not have the participle in his account (Mark 15:39); Matthew has the plural form of the participle (*ta genomena*) and adds that the centurion also saw the earthquake (Matt 27:54). Since Luke makes the participle singular, it raises the question as to whether he had one thing in mind that the centurion saw, resulting in his confession. The fact that in Luke 23:48 he says the crowd saw the things that happened and uses the plural participle

¹⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 874-76.

¹⁶ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, ICC (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1902), 538.

¹⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 2, Anchor Bible, vol. 28A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 1519.

¹⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 108. Metzger points out an argument from internal evidence as well. There are also those who argue that a scribe was more likely to omit the verse because after AD 70 it seemed that Jesus' prayer was not answered. Metzger, however, puts little weight on the argument.

also suggests that maybe Luke had one thing in mind in reference to the centurion.

Crump argues that the centurion only saw one thing. This one thing is the prayer of 23:46. It is intimately tied in the same verse with the death of Jesus. There is a connection between the repentant criminal and the centurion. The criminal hears a prayer by Jesus about forgiveness (Luke 23:34). Both the criminal and the centurion respond positively to a prayer by Jesus on the cross.¹⁹

The criminal, by all indications, was a Jew. The other criminal asks if Jesus is the Christ (23:39). The repentant criminal mentions God and the “kingdom” (23:40, 42). He appears to have an understanding of the coming Messiah, while the centurion did not. It is entirely possible in Luke’s account that both were impressed with Jesus and that one experienced spiritual salvation and the other did not. Even if the centurion did not believe in Jesus as the Christ, he could nonetheless make the confession he did.

Of the three Synoptics, Matthew clearly states that it was a number of things the centurion saw which caused him to make his confession. These things included the miraculous events that surrounded the crucifixion.

Nolland and Fitzmyer say the centurion in Luke’s account saw a plurality of things, but they do not discuss the singular participle. These things include the steadfastness of Jesus, the words of the penitent criminal, the prayer of Jesus, and the darkness that covered the land.²⁰

The differences between the accounts of Mark and Luke give some indication that Luke at least did not mean the way in which Christ died when he used the singular participle. Mark says that Jesus cried out with a loud voice. When the centurion saw the manner in which He died (Mark 15:39), he proclaimed that He was the Son of God. In other words, in Mark, the centurion seems impressed by the *way* in which Christ died. He was not exhausted but at full strength. Luke includes the prayer in Jesus’ loud cry but does not mention the way in

¹⁹ David Michael Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor: Prayer and Christology in Luke-Acts*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 49 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1992), 87-89.

²⁰ Fitzmyer, *Luke (X-XXIV)*, 1521; John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35c (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 1159.

which Christ died. Since Luke refers to the thing(s) that happened, this might argue that Luke had other things in mind.

It does seem that, based upon the singular participle, to argue that the centurion only saw one thing when he made his confession is too subtle. The participle is acting as a noun, and a singular noun can refer to a plurality of things.²¹ The article would then be functioning in an anaphoric way, referring to all the things the centurion saw in a collective sense.²²

The centurion certainly saw the darkness, how Jesus suffered, and heard His last prayer. It is not surprising that these things made an impression on this pagan military leader. He saw a man die bravely, under composure, and willingly. These are attributes that such a military man could admire.

In addition, since military men often adopted local religious practices and gods, this centurion could very well interpret the darkness as a display of the displeasure of the Jewish god.²³ After all, Jesus died in the vicinity of this god's temple and in the holy city.

By placing this participle of seeing at the beginning of the sentence, both Mark and Luke emphasize that the centurion "saw" what happened on Golgotha. As mentioned earlier, both Mark and Luke present the centurion as an example. Karris says that in Luke, the centurion saw both the darkness and the actions of Jesus. The participle indicates that he is open to revelation.²⁴

²¹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 409.

²² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 217. The singular verb *ginomai* certainly is appropriately used in a collective sense. For example, the singular is used in Rev 8:7 to refer to a plurality of things.

²³ Yates, "Centurions," 68-80.

²⁴ Robert J. Karris, "Luke 23:47 and the Lucan View of Jesus' Death," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 66.

V. THE CHARACTER AND BACKGROUND OF THE CENTURION

In Luke 23:40, the repentant thief asks the other thief, who is reviling Jesus, if he does not fear God. Since the latter is mocking Jesus, this indicates that he does not.²⁵ The implication is that the repentant thief does fear God. He feels that he and his fellow criminal suffer “justly” (or righteously, 23:41; *dikaiōs*).²⁶ Jesus, on the other hand, does not suffer justly in that He does not deserve what is happening to Him.²⁷

Luke has the centurion make the same statement. Jesus is righteous (*dikaio*s). The implication is that the centurion is like the repentant criminal. He, too, is one that fears God.

Even though it is not likely that the centurion understood about the darkness at the cross as a demonstration of the judgment of God on the Day of the Lord, there was the belief in the ancient world that darkness was a sign of the death of a great person. This is the way astrological signs were understood by many in that day.²⁸

It is perhaps significant that only Luke mentions the sun in reference to this darkness. The Critical Text uses a participle (*eklipontos*; Luke 23:45). The participle might indicate a solar eclipse. Perhaps, for Luke, the centurion saw this as a solar eclipse and believed, with many in the ancient world, that such an event was a divine statement.²⁹ The darkness certainly contributed to the centurion’s assessment of Jesus.

Burriss suggests that the military background of this centurion may have contributed to how he interpreted the darkness. Army

²⁵ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 872.

²⁶ BDAG, 198. The word often carries with it the idea of righteousness.

²⁷ Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, 1855-56.

²⁸ See, for example: Plutarch, *Rom.* 27.6-7; Cicero, *Rep.* 6.22; Plutarch, *Caes.* 69.4-6; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 2.26-30; and Josephus, *Ant.* 17.6.1-4. Tacitus also confirms that astrological phenomena could be interpreted as divine portents. He writes that a comet was seen as a sign of an imminent change of political power (*Ann.* 14.58-59).

²⁹ BDAG, 242. Godet points out that during the full moon of the Passover, a solar eclipse is impossible. However, Luke could be describing the event in terms his readers and he understood. See Frédéric L. Godet, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1881), 494. It is of significance that the Majority Text simply says that the sun was darkened.

generals would use things like an eclipse or a storm to indicate the actions of the gods.³⁰

Matera holds that the centurion's confession should not be understood as a historical one. He is a literary character, making a theological point by Luke.³¹ However, there is no need to hold that the centurion could not make such a confession based upon what he thought "righteousness," or perhaps justice, meant. From Acts 10:22 we see that a pagan soldier could have a concept of righteous living. A military leader could have a concept of virtue. The centurion's words could simply be a declaration based upon that understanding.

Sterling suggests that the Greco-Roman world was very familiar with great men dying in humility. Philosophers, who were exemplary people, died in this manner. They used Socrates as an example of such a death. He faces death in the same way Jesus does. He is not afraid to die and places his death in the hands of the gods and believed in some type of existence after death (Plato, *Phaed.* 63-64a, 67e, 69, 91, 95). In fact, Sterling says that Luke is influenced by such writings in his account of the death of Jesus.³² Facing death in this way could impress even a pagan military man.

In his account of the crucifixion, Luke certainly pictures Jesus in these ways. The differences in Mark highlight these things. Even though it does not necessarily follow that Luke was influenced by these contemporary views, it does shed light on the background of the centurion. Sterling points out that any educated person would have been familiar with the life of Socrates. In spite of how Socrates died, he was considered a righteous person and, even though he was a condemned criminal, was executed unjustly.³³ The centurion was perhaps an educated man. If he could hold positive views of a man like Socrates, he could have similar views about Jesus. This would even be more likely if he saw Jesus as a devotee of the local Jewish god.

³⁰ Eli E. Burriss, "The Roman and His Religion," *Classical Journal* 24, no. 8 (1929): 596.

³¹ Frank Matera, "The Death of Jesus according to Luke: A Question of Sources," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 483.

³² Greg Sterling, "Mors Philosophi: The Death of Jesus in Luke," *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 4 (2001): 386-97.

³³ *Ibid.*, 398-99.

For a Roman centurion, no doubt humility was seen as a negative characteristic in certain circumstances. However, under honorable conditions it could be seen as a positive trait, as in the case of Socrates. For the centurion at the cross, the latter was the case with Jesus.

Whatever the background and understanding of the centurion, Luke indicates that he is able to understand what God is doing in Jesus. Both Mark and Luke, who use the centurion as an individual example for their theological purposes, comment that the centurion “saw” what was going on before him.

VI. THOSE AT THE CROSS WHO SEE AND THOSE WHO DO NOT

Crump states that in Luke there are three instances of people who see God at work in Jesus at the cross and three instances of people who do not. Those who see are the repentant criminal, the people, and the centurion. Those that do not see are the Jewish leaders, the soldiers, and the unrepentant criminal.³⁴

The three blind groups are connected by the fact that they all mock Jesus. They also call for him to “save” Himself (23:35, 37, 39). The three positive groups counterbalance the groups that neither fear God nor believe. The centurion is a part of the positive group. It is significant that Matthew loosely places the centurion in the group with the mocking soldiers, even though in Matthew, the centurion himself does not mock Jesus. In Luke, the centurion comes across more clearly as a God fearing Gentile who properly interprets events at the cross.

In the darkness that surrounds the cross, the people, the repentant thief, and centurion are able to “see.”³⁵ The centurion sees what happens (v 47). The people see the sight (v 48). For those who are willing to see, God reveals what he is doing in Jesus. This is true even for a Gentile.

This unites the centurion with the repentant criminal in another way. The criminal had incredible insight into what God was doing in Jesus. Even though the criminal was Jewish, he believed Jesus was the

³⁴ Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor*, 78, 90. The fact that the people “turned” from the cross and beat their breasts indicate they understood that Jesus’ execution was a terrible act of injustice (Luke 23:48).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

Messiah in spite of the fact that Jesus was a condemned man. As a condemned criminal himself, he was a religious and social outsider as far as Judaism was concerned. These things were true of the centurion as well. Even though he also was a religious and social outsider, he had tremendous insight into what is happening in Jesus.³⁶

VII. THE CONFESSION OF THE CENTURION

A. Jesus Was a Righteous Man

Luke differs from both Matthew and Mark in the confession of the centurion. The centurion in Matthew and Mark proclaims that Jesus was the “Son of God.” In Luke, he says that Christ was righteous.³⁷ What is the meaning of the word *righteous*?

Some maintain that it means “innocent.”³⁸ Bock says this is the primary meaning because of the context of Luke 23 where Jesus is shown to be innocent through a number of legal proceedings.³⁹ Pilate, Herod, the repentant thief, the centurion, and Joseph all proclaim that He is innocent.

Others maintain it means “righteous.” Why would the centurion glorify God if an innocent man was executed?⁴⁰ Brown falls into this camp and takes this position because of the use of Psalm 31 in

³⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 822-27.

³⁷ The only difference in Matthew and Mark is the order of the first two words.

³⁸ Arthur A. Just, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 945; Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. Bertram Lee Woolf (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 201; John T. Carroll, “Luke’s Crucifixion Scene,” in *Reimagining the Death of the Lucan Jesus*, ed. Dennis D. Sylva (Frankfurt: Anton Hain, 1990), 116-17; Vincent Taylor, *The Passion Narrative of St. Luke: A Critical and Historical Investigation*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, vol. 19 (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 97. Carroll says Luke uses the word to indicate innocence because the early church had to explain the scandal of a crucified Messiah.

³⁹ Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, 1863; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 876.

⁴⁰ Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 41-42; Beck, “‘Imitation Christi’ and the Lucan Passion Narrative,” 43; Karris, “Luke 23:47 and the Lucan View of Jesus’ Death,” 66. In another work, Bock says that even though the context indicates innocence as the meaning, it probably means “righteous.” See Darrell L. Bock, “A Theology

Jesus' prayer and the practice of the early church in calling Jesus the Righteous One.⁴¹ Tiede agrees and says the word must mean that Jesus is a "worthy" man because the adverbial form of the word is used by the thief on the cross to say that Jesus is not worthy to die, but that he and the other crucified man deserve what they are getting.⁴²

While the word in the mind of the criminal could mean "innocent," his emphasis is on what they and Jesus have done. Luke describes the criminal as an "evildoer." He and the other criminal "have done" (*epraxamen*) things worthy of death, while Jesus "has done nothing morally wrong" (*ouden atopon epraxen*; Luke 23:39-41). The word describing what Christ has not done (*atopon*) is a rare one. Luke only uses it two other times. In one case it clearly means morally evil things. In the other it refers to harmful things happening to a person.⁴³

This is the meaning of the word *dikaios* in the context as well. In 23:50, Joseph is called a "good and righteous" man. There the phrase clearly refers to a virtuous man. In Acts, Luke uses the word righteous (*dikaios*) as a title for Christ as the "Righteous One" (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). In Acts 10:22, it describes the virtuous character of the centurion Cornelius.

If there is a connection between the centurions in Luke's writings, the use of the word *righteous* in Acts 10:22 suggests that the word means righteous in a moral sense. The soldier and two traveling companions proclaim that their master Cornelius is *dikaios*. In addition, he is one that fears God. Both of these concepts are found in the events at the cross. If a soldier proclaims that his superior is a righteous man, it is not surprising that another military man would see the same thing in Jesus at the cross.⁴⁴

of Luke-Acts," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994), 127.

⁴¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah, from Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 1163-67.

⁴² Tiede, *Luke*, 420.

⁴³ BDAG, 120. Acts 25:5; 28:6.

⁴⁴ Liddell and Scott indicate that the word has numerous shades of meaning in secular writings. These include living a civilized or well-ordered life, being a good citizen, being loyal, observing one's duties to the gods and men, and being

Cornelius is not the only person whom Luke calls “righteous.” He uses the same adjective to describe Simeon, Zacharias, and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6; 2:25). In the case of Zacharias and Elizabeth, Luke says they lived blamelessly in regard to the commandments of God.

Perhaps a stronger reason for the meaning “righteous” is the overall Lucan usage. He uses the word seventeen times and it never means innocent, unless it means so on the lips of the centurion at the cross. Even if “innocent” makes sense in the context, so does the usual meaning by Luke.

The confession by the centurion is a testament to Christ’s character, which the centurion recognizes.⁴⁵ He is not interested in His legal status, but His character. It is His character that is on display in His actions and words. The centurion is open to God’s working in Jesus. He also is aware of the heavenly signs that surround the events at the cross.⁴⁶

Why shouldn’t the centurion come to the conclusion that Jesus was a righteous man? He heard His words, saw His actions and faith in His God, as well as the darkness that accompanied His death. If the thief on the cross recognized the character of Jesus, why couldn’t a military officer? Even though he is a pagan, he is connected with the God fearing criminal and recognizes that Jesus is righteous.

Matera suggests that the declaration by the centurion comes about because the centurion sees that Jesus is in a right relationship with God. He trusts in His God until the very end, even in the midst of suffering. Unlike in Mark, where the confession is one of Jesus’ identity, in Luke it is a statement about how He acts.⁴⁷ With all that the centurion sees, it is clear to him that Jesus, and not the religious leaders, stands in a right relationship with their God.⁴⁸ It is likely that with his syncretistic religious view, he would see things this way.

The absence of the article with the word *righteous* strongly suggests it is not a Messianic title on the lips of the centurion. While a noun

righteous in both actions and words. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 429.

⁴⁵ Joseph B. Tyson, “Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts,” *New Testament Studies* 41, no. 1 (1995): 24-25.

⁴⁶ Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, 1864; Bock, “A Theology of Luke-Acts,” 127.

⁴⁷ Matera, “The Death of Jesus according to Luke: A Question of Sources,” 481-84.

⁴⁸ Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 1160.

can be definite without the article, this example does not fit any of the constructions where an anarthrous noun is definite.⁴⁹ Luke uses the word with the article as a Messianic title in Acts 3:14 and 7:52. The Christian reader understands more about the Righteous One than the centurion did.

It appears that the character of Jesus, as seen in Luke 23:47, foreshadows the use of the phrase “Righteous One” as a Messianic title. In light of these things, Green says that Luke uses the confession of the centurion to summarize the entire ministry of Jesus.⁵⁰

Beck makes the interesting suggestion that Luke uses the adverb “truly” in 23:47 to say that Christ is the “truly” righteous one. In Luke’s Gospel, others, especially the religious leaders, have thought of themselves as righteous (16:15; 18:9; 20:20). Jesus rebuked these pretensions.⁵¹ At the cross, the centurion states the truth. He can see a person who is truly righteous even though the Jewish religious leaders cannot.

If, as argued here, the term *dikaios* on the lips of the centurion means “righteous,” there is a connection back to Naaman and the Sermon at Nazareth. In Jesus’ sermon, He refers to His ministry in light of the Righteous Servant of Isaiah (4:18-19; Isa 61:1-2). In Acts 3:14, when Luke refers to Jesus as the Righteous One, he probably also has the Servant of Isaiah in mind.⁵² Without understanding the full significance of his confession, the centurion proclaims that Jesus is the righteous Servant of Isaiah. When Jesus preaches His first sermon in Luke, He mentions the same context and uses a Gentile enemy officer to show that such men are open to the message He will proclaim, even though many Jews will be not. The centurion at the cross continues the same themes.

⁴⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics*, 245-54.

⁵⁰ Joel B. Green, “The Death of Jesus and the Rending of the Tempel Veil (Luke 23:44-49),” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1991), 548; Beck, “‘Imitation Christi’ and the Lucan Passion Narrative,” 43.

⁵¹ Beck, “‘Imitation Christi’ and the Lucan Passion Narrative,” 46.

⁵² Joel B. Green, “The Death of Jesus, God’s Servant,” in *Reimagining the Death of the Lukan Jesus*, ed. Dennis D. Sylva (Frankfurt: Anton Hain, 1990), 19-24.

B. Jesus Was the Son of God

The phrase “Son of God” in both Matthew and Mark can have more than one meaning. From a Christian perspective, it can have an ontological meaning. From a Jewish perspective, it can have a royal meaning. Luke’s use of *righteous* can also have more than one meaning. One reason Luke uses it may be to show that Jesus was not only righteous but also innocent and was therefore who He claimed to be.⁵³

In all the Synoptics, the confession of the centurion has a deeper meaning. In Matthew and Mark, the centurion did not mean the title Son of God in an ontological sense. In Luke, he certainly did not mean “righteous” in the sense the early church did in the Book of Acts in reference to the risen Jesus. However, Luke uses the centurion to state a truth that the centurion did not understand. He saw the character of the man on the cross before him.

The confession of the centurion, then, states more than the centurion knows. This is not surprising. In the context, the enemies of Jesus have stated more than they realize. In 23:35, the religious leaders say that He has saved others; let Him save Himself. The leaders meant the word in the sense of physical healings, as well as deliverance from death. While Luke uses the verb in these senses in his writings, he also uses it in numerous occasions to refer to spiritual salvation (Luke 8:12; 9:24; 18:26; 19:10; Acts 2:21, 47; 4:12; 14:9; 16:30). Jesus’ death on the cross would provide the spiritual salvation of those who believe. When His enemies said that He saved others, it was an extreme understatement.

The confession of the centurion in Mark is also an understatement. The construction Mark uses is one in which an anarthrous predicate nominative (“Son”) precedes the copulative verb. Harner argues that the usual practice of Mark is that such a construction stresses the qualitative nature of the predicate nominative and not the definiteness or indefiniteness of the noun. If Mark had meant for the centurion to say that Jesus is “a Son of God,” he would have placed the verb before the noun. If he wanted to emphasize that Jesus was “the” Son of God, he could have placed the verb before an articular noun “God.” The qualitative nature of the noun stresses the nature

⁵³ Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, 1865.

or character of Christ. Christ's sonship with God involves suffering and death. That is the *type* of sonship He has, and it can only be understood in light of His suffering. The translation "God's son" is the best translation to express the qualitative nature of the predicate nominative.⁵⁴

Other findings support Harner's conclusion. The phrase "Son of God," one with an anarthrous nominative followed by an anarthrous genitive, is an example of a construction in which Apollonius' Corollary applies. In such constructions, both nouns usually have the same semantic force. The most common is that both are definite. Somewhat less common is that both are qualitative. The least likely is that they are indefinite or that one is definite and the other is indefinite.⁵⁵ It is unlikely, then, that the centurion said "a" son of God. As a rule, 80% of the time anarthrous predicate nominatives, as in this case, are qualitative.⁵⁶

If the centurion in Mark proclaimed that Jesus was "a" son of God, he would be deifying Christ as a great leader or honoring Him as a Greco-Roman hero. This would have been a Roman understanding of "a son of God." This would have been a Hellenistic confession.⁵⁷

If the centurion had said that Jesus was "the" Son of God, this would have been a Christian confession. Because the word "son" is qualitative, the centurion need not be saying something he did not know. However, he is making a step towards proclaiming Jesus' true nature. He recognizes that in Jesus is One with superhuman status and authoritative power. In Him, the centurion sees one who displays God's activity. Those who see and hear Jesus see and hear what God is doing. The centurion is the first human being in Mark's Gospel to make this confession about Jesus.⁵⁸

No doubt, Mark himself understood the phrase "Son of God" as definite/definite. The centurion understood it as qualitative/

⁵⁴ Philip B. Harner, "Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 79-81.

⁵⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics*, 250-51.

⁵⁶ Harner, "Qualitative," 86-87; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 262.

⁵⁷ Dennis J. Kavanaugh, "The Ambiguity of Mark's Use of *Hyios theou* in Mark 15:39" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2011), 264.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, "The Ambiguity of Mark," 264, 272-73.

qualitative. In the confession of the centurion in his Gospel, Luke does a similar thing.

The centurion proclaims that Jesus is righteous. As a military man, perhaps he is impressed with certain virtues in Jesus, such as courage, integrity, and devotion to His beliefs. He sees what many others around the cross do not see, even though they are Jews.

His confession, however, is not a Christian one. Luke knows there is more to this confession. Jesus is truly the “righteous one” (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). For Luke, this is a Messianic title. Through Him, one finds the forgiveness of sins and is made “righteous” apart from the Law of Moses. This righteousness is available to all who believe in “this One” (Acts 13:38-39). The centurion does not understand all these things. However, when he sees Jesus and says that “this” man was “righteous,” he is unknowingly moving in that direction.

Hamm also sees a double meaning in the confession of the centurion, but in another way. The confession occurs at the ninth hour when the afternoon sacrifice occurred at the Temple (Luke 23:44). The death of Jesus provides the true significance of that sacrifice.⁵⁹ If so, in another way the centurion states a theological truth of which he is not aware.

C. Jesus Glorified God

Of the three Synoptics, only Luke mentions that the centurion glorifies God upon the death of Jesus. The phrase “glorify God” is significant in the Gospel of Luke in that it always refers to an event in which God has revealed Himself and His power, almost always in the form of a miracle of healing. This power of God is always directed towards the “poor” and needy.⁶⁰ In each case people respond by “glorifying God.” In all but one case, the people glorify God because of what they see God doing in Jesus. This is the best understanding of

⁵⁹ Dennis Hamm, “The Tamid Service in Luke-Acts: The Cultic Background behind Luke’s Theology of Worship (Luke 1:5-25; 18:9-14; 24:50-53; Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2003): 225-26.

⁶⁰ These include the shepherds to whom the angels announce the birth of Christ, the healing of a paralytic, the raising of the widow’s son, the healing of the stooped over woman, the cleansing of a leper, and the healing of a blind man (Luke 2:20; 5:25-26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43).

the phrase in relation to the centurion as well. If so, it suggests that the centurion is also one of the poor and needy.

