

THE MASTER'S UNIVERSITY
JOURNAL
of
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

VOLUME 3

SPRING 2026



The Cause and Remedy of Unintentional Sin: The Case of Abimelech
TITUS LAIRD

Boaz's Prayer: Refuge and Redemption Under the Wings of Yahweh
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THE MASTER'S UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF
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published by

THE SCHOOL OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

of

THE MASTER'S UNIVERSITY

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The Master's University Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies features articles written by students during the course of their studies at The Master's University. It is published in print and distributed electronically. For information about articles, policy, or journal access, visit www.masters.edu/bible-journal.

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ISSN 2998-2375 (online); ISSN 2998-2367 (print)

Santa Clarita, California
masters.edu

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EDITORIAL

* * * * *

“Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable,” cries David in Psalm 145. Faced with the depths of God’s character, the psalmist cannot contain himself. Echoing the glorious description of Exodus 34, that Yahweh is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” David overflows in praise and meditation on the wonderful works of God. He has tasted God’s goodness, and through searching out the unsearchable, he has discovered that there is no exhausting the character of God or the riches of his Word. Such a discovery leads him not to abandon searching, but rather generates a deeper hunger to know and search more, for “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight,” and Yahweh “fulfills the desire of those who fear him” (Prov 9:10; Ps 145:19). The all-satisfying greatness of our God compels us to worship and serve him greatly.

From its first volume published in 2024, the goal of *The Master’s University Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* has always been that, in searching out the depths of God’s Word and presenting what is discovered, Christ would be seen and adored for who he is. The vision of the students who authored and organized that inaugural issue remains the same, rooted in Peter’s words to the believers scattered across Asia Minor: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God’s] own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

In proclaiming the excellencies of Christ, the contributors seek to do so with excellence, reflecting the character of our God. *TMUJBTs* is an endeavor driven by and dependent on students, with each article written and edited by undergraduate students, under the supervision of the university’s faculty and staff. The articles that form each volume are the result of much study and effort—both in the disciplines of researching and writing, as well as in the rigorous process of editing. Yet the goal of such discipline is never excellence for its own sake. It stems, rather, from the desire to please God and become those who are “accurately handling the word of truth” for his glory (2 Tim 2:15).

The articles in this third volume of the journal represent a variety of courses and subjects in the field of biblical and theological studies, with nine articles spanning five different books, from Genesis to Acts. The volume is ordered canonically, moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Our desire as authors and editors is that as you read these articles examining the Scriptures, you would come

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face to face with the many-faceted excellencies of Christ and be compelled to dig even more deeply into the riches of God's Word (1 Pet 2:9). And in discovering Christ's excellencies, our prayer is that you would find the testimonies of God truly wonderful and be moved to worship him in word and deed (Ps 119:129). There is no one else more worthy.

Elizabeth Powell

THE CAUSE AND REMEDY OF UNINTENTIONAL SIN: THE CASE OF ABIMELECH

Titus Laird¹

* * * * *

Genesis 20 confounds many readers and scholars because of the tension between the apparent innocence of Abimelech and his punishment from the Lord. The helpful commentary of Leviticus 4–5 on unintentional sin unlocks the text and harmonizes this paradox. Genesis 20 is shown to be a textbook example of the unintentional sin of a leader through careful comparison with Leviticus 4–5. Rereading Genesis 20 in this light illuminates the cause and remedy of unintentional sin. Understanding unintentional sin helps believers to avoid apathetic independence and instead practice proactive prayer.

Key words: ignorance, unintentional sin, apathetic independence, Abimelech, prayer, intercession

* * * * *

In Proverbs, King Solomon wrote, “Ignorant fools die for lack of a heart of wisdom” (10:21). In Genesis 20, Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, narrowly escaped such a death. He nearly committed adultery with Sarah, Abraham’s wife, after falling victim to Abraham and Sarah’s deception. Abraham told Abimelech that Sarah was his sister, which led to Abimelech’s marriage to Sarah. Only a gracious rebuke from God kept him from committing adultery. The text affirms Abimelech’s genuine fear of God from the start yet also justifies God’s death sentence upon him. Generally, the narrative evokes one of two responses: (1) the reader blindly accepts God’s treatment of Abimelech as just; or (2) they brush aside the theological difficulty of Abimelech’s condemnation, asserting that he is a polytheistic pagan who deserved judgment. Both are misguided, for further study reveals a far different interpretation of Abimelech’s sin.

The interpretive difficulty of Genesis 20 is reconciling the integrity of Abimelech and the justice of his punishment. Both aspects of the narrative can be

¹ Titus Laird is a senior majoring in Biblical Studies with an emphasis in Biblical Languages. He may be contacted at titus.laird1@gmail.com.

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defended through the instruction concerning unintentional sin in the Mosaic law, found in Leviticus 4–5 and Numbers 15:22-29. When these passages are compared with Genesis 20, it becomes evident that Abimelech committed an unintentional sin. Genesis 20 is a living example of what God described in Leviticus 4. This example of unintentional sin in Genesis 20 shows that its cause is apathetic independence and its remedy is prayer.