A particularly significant example of “glorifying” God in the Gospel of Luke is the account of the cleansing of the ten lepers in 17:12-19. Luke tells us that of the ten lepers, only one gave glory to God. This was the Samaritan whom Luke calls a foreigner. Of the ten, only he is told by Jesus that his faith has saved him. With this leper and the centurion at the cross, Luke tells us that these kinds of people can see things that many religious Jews do not see. They can give glory to God. They are also capable of exercising faith in Jesus even though they are “foreigners.”

In the Gospel of Luke, the concept of glorifying God is also sometimes specifically associated with fearing God. In 7:16, after Jesus raises the widow’s son from the dead, the people glorify God. They also experience a godly fear (*phobos*) because God has visited His people in Christ. With the healing of the paralytic in Luke 5:25-26, the same theme is present. The people glorify God and are filled with fear because of what they see in Jesus. Since the centurion is associated with the God fearing repentant criminal, the implication is that the centurion not only glorifies God, but has a godly fear as well.

The usage by Luke of this phrase in Luke and Acts leads Fitzmyer to conclude that the centurion glorifies God through Jesus in the way a Christian or Jew would.⁶¹ If so, once again it is a confession that states more than he understands.

In the case of the centurion, he glorifies God by the confession that Jesus is righteous. Even though the centurion says more than he understands, it is his confession that is the final statement at the cross. It is the final word about Jesus’ death. It is particularly significant because a Gentile makes the confession.

Doble sees a connection between this confession and Luke 4:16-30, the sermon at Nazareth. Jesus said he would proclaim good news to Gentiles. He would go to them. They, too, are part of the poor. When the centurion praises God at the cross, the sermon at Nazareth is being fulfilled.⁶²

⁶¹ Fitzmyer, *Luke (X–XXIV)*, 1520.

⁶² Peter Doble, “Luke 23.47: The Problem of *Dikaios*,” *The Bible Translator* 44 (1993): 323.

In Acts, there are two instances of the phrase “glorifying God” which suggest the same thing. After the salvation of the Gentile Cornelius, the believing Jews praise God because he has given Gentiles life. In Pisidian Antioch, Gentiles glorify God because eternal life is made available to them (Acts 11:18; 13:48).

VIII. CONCLUSION

In Luke’s account, the centurion at the cross continues themes the reader has seen already in Naaman in the Lord’s sermon at Nazareth. The centurion’s actions and words are a rebuke to the unbelief of some Jews. Gentiles are able to respond to the revelation of God. He is associated with those who fear God, and he is one of the “poor” outsiders.

God reaches out to all different kinds of people. He reaches out to them where they are. They can respond to the revelation God gives them. Unbelievers are not so spiritually depraved that such a response is impossible.

In addition, this centurion can recognize righteousness and be impressed by it. His words and actions are also completely understandable within his pagan background.

However, his confession states Christian and theological truths that he does not understand. There is a double meaning. In Mark’s account the confession is important for Mark’s theological emphasis. The changes that Luke makes in the confession also reflect his theology. The sermon at Nazareth is coming true. God is reaching out to Gentiles.

IS THE CONCEPT OF REPENTANCE FOUND IN JOHN'S GOSPEL, AND IF SO, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years I have read articles and books by leading Evangelicals arguing that *the concept of repentance* is found in the Gospel of John. They have suggested it is a major error to conclude, as I and others have, that because the words *repent* and *repentance* (*metanoēō* and *metanoia*) do not appear in John's Gospel, then repentance must not be a condition of everlasting life.¹

In this article we will consider the examples which have been put forward of the concept of repentance in John's Gospel. Is the concept of repentance indeed found in the Fourth Gospel? If so, does the Fourth Gospel teach that repentance is a condition of everlasting life?

II. WHY THIS IS AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

This is important for a number of reasons.

First, people's eternal destinies depend upon whether they do what God requires in order to be born again. If repentance is a condition of everlasting life and we do not teach that it is, then we are misleading people on the single most important issue there is. That is bad for them, and it is bad for us as well (see Jas 3:1).

¹ See, for example, Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 2nd ed. (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1989, 2014), 130-31; Robert N. Wilkin, *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible* (N.P.: Grace Evangelical Society, 2012), 110-11.

Second, Biblical doctrines build on one another. If we accurately understand the place of repentance in the Bible, then we have what Paul calls “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) in that matter. If, however, we misunderstand the role of repentance, then our thinking is seriously out of line with Scripture on this issue. And since doctrines are interrelated, to be off on repentance would mean that we misunderstand the nature of saving faith as well as assurance of everlasting life.

Third, the issue of interpreting Scripture is a vital one. Since this question is fundamentally one involving principles of hermeneutics, it is a crucial question. We must have a sound hermeneutic if we are to understand God’s Word.

III. EXAMPLES WHEREIN A GIVEN WORD OR PHRASE DOES NOT APPEAR IN A BOOK, YET THE CONCEPT IS PRESENT

I heartily agree that a given word does not need to be used in a book in order for the concept conveyed by that word to be present. I will give a few simple and clear examples.

The expression *great white throne* is not mentioned in the Gospels. In fact, that expression is only found once in the Bible, in Rev 20:11. In Rev 20:11-15 the Great White Throne Judgment is foretold. While that expression is not found in the Gospels, the concept of the Great White Throne Judgment is found in all four Gospels (cf. Matt 7:21-23; 12:41-42; Mark 6:11; Luke 10:14; 11:31; John 5:24; 12:48).

The expression *the Judgment Seat of Christ* only occurs twice in the NT (Rom 14:10 in the Majority Text; 2 Cor 5:9-10). However, the concept of the Judgment Seat of Christ is found all throughout the NT (e.g., Matt 16:24-27; Luke 19:16-26; 1 Cor 3:5-15; 9:24-27; Gal 6:7-9; Col 1:21-23; 2 Tim 1:12; 2:12; 4:6-8; Heb 1:9; Jas 2:13; 3:1; 5:9; 1 Pet 5:4; 1 John 2:28; 4:17-19).

The word *Trinity* is not found anywhere in the Bible, yet the concept of the Trinity is present throughout the NT (e.g., Matt 28:19; Luke 3:22; John 1:33; 14:26; Acts 7:55; 1 John 5:6-13).

Many other examples could be given.² Here is the point: *The fact that the words repent and repentance do not occur in John's Gospel does not necessarily prove that the concept is not present.*³

We now turn to suggested examples of the concept of repentance in John's Gospel.

IV. SUGGESTED EXAMPLES OF THE CONCEPT OF REPENTANCE IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Various Evangelicals have suggested repentance is found in the Gospel of John.

A. Wayne Grudem

Wayne Grudem suggests three examples of the concept of repentance in John:

1) [the promise that the Holy Spirit] “will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8)...2) when Jesus tells the woman [at the well], “Go, call your husband, and come here” (John 4:16), the narrative shows that he is calling her to repentance for her sexual immorality...and 3) [expressions of faith which imply repentance, like] “coming to Christ” (John 6:35, 37, 44; 7:37), “receiving” Christ (John 1:11-12), “believing in (or into)” Christ (John 3:16, and many other passages), drinking the water that Christ gives (John 4:14), and even eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:53-56).⁴

² See David A. Croteau, “Repentance Found? The Concept of Repentance in the Fourth Gospel,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Spring 2013): 108-109 (though some of the examples he gives are not very clear).

³ However, I am understating the case for the sake of argument. Since John's Gospel has as its purpose leading unbelievers to faith in Christ and everlasting life (John 20:31), it is highly unlikely that John would leave out the words *repent* and *repentance* and yet include the concept if repentance were a condition of everlasting life. He'd want to be as clear as possible. Besides, John used those words a dozen times in Revelation, but not at all in his Gospel. As Hodges says, that is an *argument about silence*, not an *argument from silence*. See Zane Hodges, *Harmony with God* (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 2001), 5-11 (see also 13-21).

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *“Free Grace” Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 52.

John 16:8. That the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin does not in any way teach that people are called to turn from their sins. That is a stretch. Being convicted that you are a sinner is not at all the same as being called to turn from your sins.

I was unable to find a single commentator who suggested that John 16:8 referred to repentance.⁵ One would think that if the concept of repentance was in John 16:8, then most commentators, especially Calvinists, would see it. But they do not. Nor does Grudem cite a single commentator who agrees with him.

Of course, we do not interpret by polling the commentaries. However, if none or very few commentators suggest that repentance is present, that is quite telling.

John 4:16. There is no evidence that the Lord was calling upon the woman at the well to turn from her sins. He mentions her living in sin with a man, not to get her to repent, but in order to lead her to faith in Him. This is clear in that shortly after He revealed things about her past, she said, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will tell us all things” (John 4:25). Then, after He said, “I who speak to you am He,” she left her water pot (the old water, the old religion) and went to the men of the village and said, “Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). Note the repetition of *telling all things*.

It is possible, of course, that the woman turned from her sinful ways. However, John did not record that detail. Evidently it was not sufficiently important to indicate that. In any case, the Lord did not call her to turn from her sins.

I found only one commentator, Alfred Plummer (1882), who suggested that the concept of repentance is present in John 4:16, and his

⁵ See, for example, D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 537; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 697-98; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 833-34 (on p. 833 he specifically says that convicting the world of sin “does not mean to bring...to repentance”); Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1882, 1981), 292; Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 338; Edward W. Klink, III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 678-79.

comment sounds as though he comes to that conclusion on theological grounds, not on textual ones. All the rest did not mention repentance and said that Jesus was moving her to faith.⁶ Grudem did not cite any who said that repentance is present.

John 6:35 and other expressions of faith in John. The very fact that Grudem calls all of these expressions (“coming to Christ,” “believing in Christ,” “drinking the [living] water that Christ gives,” and “eating his flesh and drinking his blood”) ways in which “John explains belief in Jesus,”⁷ shows that his third point is misdirected. Those are figures that speak of believing in Jesus, not figures that speak of turning from one’s sins.

I could not find a commentator who said that John 6:35 or these other expressions refer to repentance.⁸ As Grudem himself says, they refer to believing in Jesus.

B. John MacArthur

The list of occurrences of the concept of repentance in John’s Gospel which John MacArthur suggests is larger than Grudem’s. He includes the following:

To say that John called for a faith that excluded repentance is to grossly misconstrue the apostle’s concept of what it means to be a believer. Although John never uses *repent* as a verb, the verbs he does employ are even stronger. He teaches that all true believers *love the light* (3:19), *come to the light* (3:20-21), *obey the Son* (3:36), *practice the truth* (3:21), *worship in spirit and truth* (4:23-24), *honor God*

⁶ See, for example, Carson, *John*, 221; Morris, *John*, 264-66; Michaels, *John*, 245-48 (on p. 247 he specifically says that “This does *not* mean that Jesus’ words made her feel guilty, or even that he intended them to. She is not so much convicted of sin as merely amazed at his knowledge of her past and present,” italics his); Thompson, *John*, 103 (“Jesus calls attention to her problematic situation, but he does not condemn her. Subsequently, commentators and preachers have hastened to fill the void!”); Klink, *John*, 241 (“This tactic is not intended to shame the woman...but to draw her in and help her understand about that which he speaks”).

⁷ Grudem, *5 Ways*, 52.

⁸ See, for example, Carson, *John*, 288-89, 296-97; Morris, *John*, 365-66, 378-80; Michaels, *John*, 373-75, 394-99; Thompson, *John*, 149-51, 155-56; Klink, *John*, 331 (“To come to Jesus is to believe in him”), 339-40; Plummer, *John*, 156, 161.

(5:22-24), *do good deeds* (5:29), *eat Jesus' flesh and drink His blood* (6:48-66), *love God* (8:42, cf. 1 John 2:15), *follow Jesus* (10:26-28), and *keep Jesus' commandments* (14:15). Those ideas hardly concur with no-lordship salvation! All of them presuppose repentance, commitment, and a desire to obey.⁹

Much of what MacArthur covers here is also found in Grudem. We will consider the unique examples which MacArthur mentions.

Worshipping in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). Worship is not repentance. In the context of John 4, this was not even a call for the woman at the well to worship. This is not an example of the concept of repentance in John's Gospel.

I found no commentator who said that worshipping in spirit and truth is a call to repentance.¹⁰

Honoring God (John 5:22-24). Honoring God is not a synonym for repentance. Indeed, in this context it clearly refers to believing in the Son. Verse 24 makes this clear. To believe in the Father is to believe in the Son Whom He sent.

I found no commentators who said that John 5:22-24 is discussing the concept of repentance.

Doing good deeds (John 5:29). Turning from sins is not a synonym for doing good deeds. Klink is typical of most commentators in that he does not mention repentance here—I did not find a commentator who did¹¹—but instead he talks about “the significant role of works in contrast to faith.”¹² He concludes with a reference to John 6:28-29 and Jesus' statement, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”¹³

⁹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., “Repentance in the Gospel of John,” Nov. 24, 2009, blog at the Grace to You website (<https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A238/repentance-in-the-gospel-of-john>).

¹⁰ See, for example, Carson, *John*, 224-26; Morris, *John*, 270-72; Michaels, *John*, 253-55; Thompson, *John*, 104-105; Klink, *John*, 244-45; Plummer, *John*, 121-22.

¹¹ Klink, *John*, 290. See also Thompson, *John*, 129-31; Plummer, *John*, 139-40; Edwin A. Blum, “John,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT Edition, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books), 291; Morris, *John*, 321-22.

¹² Klink, *John*, 290.

¹³ So too does Michaels, *John*, 321-23. He says, “Believing in Jesus is what counts. Those who ‘do good things’ or ‘do the truth’ are those who believe. Those

Repentance is turning from sinful behavior. Doing good works is not repentance. Whatever John 5:29 means,¹⁴ the Lord Jesus there is not talking about the concept of repentance.

Loving God (John 8:42). Once again, loving God is not a synonym for repentance. I did not find a commentary that suggested it is.¹⁵

Following Jesus (John 10:26-28). While there is room for discussion about what the words “they follow Me” mean in John 10:27,¹⁶ it is clear that they do not mean, “they turn from their sins.” Following Jesus is not the same as turning from one’s sins. No commentator I consulted suggested that it is.¹⁷

Keeping Jesus’ commandments (John 14:15). Once again, keeping Jesus’ commandments is not the same as turning from sins. In John 14:15, the Lord Jesus was speaking to His disciples about being His friends by keeping His commandments. Repentance is nowhere in view.¹⁸

MacArthur seems to be identifying everything he can in John’s Gospel which refers to positive actions done for God. But repentance is turning from sins. Turning from negative actions is not the same as doing good deeds. Where in the Fourth Gospel is the concept of turning from sins?

who ‘practice wicked things’ are those who do not” (p. 322).

¹⁴ For a discussion of John 5:29, see Zane C. Hodges, *Faith in His Name: Listening to the Gospel of John* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2015), 108-10; Robert N. Wilkin, “John,” *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, vol 1 (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 388-89.

¹⁵ See, for example, Blum, “John,” 305; Thompson, *John*, 192-93; Michaels, *John*, 516; Plummer, *John*, 196; Klink, *John*, 418; Morris, *John*, 462-63; Carson, *John*, 352-53.

¹⁶ Hodges argues that sheep following a shepherd illustrates faith, not discipleship. Additionally, the start of the chapter has this figure as well. See John 10:4. There it seems to refer literally to going where the shepherd goes. Might John 10:27 be a statement of eternal security? Jesus’ sheep will follow Jesus to wherever He is, that is, the third heaven now and the kingdom in the future.

¹⁷ See, for example, Klink, *John*, 477; Michaels, *John*, 598-99; Thompson, *John*, 232-33; Blum, “John,” 311; Morris, *John*, 520; Carson, *John*, 393.

¹⁸ Again, I could not find a commentator who mentioned repentance in his discussion of John 14:15. See Carson, *John*, 498-99; Morris, *John*, 648; Blum, “John,” 323; Thompson, *John*, 312; Michaels, *John*, 782-83; Plummer, *John*, 277; Klink, *John*, 631.

To be fair, MacArthur does not specifically say that the concept of repentance is found in John's Gospel, but he implies that when he says, "Although John never uses repent as a verb, the verbs he does employ are even stronger."¹⁹ But at the end of the list which he gives, he says that all of the verbal actions which he cites "*presuppose* repentance, commitment, and a desire to obey" (emphasis added).²⁰

Thus, in a sense, MacArthur is admitting that the concept of repentance is not found in the Fourth Gospel. In his way of looking at it, any good thing that a person is called to do, including believing in Jesus, *presupposes* that the person has first turned from his sins, committed his life to Christ, and has had a desire to obey. Of course, that is clearly not true in John 4. There is no indication that the woman at the well repented, committed her life, or had a desire to obey. Yet it is clear that she believed in Jesus and that she led others to faith in Him as well. In fact, there is not a single example in John in which *anyone* was said to turn from his sins or to commit his life or to indicate a desire to obey before or in conjunction with his coming to faith in Christ. The Gospel of John is called *the Gospel of belief* for a reason.

While MacArthur has good intentions, he fails to identify a single place in which John's Gospel discusses *the concept of repentance*.

C. David Croteau

In a 2013 journal article,²¹ Croteau suggests that there are seven motifs in the Fourth Gospel which present the concept of repentance. He adds, "Not all of the arguments are equally convincing." He then gives the list, saying, "Here is the list of arguments from the strongest to the weakest:

1. The Fourth Gospel's Paraphrase of Isa 6:10: John 12:40
2. Stop Sinning: 5:14 (8:11)
3. Light and Darkness Motif: 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5
4. The Snake in the Wilderness: John 3:14-15 and Num 21:4-9
5. Born Again or Born from Above: 3:3-5

¹⁹ "Repentance in the Gospel of John," Nov 24, 2009, blog at the Grace to You website.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Croteau, "Repentance Found? The Concept of Repentance in the Fourth Gospel," 97-123.

6. Belief and Obedience: 3:36
7. Abiding in the Vine: John 15:1-5.²²

Points 3-7 will receive less attention from me since Croteau himself lists them as weaker, and since they have some conceptual overlap with the points made by Grudem and MacArthur.

Point 3: The Light and Darkness Motif (John 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5). Jesus' evangelism of Nicodemus ends in John 3:18. Verses 19-21 are a call for Nicodemus to come into the light, that is, to confess Christ publicly. John 3:22-36 gives the example of one who was very faithful in confessing Christ, John the Baptist. There is no suggestion of repentance in John 3:19-21. John 8:12 and 9:5 are statements regarding revelation and illumination, not repentance.²³

Point 4: The Snake in the Wilderness (John 3:14-15 and Num 21:4-9). There is nothing in the uplifted serpent incident or in John 3:14-15 to suggest repentance. The issue is looking and living, and the Lord specifically says that looking at the uplifted bronze serpent was a type referring to believing in Him.²⁴ These texts work against Croteau's view.

Point 5: Born Again or Born from Above (John 3:3-5). The Lord gave as the condition of the new birth believing in Him, not repentance (John 3:14-18). The new birth itself in no way implies repentance. John 3:3-5 does not support Croteau's argument.

Point 6: Belief and Obedience (John 3:36). Obedience is not mentioned. Disobedience is. John the Baptist is saying that failure to believe in Jesus is disobeying God who calls upon all to believe in His Son. Nothing in John 3:36 implies repentance.²⁵ Only faith in Christ is in view.

Point 7: Abiding in the Vine (John 15:1-5). Abiding is a key discipleship concept in both the upper room discourse and 1 John. The

²² Ibid., 121.

²³ See my discussion of each of these texts in *The Grace New Testament Commentary* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), Vol. 2, 377, 406, 413.

²⁴ Ibid., 376.

²⁵ Ibid., 379.

issue is fellowship, not regeneration. The concept of repentance is not mentioned here.²⁶

Let's now turn to Croteau's two strongest arguments.

Point 1: The Fourth Gospel's Paraphrase of Isa 6:10 (John 12:40). This verse is indeed a paraphrase of Isa 6:10. The word *repent* is not found here, of course. But Croteau thinks that the word *turn* in the expression, "Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them" refers to the concept of repentance: "Another candidate for [the concept of] repentance in the Fourth Gospel occurs in John 12:40 with the Evangelist's use of *strepō*."²⁷ While it is true that *strepō* is the verb found in a small number of manuscripts of John 12:40 (e.g., p66, aleph, B, psi, 33), the majority of manuscripts have the related verb *epistrepō*.

The problem for Croteau's view is that *turning* here is not defined. Turning from what? Or turning to what? The context in John 12 is not about turning from sins.²⁸ The context is about the fact that "although He had done so many signs before them, they *did not believe in Him*, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled..." (John 12:37-38a, emphasis added). Then after citing Isa 53:1, John says, "Therefore they *could not believe*, because Isaiah said again..." (John 12:39, emphasis added). Even the verses which follow the paraphrase of Isa 6:10 are about believing in Jesus, not turning from sins (cf. John 12:42, 44ff).

Failing to turn in John 12:40 clearly refers to *failing to believe*, not failing to turn from one's sins. Turning is sometimes used in the NT in reference to turning to the Lord in faith (see also Acts 9:35; 11:21).²⁹

Interestingly, Croteau in his discussion of John 12:40 does acknowledge that John 12:40 is being used to show why the Jewish people, for the most part (John 1:11), *did not believe in Jesus*.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., 448-49.

²⁷ Ibid., 116.

²⁸ Croteau believes he sees repentance in the context of Isa 6:10 (pp. 116-17). However, there are two problems with that suggestion. First, there is nothing in Isa 6:1-9 to suggest that Isaiah was out of fellowship with God and needed to repent. Second, the issue in John 12:40 is not the context of Isa 6:10, but the context of John 12:37-40.

²⁹ All three of those verses use *epistrepō*. The parallel texts in John 12:40, Matt 13:15 and Mark 4:12 do as well.

³⁰ Croteau, "Repentance Found," 117, 119.

I was able to find three commentaries which mention repentance when discussing John 12:40.³¹ However, all three understand the failure of the Jewish people to turn *as a failure to believe*, not a failure to repent.³² They see repentance in Isaiah 6, but not in John 12:40.³³

Most commentaries do not mention repentance at all, and instead say, as Thompson does, that the failure to turn in John 12:40 refers to “the unbelief of Jesus’ contemporaries.”³⁴

Though Michaels is one of the three who do mention repentance, he says concerning Isa 6:10, “This was a quotation used elsewhere by early Christians to explain the unbelief they faced, especially from the Jewish people (see Matt 13:15; Acts 28:27).”³⁵

Croteau’s first, and by his reckoning, best example of the concept of repentance in John’s Gospel is not persuasive. But what about his second example?

Point 2: Stop Sinning (John 5:14; 8:11). Here John recounts when Jesus healed a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda. When Jesus healed the man, He said, “Take up your bed and walk” (John 5:11). Jesus then withdrew, and the man did not know who healed him (John 5:13). “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’” (John 5:14).

Is the concept of repentance found here?

No. There are several reasons why it is not.

³¹ See Klink, *John*, 559; Michaels, *John*, 710; Carson, *John*, 448.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Michaels is a bit hard to follow. After saying that the issue in John 12:40 is unbelief, Michaels ended his discussion saying, “Not only has God not ‘drawn’ these people or ‘given’ them faith, but he has ‘blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts’ to make sure they would *not* repent and be healed!” (710). Klink does the opposite. He starts out talking about repentance in the context of Isaiah 6. But then when talking about John 12:40, he refers to “the failure to believe” and to “the unbelieving response to Jesus” (p. 560). Carson similarly sees repentance in Isaiah 6, but when he discusses John 12:40, he sees unbelief or “merely superficial faith” (p. 449).

³⁴ So Thompson, *John*, 275. See also Morris, *John*, 604-605; Blum, “John,” 318-19; Plummer, *John*, 260. Carson (*John*, 448-49) mentions that Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6 “resulted in his profound repentance and cleansing” (448). However, when he then discusses John 12:40, he does not mention failing to repent, but he discusses failing to believe (or to believing with “merely superficial faith,” 449).

³⁵ Michaels, *John*, 709.

First, the Lord has already forgiven this man. He did not need to repent to gain forgiveness. He already has it, unlike Luke 15:11-32 and other NT texts on repentance. Croteau does not discuss this fact.

Second, the Lord is not calling him to turn from his sins, plural. There is one particular sin that led to his paralysis in the first place. Croteau thinks that the best translation of what Jesus said is “stop sinning.”³⁶ Yet the best translation of *mēketi hamartane* is “no longer sin” or “no longer commit [that] sin.”³⁷

Third, the Lord is not specifically telling him to turn from that sin. The man last committed that sin thirty-eight years ago (John 5:5). It would be like someone with thirty-eight years of sobriety in AA who was paralyzed in a car crash and then miraculously healed being told, “Don’t get drunk again, lest a worse thing happen to you.”

Being told to avoid repeating a sin which you committed decades ago that led to calamity in your life is not at all the same as being called to turn from sins which are currently active in your life.

Carson mentions repentance when he discusses Luke 13:3, 5, which he thinks is a similar but different passage from John 5:14, saying, “But Luke 13:1-5 says nothing *to the person who is suffering*, and hence is irrelevant here.”³⁸ In the rest of his discussion of this text, he stresses that the man’s suffering is “the outcome of specific sin.”³⁹

Other commentaries either do not mention repentance,⁴⁰ or, like Carson, mention it but see this passage as dealing with something different.⁴¹

³⁶ Croteau, “Repentance Found,” 115.

³⁷ This is the first reference in John’s Gospel to anyone sinning and the first reference to sin since John 1:29. Jesus did not refer to sin when talking with Nicodemus or the woman at the well. Why here? The reason is because the lame man’s illness had been linked to some sin in his life (and the fact that the context here is not evangelistic).

³⁸ Carson, *John*, 246.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ So Blum, “John,” 290 (though he does see the warning concerns “the doom of hell”); Michaels, *John*, 297-99; Klink, *John*, 274-75 (“The command to stop sinning is an admonition against the sin of unbelief,” p. 275); Morris, *John*, 307; Plummer, *John*, 134-35.

⁴¹ Thompson says “neither the man’s repentance nor faith [was] a precondition of his being healed” and adds that “sin is...defined as unbelief” and that Jesus was “inviting him to confess faith in Jesus,” (*John*, p. 123).

John 8:11. Croteau puts this in parentheses because he does not think the woman caught in adultery is part of Scripture.⁴² However, the vast majority of manuscripts contain it. It is Scripture.

The same three points made about *John 5:14* apply.

First, she was already forgiven. She did not need to repent to gain forgiveness (*John 8:11*).

Second, the issue here is one sin, not all her sins. Since repentance concerns all sins, not one sin, this is not a call to repentance.

Third, it is not clear here that the woman was a harlot or that she had repeatedly committed adultery. That is possible. But when Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more from now on” (*John 8:11*), He is saying that if she repeats this sin, the next time she might not be given a reprieve from the death penalty. Being called not to repeat a specific sin is not the same as calling a person to repentance. It is a related idea. But where, for example, in the Synoptics (see below) do we see anything similar to this called repentance? We do not.

Notice, too, that the context of the command to sin no more is “Neither do I condemn you.” As we shall discuss below, even if the concept of repentance were found in John’s Gospel, it would also be required to show that the context is dealing with what one must do to have everlasting life. This passage fails on both counts.⁴³

As with *John 5:14*, commentators typically do not mention repentance when discussing this text.⁴⁴ Though Plummer does not use the word *repentance*, he does use related terms such as *penitent* and *time to amend*.⁴⁵ Similarly, Morris says that Jesus “is calling the woman to

⁴² Croteau, “Repentance Found,” 115, esp. note 112.

⁴³ Croteau says that in *John 5:14*, “the context is salvific, not of progressive sanctification” (p. 115). He errs in thinking those are the only options. The context here concerns salvation *from physical illness*: “See, you have been made well” (*John 5:14*). Whether the man was a believer or an unbeliever is not the point in this passage. The point here is that he was a lame man who was healed by Jesus. Evidently his illness was due to a sin in his life many years before. Repeating that sin would lead to more temporal judgment.

⁴⁴ Carson, *John*, 336-37; R. V. G. Tasker, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960, 1997), 112-13; Thompson, *John*, 180-81; Klink, *John*, 396-97; Michaels, *John*, 500; Blum, “John,” 347.

⁴⁵ Plummer, *John*, 186.

amendment of life, the whole of life,” but that she “has given no signs of repentance or of faith.”⁴⁶

D. Summary

There is only one text, John 5:14 (and the related text, John 8:11), which is even close to conveying the concept of repentance in John. But even there, it is evident that repentance is not in view.

John 5:14 does not say, “Turn from your sins, lest a worse thing come upon you.” It says, “Sin no more...” The former calls for a turning from a life of rebellion against God. The latter calls for a person not to repeat a particular sin (in this case one from nearly forty years earlier). Those two concepts are not the same.

V. COMPARING CALLS TO REPENT IN THE SYNOPTICS WITH SUGGESTED CALLS TO REPENT IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

A comparison between the calls to repentance in the Synoptics with the supposed occurrence of the concept of repentance in John shows dramatically that the concept of repentance is not in John.

I have selected five major texts on repentance in the Synoptics to see if the concepts found here are found in the Fourth Gospel.

A. Matthew 12:41

In Matt 12:41, Jesus says, “Nineveh...repented at the preaching of Jonah.” What does that mean? Does that mean that the Ninevites stopped sinning? Hardly. That they committed their lives to Yahweh? No. That they did good deeds? Certainly not.

Jonah 3:5-10 tells us what they did. They put on sackcloth and ashes. These were symbols of repentance. They fasted. “Everyone turn[ed] from his evil way” (Jonah 3:8, 10).

Do we see an example in John of someone who turned from his evil way? No.

⁴⁶ Morris, *John*, 891.

B. Matthew 3:2; 4:17

Both John the Baptist and Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This was a call for national repentance in order for the kingdom to come. Of course, there was a second condition which both John the Baptist and Jesus preached—national faith in Messiah

Is the concept “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” in John’s Gospel? No. Not once.

C. Luke 13:3, 5

The Lord said, “Repent or you will all likewise perish.” The context here concerns physical death. There is no general call like that in John. No national call to turn from sins, either for the kingdom to come, or to avoid the calamity of AD 70, which is what Luke 13:3, 5 are about.

The closest we find is John 5:14 and 8:11. But both of those contexts are individual, not corporate, and both concern not repeating a particular sin that led to temporal judgment instead of a general call to turn from one’s sins.

D. Luke 24:47

In this verse, the Lord said that the Apostles would preach “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Do we see that anywhere in John? No. Not once in John’s Gospel is the forgiveness of sins linked to repentance. In fact, the idea of the forgiveness of sins is exceedingly rare in John. It is implied in John 5:14 and 8:11, though in both cases independent of any action on the part of the forgiven. Foot washing in John 13 illustrates the forgiveness of a believer, but not in any way linked with repentance. The only explicit reference to forgiveness in the Fourth Gospel is when the Lord says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). That is the lone explicit reference to forgiveness in John. And it is contextually unrelated to repentance.

E. Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3 (John the Baptist's Baptism of Repentance)

The Synoptics tell us that John the Baptist's baptism was one "of repentance." That is, he baptized people who were professing to have repented. People went out to him and heard him preach. Then they would commit to turn from their sinful ways, and they would be baptized.

Though John the Baptist plays a prominent role in John 1 and John 3, and John's baptizing ministry is mentioned in John 4:1, there is no mention of John the Baptist's baptism of repentance. None. When we consider that the Apostle John was likely one of the two disciples of John the Baptist who left him to become Jesus' disciple (cf. John 1:35-37), this omission is even more telling.

F. Summary

The repentance preaching we see in the Synoptics is absent in the Fourth Gospel.

Those who suggest that the concept of repentance is present in John's Gospel appear to do so because their theology demands it, not because they actually find the concept in John's Gospel. They fail to compare the repentance preaching in the Synoptics with what they think might be repentance preaching in John.

Whether the concept of repentance is in John's Gospel or not does not matter since the sole condition of everlasting life is said repeatedly in John's Gospel to be belief in Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel, faith is the lone condition of eternal salvation. So even if there were a robust ministry of repentance in John, it would not undercut the promise of everlasting life to all who simply believe in Jesus. But there is no ministry of repentance in John. The concept is absent.

VI. EVIDENCE THAT REPENTANCE IS NOT A CONDITION OF EVERLASTING LIFE IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL EVEN IF THE CONCEPT IS PRESENT

Only two texts in John are even close to the concept of repentance: John 5:14 and John 8:11. While neither is a call for someone to turn from his sins to get into a harmonious relationship with God, even if we granted they were, neither context is salvific.

In John 5 the issue is physical healing. If the man returned to his former sin, then something worse (instant death, lingering suffering of a greater magnitude than before) would happen.

The issue in John 8:1-11 is escaping the death penalty. The woman was forgiven by Christ, and she escaped death. But if she returned to adultery, the next time she might well be stoned to death.

In neither passage does the Lord use the phrase He always uses when He evangelizes: *everlasting life* (or the equivalent).⁴⁷ There is no mention of condemnation, everlasting life, or anything like that.

Over twenty times in John's Gospel, everlasting life is conditioned solely upon faith in Christ (John 1:12-13; 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 4:14, 39, 41, 42; 5:24, 39-40; 6:35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 54; 8:24; 11:25, 26, 27, 45; 14:6; 20:31). If repentance is another condition of everlasting life, as many suggest, then there is a major problem. John's Gospel is inaccurate. It tells people a way to be born again that is insufficient and ineffective. But that is impossible since the Fourth Gospel is Scripture, and all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16-17). Jesus' evangelistic ministry as recorded in John is accurate. Since the sole condition is faith in Christ, repentance is not a condition.

VII. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked a good question. Theologians should ask this same question all the time.

If the concept of repentance is found in John's Gospel, then our Biblical theology needs to reflect that. However, if the concept is not there and yet we say that it is, we confuse people. The study

⁴⁷ Equivalent expressions found in John are "shall not perish," "shall not come into judgment," "shall never hunger," "shall never thirst," and "shall never die."

of Scripture is then moved from the realm of science into alchemy. Exegesis becomes inexplicable and mysterious.

How we interpret the Bible, indeed, whether we even attempt to or not, is impacted by this discussion.

Evangelism is at stake as well. The person who becomes convinced that the concept of repentance is in John and that it is one of the conditions of everlasting life likely will be unwilling to try to share about Christ because he will not know what to say. If the message of John 3:16 is inadequate, and if we must also call people to turn from their sins, what else is required? Maybe there are many hidden conditions in John's Gospel which only the scholars can see and reveal.

If repentance is one of multiple conditions of everlasting life, then people will cease being sure of their eternal destiny. How can I know whether I am born again if the scholars convince me that the conditions include turning from sins, believing certain facts about Jesus, committing one's life to Him, following Him, obeying Him, and persevering in all of that? Those who say the concept of repentance is found in John argue that all of those things are conditions of everlasting life and of assurance.

One's motivation for serving God changes. Instead of serving Him out of love and gratitude and a desire for His approval, now one will serve Him in order to avoid eternal condemnation. He will view turning from sins, obedience, self-denial, cross-bearing, and perseverance as conditions of everlasting life. The result is that those motivations for service become an insult to the blood of Christ and the grace of God when they are viewed as requirements to receive everlasting life.

If you want to know whether this issue matters, read the writings of men like Wayne Grudem, John MacArthur, and David Croteau. They certainly are convinced that this is a vital issue. I agree. The difference is that we are on opposite sides of the issue. They see it as vital since, in their view, most people do not do enough to be born again. They think that false assurance is rampant because people believe the faith-alone message. I see this issue as vital since most people wrongly think that believing in Jesus is not enough to have everlasting life. People are unfortunately looking at their own works to see evidence that they are kingdom bound. But that is the wrong place to look. We are to look to Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb 12:2), not to ourselves.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Those who suggest that the concept of repentance is in John's Gospel have good intentions. They want as many people as possible to be born again. They want believers to have assurance of everlasting life and to live godly lives.

I want those things as well.

The question is not intentions, but reality. The concept of repentance is not found in John's Gospel. To suggest that it is present when it is not is developing our own man-made religion. God knows best what a person must do to be born again, and only if we adopt His thinking, do we have "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

A REVIEW OF RICHARD J. FOSTER'S *CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE: THE PATH TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH*, PART 1

BRAD DOSKOCIL

Chairman
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I. INTRODUCTION

Richard J. Foster has written numerous books and is founder of Renovaré, a Christian non-profit organization dedicated to promoting spiritual formation through the use of spiritual disciplines. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*¹ was first published in 1978 with subsequent versions published in 1988, 1989, and 2018. This is a review of the fortieth anniversary edition published in 2018.

The book is written in an engaging style. In addition, who can argue that discipline or spiritual disciplines are not important to living the Christian life? The Apostle Paul said that he buffeted his body to make it his slave (1 Cor 9:27). In that context Paul was stressing being disciplined and intentional in serving the Lord.

Spiritual disciplines are something every Christian should practice. However, the Biblical record about spiritual disciplines is a bit different from what is offered by Foster. Foster derives his methods of practicing spiritual disciplines mostly from ancient Catholic mystics.

Celebration is organized into four parts. There is an introduction followed by sections describing inward disciplines, outward disciplines, and corporate disciplines. He discusses many things under each category. The question is whether the practices which Foster promotes are Biblical. To answer that, I will look at *Celebration* one

¹ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers; 2018).

chapter at a time, with each heading corresponding to its respective chapter title in *Celebration*.

II. THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: DOOR TO LIBERATION

Foster says the problem spiritual people have is superficiality. He encourages them to become deep people. We can be the answer to a hollow world through the “classical disciplines”² (p. 1). These disciplines allow us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm.

He wants us to have contact with the spiritual world. He is not pointing us to Christ, but to a mystical experience based on practices of mystics of the past, and not necessarily the Bible. Paul warned us of this in Col 2:8: “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.”

Foster says anyone who longs for God can practice these disciplines. He does not even have to be a believer in Christ (p. 2).

There are two obstacles to practicing these disciplines. Philosophically, many doubt that they can reach beyond this materialistic world. Practically, we do not know how to explore the inward life (p. 3).

Foster rightly says we cannot solve the problem of sin through legalism and willpower. We can only do it through the spiritual disciplines. Unfortunately, he does not see the solution as being transformed by the Word of God through the renewing of our minds by the work of the Spirit (Rom 8:4-6; 12:2). Walking by belief in God’s Word and believing more truths found in it seem irrelevant to Foster. However, the Bible says that belief is essential to pleasing God. Foster does not mention it (see, however, Heb 11:6; 2 Cor 5:7).

A more basic question is: instead of telling them to walk by belief, why didn’t Paul tell Christians to live by the spiritual disciplines?

² The classical disciplines are classical because they are central to experiential Christianity and have been practiced by all the “devotional masters” over the centuries.

III. MEDITATION

The first discipline Foster discusses is meditation. It involves entering the inner world of contemplation and following the “masters of meditation.” Contemplative prayer is central to it (p. 15).

Foster says that the Bible supports the idea of meditation by using two different Hebrew words to describe it. Each word stresses changed behavior as a result of meditation (Gen 24:63; Ps 1:2; 63:6; 119:97) (p. 15).³ However, the words used in the Bible for meditation mean to think about, ponder, muse, to contemplate, and to mull over, just like their English counterparts.

Foster emphasizes that this meditation should be done in solitude. God speaks to people who are willing to listen (p. 16). Foster makes the point that God still speaks to such people today. This is a result of meditation.⁴

According to Foster, people like Moses learned to hear God’s voice. They could then obey what He told them to do (p. 19). God will do the same with us. We can have mystical and subjective encounters with Him. But if that is the case, why do we need the Bible?

People who have had such mystical experiences include Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, whom he calls “faithful believers.” Since there is no certainty such people believed in Christ alone for eternal life apart from works, it seems that Foster is saying we should derive spiritual practices from unbelievers.

Foster tries to distinguish between “Christian meditation” and Eastern forms of it. In the former the goal is to fill the mind, while in the latter to empty it. He admits, however, that one must empty the mind before he can fill it (p. 21). The imagination is the tool for filling our minds with the correct things. Foster cites several mystics who drew mental pictures for themselves and says that while our imagination can be untrustworthy, it can also be used for good (p.

³ The Hebrew word for meditation used in Gen 24:63 is a *hapax legomenon*, and the meaning is uncertain. The passage concerns Isaac’s going out into the field for an evening stroll. Meditation may not necessarily be in view.

⁴ One wonders who may be speaking to those practicing Foster’s method of meditation. It is important to note that Foster does not believe the Bible is inerrant, and he seems to place more emphasis on mystical experiences than on the Bible.

25). Foster thinks God sanctifies our imaginations while meditating (p. 26).

But imagination is the act of forming a mental image or picture of an object not present to our senses. God prohibited the Jewish people from making images of Him for worship (Exod 20:4; Lev 26:1; Deut 5:8). The word for image includes the idea of a mental one. In addition, the Bible does not hold our imagination in high esteem. In Gen 6:5 it says that the imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was evil continually.

The Bible takes a dim view of images and imagination because they are not real. Why should we expect imagination used in meditation to produce truth about the true God?

In preparing to meditate, Foster says we can only learn by doing. He suggests setting a specific time and place to do it each day. It should be a place of solitude. While many different positions are possible, he suggests sitting in a chair, palms up, with one's feet firmly planted on the floor.

Foster says that there are different forms of meditation. He correctly says that we should meditate on the Scriptures and cites Mary as an example (Luke 2:19). However, he says that focusing on the Scriptures is how we keep "other forms of meditation" in their proper perspective (p. 29). This suggests that meditation is more than pondering what the Word of God says and means.

In addition, Foster introduces imagination into the process. He says we should center on a word or phrase of the Bible for a period of time. Then we should live in all of our senses what the text is saying. We should smell and hear what is going on. We should feel what the people are feeling and touch what they are touching. We use our imagination to accomplish it (p. 30). But how do we picture ourselves in places we have never been or seen and be accurate to what the Bible says? Foster doesn't say. For him, imagination is reality. In this process we need to be "active participants." It is then that Christ will teach us in an audible way (p 30).

One form of meditation is called "re-collection" or "centering down." The person is to confess his anxieties and enter into silence. This allows him to listen to what God wants to say. However, this is Eastern mysticism, seeking to empty one's mind and filling it in a mystical manner.

Foster says we can also meditate on creation. We can focus on a flower or animal and allow its characteristics to sink into our minds. God will audibly speak to us as we commune with nature.

In a similar vein, we can meditate on the events of our time to gain a perspective of their significance. With a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, we can receive from God prophetic insight on things going on around us.

In all of the forms of meditation Foster discusses, he says we can hear the voice of God. However, his examples come from past mystics and not from the Biblical text.

Instead of following these unbiblical examples, the Christian should meditate on God's Word. We need to think about it and ponder its meaning. We need to see what God has said in His Word. Not surprisingly, there is no command in the Bible for believers to engage in contemplative meditation. Instead, there are many examples of righteous people thinking about God's Word (Ps 1:1-2; Luke 2:19).

IV. PRAYER

Foster points out the importance of prayer in a person's life. He says that, "Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us" (p. 33). He observes that if we are unwilling to change or be transformed, prayer will not be a noticeable characteristic of our lives. Rightly he observes that when we pray correctly we begin to think God's thoughts. In addition, prayer is communion with God. He says prayer is transforming, but this may be confusing the result with the cause.

In discussing things that discourage people from prayer, Foster says that some may think only spiritual giants pray a lot. He says that God will meet us where we are. God wants to hear from all of us (Isa 65:24; Jer 33:3).

Foster gives good advice when he says that we should not be discouraged from praying because we have the idea that things cannot change (p. 35). The Bible does indeed teach that prayer can affect outcomes.

Most of the chapter on prayer is devoted to intercessory prayer. As with meditating, Foster says we need to learn how to pray. This is consistent with the Bible as well, as Jesus taught His disciples how

to pray (Luke 11:1). Foster found learning to pray was a liberating experience because he was free to experiment.

Foster makes a valuable observation concerning prayer. He says that when praying for others, Jesus never said, "if it be your will" (p. 37). Neither did the Apostles or prophets. He says the reason for this is because they knew what the will of God was before they prayed. Foster says we should pray the same way. However, we do not know what God wants in every situation, while Foster relies on mystical practices to find out. He also recognizes that there will be times when we do not know what God wants in a given situation. The Bible tells us to ask Him for wisdom so we can learn what He wants (Jas 1:5). By describing his own experiences, Foster tells us how he learned to pray. He says we can know if we are praying correctly if the requests come to pass (p. 38). This is a logical conclusion based upon his view of learning God's will. However, it does not take into account that God sometimes changes His mind about something as the result of prayer. In addition when God says "no," it doesn't always mean we are asking for something outside of His will. Paul's thorn in the flesh situation is a case in point (2 Cor 12:7-10). In Dan 9:14-19, we see another example. Daniel prayed that the kingdom would come immediately. God said it would happen after seventy sevens of years.

These examples, as well as others, tell us that what God wants can change based upon human response. His will is dynamic, not static.

Our prayers should indeed reflect what God wants (1 John 5:14). However, no matter how we pray, God wants to hear from us (1 Thess 5:17).

Foster describes how we should pray for others. He appeals to mystical practices again by saying, "We begin praying for others by first quieting our fleshly activity and listening to the silent thunder of the Lord of Hosts" (p. 39). Listening for guidance is the first step. God will audibly tell us what to do. Foster argues that God's will comes through a mystical voice, not from the Scriptures.

This leads Foster to inform us how we can better get in touch with God and receive divine guidance to pray for others. Once again he appeals to imagination. "The imagination is a powerful tool in the work of prayer" (p. 41). We should draw pictures in our minds of what we want to occur.

At this point he provides a caution. He recognizes his method could be challenged. He says that in using the imagination we are not trying to conjure up something in our mind that isn't so (p. 42). Rather, the intention is to ask God to tell us what to do. It is not an attempt to manipulate God or tell Him what to do. However, contra Foster, the fact is that imagination is the product of our own mind and is not real.

Foster reminds us that prayer is work (p. 45). He equates prayer to any other kind of work. We may not like work, but after working for a while we begin to like it. What is interesting is that Foster offers no Biblical support for this observation. Instead, he appeals to people and so-called masters of past ages.

Daniel's prayer in Dan 9:4-19 gives us a better pattern for prayer. After studying portions of Jeremiah and hearing what the prophet said, Daniel prayed! Daniel did not use his imagination or wait to see if God was going to audibly talk with him about what he should do. Foster introduces his mystical methods into prayer and they sound very enticing, but they are devoid of Biblical truth.

V. FASTING

Foster gives two reasons why people do not fast. The first is the abuse of the practice in the Middle Ages. The second is that we live in a modern society that wants instant gratification (p. 47).

To counter these problems, Foster mentions examples of Biblical heroes who fasted, including Jesus. He also mentions "great Christians" of the past who fasted and valued the practice (p. 48). The implication is that if these spiritual giants fasted, so should we.

Foster defines Biblical fasting as "abstaining from food for spiritual purposes" (p. 48). It should not be done for reasons of vanity or power. He also mentions partial fasts when certain types of both food and drink are avoided (e.g., Dan 10:3).

In looking at Biblical examples of fasting, Foster says that individuals often did it in times of distress, grief, or repentance from sin. He assumes it is for everyone, regardless of tradition and culture. He ignores the fact that in the Bible those who fasted came from an Eastern culture and tradition, as well as the fact that it was often

accompanied by wearing sackcloth and putting ashes on oneself. Foster does not mention these other practices or suggest we do them.

Foster maintains that Jesus assumes His disciples will fast (Matt 6:16-18) but says that it is not a command. Jesus was giving instruction on the proper exercise of a common practice of His time. He did not speak a word about whether it was a right practice or if it should be continued (pp. 52-53).

Although it is not a command, Foster says all Christians should fast. He says that Matt 9:14-15 implies that the disciples of Jesus will fast after His death and ascension (p. 53). Foster considers this the most important statement in the NT on fasting.

However, in this passage Jesus associates mourning with fasting. Foster does not discuss this issue and whether the statement is simply saying the disciples will mourn the departure of the Lord. For those in an Eastern culture, fasting was an expression of grief.

Even though there is no command to fast in the NT, Foster says it is expected. He implies that Christians who don't fast will not grow spiritually. In Foster's view, we are operating under "cheap grace" by shying away from calls to obedience if we don't fast (p. 54).

The chapter on fasting concludes with instruction on how to fast. Foster gives some practical guidance on how to ease into fasting, including doing it over different periods of time.

It is clear, however, that Christians are not commanded to fast. It was practiced by the Jewish people and other ancient Eastern peoples. Every Christian has freedom in Christ and should discern for himself or herself whether to fast.

VI. STUDY

Foster places a high value on the discipline of study and says it is essential for spiritual transformation (p. 63). It involves a "careful attention to reality" that allows the mind to "move in a certain direction" (p. 63). It is more than acquiring knowledge. It includes adherence to what is being studied.

According to Foster, there are four steps in the process of studying. They are repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection. Repetition helps focus the attention. Concentration focuses the attention on what is studied. We must avoid distraction (p. 65).

Comprehension focuses on the knowledge of truth, and with it learning is accomplished (p. 66). Foster assumes that in doing so we learn truth or a true perception of reality. However, this depends on what is being studied. A person can study evolution, understand it, but not be convinced it is true.

Foster explains that reflection “defines the significance of what we are studying” (p. 66). It is essentially meditation and allows us to see things from God’s perspective. This allows us to obey God.

Whatever can be said about these four steps, it is significant that Foster omits the idea of belief. Through belief, we agree with God about what we are studying. We are persuaded that it is true (2 Cor 5:7).

Perhaps Foster assumes that belief is automatic, when in fact it is not. On the other hand, the fact that he does not mention belief may suggest he does not consider it important.

Next Foster introduces what and how to study. We can study books or “nonverbal books.” He gives helpful guidance about books when he says we need to understand what is written, what the author means, and then evaluate whether the author is right or wrong. According to Foster, to properly study we also need the help of experience, other books, and live discussion with others. These will help refine our thinking (p. 68).

These things can help our study of the Bible. In studying the Bible we are not merely amassing information. Foster says the goal is to be changed. While this is helpful, it seems to make the Bible a self-help book. Instead, learning about God from the Scriptures is transformative. It should cause us to love Him more by realizing His greatness.

Foster warns that all too often people “rush to application” and bypass understanding and interpretation. As he correctly observes, people “want to know what it means for them before they know what it means” (p. 69).

Foster suggests that a person should have a study “retreat” where he can go to a secluded place to study for a weekend. While this may be helpful for some, it does not promote regular study. Second Timothy 2:15 suggests regularity in studying God’s Word.

It seems that Foster takes a self-centered approach to studying and maintains we should study what we need (p. 72). This is suitable at times, however, it should not dictate general study habits. We need

to embrace and study all of Scripture, even if we don't see a pressing need of what we are studying.

Unfortunately, Foster says that we should study the "experiential classics in Christian literature" when studying the Bible (p. 72). Things like *The Confessions of St. Augustine* can guide us in our spiritual walk, in his view. He does not address whether these kinds of works contain false teachings. It is more important for Foster that we "experience" what we read (p. 72).

Foster views "nonverbal books" as the most important field of study. This is "the observation of reality in things, events, and actions" (p. 73). He mentions several obvious things in this field of study such as nature, human actions and relationships, current events, human institutions and cultures, and ourselves. This is good. However, it is sad that Foster places the study of creation and the world as more important than God's Word. After all, God's Word, the Bible, tells us the truth about the world in which we live and the people who occupy it.

There is good information about study and learning in this chapter, but it falls short for several reasons. Foster fails to make God's Word the priority, and he ignores the value of belief in God's Word. Christians are transformed when they regularly believe God and what He says in His Word.

Now Foster moves to what he calls the outward disciplines.

VII. SIMPLICITY

In this chapter Foster develops the idea that, "Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage" (p. 79). Simplicity is having a single focus and is the discipline that deals with an *inward* reality that results in an *outward* lifestyle. Without the outward expression the inward reality is called into doubt.

Foster describes duplicity, or what simplicity is not. He admonishes people not to have faulty attitudes when it comes to money, wealth, and possessions. The choice is serving mammon or serving God. He rightly concludes that Christians cannot serve both. According to Foster, there is always the danger of turning simplicity into legalistic asceticism. Asceticism renounces possessions, but simplicity puts them in the proper perspective (p. 84).

Based upon Matt 6:33, Foster says that “the central point for the Discipline of simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of his kingdom *first*” (p. 86, emphasis his). Certainly every Christian is commanded to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. That was Jesus’ main point in the Sermon on the Mount. Foster is correct to point out that Christians should place God’s kingdom and righteousness first in the priorities of life. He also correctly observes that this attitude is related to freedom from anxiety.

Foster mentions three attitudes that free people from anxiety.

If what we have we receive as a gift, and if what we have is to be cared for by God, and if what we have is available to others, then we will possess freedom from anxiety. *This is the inward reality of simplicity*” (p. 88, emphasis his).

This is helpful and shows that Christians should have an attitude reflecting God’s grace. This results in dependence on God and is freeing when it comes to possessions.

At this point, Foster does not explain how this attitude is a spiritual discipline. Jesus is telling us what attitude and motive every Christian should have every day. However, Foster explains how when he discusses the outward expression of simplicity. It is a discipline to make the inner reality of simplicity an outward expression (p. 89). He offers many suggestions of how we can outwardly practice this discipline and train the inner spirit.

To get an idea of what he is saying, I think it will be helpful to list the first three suggestions. Foster says we should buy things for their usefulness and not their status. We should reject anything that can lead to addiction, and we should develop a habit of giving things away (pp. 90-91). It is a learn by doing approach. Foster’s list of helpful suggestions are practical ways to exhibit a kingdom first attitude, but they do not necessarily guarantee that a person will develop a kingdom first attitude or motive. Once again, Foster says nothing about the need to believe the truth Jesus taught.

Unfortunately, unlike Jesus, Foster does not mention eternal rewards as a motivation for seeking the kingdom of God first (Matt 6:19-21). Instead, Foster focuses only on the here and now. Also Foster does not define what the kingdom is, whether it will be a literal kingdom on this earth and later new earth, or if it is an ethereal mystical kingdom that is now in the hearts of Christ’s followers. A future

literal kingdom can be a strong motivation to place that kingdom first.

VIII. SOLITUDE

Foster sets the stage for this discipline by astutely suggesting that, “our fear of being alone drives us to noise and crowds.” But he points out that “loneliness and clatter are not our only alternatives” (p. 96). Instead we can enter into inner solitude and silence that will free us from loneliness and fear. In Foster’s view, solitude is necessary in order to hear the divine whisper. Once again, we see Foster’s mystical tendencies. Solitude and silence become means whereby God audibly speaks to us.

To support his claim for solitude, Foster cites numerous Biblical examples of Jesus spending time alone. He considers Jesus’ example sufficient to show the need to seek moments of solitude and silence. However, there is no Biblical command for solitude and silence *per se*. While solitude is a good idea, based on Jesus’ example and the example of many other devotional people from history that he mentions, it is not something we are commanded to do.

The discipline of solitude is closely associated with the discipline of silence. They go hand in glove. Foster maintains that “without silence there is no solitude,” and silence “always involves the act of listening” (p. 98).

Foster says that “the purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear” (p. 98). He does not mention what we are supposed to see and hear. However, the discussion that follows suggests it involves discernment when it comes to what we should say.

He implies that silence and solitude are instrumental to being able to control one’s tongue or speech. When practicing silence and solitude, we learn when to speak and when not to speak. He cites several Biblical examples about speech and controlling it; e.g. Prov 25:11; Eccl 3:7; Jas 3:1-12. This is a helpful discussion.

Since some might feel uncomfortable or anxious about spending moments alone in silence, Foster shows the importance of doing it by discussing how, when we say uncontrolled things, we are offering the “sacrifice of fools” (pp. 99-100). He also observes that another reason we do not like to be silent is that it brings on a sense of helplessness.

We cannot manipulate others or justify ourselves when we remain silent.

Foster mentions that silence is “intimately related to trust” (p. 101). We won’t let God have control of our lives unless we trust Him. God takes control when we are silent. Foster concludes by telling us that “silence brings us to believe that God can care for us – reputation and all” (p. 101). For Foster, it seems people need to practice silence and solitude before they can believe God or His Word.

To practice solitude and silence, Foster says we must enter the “dark night of the soul” (p. 102). He does not derive this expression from the Bible, but from St. John of the Cross. The goal is to have all distractions, whether imagination, mind, will, emotions, or whole person put into a suspended state so that God can work (p. 103). This suggests God can work only under certain conditions. On the other hand, there is value in having focus, but Foster appears more concerned about emptying distractions than having focus. Once again, his mystical tendencies are subtly implied.

Since “spiritual disciplines are things that we do.” Foster makes some practical suggestions on how to practice solitude and silence. First, we can “take advantage of the ‘little solitudes’ that fill our day” (p. 105). He provides some simple examples of these moments like when we have a cup of coffee in the morning or driving to work in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

We can also develop a “quiet place” that is designed for solitude and silence. He suggests that we make a small room in our homes for such a purpose, like a small chapel. He also suggests doing good deeds without speaking or offering any explanation. Four times a year we should withdraw for several hours to focus on reorienting our life goals. This last one was surprising and seems out of place with his other suggestions. His idea is to listen to God’s audible instruction while focusing on your life goals. Then finally, we should take a retreat once a year with no other purpose in mind but solitude. All these moments of silence are designed to be able to “listen to God’s speech” (p. 109).

Once again, we see that for Foster, the practice of spiritual disciplines is to place us in a mystical position to audibly hear God speak so we can follow instruction. It begs the question, why do we need the Bible?

IX. SUBMISSION

Foster begins the chapter by describing what submission accomplishes before defining what it is. The reason he does so is to try and remove misconceptions about this discipline.

He maintains that a spiritual discipline is a means to an end. It is the pathway to spiritual growth. His fear is that “the moment we make the discipline our central focus, we turn it into law and lose the corresponding freedom” (p. 110). He also warns that people can turn the discipline of submission into a legalistic adventure.

Foster then describes the result of properly practicing this discipline. It is the ability to do away with “always needing to get our own way.” He then discusses the destructiveness of living life by always trying to get our own way and then suffering frustrations that go with times when we don’t. He correctly observes that people often will outwardly submit in some manner but inwardly be in rebellion. His conclusion is that this is unhealthy and not in accord with what Jesus taught.

The chapter provides some good descriptions of how the attitude of submission plays out in different circumstances. Foster makes an insightful comment in this discussion about relationships between people. “Usually the best way to handle most matters of submission is to say nothing” (p. 112). These are good and practical observations.

Foster then defines submission by reference to Jesus and quotes Mark 8:34. The concept of self-denial lies at the root of the discipline of submission. Realizing he is writing to a western and modern audience, Foster is careful to describe self-denial. It is refreshing for once that Foster bases his arguments on Scripture instead of so-called devotional masters or mystics of the past.

According to Foster, our happiness does not depend upon getting what we want. Self-denial is simply a way of understanding this truth. He cites examples of Jesus and the Apostles to show real self-denial. If we practice it, it will save us from self-indulgence (pp. 113-14).

By using Jesus, Foster shows that Jesus lived a life that was in submission to the Father’s plan in both how He lived, as well as His death on the cross. He bore His cross daily to serve others and put them first. Foster rightly observes the revolutionary nature of this concept. It was Jesus who taught that the last will be first and the first

will be last. The “compelling reason for submission is the example of Jesus” (p. 117).

He then proceeds to give numerous examples of what submission looks like in daily life. His examples convey how close the idea of submission is to loving others, which is an important Christian obligation. It is the idea that a person regards someone else’s needs as more important than his own. This is true in marriage, family, and parenting.

There are limits to submission. According to Foster, Christians are to be submissive until it becomes destructive. He bases this on several Scriptures, including 1 Pet 2:13-14 which says,

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme or to governors as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.

But then observes that it was Peter who told authorities that he had to obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

It seems that what Foster means is that when there is a conflict between being submissive to authorities in life and being submissive to God, we are to submit to God. By submitting to God in such a circumstance, one could become a martyr (e.g. James in Acts 12:1-2).

Foster gives a number of examples that show that in some circumstances it is difficult to know how to submit. It is complicated because human relationships are complicated. He concludes this section by telling us that we need the Holy Spirit to inform and instruct us about what to do in these types of situations.

A Christian should rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but this comes from God’s Word. While Foster doesn’t say so specifically here, his approach is that such guidance is obtained through mystical practices whereby a person puts himself in a position to hear God audibly speak.

Foster then provides seven ways to practice submission and places them in a list by priority. We are to be submissive to:

1. God
2. Scripture
3. Family

4. Neighbors or those we meet in the course of our daily lives
5. Body of Christ or church
6. The Broken and despised; e.g., widows and orphans
7. The World.

Foster does not provide any Biblical references for the order of this list. The only Biblical citation mentioned is Jas 1:27, in relation to widows and orphans.

While his list contains most categories in which a Christian should be submissive, some could argue about the order. For example, should neighbors come before the Body of Christ? Because Foster did not provide Biblical support for his list, we cannot see how the priority of the list was developed.

Foster concludes the chapter with remarks about the problem of the time in which we live. He remarks that in modern society there is a perception that authority does not reside in positions or titles.

Not all who are in authority possess spiritual authority. Foster remarks, "Spiritual authority is God-ordained and God-sustained." He says spiritual authority is marked by "compassion and power" (p. 124).

Foster's writings beg some questions about being submissive to authority. Should Christians be submissive to people who are in a position of authority, but do not possess any spiritual authority? Can't we disregard such authority?

He does answer them in a general way. "Revolutionary subordination commands us to live in submission to human authority until it becomes destructive" (p. 124). He then refers the reader back to his discussion on the limits of submission.

Foster then adds some personal comments that submission should reflect common courtesy to those in authority. It is commendable that Foster maintains that Christians should be submissive, and such a sentiment is sorely needed today. Our greatest example, Jesus, was submissive, even to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:8).

X. CONCLUSION

While Foster makes some helpful suggestions, it is difficult to miss the fact that he places an unhealthy emphasis on mystical experiences. Anybody who accepts the inspiration of the Scriptures will find himself wondering why Foster does not rely upon the Word of God to transform the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The next edition of the *JOTGES* will contain the second half of this review of *Celebration of Discipline*.

THE WHIRLPOOL'S DEADLY TRAP: DISENFRANCHISING JESUS

ZANE C. HODGES¹

I. INTRODUCTION

In his famous epic poem the *Odyssey*, Homer describes Odysseus' danger-filled return from the Trojan War to his home in Ithaca. Among the legion of dangers he faced was the whirlpool called Charybdis.

Odysseus was warned that his ship must pass between two great rocks no farther apart than a bowshot. On one rock dwelt the monster Scylla that could snatch six men off his vessel at one time and devour them. At the foot of the other was the whirlpool. It was called the dreaded Charybdis because it,

...sucks the dark waters down. Three times a day she spews them up, and three times she swallows them down once more in her horrible way...you must hug Scylla's rock and with all speed drive your ship through, since it is far better to mourn the loss of six of your company than that of your whole crew.²

Reluctantly, Odysseus took this advice and, although he suffered the loss of six of his men, he passed safely by Charybdis. Thus Odysseus escaped the whirlpool's deadly trap.

¹ Editor's Note: Zane Hodges was a frequent contributor to the *JOTGES*. He went to be with the Lord in November 2008. He wrote this article shortly before his passing. It sat in a file until it was recently discovered.

² *The Illustrated Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (New York, NY: A & W Publishers Inc., 1946), 148.

II. A THEOLOGICAL ANALOGY

A whirlpool, in fact, is an extremely appropriate figure of speech to describe the enormous confusion that characterizes today's Evangelical views of eternal salvation. This roiling vortex pulls into itself not only individuals, but whole churches, denominations, and Christian organizations. A cacophony of voices extols virtually every theological view that the human mind can imagine.

But of course it is not really the human mind that produces this confusion. Paul tells us in 2 Cor 4:3-4:

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

The simple decisive fact is this: Satan vigorously seeks to prevent the salvation of the lost. His stratagems are many, but one of the most obvious involves the preaching of unclear and/or false gospels by those who profess to be Christians. This happened quite early in the history of Christianity. Luke records that when the leaders of the early Church met to discuss the inclusion of Gentiles, there were different opinions. We learn in Acts 15:1 that one such opinion was given by a certain group: "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

Naturally, these men could not have gotten inside the door at the Antiochan Church if they had not been professed believers in Jesus Christ. What's more, they used Christian terminology. Here the word *saved* was their crucial term.

Their doctrine, however, *disenfranchised Jesus*. Apparently, these teachers did not deny that He had a saving role of some kind, but they plainly held that faith in Jesus Christ was not enough for eternal salvation. It was necessary to add to that faith circumcision, that is, submission to the Law of Moses. Thus Jesus Christ was not for them a sufficient or adequate Savior. At best He was a *co-Savior*, along with the Mosaic Law.

According to *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, one of the meanings of "disenfranchise" is to "deprive (someone) of a right or

privilege.”³ A gospel presentation does exactly that when, like the message of the legalists of Acts 15, it deprives Jesus personally of His unique *right and privilege* to be the *exclusive object* of saving faith.

III. THE NAME OF JESUS

In a previous article, I noted that Jesus repeatedly presented *Himself alone* as the object of the faith that obtains eternal life (e.g., John 3:16; 6:47; 11:25-27).⁴ In fact, in the very first reference in the Gospel of John to an “object” of saving faith, we meet this inspired statement:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *to those who believe in His name*: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12,13, emphasis added).

Very simply stated, the people who *received* Jesus were those who *believed in His name*. That is to say, they trusted in the Jesus presented in John's Gospel for eternal life. As this verse makes clear, this belief *in His name* resulted in a birth from God Himself, that is, it resulted in regeneration.

The name of Jesus is equally effective today. In fact, the Jesus of God's Word has been exalted by God so highly that His name is far above every other name in the universe. No person or being, whether in heaven, on earth or beneath the earth, has the honor God has given to Jesus. Since He alone has this supreme honor, the name of *no other person or being* can even be compared with the name of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul expresses this truth unforgettably in Phil 2:5b-11. In that passage, Paul speaks of:

...Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him

³ *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford: University Press, 2001).

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, “The Hydra's New Head: Theological Legalism,” *Grace in Focus* (Sept/Oct, 2008).

a *name* that is above every name, that at *the name of Jesus* every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that *Jesus Christ* is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (emphasis added).

This is a marvelous and inspiring text. Clearly the exaltation of *the name of Jesus* is based on His impressive condescension in leaving the presence of God, to whom He was already equal, and becoming a man who submitted to the death of the cross. Thus His incarnation, His servanthood, and His crucifixion are *the basis* for God's magnification of His *name*. For the reasons specified here, *the name of Jesus* has become the sole name to which the knee of every intelligent creature must someday bow.

But a strange and bizarre thing has happened in some Evangelical circles. For many, the magnificent work of the cross is not what Paul showed it to be here—*the basis* for the exaltation of the name of Jesus.

Instead, in those circles, *the cross itself* has been lifted up and has become a co-equal *object of faith* along with the *exalted name* of Jesus. Thus we have professed Evangelicals saying that the name of Jesus alone, apart from knowledge of the cross, can no longer save the sinner. The sinner must also believe in His sacrifice on the cross.

This is an affront to the name that God has exalted above every name.

IV. THOSE WHO BELIEVED IN HIS NAME

Among those who “received” Jesus in the sense specified by John 1:12-13 were the disciples themselves. After John the Baptist, it is these men who, as believers in Him, first stand out clearly on the pages of the Fourth Gospel. And, as John 1:13 shows, these men had believed *in His name* and were therefore “born of God” (1:13).

In fact, following the testimony of John the Baptist (1:19-34), we meet some of them in person. Thus, in 1:35-51 we are introduced to Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. John's report about these men exhibits his usual mastery of narrative technique as a vehicle for truth. Here we see clearly what it means to *believe in His name*.

Andrew, we are told, announces to Peter that, “We have found the Messiah” (1:41). He then promptly “brought him to *Jesus*” (1:42, italics added).

Next we learn that “the following day” Philip reports to Nathanael, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—*Jesus of Nazareth*, the son of Joseph” (1:45, emphasis added).

Finally, Nathanael meets Jesus in person and declares, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (1:49).

With these simple examples, the Fourth Evangelist deftly shows us that Jesus personally is the object of the faith of these three men. They know *who the Messiah is*. He is Jesus of Nazareth. The three confessions, therefore, serve to illustrate the main point of John's book as expressed in 20:31:

...but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life *in His name* (emphasis added).

Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael have discovered that *the name* of the Messiah [the Christ] is Jesus of Nazareth. That discovery had brought them *eternal life!*

But there is a lot they have *not yet* discovered. For one thing, Philip cannot answer the objection of Nathanael: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (This objection is repeated, with a no answer[!], in 7:41, 42, 52.) Philip is apparently ignorant of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem and also of the fact that Mary had been a virgin at the time. He here calls the Messiah, “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:45). Even Nathanael himself still does not know the actual facts when he makes his great confession.

Of course, we now understand that Jesus could not possibly have been our Savior if He had *not* been born of a virgin *at Bethlehem*. Prophetic Scripture specifies these requirements (Micah 5:2; Isa 7:14). But still, despite their theological ignorance, these disciples believed *in His name* and were born of God.

As a matter of fact, it is equally clear that the disciples of Jesus who believed in His name did not anticipate His death at all, much less that His death would be for their sins. Their confusion on this point is clearly pointed out even in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33; Luke 18:31-34). Indeed, the two disciples on the road

to Emmaus had temporarily lost their faith in Jesus when He was crucified (Luke 24:19-21).

According to the Fourth Gospel, in their final hours with Jesus in the Upper Room and on the way to the Garden, the disciples did not have a clue in this matter. They ply Him with questions like: “Lord, where are You going?” (13:36); “Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake” (13:37); “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” (14:5); “Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?” (14:22).

Finally, we hear them saying to one another, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me;’ and ‘because I go to My Father?’...We do not know what He is saying” (16:17, 18). And even after Jesus rose from the dead, John informs us that only then did he himself believe in the resurrection (20:8). He writes, “For as yet they [the disciples] did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (20:9).

Obviously then, when the disciples believed in the name of Jesus this *did not include* belief in His virgin birth or in His sacrificial death for our sins or in His resurrection.

Belief *in His name* was enough!

V. DISENFRANCHISING JESUS

Many Evangelicals in various ways vigorously resist the obvious conclusions to be drawn from the Biblical material we have just examined. Some make the completely spurious claim that the terms of eternal salvation have changed since the cross. But this claim is arbitrary dogmatism at its worst and is totally without any Scriptural support.⁵

Worse than that, it demeans and disenfranchises the saving name of Jesus Christ.

Let me make this point in the form of a logical syllogism that refers to eternal salvation. In this syllogism, “A” stands for believing

⁵ A recent book advocating a theology that should be called theological legalism is J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, Foreward [sic] by Earl D. Radmacher, [n.p.], (Xulon Press, 2008).

in the name of Jesus for eternal life, and “B” stands for believing in His sacrificial death for our sins. The syllogism is as follows:

Major premise: “A” was completely effective before the cross.

Minor premise: “A” is not effective today without “B”.

Conclusion: “A” now has diminished effectiveness.

How ironic! According to Paul, as a result of our Lord's incarnation and death, God has highly exalted the name of Jesus (Phil 2:5b-11). But in the theology of some dispensationalists, the elevation of belief in the sacrificial death of Christ to the level of a co-condition for eternal salvation decreases the saving effectiveness of Jesus' exalted name.

In this sad result we see clearly how parallel are these two statements:

“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

“Unless you believe in the sacrifice of Christ for your sins, you cannot be saved.”

Both statements deny the saving sufficiency of the name of Jesus.

Our conclusion here is dramatically reinforced by the exact nature of Apostolic preaching as it is recorded in the Book of Acts. It will come as a surprise to many to learn that not a single speaker in the entirety of Acts, from Chap. 1 through Chap. 28, ever refers to the death of Christ as a sacrifice for our sins. Not even one! As more than one student of Acts has observed, Acts has *no theology of the cross (theologia crucis)*.⁶

To be sure, the death of Christ is often mentioned, but usually as a prelude to the fact of His resurrection. In Acts, the death and resurrection of Christ are primarily evidence for who Jesus really is. This is clearly seen in the first great sermon of the post-Ascension age (i.e., in Peter's message on the day of Pentecost). Peter says not a word about the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death in his entire sermon (as reported by Luke). Instead, after describing the death of Christ as a grave sin of his Jewish audience (Acts 2:23), Peter declares Jesus to be risen in

⁶ Acts 20:28 doesn't do it, either. We must import theology from outside Acts to find substitutionary atonement here. Besides, Acts 20:28 is spoken to Christian elders!

fulfillment of prophetic Scripture and to be now exalted to God's right hand (Acts 2:24-35).

Peter's climactic statement in Acts 2:36 focuses on *the name of Jesus*: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made *this Jesus*, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (emphasis added).⁷

The apostles preached *the name of Jesus*.

VI. A CROSSLESS GOSPEL?

Those who preach simple faith in the name of Jesus for eternal life are often accused by theological legalists⁸ of preaching a "crossless gospel." But the very term is dishonest rhetoric. I know of no grace preacher who does not proclaim that the cross of Christ is essential to God's plan of salvation. If the cross of Christ is essential to man's eternal well being, a gospel based on that fact is not "crossless."

But theological legalists are desperately short of sound Biblical arguments. In such cases, it is often more useful to substitute rhetoric for real Scriptural analysis.

Since Scripture does not support the theological proposition that there can be no salvation today apart from believing that Christ died for our sins, these legalists are driven to use rhetoric and emotionally charged appeals to support a doctrine they cannot truly find in the Bible.

That's tragic. For in reality, their doctrine is part of that dreadful whirlpool of confusion that seeks to swallow up the saving sufficiency of the highest name in the entire universe—the name of Jesus.

⁷ For a discussion of Acts 2:38, see my book, Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, Second Edition (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1992), 117-19.

⁸ Editor's Note: As this article points out, what Hodges mean by a "theological legalist" is a person that requires a belief in some theological doctrine, other than faith in Jesus alone, in order to be saved from hell and receive eternal life. A belief in the death of Christ for one's sins is an example of such a theological doctrine.

“ABRAHAM REJOICED TO SEE MY DAY AND SAW IT”: JESUS’ TAKE ON THEOPHANIES¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day, and he saw it and was glad” (NET). Jesus’ intriguing words in John 8:56 have puzzled church fathers, scholars, and Bible readers of all kinds for centuries. Indeed, the crowd of Jesus’ original hearers was also baffled and asked, “You are not yet fifty years old! Have you seen Abraham?” (John 8:57 NET). To what does Jesus refer when He speaks of “my day” and Abraham’s joyful response to it? What did Abraham see and when did he see it?

As we would expect, differing interpretations have been defended, but there is no clear consensus among Johannine specialists today. Amid the contenders from ancient times till the present has been the view that Jesus refers to pre-incarnate appearances in human form to Abraham and Sarah as recorded in Genesis. Like all the other suggestions, this one is not without its difficulties—among them the concern that pre-incarnate appearances of Christ (i.e., theophanies or Christophanies) diminish the uniqueness of the Incarnation. But what did John’s Jesus mean when He spoke these words?

In this paper, I shall argue that when we consider Jesus’ statement in John 8:56 in light of the account of Yahweh’s appearances

¹ Editor’s Note: This article was first presented as a paper at the National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2018 in Denver, CO. Used by permission of the author.

in Genesis and contextual factors in John's Gospel, Jesus is most likely alluding to His appearing as Yahweh in pre-incarnate form to Abraham.² First, I will look briefly at some alternative viewpoints and then devote the bulk of this article to demonstrating my thesis.

II. ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Since treatments of the views discussed in this section are readily available in the technical commentaries on John,³ here I shall provide only a very brief sketch of three common interpretations of John 8:56 and an even briefer critique of each so as to maximize space for explaining and defending my own thesis.

A. A Visionary View

One approach to John 8:56 is to appeal to the understanding, at least among some first-century Jews, that Abraham foresaw the messianic age through a vision, perhaps revealed in connection with the events described in Genesis 15.⁴ Perhaps Jesus' reference to raising up the dead "on the last day"⁵ in John is an allusion to the eschatological day foreseen by the great patriarch two millennia earlier. While this view is possible, it lacks any clear Scriptural support.

² For more on OT appearances of the pre-incarnate Christ, see Randy Rheaume, *God the Son: What John's Portrait of Jesus Means and Why It Matters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 53-58, 130-33 and Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

³ Good places to start include Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982) 2:221-23 and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 529-32.

⁴ On Jewish speculation about Abraham, see esp. Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 1:767-68. In *4 Ezra* 3:14 God reveals to Abraham "the end of times." Also, *T. Levi* 18:11-14—the coming of the eschatological priest revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-T7Y10PusEVDrsirI/The%20Testament%20Of%20Levi_djvu.txt; accessed 10-11-18) and *2 Bar.* 4:4, in which Abraham is shown the tabernacle in New Jerusalem.

⁵ John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; cf. 11:24; 12:48.

B. A View from Afar

Alternatively, many scholars believe the “day” in 8:56 must refer to Jesus’ ministry—the eschatological day *anticipated* by Abraham. This “day” is the ultimate fulfillment of Abraham’s joyful hopes as realized in Jesus Himself.⁶

Since Isaac’s birth prophetically points to Christ, as Thomas Brodie argues, “to have rejoiced over Isaac is to have rejoiced over Christ.”⁷ For example, through the promise inherent in the near sacrifice of Isaac and the covenant that assured him all nations would be blessed through him, Abraham need not have had a messianic vision or have seen a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus in his time to satisfy the language of 8:56. In Jesus everything that Abraham hoped for and more is met.

Thus when this is viewed proleptically, the great patriarch has seen and rejoiced in the fulfillment of the promises in which he so fervently believed. The NIV’s rendering of 8:56 allows for this idea: “Abraham rejoiced *at the thought* of seeing my day...” (italics added). The *hina* introducing the clause *idē tēn hēmeran tēn emēn* can be taken this way.⁸ Abraham does not *literally* see Jesus or the “day” of His ministry. Instead Abraham’s hopes, based on God’s promises, are later realized in Jesus’ day (cf. Heb 11:39).

But this view, though possible, strains a bit at the words, “and he saw it and was glad” (NIV). As Edward Klink—who favors this view in his commentary—admits, “The statement is not straightforward.”⁹ Indeed, if we take it as a straightforward or literal statement, the wording more naturally points to a spectacle viewed in Abraham’s life. If this view-from-afar interpretation had been the intended meaning, it would have been more natural to say, “Abraham was overjoyed as he

⁶ E.g., Andreas Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 272; D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 357; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 321.

⁷ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 1993), 335.

⁸ Cf. Michaels, *John*, 530 n126.

⁹ Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 424.

anticipated (perhaps using a form of *prooraō*) My day and was glad.” But that is not what Jesus said.

C. A View from Paradise

Another interpretation of 8:56 among scholars is that Jesus implies that Abraham is viewing the ministry of Jesus in real time from paradise.¹⁰ The longing of OT heroes, reported in a few NT texts,¹¹ is met for them as they are allowed in the afterlife to view the events of Jesus’ ministry. Thus Abraham literally sees Jesus *in His day*.

But if this were the intended sense of Jesus’ words, it would have been more natural for Him to say that Abraham “*is rejoicing* to see My day,” rather than placing both the spectacle and the joy of seeing it in the past—as though it happened in Abraham’s time. Certainly the Jews debating with Jesus did not take His words as a reference to Abraham’s status in the afterlife.

Some answer this and other objections noted above by chalking it up to another example of reported misunderstandings¹² of Jesus so typical in John’s gospel. No doubt Jesus’ opponents do indeed misunderstand Him, but what precisely is the nature of their misunderstanding? Is it that they take Him to refer to Abraham’s past when they should have known He meant Abraham in the present? In other words, is it simply a chronological misunderstanding? Or, in the case of the from afar view, are they taking Jesus’ words too literally and should realize that Jesus speaks of Abraham anticipating His day or, perhaps, foreseeing it in a vision? Or could it be—in the theophany view—that the misunderstanding is self-imposed? That would involve a stubborn refusal to believe Jesus could possibly have preexisted His earthly life and hence they ridicule Him with the absurd notion of a mortal life stretching back two thousand years. While any of these alternatives might be plausible on their own, the best recourse is to look for clues in the immediate context and John’s wider perspective on the possibility of pre-incarnate appearances of the Son.

¹⁰ Barnabas Lindars, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 334-35; Michaels, *John*, 532-33.

¹¹ Luke 10:24; Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:10-12.

¹² Lindars, *John*, 335; Michaels, *John*, 533.

III. THE THEOPHANY VIEW RECONSIDERED

In John 1:1 we are informed that the Logos—later identified as God the Son—is God the Father’s spokesperson or voice. In 1:18 we are informed that though no one has ever seen God the Father, God the Son has indeed revealed the Father. But does this refer solely to the Incarnation or could it include pre-incarnate appearances of the Son as well? Justin Martyr argued that the Father is the *invisible* God whom the OT says no one can see. The Son, on the other hand, is the *visible* God who appeared to Abraham and others in the OT.¹³

The Hebrew Bible contains some intriguing stories of apparent Yahweh appearances in human form to humans. Several of these texts involve the Angel of Yahweh figure—which is hotly disputed. However, there are a number of other texts which speak of Yahweh Himself appearing, with no mention of the disputed Angel of the LORD figure. Could these texts involve pre-incarnate appearances of God the Son? John seems to think so.

IV. ABRAHAM SEES YAHWEH’S DAY

My contention here is that both Jesus and John affirm that it was indeed the Son who appeared in the OT as Yahweh. A prime example is our text under consideration in this paper. Once again:

“Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” Then the Judeans replied, “You are not yet fifty years old! Have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “I tell you the solemn truth, before Abraham came into existence, I am!” Then they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out from the temple area (John 8:56–59 NET).

So much is going on in this fascinating passage, but here we can only unpack a few pertinent points. As we know, Abraham lived about two thousand years before Jesus. Therefore, His enemies are convinced that His claims show He’s delusional or demonized.

¹³ *Dialogue with Trypho* 127; see also 56, 59. A modern scholar who takes this approach is Jerome Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 442-43. Craig Keener seems to favor this view among those he discusses. See Keener, *John* 1:767-68.

But knowing who Jesus is, we naturally ask when and how Abraham saw Jesus' day. Jesus seems to be referencing an event the Jews in His time could recognize from Scripture. The Johannine Jesus characteristically grounds His claims about OT characters from what is stated in Scripture or may be deduced from it.¹⁴ Thus it is reasonable to look first to the Genesis account.

The only instance in the Genesis account of Abraham that comes close to rejoicing and gladness takes place, remarkably, in connection with two Yahweh appearances.¹⁵ We are told, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD [Yahweh] appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless'" (Gen 17:1).¹⁶ During this appearance Yahweh reveals the startling news that Abraham's wife, Sarah, is going to conceive a child in her old age. At this Abraham suddenly bursts into a fit of laughter: "Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'" (Gen 17:17).

Could this be what Jesus meant by "Abraham was overjoyed to see my day?" At first it may appear unlikely. Abraham's laughter seems spawned more out of incredulity at the idea of a pregnant, ninety-year-old woman than out of rejoicing for the good news of a soon-to-be baby boy. Abraham's first reaction to the surprising news may indeed have sparked a doubtful laugh. Today a ninety-year old pregnant woman is the stuff of supermarket tabloids, and it would seem just as bizarre back then.

On the other hand, Abraham and Sarah had patiently waited and trusted God for nearly twenty-five agonizing years, struggling and even quarrelling with each other over God's promise to provide them with an heir. Such momentous news must have produced a flood of powerful and even conflicting emotions within Abraham. But to

¹⁴ E.g., John 3:14; 6:31-32, 49, 58; 7:22; 10:34-35.

¹⁵ P. Linwood Urban, Jr., and P. Henry, "Before Abraham Was I Am': Does Philo Explain John 8:56-58?" *Studia Philonica*, vol. 6, (1979): 157-93; J. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 442.

¹⁶ Like the Genesis 18 appearance, the characteristics of this Yahweh appearance indicate it was likely not a dream or a vision (17:3, 17, 22).

assume he was howling with laughter out of pure mockery and doubt is inconsistent with everything else we know about him.

Consider the Apostle Paul's take on the situation:

Without weakening in his faith, [Abraham] faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (Rom 4:19–21 NIV).

Paul's insistence on Abraham's unwavering response of faith to the birth announcement would imply that he did not regard the outburst of laughter as a pure expression of distrust.

But Abraham's laughter in Genesis 17 is just the beginning. In Genesis 18, Yahweh, along with two angels (see Gen 19:1), makes another appearance to Abraham—one of the most intriguing found anywhere in the OT.¹⁷ Not only does the author clearly identify the figure as Yahweh ("Yahweh appeared to Abraham," 18:1), but he also underscores the humanness of His appearance, referring to Him and the angels as "men" who converse, walk, eat, drink, and have their feet washed as Abraham's honored guests. On this occasion Sarah overhears Yahweh reiterate His prediction of her impending pregnancy. Similar to her husband in the previous encounter, Sarah immediately laughs to herself when she hears of it (18:12-15). If you put yourself in Sarah's sandals, the promise must have sounded too good (and hilarious!) to be true. But about a year later, when Sarah's baby boy is born, Abraham names him "Isaac," which means in Hebrew "he laughs." After the initial shock and surprise of the pregnancy announcement had worn off, Abraham and Sarah must have been delirious with joy over their miracle son. By naming him "he laughs," they were fondly remembering their stunned, turned-into-ecstasy feelings, when the impossible became a reality.

¹⁷ For more detailed discussion on OT appearances of Yahweh, see esp. Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Vol. 2: Theological Objections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 2:25-37; Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 127-48; Poythress, *Theophany*.

And yet “he laughs” was born out of (pardon the pun!) two appearances of Yahweh. For Abraham and Sarah, these days were likely the most memorable and happy of their lives.

With this background in mind, we see that Jesus’ statement in John 8:56 fits these events in Abraham’s life better than anything else. The “day” Jesus refers to is likely His remarkable birth announcement visits to the elderly couple, commemorated in the naming of Isaac.

But there is a problem. Technically, Jesus does not say Abraham saw *Him* but saw His “day.” How could this reference to Jesus’ day fit with Abraham’s encounter with Yahweh?

The escalating conflict in John 8 provides an answer. When Jesus’ opponents scoff at the notion of the young man standing before them somehow having met Abraham two thousand years earlier, Jesus makes the stunning declaration: “I tell you the solemn truth, before Abraham came into existence, I am!” (8:58 NET). Jesus’ climactic pronouncement “I am” refers back to the *egō eimi* statements in the LXX of Deuteronomy and Isaiah,¹⁸ which likely echo Exodus 3:14—as noted routinely in commentaries. By applying this title to Himself, Jesus is claiming—as I have argued in detail elsewhere—to be Yahweh.¹⁹

Jesus is saying, “*Abraham* seeing my day two thousand years ago? *My* seeing Abraham two thousand years ago? That’s nothing! Long before Abraham existed, I am!” Jesus’ words lay claim to the eternal present tense of Yahweh’s true identity.²⁰ Jesus’ enemies clearly get His point. They react by attempting to stone Him because they believe He has profaned the sacred name of Yahweh by applying a form of it to Himself (John 8:59). But if we see Jesus’ declaration within the context of the debate about Abraham, we can better understand what He meant. Abraham could see Jesus’ “day” because as the eternal Word, God the Son is present every day throughout time—including during His personal appearances to the great patriarch and matriarch.

¹⁸ See LXX Deut 32:39; Isa 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 48:12; 51:12.

¹⁹ Randy Rheaume, *An Exegetical and Theological Analysis of the Son’s Relationship to the Father in John’s Gospel: God’s Equal and Subordinate* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2014), 310-15.

²⁰ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 529-32.

Unlike the other explanations of John 8:56, the theophany encounter as defended here shows how Jesus' "I am" declaration answers the Jews' objection about Jesus' age. Abraham could easily have seen Jesus' "day" two thousand years earlier because Jesus is the ever-present "I am." If Jesus meant that Abraham saw a vision of the eschatological day of the Messiah or merely anticipated Him via Yahweh's Abrahamic promise or viewed His ministry from paradise, Jesus' appeal to the divine "I am" would hardly be needed. It would also not answer the objection regarding His age. But if Jesus was claiming to have visited Abraham as Yahweh in human form, it would make good sense. The fact that Jesus is not yet fifty years old, or even two thousand years old as a human, makes no difference. He is the Eternal One, whose days have no number. As the Psalmist wrote, "from everlasting to everlasting you are God...A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by" (Ps 90:2, 4 NIV).

In connecting the OT Yahweh appearances to Abraham with Jesus' declaration to be Yahweh, John shows the deep irony of the situation by bringing the conflict in Chap. 8 to a startling conclusion. Jesus' opponents appeal to their ancestral lineage back to Abraham (John 8:39). But the true paternity test is their behavior towards Him. Jesus insists their rejection of Him reveals their spiritual father is the devil (John 8:44). Once again, Yahweh is visiting earth in human form, speaking this time to Abraham's physical offspring. But instead of rejoicing, they are attempting to stone Him, proving they are not *true* children of Abraham.

V. ISAIAH MEETS JESUS

Another text within John's Gospel helps bolster this understanding. According to John 12, Jesus is identified with Yahweh's appearance to Isaiah when he was called into prophetic ministry. In John 12, John is lamenting the rejection Jesus received among so many of His fellow Jews, despite all the miracles He performed.

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord

been revealed?” For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.” Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him (John 12:37–41 NIV).

This text requires a bit of unpacking. John informs us that the Jewish rejection of Jesus was sad but not surprising. He proves this by quoting two Isaianic texts—the first from Isaiah 53, in which the Servant of Yahweh faces stubborn rejection from Israel. John then quotes from Isaiah 6, in which the prophet speaks of Israel’s stubborn unbelief, using the vivid metaphors of blinded eyes and hardened hearts. Then John adds this stunning commentary: “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus²¹ glory and spoke about him” (John 12:41 NIV).

When did Isaiah see Jesus’ glory? In context Isaiah has just seen a vision of the exalted Yahweh in the temple where the seraphim call to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD [Yahweh] Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3).

This is one of the OT’s most awesome Yahweh appearances. Unlike some cases, in which Yahweh shows up in the somewhat plain appearance of a man, here Yahweh is seated on a glorious throne, high and lifted up, surrounded by angelic creatures that are sounding His praises and afraid even to look at Him. Verse 5 confirms that Isaiah is seeing Yahweh himself: “[M]y eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty,” he cries. So fearful and flabbergasted is Isaiah at this glorious sight that he shrieks at his impending doom! He remembers that no one can see Yahweh’s face and live (Exod 33:20).

Thankfully, Isaiah lives to tell of this spectacular encounter, but before the appearance is over, Yahweh imparts to Isaiah the prophecy which John quotes. Clearly the glory Isaiah saw and to which John refers is Yahweh’s glory revealed in Isaiah 6. Yet John says that what Isaiah calls Yahweh’s glory was in fact Jesus’ glory—a point routinely affirmed by Johannine scholars.²² Like Jesus’ allusion to the Abraham

²¹ In the Greek text, the word “Jesus” does not appear here, as it does in the NIV. It simply reads “his.” The NIV translators supply the name to make plain what the context clearly implies.

²² See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, Anchor Bible (New York: Double Day, 1966), 486-87; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) 217; Klink, *John*, 560; Michaels, *John*, 710-11; Lindars,

episode, John's quote from Isaiah 6 identifies an OT appearance of Yahweh as the pre-incarnate Son.

And so, when John declares in 1:18 that God the Son has revealed God the Father, and perhaps when he speaks of the Word giving life and light to all people while being unrecognized by the world, he is likely not referring exclusively to Jesus' earthly life as recorded in John. He is God's Word Who spoke creation into being, as recounted in Genesis 1 and Psalm 33. From John's perspective, the Son has always exercised His role as the Word—God's spokesperson who is also Yahweh Himself. No one has ever seen God the Father, but when God shows up visibly, He comes in the person of the Son.²³ Isaiah's experience of witnessing Yahweh's glory, as recounted by John, is paralleled in Jesus' manifestation of divine glory and subsequent rejection. When Yahweh showed His glory to the great prophet, he responded with the fear of the LORD and obedience. But when Yahweh shows His glory through the Incarnation to Jesus' generation (cf. John 1:14; 2:11), the vast majority tragically respond in unbelief.

VI. THEOPHANIES VERSUS THE INCARNATION

But some scholars are leery of postulating pre-incarnate theophanies of Christ. Aside from other concerns—which I cannot address here—some scholars worry that pre-incarnate appearances of Christ diminish the glory of the Incarnation. Fred Sanders, for example, in his influential work on the Trinity writes:

If the Father sent the Son repeatedly during the old covenant, it derogates in some way from the uniqueness of the incarnation sending. The question is not so much where the Old Testament Jesus got the body he appeared to the patriarchs in (though that surely calls for some speculation).

John, 439; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 364; Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:416-17.

²³ A word of clarification is appropriate here: because the Son is the member of the Trinity who makes visible appearances, we should not conclude that He is not as glorious as God the Father or the Holy Spirit or that He does not also exist as a non-physical, invisible spirit. In His divine nature the Son shares the same eternal glory as the Father possesses (John 17:5) and is omnipresent (John 14:23; Matt 18:20; 28:20; Eph 4:10).

It is more a matter of the unrepeatability of the uniqueness of the incarnation of the Son...This is not to deny that God is active in the Old Testament or in creation at large—in fact, that the Trinity, the entire Trinity, is active and present in appropriate ways. But it is to reject the notion that apart from the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity was the subject of visible mission.²⁴

Sanders's objection strikes me as rather subjective and lacking in Scriptural foundation. While showing due reverence to the Incarnation is always essential, it is also important never to allow the tail of systematic theology to wag the dog of exegesis. In formulating our theology, the definitive question is, "What saith the Scripture?" The real issue here is: do John's Jesus in Chap. 8 and John's editorial remarks in Chap. 12 claim that God the Son appeared to Abraham and Isaiah? Has the light shined in the BC darkness, as well as in the dawning of the Incarnation? If so, does this indeed lessen the luster of the Word becoming flesh and "tabernacling" among us?

I believe if John were answering this question in today's parlance, he would be quick to remind us that the "trailer appearances" of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible cannot compare to the "feature film" appearance of the Word made flesh among us. On the contrary, like movie trailers, theophanies in the OT serve to prepare the way and generate anticipation for the climactic revelation of the divine Christ. For John, the definitive disclosure of God is found not in OT appearances but in the Word who "became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

When John says in 1:18 that the Son revealed the Father, he's speaking *primarily* of this unique event, which Christians call the *Incarnation*. An OT appearance of Yahweh is not God "made flesh," that is, God uniting Himself with humanity—as John means it—but God manifesting Himself in human form for a brief encounter. We may safely assume that when angels (which are incorporeal creatures) appeared in the Bible in human-looking forms, they did not possess bodies that had once been an embryo in a womb, had not been born of a woman, and had not lived a human life. Though they appeared

²⁴ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 225–26. See also, for example, Kenneth Way, *Judges and Ruth*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 79.

as humans, no angel has become incarnate as did God the Son. If angels can appear in a temporary human form without becoming incarnate in the full sense, certainly Yahweh can.

Nothing in the OT compares with the incarnate Son. The pre-dawn glow does not diminish the brilliance of the bright sun. To see Jesus is not only to see an appearance of Yahweh the Son (as if that were not enough), but also the perfect representation of God the Father. As Jesus said, “The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me” (John 12:45 NIV). In Jesus God did not visit the planet for a fleeting appearance in a temporary human form²⁵—as in the OT visits. In Jesus, God entered the human race by joining Himself permanently with humanity.²⁶

Nothing of this wondrous magnitude had ever occurred. Unlike the OT appearances, Jesus is God’s light not merely in the invisible presence of God for people, nor for a select few OT believers who beheld brief theophanies, but now for all mankind so that all may believe and be saved.²⁷ And the grand finale of this supreme revelation is Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins followed by His resurrection and ascension. Jesus refers to this as His being “lifted up”²⁸—an event of cosmic significance in John’s Gospel.

Unlike the OT appearances, Jesus came into the world as God’s ultimate gift, so that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). True, Jesus’ human life did not come with the stunning “special effects” of glory,²⁹ as some of the OT ap-

²⁵ The tangible human forms in which Yahweh appeared in the OT were temporary—as in the case of angels that appeared as humans. Unlike Jesus, they were not conceived and physically born, nor did they experience a human life and death.

²⁶ Contrary to common misconception, Jesus did not dispense with His humanity or His body when He ascended to heaven. He will return just as He left (Acts 1:11). He is still a man (1 Tim 2:5)—though now with a glorified human body (Phil 3:21)—and remains a descendent of Judah and David (Rev 5:5; 22:16).

²⁷ John 1:4, 7; 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5.

²⁸ John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34. This expression “lifted up” is an allusion to Isaiah’s prophecy of Yahweh’s Servant who is lifted up in glory after suffering horribly (Isa 52:13-15). John uses it as a double entendre to refer both to Jesus’ being lifted up on the cross and in glory.

²⁹ According to John, Jesus’ presence (1:14) and miracles (2:11) showed His glory to His disciples, but He otherwise appeared as simply human to onlookers.

pearances did. But the quality of the revelation was of much deeper and higher significance. And when Jesus returns in power and great glory to raise the dead and fully establish His kingdom, He will consummate the glorious revelation He began when He became flesh.³⁰ This is the ultimate hope of every Christ follower. The final chapter of the Bible sums up this unfathomable climax by saying, “They will see His face” (Rev 22:4 HCSB).

I can think of no NT passage that rules out an OT theophany. Sometimes Heb 1:1-2 is cited, allegedly indicating that the Son—in contrast to the “many times and various ways” God spoke to people in the past—has made His first and only appearance “in these last days” (NIV). But surely this does not negate the scenario described above, for the writer of Hebrews insists that the whole OT is scented with the ubiquitous fragrance of Christ. Our Lord Himself taught the entire canon spoke of Him and pointed to Him (Luke 24:44). Was He not the spiritual rock that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4), according to Paul? Was He not the “Son of Man” figure Daniel saw on the clouds of heaven in his vision (Dan 7:13-14), according to Jesus Himself (Mark 14:62)? Rather than spoilers, the trailers generate expectancy and enthusiasm for the feature film.

VII. CONCLUSION

John’s Gospel opens with the insistence that God the Son has been present and active in the Hebrew Bible since the very first verse of Genesis. The beginning of His story—from a human viewpoint—commences not with the birth of Jesus but prior to the birth of the universe. When we try to wrap our heads around the notion that the Son is the eternal God, co-equal with the Father, we are delighted to discover that before the Author of history made His entrance on His own stage to play the role of the Savior of the world, He had already made several cameo appearances earlier in the play without our realizing it. When we do so, we also discover that the Gospel of John not only recounts this glorious drama, but also brings together the testaments into a unified narrative of God’s revelation.

The other NT gospels record Jesus’ transfiguration as an exception to the rule (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36).

³⁰ John 5:27-29; 1 John 3:2; Rev 1:7; 11:15-19; 19:11-21; 21-22.

REVIEW OF CRAIG L. BLOMBERG'S *THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL: ISSUES & COMMENTARY*

EDWIN EDIGER

I. INTRODUCTION

As Craig Blomberg notes, the content of John's Gospel is distinctive, was likely written after the Synoptic Gospels, and has been used and misused through the centuries.¹ Blomberg provides a helpful list of distinctives of John's Gospel under five headings: 1) selection of material; 2) theological material, particularly the affirmation of Jesus' divinity; 3) a chronology that appears to contradict the Synoptics' outline; 4) apparent historical discrepancies; and 5) a style of writing that differs markedly from the Synoptics (pp. 19-20). Blomberg does not provide an exegetical commentary on the text, although he does give his interpretation of key passages in the Gospel of John.

The main question addressed by this book is how John's Gospel can be harmonized with the Synoptic Gospels. Throughout the book, Blomberg asserts that theology and historicity can coexist and in fact do so in John's Gospel. A strength of the book is that it repeatedly demonstrates how the Apostle John has not written theology at the expense of historicity. As will be shown in this review, there is much to commend in this volume. It is an honest attempt to harmonize apparent contradictions between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics.

However, this reviewer has some concerns, particularly with Blomberg's presuppositions and methodological approach. Blomberg views himself as occupying a middle ground between conservative and liberal positions. In this reviewer's opinion, this is suspect. Blomberg mentions Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell's book *The Jesus Crisis*² on the conservative end of the hermeneutical spectrum and

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 17.

² Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998).

criticizes their “fideism that simply *presupposes* the historicity of the Gospels as a necessary first move in authentic Christian faith” (p. 292). He places on the liberal extreme John D. Crossan and Robert W. Funk, who find very little in the Synoptic Gospels as authentic (p. 292). In Blomberg’s opinion there is a third option, which can limit one’s presuppositions (pp. 292-93).

As this review will demonstrate, Blomberg’s methodology, borrowed from the liberal end of the hermeneutical continuum, leads him to conclusions that he may consider to be conservative, but are in fact liberal, and contain the seeds of skepticism. This will eventually lead to the abandonment of inerrancy in any meaningful form.

One’s true position on the hermeneutical spectrum is often revealed by the people and positions to which one appeals and draws support. While truth can be articulated by the unsaved, it is wise to look at the conclusions of unregenerate Biblical exegetes with at least a jaundiced eye. The question of Raymond E. Brown’s eternal destiny aside, the late Roman Catholic theologian and prolific writer is frequently quoted in this volume. As Blomberg himself observes:

It is unclear whether Brown’s subsequent work always retained this balance [between historical preoccupations and theological reflections], however, as theology [it] at times seemed to be stressed at the expense of history.³

Blomberg also draws support from redaction criticism.

One of the fundamental tenets of this volume is that the Synoptic Gospels and John’s Gospel must be judged “*according to the historiographical standards of the first century*, . . . which are of course the only standards by which we may fairly judge them” (pp. 52, 93). No doubt Blomberg does not intend to have his statement taken literally because there are standards that supersede those of historiography, such as truth versus error, the law of non-contradiction, etc., regardless of historical provenance. The slippery slope of historiographical standards, which are based upon probability, can never arrive at certainty.

On a positive note, Blomberg has an excellent section on the authorship of the Gospel of John, concluding that John the son of Zebedee was its author. For internal support, Blomberg affirms the

³ Blomberg, 280, n. 415.

classic work of B. F. Westcott. The identity of the “beloved disciple” is the key to identifying the author (p. 28).

In his introduction, Blomberg gives what he believes to be criteria for authenticity and says that, “the ‘third quest of the historical Jesus’ has offered extremely important refinements of the classic criteria of authenticity” (p. 63). He explains that there is a tension between the dissimilarity criterion (material is authentic when it differs from both conventional first-century Judaism and post-Easter Christianity) and the criterion of the Palestinian environment (material must cohere with what is conceivable in an early first-century Palestinian Jewish context) (p. 63). Blomberg writes approvingly of N. T. Wright, who advocates “double similarity and dissimilarity criteria” in which “a combination of similarities and dissimilarities from both Judaism and Christianity in any given passage will probably support authenticity” (pp. 63-64). Blomberg also agrees with Gerd Theissen who calls for the criterion of “historical plausibility” (p. 64).

Theissen’s authenticity criteria include four parts. A text must be plausible in its historical context. It must demonstrate some influence in early Christianity. It must disclose Jesus’ individuality within His original context, and it must go against the grain of later Christian theologizing (p. 64). Blomberg concludes that both Theissen and Wright have independently formulated equivalent criteria (p. 64).

Blomberg adds that multiple attestations provide an important criterion of authenticity. This can include similar teachings, events, themes, or forms (p. 64). However, material singly attested can be authentic based upon similarity/dissimilarity criteria (p. 64). He acknowledges that there is much subjectivity in these criteria and also calls for restraint on the recent wholesale acceptance of rabbinic parallels, of which much is of a later provenance than the first century to which it is being applied (pp. 64-65).

II. BLOMBERG’S COMMENTARY

A. Prologue and John the Baptist

Perhaps one of the most notable distinctives of John’s Gospel is the high Christology of the prologue. Following Larry Hurtado and Alan Segal, Blomberg convincingly shows that in first century Judaism

there was diversity within its monotheism. The two thrones in Dan 7:9 led to the idea of angels and humans closely resembling deity. Later Judaism reversed this trend.⁴ In addition, the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls with their synchronic attestation of motifs that were previously thought to be of Gnostic origin throws new light on the viability of an earlier date for the dualism found in John's Gospel.

Blomberg is to be commended for his appeal to harmonization of the accounts of John the Baptist found in the Synoptics and John's Gospel, particularly his view that the Baptist's teaching was likely repeated on different occasions (p. 77). In relation to the controversy over the location of John the Baptist's ministry, Blomberg says that claims that John is mistaken are unjustified. We should accept the text as authentic even if we cannot reconcile seeming contradictions (p. 77).

Curiously, the dissimilarity criterion which Blomberg employs has him proposing the possibility, based upon John 1:30 (p. 79), that Jesus was at one time a disciple of John the Baptist. Blomberg says this idea was not likely to have been invented by early Christianity. John himself wanted to magnify Jesus. One wonders whether such an exegetical implication would have even been thought of had not the dissimilarity criterion given it some semblance of credibility.

Blomberg reveals the basis for his own affirmation of the authenticity of John the Baptist's ministry with the following:

John's ministry of baptism admirably satisfies the double similarity and dissimilarity criterion. One can trace an unbroken thread of immersion, from Jewish ritual lustrations, through John's and Jesus' baptisms, to the practice of the early church...But over against his predecessors, John gave his ministry a unique eschatological meaning, yet stopping short of claiming the exalted role that some would give him later. (p. 80)

B. The Cleansing of the Temple

Arguably, ground zero in the battle over the historicity of the Gospel of John is the cleansing of the temple. In the Synoptic Gospels,

⁴ Ibid., 73. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), and Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988).

it occurs once, during the last week of Jesus' life. In John's account, it occurs twice, once at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and once near the end. Blomberg presents two alternatives: 1) "Has John thematically relocated this passage as a kind of headline to the meaning of Jesus' ministry and to the mixed response Christ would receive (so most commentators today)?" 2) "Or did Jesus in fact clear the temple twice, once toward the beginning and once near the end of his public ministry (so most commentators throughout church history)?" (p. 88). Blomberg says support for the former position includes that this is the first pericope in John that is not introduced with a time reference that requires that it occurred soon after the previous pericope (p. 88).

Additionally, J.A.T. Robinson cites Josephus concerning Herod's building of the temple and argues that John 2:20 occurred in AD 28. This was two years prior to the most probable date of Jesus' crucifixion (p. 89).⁵ Robinson argues for one cleansing. Raymond Brown suggests the same by saying that Jesus gave a prophetic warning against the temple early in His ministry and actually cleansed it at the end of His life. John has conflated these two things (p. 89).⁶ Other commentators, cited by Blomberg, reverse the order, placing the event at the beginning, and the reference to it at the end of Jesus' ministry (pp. 89-90).

However, Blomberg notes that the two accounts "are entirely different," and "do not contradict each other at any point and can be combined to form a plausible, harmonious whole." He concludes that it is odd that some do not see the possibility of two separate cleansings (p. 90). The objection that the authorities would have reacted strongly to a temple cleansing are countered with contextually mitigating factors, such as the first cleansing being "a protest merely against corrupt trade," as well as support by the crowds (pp. 90-91). Blomberg's view is that without new information the debate among the various approaches to this passage will not be settled. However, the account in John 2:20 has numerous allusions to Hebrew prophets and is a "plausible" and "authentic" event in the life of Jesus (p. 91).

⁵ Blomberg cites Josephus, *Ant.* 15.380.

⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1966), 118-20.

It needs to be stated that for Blomberg, the discovery of such information could persuade him to adopt a view incompatible with inerrancy. The best he can do now is proclaim a “plausible verdict.” Those who adopt this position are one small step away from discarding inerrancy. It only takes one instance of a supposed error in the text to disprove inerrancy.

C. John 2:23-25

Although Blomberg’s volume is not a commentary, he nevertheless briefly comments on John 2:23-25. He uses his conclusions in support of other passages throughout the Gospel of John. He states, “but as will become clearer as John’s narrative unfolds, not all who apparently believe continue in that faith, and Jesus recognizes that fact already at this stage in his ministry” (p. 91).⁷

This reviewer finds no exegetical reason for reaching Blomberg’s theological conclusion, and particularly this early in the Gospel. Notably, John 1:12 does not qualify the belief which gives one the “right” to become a child of God, and the belief in John 2:23 meets the stated requirement. Reading in future contexts, which do not necessarily reach that conclusion, is methodologically suspect. Understandably, within the confines of the present volume, Blomberg cannot go into this passage in depth, however, because of his continued reliance on it, it would have been good for him to give evidence in support of his conclusion.

D. John 3

The use of the Greek adverb *anōthen* (“from above” or “again”) in John’s account of Nicodemus brings up the issue of the translation of Jesus’ words from Aramaic to Greek, and “whether one Aramaic expression could generate both senses” (p. 93). Blomberg also mentions the issue of Semitic double meaning. The Hebrew *ruah* can mean either “wind” or “spirit” (p. 93). The question of Semitisms, in this reviewer’s opinion, has frequently not taken into account (or sufficiently accounted for) the fact that Jesus, as well as those who

⁷ Using a similar exegesis of skepticism, Robert H. Gundry, *Peter: False Disciple and Apostate According to the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), concludes that Peter was eternally lost.

wrote the Gospel accounts, were quite likely bilingual (or even trilingual) speakers who easily and naturally navigated seamlessly between languages and may have engaged in code switching.

Blomberg's negative portrayal of Nicodemus in John 3 would not necessarily be shared by all contemporary readers. Blomberg uses his negative assessment in support of authenticity. He says that Nicodemus is seen in a more positive light later in the Gospel, and one would expect that if a later writer wrote John 3, he would have produced a less negative picture of him in that encounter with the Lord. This would have been more in line with "Christian truth" (p. 93).⁸ Blomberg feels that in light of more positive references to Nicodemus later in John, a later writer would have painted a less negative portrait of the Pharisee in John 3 and would have presented a clearer witness to Christian truth. It appears, unfortunately, that even if a scholar is a conservative, when using the tools of the redaction critical mindset, contrary evidence is seen even where it might not exist. This is due to the scholar having bought into, to some degree, a redaction critical methodology.

The Apostle John's portrayal of Nicodemus can be read naturally, with the latter understood to be an honest inquirer, albeit ignorant of what is being talked about, who holds no animus toward Jesus. Blomberg's assessment of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 is that:

...the overall description of this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus thus seems authentic. The latter is portrayed in a credible Jewish role and fits what we know about the Gurion family in Jerusalem, but he is not yet turned into a full-fledged believer, as in later Christian apocryphal tradition (p. 95).

It is difficult for this reviewer to avoid the impression that Blomberg has put himself above and in judgment of the text, rather than vice versa.

⁸ Later on, in a footnote, Blomberg contrasts the Samaritan woman at the well with Nicodemus, writing that "unlike Nicodemus, the woman holds her own as an equal conversation partner with Jesus, one of numerous ways in which the two characters contrast with each other, with the portrait of Nicodemus proving surprisingly negative and the picture of the woman appearing surprisingly positive," 99, n. 116.

In the discussion of Jesus and John the Baptist in John 3, Blomberg says that John 3:27 is the first of several instances in the Gospel of John in which the reader finds a theology of predestination (p. 97). The text reads, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven." This is hardly an unambiguous reference to predestination.

Blomberg does explain how the term "heaven" was used at Qumran "as a euphemism for 'God,'" which "clearly grounds John's saying in a Jewish milieu" (p. 97). The comment is helpful in filling in the first century background and represents corroborative lexical evidence. But this evidence, or the lack of it, should not be viewed in any way as determinative in matters of authenticity.

A feature that comes up repeatedly in the Gospel of John is John's editorial comments and where they begin and end. Related to this idea is where and when Johannine verbiage is employed. This is not always easy to ascertain. Blomberg makes a legitimate point when he observes that in certain instances, "we can see what John's theology stresses and what his writing looks like when he is not constrained by reporting historical facts or the teachings of John and Jesus" (p. 97).

E. John 4

In his discussion of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Blomberg makes an interesting observation when he writes that even if one rejects the account as a whole, v 22 should be accepted as authentic. The reason for this conclusion is that that particular verse does not follow John's tendency to be critical of the official Judaism of his day (p. 101). John 4:22 reads, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."

Blomberg does not give the reader his own position on whether the account of the woman at the well should be rejected, but one is left to wonder if he thinks it is a legitimate position for an exegete to hold. Certainly if one held to parts of the text as being less than "authentic," one would not be in the inerrantist camp. This reviewer cannot see how using redaction critical methodology will not sooner, rather than later, result in an errantist view of Scripture.

In Blomberg's comments on the Samaritan woman's verbal interaction with the men of Sychar, he notes that John uses the negative Greek particle (John 4:29) in the woman's question. This suggests she

is still skeptical about whether Jesus is the Messiah or not (p. 102). However, the use of the Greek interrogative particle indicates that she was expecting a negative reply. Employing the redaction critical criterion of dissimilarity, Blomberg goes on to say that a later Christian writer would not have included this hesitancy on the part of the woman (p. 102). Completely ignored, perhaps because of Blomberg's mission to find redaction critical "authenticating" evidence, is the likely possibility that the woman was simply employing discretion and attempting to arouse curiosity in the men so that they would want to come and see this fascinating individual for themselves.

The words of the people of Sychar, when referring to Jesus, include the title, "the Savior of the world." Blomberg gives two reasons why this title in John 4 (p. 104) is probably authentic. First, the woman was an apostle to the men of Sychar, which is a detail that would not have been invented in such a "patriarchal world." The second reason is the people of Sychar may have deliberately chosen this title for Jesus because they were, like the Jews themselves, opposed to the occupation of their country by the Romans. This showed their preference for Jesus over Caesar (p. 104). The former reason appears to be one of "dissimilarity" and the latter that of "similarity."

One wonders how many "probably authentic" examples Blomberg's system can handle without being an errantist position. Blomberg concludes his discussion of the Samaritan woman and the villagers with the following comment:

...we must not overestimate the amount of belief implied in this story... 'Many' of a probable population of a few hundred need not have implied more than a couple of dozen adults. And John will later describe 'believers' who do not persevere in their commitment (esp. in ch. 8), so we really have no way of telling how many of these followers proved faithful (p. 104).

The reader sees here another example of a theological conclusion unsupported by the text. It is one that, as will be seen, is not supported by the evidence in Chap. 8, either. John 1:12 does not speak of the "amount of belief" required to become one of God's children. Faith is the only requirement.

Blomberg's discussion of the healing of the official's son (John 4:43-54) is well taken. Commentators debate whether this healing is

the same as that found in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. Blomberg points out that the differences in John's account and the accounts in Matthew and Luke are striking. Only the words "Capernaum," "asked," and "about to" utilize the same roots, while "die" appears in both accounts via synonyms (p. 105). That notwithstanding, Blomberg "tentatively favors" that all of these are accounts of the same event (p. 107). He believes that there are no "necessary contradictions" in the different accounts (p. 107). According to Blomberg, this should leave us with confidence that in the majority of the cases where there are no synoptic parallels in John that John is not "freely inventing" the accounts that do not reflect the actual words and deeds of Jesus (p. 107). However, one is left to wonder what degree of confidence this might be if Blomberg himself only comes to a "tentative" conclusion.

F. John 5

As noted by Blomberg, certain details of the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda were corroborated by archaeology in the 1890's, such as the reference in John 5:2 (p. 109) to five porticoes. Furthermore, the Copper Scroll at Qumran supports the name of the site (p. 109).

In the aftermath of this healing, the author of the Gospel, presumably the Apostle John, gives the editorial comment that Jesus was "calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." Blomberg says that at first glance this verse is the part of the text that least fits into a first-century Jewish setting (p. 111). But Blomberg reassures the reader that, upon closer inspection, this is not the case. He agrees with J. C. O'Neill who says that Jesus is not charged here with being equal to God in every respect, but with claiming to be equal to God in only one way. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, and this was a prerogative that God the Father had reserved for Himself (p. 111).⁹

According to O'Neill, no human being could claim to be the Messiah, since this was something only the Father could do. Jesus

⁹ J.C. O'Neill, "Making Himself Equal with God (John 5:17-18): The Alleged Challenge to Jewish Monotheism in the Fourth Gospel," *Irish Biblical Studies* 17 (1995): 50-61.

was being charged with making Himself equal to God in this very limited sense (p.111).¹⁰

It appears, according to Blomberg and O'Neill, that in John 5:18, Jesus was not being charged with making an ontological claim of equality with God. Blomberg garners additional support from Darrell Bock. Bock says the problem is not only that Jesus was bold enough to claim to be the Messiah, but also that this claim was seen to be false and risky (pp. 111-12).¹¹ Blomberg concludes by saying the following:

But this is still a kind of equality with God that stops well short of later Christian reflection about the second person of the Trinity, which did clearly transcend the boundaries of Jewish monotheism. The Fourth Evangelist, of course, sees a fuller sense of divine Sonship in Jesus as he writes at the end of the first century. But the account as it stands is also fully intelligible within Jesus' world some sixty years earlier (p. 112).

This appears to be an appeal to a form of *sensus plenior*. However, nowhere in the text does the title "Messiah" appear in John's description of the event. It seems that because an ontological claim does not fit with Blomberg's (as well as O'Neill's and Bock's) view of the early first-century milieu, an explanation, no matter how implausible, must be entertained.

G. John 6

The discussion of John 6:28ff again shows Blomberg's affinity for the similarity/dissimilarity criteria. He states that, "because Jesus has mentioned 'work,' this Jewish audience understandably raises the question of what kind of works God requires" (p. 123). Blomberg observes that the Qumran *Manual of Discipline* contains a close parallel to the idea of the works of God (1 QS 4:4). However, Jesus defines this work in terms of believing in the one the Father has sent (p. 123). The Biblical text receives Blomberg's seal of authenticity because it clearly passes the double similarity and dissimilarity test (p. 123). It passes this test because it is both "grounded in Judaism's fascination

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 25.

with works” and also gives it an unexpected redefinition. In addition, it agrees with the emphasis on belief that was promoted by later Christianity, while at the same time referring to this faith as a good work (p. 123).

One wonders how Jesus could redefine faith as a work and reconcile that with the “later Christian emphasis on belief.” How does this reconcile with salvation being by faith alone and not by works (Eph 2:8)?

The seven “I am” sayings of Jesus are a problem for the “similarity” criteria. However, Blomberg answers that we should not assume that they are an invention by John. All these sayings that contain a predicate depend on metaphor. They would not have sounded as “blunt” as Christians today interpret them. They are not direct “affirmations of Jesus’ Deity.” In addition, the Synoptics have parallels to the more explicit “I am” statements but do not have the predicates (p. 124).

If the text uses a metaphor, the criterion for similarity appears to be broadly expanded, and subjectivity in its application increases as well. Blomberg concludes that John is responsible for the specific “I am” form of these sayings, but the concepts can be found in Judaism and are not foreign to Jesus (p. 124). Although the text is recording Jesus’ words, that does not pose a problem for Blomberg. It appears that the criterion of authenticity is in the eye of the one doing the authenticating.

Perhaps one of the most significant issues related to Blomberg’s book is his acceptance of what he has labeled *proem midrash* (p. 127). Taking John 6:31-58 as his example, Blomberg describes this “Jewish rhetorical and literary form” as:

A text of Scripture is introduced for discussion (v. 31), which is then exegeted and paraphrased (vv. 32-40). Certain considerations of this discussion lead to a second, related Scripture (vv. 41-44), which is then expounded (vv. 45-47). Finally, attention returns to the first passage, with further exposition (vv. 48-58).

Blomberg concludes that the theme of Jesus as the bread from heaven unifies this material. There is no need to seek out the various stages of tradition or redaction, even if the material of vv 51-58 is “troublesome.” Shorter Synoptic parables provide parallels, as do various speeches in Acts. It is certainly possible that the historical

Jesus could have said something “substantially similar” to what Jesus is reported to have said in John 6 (p. 127).

In fact, Blomberg concludes this discussion on a positive note by saying that “there are no reasons to deny the substance of the remarks attributed to Christ in John 6 to the historical Jesus.” However, this “midrash” hermeneutic would seem to present a problem for adherents of verbal plenary inspiration, as well as inerrancy.

In the early 1980’s, the “midrash” hermeneutic came to the attention of the Evangelical community with Robert H. Gundry’s commentary on Matthew.¹² Gundry was essentially driven out of the Evangelical Theological Society largely due to that publication. While this reviewer does not believe that Blomberg’s book under present consideration has used “midrash” in the same way that Gundry does, there is the concern that adopting a “midrash” hermeneutic does open the door to significant problems, particularly when coupled with the acceptance of the redaction critical methodology of similarity/dissimilarity and its hermeneutical brethren.

Blomberg labels John 6:60-70 as “a turning point in Jesus’ ministry,” detailing the defection of many of His followers. This rejection is not likely to have been invented since it was “sufficiently disrespectful” (p. 128). Evidently, using the redaction critical criterion of dissimilarity, the likelihood of authenticity increases in direct proportion to the amount of disrespect involved.

Blomberg says that this account of defection is the first time the reader becomes aware that not all apparent followers of Jesus are genuine (p. 128). Jesus says nothing about whether these individuals were “genuine,” but instead, by using the verb “believe” twice in one verse (John 6:64), explicitly states the reason for the defection. They did not believe in Him.

In spite of the author of the Gospel having the purpose of providing signs so that men might believe in Jesus (John 20:30-31), Blomberg seems to hold that belief in Jesus based on signs is salvifically deficient. In a footnote related to the unbelief of Jesus’ physical half-brothers, he cites F. F. Bruce who maintains that faith based upon outward signs was inadequate if not accompanied by an “appreciation of the inward truth” the signs were intended to demonstrate. This

¹² Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

kind of faith is one that cannot be strengthened by more wonders (p. 131).¹³ However, Jesus said they lacked faith. He did not say they had a deficient faith.

H. John 7

In the textual critical debate over “not” or “not yet” in John 7:8, Blomberg favors “not.” Jesus says He will not go up to the feast in Jerusalem. Blomberg says that “not” is the more difficult textual variant and therefore is more plausible (p. 132).¹⁴

The UBS text agrees with Blomberg. However, Metzger, in his textual commentary, only gives it a “C” rating, acknowledging that two of the earliest papyri, P66 and P75 have “not yet.”¹⁵ Blomberg’s solution to the apparent contradiction between Jesus saying in John 7:8 that He will not go up and then later going up anyway is to say that Jesus states He is not going up, in the present tense, with everybody else. Jesus knows that He will go up at a different time (p. 132). This argument is not convincing. The simple answer is that the variant “not yet” is the viable one.

Blomberg continues his disparagement of the faith of certain people in John’s Gospel. John 7:31 says that “many of the people believed in Him.” Blomberg maintains that this was faith on a “superficial level.” He says the authenticity of this statement is supported because it runs counter to John’s emphasis on the growing unbelief and opposition of the Jewish authorities (pp. 135-36). In spite of the text saying nothing to question the belief of these people, Blomberg goes on to say “that John elsewhere stresses the inadequacy of a merely signs-based faith (2:23-25; 3:1-3; 4:48; etc.)” and we should not assume the faith here is genuine (p. 136). The conclusion of Blomberg in reference to these verses is questionable.

The intervention by Nicodemus in John 7:48-51 is also given a negative spin by Blomberg. In the context, the religious leaders say that none of the Pharisees had believed in Jesus. It is surprising then if Nicodemus says something positive about Him. Blomberg concludes

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 171.

¹⁴ Chrys C. Caragounis, “Jesus, His Brothers and the Journey to the Feast (John 7:8-10),” *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok*, 63, (1998): 177-87.

¹⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 216.

that nothing in the actions of Nicodemus suggest he is a true disciple. He is only an “honest judge” (p. 139).

Granted, the text does not indicate that Nicodemus had believed. However, it could be argued that he was taking an enormous risk by defending Jesus in a hostile environment. Blomberg does concede that there is a “superficial faith” among some in the crowds and even among some of the religious authorities. This faith even made it impossible for the authorities to arrest Jesus (pp. 139-40).

Blomberg himself argues that John’s “redactional concern,” such as we find here with Nicodemus’ support of Jesus, usually does not violate historicity (p. 140). However, we must face the fact that others using his methodology may well reach the conclusion that such redactional material is inauthentic.

I. John 8

In John 8, Blomberg finds more evidence for his view that there is a belief that does not save. In John 8:31 he says that Jesus focuses His attention on those Jews who had just “believed” in Him (v 30). However, by the end of the passage, these same “believers” want to kill Him. Blomberg concludes that John frequently speaks of a faith that is “superficial” and that does not mature into genuine faith (pp. 144-45). It is difficult to find in John’s Gospel any belief that Blomberg does not find suspect.

A better exegetical route in John 8 is to take vv 31 and 32 as a parenthesis, a frequent Johannine feature of employing editorial asides, in which he is talking about and to those who had just believed in v 30. Then, from v 33 on, he is speaking of the response of the rest of the crowd. Failure to do so sets up a contradiction: in vv 30 and 31, individuals are said to have believed (aorist indicative in the former and perfect participle in the latter), and then in vv 45 and 46, Jesus says that they do not believe Him. The perfect participle in v 31 indicates that those mentioned had believed in the past. The perfect tense argues against an instant flip-flop of belief by the antagonistic individuals.

J. John 9

The pericope in John 9 of the healing of the man who had been born blind is described by Blomberg as “one of the most historically suspect statements in the entire Gospel” (p. 153). He summarizes Louis Martyn’s argument against the historicity of the mention of excommunication from the synagogue. Martyn’s argument is that the excommunication of John 9 is an anachronism, since such expulsion from the synagogue did not occur before AD 85 (pp. 153-54).¹⁶

Following a lengthy interaction of pros and cons for the historicity of this passage, Blomberg concludes that, “the double similarity and dissimilarity criterion again appears apropos.” He believes that the entire chapter makes sense in an early first-century Palestinian Jewish framework. It also promotes belief in Jesus. This satisfies the criterion of similarity. Dissimilarity is also present because what Jesus says and does are scandalous (p. 157). In the final analysis, Blomberg concludes that the essence of the chapter reflects the words and actions of the historical Jesus.

K. John 11

One wonders what will happen to Blomberg’s “essence of the chapter” if and when redaction of critical evidence for doubting the historicity of the chapter emerges.

In the account of the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11), Blomberg rightly concludes that “if one comes to these texts already convinced that resurrections are under no circumstances possible, no amount of evidence will persuade one of historicity” (p. 167). The same would apply to all miracles.

Blomberg continues his skepticism about the belief of certain individuals. In John 11:15, Jesus says that Lazarus was allowed to die so that the disciples might believe. Blomberg maintains that this shows that initial faith is not always adequate (p. 167).

Regarding the historicity of this event, Blomberg points out that John does not always paint a negative picture of the Jews. But since negative references outweigh the positive, we should conclude that the positive ones are more likely to be historical (p. 169). If the positive

¹⁶ Louis J. Martyn, *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979).

passages are more likely to be historical, one wonders what degree of historicity can be attached to the negative ones. In either case the best verdict is that something is only *more likely* to be historical.

As far as Jesus' prayer goes, Blomberg says that it seems probable that Jesus did pray something like what these two verses (John 11:41-42) record. Blomberg's assessment of this passage, that includes arguably the greatest of Jesus' miracles, excluding His own resurrection, is interesting. He says that a "substantial historical core" appears to be behind the narrative. It should be considered historical in the absence of "convincing evidences to the contrary" (pp. 171-72).

L. John 14–17

When Jesus speaks of the coming of the Paraclete, Blomberg says that John is not inventing "pious, edifying fiction." Instead, John is relaying the significance of what Jesus actually said (p. 203). Although this reviewer questions the methodology employed for reaching his conclusion, Blomberg is right to say that in John 14:28 the subordination of Jesus to the Father is clear. This would not have been written by a community that wanted to exalt Jesus as being fully equal to the Father (p. 204). Blomberg is also to be applauded for not shying away from attempting to reconcile apparent contradictions. He wonders if many scholars reject certain options simply because they are seen as an attempt at "harmonizing" (pp. 204-205).

In his discussion of Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, Blomberg finds parallels for John's structure in the Lord's Prayer of the Synoptics. That assumes that John had access to the latter, which is quite probable. However, one might object to Blomberg's characterization of John's composition. Blomberg says it could be an example of "midrashic" expansion of the original prayer of Jesus. At the same time, however, it could be seen as authentic under the criteria of multiple attestation and coherence (p. 219). Once again one sees the employment of the canons of redaction criticism.

M. John's Final Chapters

Blomberg discusses Peter's denials. He claims that minor discrepancies among the Gospels have risen to the forefront after Harold

Lindsell's attempt at harmonization (p. 234).¹⁷ Blomberg criticizes Lindsell's attempt because it brings into disrepute *all* attempts at harmonization. Lindsell said that Peter denied the Lord six times, but in fact each Gospel says Peter denied Him three times (p. 234).

Interestingly, Blomberg suggests that more than three accusers may have been involved in Peter's denials. There may have been a crowd of people around the fire, with many of them accusing Peter. More than three people could have "accosted" him (p. 234). This solution says that more than three people approached or questioned Peter, although he only gave three responses or denials. Regarding his solution, Blomberg writes that once this view is accepted there is nothing in the Gospels that can be seen as a contradiction. This is especially the case when we take into consideration the "historiographical standards" of the first-century world. In that world, ancient writers had freedom to paraphrase a speaker's words (p. 234).

However, the four accounts record the location of the denials in two different locations, something that Blomberg does not address. Perhaps Lindsell is right that there were more than three denials and Jesus' prediction about three denials was to convey that there would be sufficient, indisputable evidence (that of two or three witnesses) to confirm that Peter had indeed denied Him. Jesus may not have intended to say that there would be just three and no more. Whatever the case may be, varying historiographical standards cannot trump the law of non-contradiction.

Blomberg gives an excellent example of the harmonization of the Synoptic and Johannine chronology of the Passion Week. He points out that the apparent contradiction is due to the fact that the "Passover" could refer to the week-long festival. In addition, the "Day of Preparation" could mean Friday, which would be the day before the Sabbath (p. 247).

III. CONCLUSION

In his discussion of the resurrection, Blomberg asserts that his intent in this book is not to prove the authenticity of miracles. As he notes:

¹⁷ Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 174-76.

...throughout the book, our task is the narrower one of seeing if the text of John coheres with an early first-century Palestinian Jewish setting and if it meshes with or contradicts the synoptic narratives (pp. 258-59).

It may be concluded that Blomberg has, to a large extent, succeeded in what he set out to accomplish. However, the limitations of Blomberg's methodology is primarily what troubles this reviewer.

Blomberg advocates for what he calls the *via media*, which maintains that historical research, especially when evaluating ancient documents, cannot "adjudicate" any document in its entirety (p. 293). He admits that his investigation does not claim to demonstrate that all of the Gospel of John would have been considered accurate by the conventions of the first century (p. 293). Furthermore, Blomberg says that other material could be unhistorical, but he does not feel that any arguments presented tip the scales in that direction (p. 293). Unfortunately, other scholars, using the same redaction critical criteria as Blomberg employs have come to radically different conclusions. Blomberg rightly concludes that other considerations come into play if anybody wants to make a theological statement regarding the inspiration or inerrancy of the Scriptures (p. 293).

Blomberg refers to Kierkegaard's famous "leap of faith." He says that such a leap cannot be avoided and that it moves in the same direction to which the historical evidence points (p. 293). The problem, as has been shown in this review, is that all of Blomberg's conclusions are couched together with the caveat of their likelihood, not their certainty. Inerrancy is not just a theological statement, but a theological/historical statement about the text. While Scripture is both theological and historical, the two are not to be regarded as separate but equal. Only fideism can make up for man's limited knowledge and provide the methodological control that the overall genre and majesty of Scripture deserve.

BOOK REVIEWS

Colossians and Philemon. By G. K. Beale. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019. 514 pp. Cloth, \$54.99.

This commentary is well laid out, making it easier to find the discussion of a particular verse. The publisher has put the start of a discussion of a new verse in the margin in bold font. So, the header tells the reader the section being discussed (e.g., Col 3:5-11, p. 275) and then in the margin the reader sees 3:6 and 3:7 and 3:8-9a at the start of each paragraph discussing those verses. This is a small feature, but I much appreciate it. Some if not many commentaries make it difficult to see where the discussion of a given verse begins.

A bit less helpful is the fact that the text of Colossians and Philemon is not given along with the exposition, but instead is given before the discussion of a given section begins. For example, the translation of Col 1:15-23 is found on the bottom of page 79 and top of page 80. The discussion of Col 1:15 begins half way down on page 80. The discussion of Col 1:16 begins on the bottom of page 91, twelve pages separated from the text. It would have been more helpful to have the text immediately before the discussion of each new verse.

One way I like to test commentaries is to go to key passages that deal with Free Grace issues. One such passage is Col 1:21-23. Paul says that Jesus reconciled the believers in Colossians in order “to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard...” Beale takes the typical Reformed understanding, saying “despite his [Paul’s] confidence [that his readers]” or “at least the majority” were born again, “this is a real condition: if the Colossians do not persevere, then they will not benefit from Christ’s work described in verses 19-22” (p. 116). That would show, he suggests, “that they were pseudo-believers all along.” He has a note indicating that “This is in line with his caveats in his other epistles, e.g., 1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 5:20; 11:13-15; 13:5; and Eph 4:20-21 [which] indicate that he is not sure about the genuineness of all who profess faith in his churches”

(p. 116, note 109). While I disagree with that view, I much appreciate the clarity in which he states it.

Likewise, Col 3:24 is another key verse dealing with the Bema and eternal rewards. Once again, Beale sees the issue here as eternal destiny: “A third reason why slaves should be motivated to ‘work for the Lord’ (3:23) is in order to avoid God’s final judgment” (p. 327). He sees the reward of the inheritance to be a typological application of “the OT’s promised land inheritance” (p. 324). He thus understands the inheritance to be receiving “resurrection life through the new creation of Christ,” which he calls the “initial stage of resurrection existence [that] will be consummated for eternity at the final coming of Christ.” He then says, “It is this future completed inheritance of resurrection to which Col. 3:24 refers” (p. 325).

I appreciate the clarity with which Beale writes. While I do not agree with his Lordship Salvation conclusions, I really like this commentary. He makes many good observations (e.g., while commenting on Col 3:25, he indicates that in 1 Pet 2:18-21 when Peter speaks of a Christian slave “doing what is right and suffering for it,” he is alluding [at least in part] to the fact that Christian slaves were sometimes asked by their pagan masters for sexual favors, p. 326).

I recommend this commentary.

Robert N. Wilkin

Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

***A Victorian Dissenter: Robert Govett and the Doctrine of Millennial Reward.* By David E. Seip. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018. 253 pp. Paper, \$32.00.**

As the subtitle states, *A Victorian Dissenter (AVD)* is about Robert Govett (1813–1901), who lived in England during the Victorian Age. He was a dispensational dissenter against the Church of England. In addition, he supported many Free Grace ideas. *AVD* is well researched and discusses in detail the theological and cultural environment in which Govett ministered.

Govett was a prolific writer and the long time pastor (57 years) of Surrey Road Chapel in Norwich, England. He authored numerous books and tracts and often contributed to the many theological

journals in print in his day. Though his views were widely discussed, he had only a small following and these views placed him on the margin of Victorian religious life (p. 2).

AVD relies heavily on the original writings of Govett. He was an interesting figure. Many of his day disagreed with his theological views. But at the same time, many of those who opposed him respected him for his tenacity in studying the Scriptures and his logical argumentation. Spurgeon, who was not Free Grace, had a strong admiration for him (p. 8).

AVD concentrates on two theological issues that marked the life of Govett. The first was infant baptism. Govett was, in his early adult life, a clergy in the Church of England. He came from a long line of such men. However, he broke with the Church over the issue of infant baptism. The second issue was eschatological reward. He felt that the way a Christian lives does not indicate whether that Christian was truly saved. Instead, it would impact certain rewards in the world to come (p. 9).

While most readers of *JOTGES* will agree with these statements, Govett held to some views of rewards with which most Free Grace people would disagree. Unfaithful believers will miss the Rapture and be excluded from the millennial kingdom (p. 11). Seip says that Govett originated the idea of such a “partial rapture” (v. 3).

AVD does not deal much with Govett’s presentation of the gospel. As such, it is unclear. Seip does not quote from him but says that Govett believed that unbelievers are to “repent and turn from their wicked way and to leave their associations with the worldly” (p. 10). It is difficult to determine if Govett felt these things were necessary to receive eternal life or if this was something believers were to do after coming to faith. In the same light, Seip says that Govett taught that “restoration” was through repentance and a “surrender of self-righteousness.” However, Govett also said that the unbeliever needs to only, “First believe, then be baptized—rejoice then in your salvation” (p. 155). In a direct quote from Govett, he says that the only requirement for salvation is “faith and repentance” (p. 115). However, in this quote there is no explanation of what repentance means.

D. M. Panton, a disciple of Govett, said that his mentor taught that eternal life was given by faith and that works resulted in rewards (p. 156). Seip adds that in his first tract, Govett said that eternal

salvation came by faith apart from works of any kind (p. 165). In addition, Govett clearly taught that repentance was an activity that believers should be engaged in (p. 178).

Seip points out that Govett was a premillennialist and that premillennialism was the dominant position in the early church (p. 20). Govett devoted much of his writing promoting a coming millennial kingdom even though it was a minority view in his day.

Govett impacted some writers who came after him that Free Grace readers will occasionally encounter. These included G. H. Lang, Panton, and Watchman Nee.

Seip does an outstanding job of explaining the social and historical background of the theological climate in which Govett lived. For example, the rebirth of millennial thought did not just happen in Govett's lifetime. A number of Scottish and English Reformed theologians spoke of it in the 17th century. But this thought arose even in the 16th century, soon after the Reformation began (p. 46). Eventually, this would lead to premillennial prophetic conferences in England and Ireland (p. 47). In this context, Seip discusses the contributions of men like J. N. Darby and Edward Irving. Darby was a major leader in the Plymouth Brethren movement. Govett agreed with certain aspects of Darby's teachings but disagreed with others.

On the historical and scientific side, Govett ministered in a time of religious doubt. Darwin's theory of evolution shook the faith of many. It was also the time of German higher criticism's attack on the Scriptures (pp. 59-62). In the midst of this environment, Govett devoted himself to the study and explanation of the Scriptures.

This study led Govett to the conclusion that the NT taught two "salvations." One is by faith and the believer obtains it at the moment of belief. The other is a future salvation that depends upon works and will result in rewards (p. 68).

Seip points out that Victorian England had an "obsession" with the topic of eschatology (p. 94). Govett was a key player in the publications of his day in the discussion of these topics. However, his view of a partial Rapture eventually led to a decline in his reputation as a respected Biblical scholar. In addition, he also came to the conclusion that the Church of England as an entity was unscriptural, not just its view on infant baptism. Many of his day thought this was going too

far. He was also eclipsed by the popularity of Darby's eschatological framework (pp. 96-98).

Govett also went against other popular views concerning the last days. The Historicists of his day said that the Pope was the Antichrist in Revelation. Govett disagreed and said that the vast majority of Revelation was still in the future (pp. 101-108). As such, the Antichrist would come upon the scene later.

Even though it is not discussed in length, Govett taught that believers who are not raptured and miss the millennial kingdom will be punished for those 1000 years. This punishment will include being hurt by the second death in the lake of fire (p. 158). As a result, some accused Govett of promoting a kind of purgatory (pp. 167, 182).

Clearly Govett was a man who was willing to pay a price for what he believed the Scriptures taught. The readers of *JOTGES* will no doubt admire him for his diligence. At the same time, they will question some his views concerning the Rapture and millennial kingdom. Another such teaching was his view that even though water baptism did not contribute to one's eternal salvation, one had to be baptized in order to be a part of the Rapture and the millennial kingdom (p. 125).

After his death, his writings became basically unknown. His views were rejected, and the teachings of the dispensationalism of Darby, the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and Dallas Theological Seminary, won the theological debate in dispensational thought (pp. 202-205). Today, however, Schoettle Publishing Company publishes his books as well as those who shared his views.

People often wonder about the historical background of Free Grace theology. This well-researched book gives part of that history. Govett, like Free Grace writers today, knew what it was like to go against the theological grain and tradition. Seip has done an outstanding job of explaining his teachings and the context in which they arose. The reader can draw many modern day parallels. I highly recommend this book.

Kenneth W. Yates
Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

***Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News.* By Brian Zahnd. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2017. 209 pp. Paper, \$14.99.**

This book gives no indication of any theological education by Zahnd. A website search indicates that he is self-taught.

Regardless of education, Zahnd is a very good writer. He draws the reader in, even the reader who strongly disagrees with what he is saying. He is clearly a very intelligent man and a gifted communicator.

The back cover shows the false dichotomy addressed in this book: “God is wrath? Or God is love?” Throughout the book Zahnd rejects the idea that God is ever angry, that He ever destroyed or ordered the destruction of entire populations, that large numbers of people will be killed by God during the Tribulation, or that Jesus will be a conqueror when He returns.

Of course, it is true that God is not wrath. He exercises wrath. But that is not part of His eternal nature. He was never angry before the creation of angels and humans. He will never be angry again after the Great White Throne Judgment (cf. Ps 103:9). His anger is limited to the time of rebellion.

But none of that is discussed by the author. In fact, Zahnd believes that God never exercises wrath.

How could a pastor write such a thing when a simple word study shows that God often is angry? A concordance study shows that there are 27 references to the anger of the Lord in the Pentateuch alone. There are an additional 152 references to the anger of the Lord in the rest of the OT. How could someone who has read the Bible from cover to cover many times, as Zahnd says he has (pp. 48-50), miss this? Why couldn't he just pick up a concordance?

What about the NT? There are 30 references to God's wrath (*orgē*) in the NT, including references where the Lord Jesus is angry (Mark 3:5; Rev 6:16, 17) and where He warns of coming wrath (Luke 21:23). As we shall see, Zahnd thinks that Jesus never was angry and never will be angry.

Zahnd is not clear about what he thinks a person must do to become a Christian. My best guess is that he thinks that a person becomes a Christian by becoming a follower of Jesus (see, for example, p. 158, “loyal follower,” and p. 171, “follow the Lamb”). Concerning his own

testimony, he says that “on a Saturday night in 1974” he became a “Jesus freak” when he had a “mystical encounter with Jesus” (p. 48).

Before we consider some of the more extreme unorthodox positions espoused by Zahnd, we should understand his method for determining what is true.

The author does not do word studies. He does not check his statements against the Word of God, at least not the Bible. Zahnd believes that “the Bible is the word [sic] of God in a secondary sense, faithfully pointing to the perfect Word [sic] of God: the Word [sic] made flesh” (p. 50). The Bible is not “the perfect Word of God.” Instead, the Bible is an imperfect “word of God in a secondary sense.” “Christians are to believe in the perfect, infallible, inerrant Word of God—and his name is Jesus” (p. 13). So Zahnd checks his views against his understanding of who Jesus is. He does not need to study the Bible to determine his theology.

So how does he determine who Jesus is if he doesn’t discover this in the Bible? Zahnd tells us: “But it wasn’t primarily reading theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar [Catholic mystical theologian], Henri Nouwen [Catholic mystical spiritual director and activist], and Stanley Hauerwas [an ethicist and non-violent theologian] that led me away from an angry-God theology; *it was mostly mystical experiences in prayer. As I learned to directly experience the presence of God in contemplative prayer—or sitting with Jesus, as I describe it—I have come to know God as light and love. I have seen the face of God in Jesus*” (p. 204, emphasis added). (For more on his practice of contemplative prayer, see pp. 97, 205-26.)

Here are some of the pillars of Zahnd’s theology, derived from his mystical experiences:

1. Jesus did not have to die on the cross or shed His blood for our salvation and forgiveness (pp. 91-92).
2. God the Father did not want Jesus to go to the cross (pp. 84, 91-92, 100-103, 115). Zahnd considers that teaching was derived from pagan child sacrifice practices through the ages.
3. God never intended Israel to offer animal sacrifices. Men thought up the idea of animal sacrifices, put that false teaching in the earlier parts of the OT, and then God later abolished the pagan practice (pp. 15-16, 30-31, 104-105).

4. Dispensationalism is “reckless eschatology,” a “hideous distortion,” and “hokum” (p. 171).
5. Revelation is not prophecy about “future geopolitical events” (p. 155).
6. Jesus will not kill 200 million when He comes again. (Actually, the Bible says He will kill over half the world’s population, likely five *billion* or more.)
7. The Bible has lots of contradictions in it (see, for example, pp. 15, 16, 67, 68, 69, 71). After citing various verses dealing with violence and mercy, Zahnd asks, “Are these contradictions?” (p. 67). His answer? “Of course they are! And it’s a fool’s errand to try to reconcile all the disparate things the Bible says about violence” (pp. 67-68).
8. God never commanded the destruction of the Canaanites or anyone else (pp. 26-31).
9. A person does not need to be a Christian to avoid hell. All “good people” (p. 144) of all religions (or no religion) avoid hell (pp. 118-20, 144-45). He calls the idea that only Christians will avoid hell “an arrogant fundamentalist fiction, an ugly distortion inflicted upon Christian faith” (p. 145).
10. The author of the Book of Revelation “was almost certainly not John, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelves disciples” (p. 151).
11. Contemplative prayer is the key to renewing your mind and learning the true meaning of the Word of God and the word of God (pp. 204-206).
12. The Bible is not our final authority: “If we want to make the Bible our final authority, which is an act of idolatry, we are conveniently ignoring the problem that we can make the Bible say just about whatever we want” (p. 63). Amazingly, that is precisely what Zahnd himself does.
13. The Bible needs saving: “Jesus is the Savior of all that is to be saved...including the Bible. Jesus saves the Bible from itself! Jesus shows us how to read the Bible *and not be harmed by it. Jesus delivers the Bible from its addiction to violent retaliation*” (p. 57, emphasis added). “I don’t regard the OT as the perfect revelation of God” (p. 60). “There needs to be some way of adjudicating what texts are definitive in the Bible, especially on

- the subject of violence” (p. 69). “The Bible itself is on the quest to discover the Word of God” (p. 15).
14. “The Bible is not the perfect revelation of God: Jesus is. Jesus is the only perfect theology. Perfect theology is not a system of theology; perfect theology is a person. Perfect theology is not found in abstract thought; perfect theology is found in the Incarnation. Perfect theology is not a book; perfect theology is the life that Jesus lived” (p. 31).
 15. There is no such thing as eternal, conscious torment (ECT): “It is such a ludicrous notion that the God who is love would of his volition inflict torment upon people eternally. The idea is so ridiculous that it is either hilarious or horrendous” (p. 206). “What I can say about hell is that we do not need to (and must not!) hold to a perverse doctrine that all non-Christians are subjected by God to eternal conscious torment...The gospel is not a perverse theological system in which good people are tortured by God for eternity” (p. 144).

I do not recommend this book for most believers. The book is an assault of the Bible and orthodoxy. Zahl remakes Christianity into his own image of what it should be like. I do, however, recommend this book for pastors and Christian educators. They should be aware of what is going on in the emerging church movement. But let the reader beware. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is a dangerous book.

Robert N. Wilkin
Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

***Secularity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do About It.* By David Zahl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019. 211 pp. Hardcover, \$26.99.**

Every page of this book hit a nerve. David Zahl demonstrates how salvation by works has been rebranded and promoted by secular culture. To describe this phenomenon of secular religion and to translate

it in language modern people can understand, Zahl coined a new term: *seculosity*.

Zahl argues that, despite what the polls may say, people have not become less religious. Instead, they have turned their desire “horizontally rather than vertically, at earthly rather than heavenly objects” (p. xxi). Instead of seeking the gifts of justification and righteousness before God through faith (cf. p. 62), *seculosity* tries to manage its guilt by seeking “enoughness” (Zahl’s language for self-justification) through secular pursuits such as careers, parenting, food, romances, and so on.

Drawing on the work of Jonathan Haidt, Zahl notes that “the human psyche instinctually seeks righteousness” (p. 143). Christian or not, we all seek to be vindicated. Rather than find that through faith in Christ, people look to objects of *seculosity* which have become “replacement religions” (p. 137).

In nine chapters, Zahl uncovers how each of the categories of replacement religions mentioned in the subtitle function analogously to the Mosaic Law, i.e., as demands for perfection (what Zahl calls “performancism”) that we inevitably, terminally, fall short of meeting. Instead of enoughness, these pursuits create a deep sense of anxiety, guilt, and despair, or “not-enoughness.”

Each chapter has a similar structure.

Zahl quotes non-religious authors who make salvation claims about each “object of *seculosity*.” For example, in the chapter on food, Zahl quotes Alice Waters who said, “every single choice about food matters, at every level. The right choice saves the world” (pp. 124-125). So food is a secular salvation issue.

Then Zahl illustrates how these objects function as standards of performance (i.e., as law) that we fail to live up to. We buy organic, locally sourced, gluten-free, cage-free, farm-raised food (when we can afford it!). We shame each other for eating poorly or wrongly. We feel self-justified when we shop at the farmer’s market while our neighbors eat frozen dinners. We take pictures of our food so others can admire what, and how, we eat. But it is never quite enough to save ourselves or the planet. As with all law, there is always more to do, and we always come up short.

Finally, every chapter ends with a brief quote from Scripture or from a theologian who explains the “nonperformancist” approach

(p. 133). For example, in the chapter on food, Zahl quotes Paul in 1 Cor 8:8, “Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” Zahl concludes, “We are *not* what we eat. And that is good news” (p. 134).

In each chapter, Zahl summarizes the way that secular religion operates as religions of law in the life of secular culture: “You may have noticed that the strands of secularity we’ve explored thus far all operate more or less identically. They cast a vision of enoughness and then implore us to realize that vision with forbearance, grit, and hard currency, for the sake of existential reward. If you eat well enough, love well enough, parent well enough, stay busy enough, you will *be* enough. This is the promise at the heart of what we might call *a religion of law*, and it applies to every replacement religion under the sun” (p. 164). Later he writes, “Religions of law promise wholeness and peace, but as the preceding chapters illustrate, they ultimately deliver anxiety, self-consciousness, and loneliness. A culture awash in secularity is therefore a culture of despair” (p. 166).

In the last chapter, Zahl proposes what to “do” about secularity. He suggests three things. First, Christianity should speak more about death and eternal things. Second, Christianity should focus on human motivations, by which he means sinful motivations, with an emphasis on how this hurts the person himself (“Everyone you meet is in some kind of pain,” p. 190). Third, Christianity should be Christ-centered announcing “the good news that *nothing that needs to be done hasn’t already been done*” (p. 191).

I think the conclusion was a missed opportunity. Readers will likely find it to be the weakest part of the book. Here was a chance to follow up the devastating news of the law with the good news of what Christ has done (e.g., justification by faith in Christ apart from works, or the promise of eternal life). This was the chance for Zahl to translate the thick theology of grace found in, say, his father’s book, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life*, to a reading audience who would be, by the end of *Secularity*, very hungry for good news. Instead, we get the barest outlines of something we-know-not-what. Without a strong and clear explanation of the grace-based alternative to secularity, I suspect most readers who are convicted by the book will simply commit themselves to new programs of self-improvement and self-acceptance, or some amorphous version of “grace,” because

that is all they know—even if they attend church. Hopefully, though, they will be interested enough to seek out what Zahl has written about grace elsewhere and come to find it in Christ and Him alone.

Some *JOTGES* readers will be disappointed that Zahl's book is very light on the Bible. They should understand this book is a work of sociology and social commentary, *not* Biblical theology. Nevertheless, I believe every pastor or ministry worker would benefit from reading it. *Seculosity* will help you understand how the pursuit of secular forms of righteousness are at work in your life and in the lives of those around you. Strongly recommended.

Shawn Lazar

Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

The Created Cosmos: What the Bible Reveals About Astronomy.
By Danny R. Faulkner and Lee Anderson, Jr. Green Forest, AR:
New Leaf Publishing, 2016. 352 pp. Hardcover, \$19.99.

As can be determined by the title, this book is heavy on apologetics. With degrees in physics and astronomy, Faulkner is a professor at the University of South Carolina. Anderson's expertise is theology, with degrees from The Master's College and Baptist Bible Seminary. The authors are conservative in theology and take a young earth view of creation (YEC). Exodus 20:8-11 precludes billions of years in the creation process (p. 47). The authors argue against a gap theory in Gen 1:1-2 as well (pp. 55-56).

The book is divided into four parts. The first is "Astronomical Concepts in the Bible." The second is "Astronomical Anomalies in the Bible: What Scripture Says about Unusual Astronomical Events." Part three is "Astronomical Questions and the Bible." The final part is "Astronomy and Distortions of the Bible."

The authors believe that the study of astronomy is God-honoring since the heavens declare God's glory (Ps 19:1, p. 21). A strong point of the book is the emphasis on allowing the Scriptures to govern our worldview (p. 24). In passages such as Joshua 10 and 2 Kings 20, where the Lord halts the rotation of the earth, we should not look for natural explanations. God is more than able to do miraculous things like these (p. 27). In another example, the authors say that the

Christmas star cannot be explained by natural phenomena. Perhaps it was an angel, or even the Shekinah glory. In any event, Christians should not be hesitant to say it was a miracle (p. 141). The same thing would apply to the darkness at the cross of Jesus (p. 150).

When it comes to the layout of the heavens, the Bible does not say much. But when it does it is “profound” and even “ahead of its time.” Not surprisingly, the authors maintain that such a complex universe could not have come into existence without an intelligent Creator (p. 35).

As would be expected, the book is heavy, in parts, on technical and scientific language, including certain Hebrew words. However, the authors do a good job of making it readable for the layman. In places, they also describe certain astronomical terms in the NT as best understood in a figurative sense. The falling stars of Rev 6:13 are probably a reference to a great and unusual meteor shower. The darkening of a third of the sun, moon, and stars probably refers to a dimming of these lights by that amount (pp. 79-80).

There is a wealth of information on why we use the calendars we use and have a 365 day year. At places in the Bible it appears that people lived by a 12 month, 360 day year. The authors point out that lunar calendars are different from religious calendars and that without the Bible it is not possible to explain a seven day week (pp. 89-91).

There is a discussion on the difference between astronomy and astrology. The former is the “science, or systemized study, of the stars.” It is a legitimate area of study. Astrology is the belief that the positions of the heavenly bodies impact our lives and destinies. It is more of a belief system, a religion, or a cult. The Bible warns us about astrology (Isa 47:13-14; Dan 4-5) (pp. 101-105). The authors advise against Christians reading horoscopes, even if the believer believes they are nonsense, because such activity can open the door to the occult.

There is a good, concise, explanation of the differences between postmillennialism, premillennialism, and amillennialism (pp. 157-61). This serves as a springboard to discuss astronomical events in eschatological passages such as the moon turning into blood in Revelation 6 and the danger of using signs like these to predict the timing of the Rapture.

In chapter 11, the authors say that perhaps the biggest problem with young creationists is the issue of “light-travel-time.” If the world

is young and God created the universe in six literal days, how could the light from suns billions of light years away have already reached us? However, the answer is not complicated at all. The God who created the universe could have performed the miracle of creating a universe where that light was already present in our world. After all, creation itself was a miracle.

The book argues that the belief in UFOs and extraterrestrial aliens have problems with Biblical principles, even if the Bible does not explicitly refute such things. The authors say such belief may be a deception by Satan (2 Cor 11:14, chapter 12).

There is a long discussion on the teaching of the “Gospel in the Stars” (pp. 257-318). This is the view that God placed the gospel of Christ in the heavenly bodies for those who study the stars. This made the gospel available to those who did not have the Scriptures. E. W. Bullinger, famous among seminary students for his book about figures of speech used in the Bible, was a strong advocate for this view. The authors reject it out of hand, noting that there is no Biblical evidence for it. We should not accept another Bible outside of the Bible.

I found this book to be informative and enjoyable. It is an encouragement to know that there are scientists who do not consider it fanciful to believe in a literal interpretation of Genesis 1–2. I appreciate the strong emphasis on allowing the Bible to dictate our view of the universe in which we live. The authors refuse to accept, as a presupposition, that a miracle performing Creator cannot exist. Even though there are parts of the book that are scientific in nature and thus are hard to follow for those uninitiated in the sciences, it can be understood. Creation does proclaim the glory of God. We can and should unashamedly believe in what the Scriptures say. I recommend this book.

Kenneth W. Yates
Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

***Gospel Assurance & Warnings.* By Paul Washer. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014. 252 pp. Paper, \$20.00.**

Paul Washer has done lots of videos which are available online. He promotes a strong form of Lordship Salvation.

This book has essentially the same title as a book I read years ago by Gerald Borchert (*Assurance and Warning*). He takes the same position as Borchert does, the Lordship Salvation position.

One theme runs through the entire book: *In order to have assurance of everlasting life, we must see a life-long pattern of conformity to God's nature and will.* The book is filled with ideas on how to examine yourself, what to look for, and how to become the type of person that will come out on the good side at the final judgment.

For Washer, there is no such thing as certainty. The best one can hope for is having such a strong pattern of growth over decades that it is highly probable that one is really born again.

Here are some of Washer's key points:

- One must submit to the Lordship of Christ to be born again (pp. 8, 89, 186).
- Assurance can be greater (p. 11), and there is even a type of assurance called "full assurance" (p. 20).
- Assurance is by degrees. It depends on "the degree that" one "walks as Christ walked" (p. 56). "To the degree that these qualities are growing and observable realities, we may assume that we possess eternal life" (p. 232). But, "to the degree that they are lacking, we should be concerned about whether we are truly Christian" (p. 232).
- Genuine believers can fall many times ("no matter how often he may fall," p. 83), can have "even periodic falls" (p. 215), and at any time in his life "a Christian may be running, walking, crawling, sliding, *or even falling*" (p. 225, emphasis added).
- But "genuine believers do not fall away" (p. 94). Genuine believers continue their entire lives "believing, repenting, and following" (p. 136; see also pp. 88-96).
- The key to assurance is "gradually growing in conformity to God's nature and will" so that "there would be discernible

evidence of greater and greater conformity to the nature and will of God” (p. 27; see also pp. 83n, 92, 93, 115, 149, 151-53, 165).

- Assurance depends on self-examination (pp. 11, 15, 27, 56, 69-71, 85, 94, 111, 114, 163, 188, 211, 215).
- No one can be genuinely born again who “lives a life of open sin and rebellion” (p. 125).
- First John gives us a dozen tests of whether we are born again (pp. 139-53, esp. pp. 152-53 where the twelve are summarized).
- Like many Calvinists, Washer equates the Judgment Seat of Christ with the Great White Throne Judgment (e.g., p. 242).
- Unregenerate people “will perform good deeds and even reflect a resemblance of righteousness” (p. 215). “However, over time, both the righteous and the wicked will be revealed by their ongoing behavior” (p. 215).

Unfortunately, there are no subject or Scripture indexes in this book.

I do not recommend this book for new believers or believers who are not well grounded. However, I do recommend it for Free Grace pastors, teachers, leaders, and any who wish to be aware of the extent to which some in Lordship Salvation make certainty of one’s salvation impossible.

Robert N. Wilkin
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Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

***Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God’s Heavenly Host.* By Michael S. Heiser. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018. Hardcover, \$19.99.**

In his book *Angels*, Michael Heiser says that there are many misunderstandings about angels due to Christian traditions and myths. He desires to speak about what the Bible says about angels. He does not discuss fallen angels in any detail. The topic of the book is important simply because the Bible discusses it (p. xiv).

While a layman can understand the book, it is a scholarly work. There are many detailed footnotes. In addition, Heiser deals with the

meaning of both Hebrew and Greek words. He spends a great deal of time discussing Second Temple Judaism and its view of angels. This includes the writings found at Qumran.

The reader will find that some of the things Heiser says agrees with what most Evangelicals think about angels. However, other things will challenge our traditional way of understanding these issues. This is a major purpose of the book.

Heiser says that the nations are currently being ruled by fallen angels. He rightly states that “heaven” will be on earth. He also thinks that all Christians will rule with Christ in the coming kingdom. The current role of angels teaches us about the destiny of the Church (pp. xviii-xix).

Heiser discusses the word “gods” (*elohim*) in the OT. It is used sometimes to refer to God, but it can also refer to angels (p. 12). They are part of the heavenly council, which means they participate in decisions made and are used by God to execute various judgments. This council helps govern the world. In some cases, God asks for their advice (pp. 33-55).

To understand certain OT passages, Heiser sometimes appeals to New Eastern texts. For example, he uses Ugaritic texts to help identify the fallen one in Isa 14:13 as the king of Babylon, and not Satan (p. 9).

In Job 1–2, Heiser does not think “Satan” is Lucifer, the fallen cherubim (pp. 42-43). He argues from Hebrew grammar that the word is not a proper name. The one spoken of is a temporary accuser. Obviously this is contrary to the understanding of most Evangelicals.

Another example of where Heiser goes against tradition is the meaning of the word “seraphim.” He says it does not signify “to burn.” Instead, it comes from Egyptian throne guardian terminology and means “serpent” (p. 26). Here we see that Heiser believes that Near Eastern literature can determine the meaning of Biblical terms.

Other areas in which Heiser challenges commonly held positions include his opinion that angels who rebel against God will eventually have their existence terminated (Ps 82:6-7; p. 29). He also believes that angels bear the image of God, which accounts for the “us” in Gen 1:26 (p. 31). Finally, Heiser thinks that unfallen angels have free will and can fall away (p. 48, 169).

Heiser has a lengthy discussion on the Angel of the Lord in the OT. Like most Evangelicals, he says this angel is the Lord Himself (p. 57) and is the pre-incarnate Christ. This reviewer found it interesting that Heiser says that Judaism accepted the idea of two “Yahweh figures” in the OT. Jewish writers did not change that view until the second century AD. Heiser also thinks that the Prince of the Host in Dan 8:11 is Christ. However, it should be said that this Prince needs help in his conflict with Satan. It is better to take this individual as an archangel.

Chapters 4-5 address the topic of angels in Second Temple Judaism. This literature gives insight into what the Jews at the time of Christ thought about angels. The Dead Sea Scrolls, like the OT, referred to angels as “gods.” The literature was more interested in naming specific angles than the OT. There is a focus on Melchizedek (p. 121). Michael fought with Satan over the body of Moses so Moses could go to the Kingdom of God (p. 123). In this last instance it is clear that the writer did not believe in the eternal security of the believer.

Heiser says that the idea of guardian angels is found in the OT (as “mediators”) and Second Temple Literature. Jesus speaks of the same thing in the NT. Based upon Luke 16:19-31 Heiser says that angels are involved in taking the dead believer into the presence of God. Second Temple Judaism contains the same idea (p. 174).

Heiser does not seem to see a sharp distinction between the Church and angels. He says that fallen angels cannot be redeemed (p. 147, 151). However, in the kingdom, believers will become part of the heavenly divine family with angels (p. 140). We will rule over angels only in the sense of “heavenly hierarchical terminology.” We will be a blended divine family with them (pp. 176-77). When Jesus confesses the names of believers before the angels in Rev 3:5, it is a reference to the angels in the council of heaven validating that they are indeed believers (p. 136).

When it comes to 1 Cor 13:1 and 2 Cor 12:2-4, Heiser says there is indeed a language of angels. It is unintelligible. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is speaking hypothetically. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul says he heard the angels speak but could not understand what was being said (p. 162).

While this book does not address in detail issues related to the gospel of eternal life, it is clear that Heiser does not accept a Free

Grace definition of that gospel. Heiser does a good job debunking certain unbiblical thinking in the area of angels. It seems to this reviewer that the main issue of the book is how much writings of the Second Temple Judaism era should impact our interpretation of the NT. Do these writings determine our interpretation, or do they simply shed light on the background of our interpretations? Many Evangelicals will probably think that Heiser too often falls in the former camp.

However, the book does have a great deal of information on the use of original words in the Bible when it comes to angels. It also tells us what certain Jewish religious writers in the first century thought. This can help the exegete put certain texts in their historical context. I recommend the book.

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Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