Definition of Unintentional Sin

Any study of unintentional sin should clarify what is meant by *תְּחֵלָּה בִּישְׁגָּאָה* (*tehēṭā' bišgāgā'*)—"sinning unintentionally" (Lev 4:2). In Biblical Hebrew, to sin, *חָטָא* (*hata'*), means "much more than the mere act of going astray; it also includes the guilt incurred by the act."² The desire to commit evil is not essential to the concept of sin in biblical Hebrew. Indeed, inadvertence, *שֶׁגָּגָה* (*shegagah*), clarifies that sin can be committed without evil intent. Therefore, unintentional sin is restricted to "offenses committed out of ignorance or human frailty."³

But *שֶׁגָּגָה* (*shegagah*), inadvertence, also implies the pursuit of obedience. God allows no moral neutrality (Josh 24:15; Matt 12:30; Rev 3:15-16). Absence of evil intent can only be achieved by replacing evil desire with a thirst for righteousness (Prov 15:9; Rom 12:2; Ezek 36:26; Gal 5:16-17). By definition, those who seek their own desires are fundamentally unable to sin unintentionally, because their sin is consistent with their will. Unintentional sin, on the other hand, presupposes a theocentric lifestyle; it is an action that doesn't comply with a person's conscious commitment to act righteously.

Could man sin unintentionally in the garden? In the garden, man had free and constant access to God. Unintentional sin was impossible because of God's character; God, unlike man, is infinite. He cannot commit unintentional sin because he is not ignorant or incapable of anything. Without God, man cannot ensure congruity between his actions and will. Thus, when man's relationship with God was severed, he became able to sin unintentionally. The potential for our actions to deviate autonomously from our will demonstrates that unintentional sin is a post-fall reality. Hence, the biblical definition of unintentional sin: the transgression of a God-fearing man who sins because of the ignorance that is characteristic of the fallen nature.

Comparing Genesis 20 and Leviticus 4:22-26

To be classified as an example of the inadvertent sin of a leader, Abimelech must (1) demonstrate a consistent desire to follow God's law and (2) fail due to ignorance. Abimelech fulfills both qualifications:

² John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Leviticus*, EP Study Commentary (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2004), 53.

³ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), 55.

Leviticus 4:22-26: Unintentional Sin of Leader	Genesis 20: Abimelech	Thematic Commonality
“When a leader sins unintentionally . . .” (Lev 4:2).	“Did he not himself say to me, ‘She is my sister?’ And she herself also said, ‘He is my brother’” (Gen 20:4).	Abimelech claims ignorance.
“When a leader sins unintentionally . . .” (Lev 4:2).	“In the integrity of my heart [thoughts] and the innocence of my hands [intentions] I have done this” (Gen 20:5).	Abimelech claims he pursued righteousness.
“He shall bring for his offering . . .” (Lev 4:23).	“Indeed, I know that in the integrity of your heart [intentions and thoughts] you have done this” (Gen 20:6).	God affirms Abimelech’s righteous intent.

“Unintentionally” in Leviticus 4 assumes that the leader did not intend (*intentions*) nor consider (*thoughts*) his actions to be sin but fails on account of his *ignorance*. The leader demonstrates his *pursuit of righteousness* by bringing the offering himself. There is clear thematic correlation between the texts in three respects: (1) a claim of ignorance, (2) a pursuit of righteousness, and (3) the leader’s righteous intent. Hamilton summarizes: “While Gen. 20 does not use the category of ‘sinning inadvertently’ in the same way as Lev. 4–5, it provides an illustration of this kind of violation.”⁴ Abimelech’s sin is an example of the unintentional sin of a leader (Lev 4:22-26).

This connection becomes more evident with the realization that Genesis 20 reflects the theology of Leviticus 4. Abimelech bases his innocence on his aspiration to be “righteous” (v. 4) and his claim of ignorance (v. 5). While God affirms his integrity, he does not affirm Abimelech’s innocence.⁵ This agrees with the theology of Leviticus: all unintentional sin bears guilt. But can Leviticus 4:22-26, which is intended for God-fearing leaders, apply to Abimelech? God only affirms Abimelech’s integrity in one situation, so further evaluation of Abimelech’s character is needed to know whether he had a *consistent* desire to follow God’s law. If he has no interest in a relationship with God, he is not an example of Leviticus 4.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 18–50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 61–62. Hamilton observes, “This kind of sin may happen in one of two ways. A person may know the law and accidentally violate it (i.e., negligence), or he may act deliberately without knowing he did wrong (i.e., ignorance). Abimelech’s act falls into this second category.”

⁵ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Springfield: Wartburg, 1942), 586.

The Character of Abimelech

Moses portrays Abimelech as a God-fearing leader. He tells the story in a way which inclines the reader to think favorably of Abimelech. For instance, the narrator chooses to affirm his innocence at the beginning of the narrative (v. 4). Were it not for the preface that no sexual offense had occurred, Abimelech's words would appear as the excuses of a guilty sinner.⁶ The organization of the narrative restrains the reader from viewing Abimelech as a pagan.

Additionally, Abimelech's motivation in taking Sarah is not as villainous as it may seem. Certain details indicate that he did not take her simply for pleasure. For one, there is no description of Sarah's beauty, previously presented as Pharaoh's motivation to take Sarah (Gen 12:14). Scholars differ on her exact age, but Sarah is old by the events of Genesis 20.⁷ Her age, coupled with the lack of description of her beauty, may indicate that Abimelech was "forging an economic relationship with the Abraham clan."⁸

By this time, Abraham "was very rich in livestock, in silver and gold" (Gen 13:2). He gained great renown for winning the battle of nine kings (Gen 14). Canaan was still reeling from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. It seems likely that Abimelech sought to avoid the same fate, which explains his servants' reaction of "great fear" of God (v. 8). In fact, the king states that he seeks a relationship with Abraham because "God is with you in all that you do" (Gen 21:22). This is consistent with his offers of land (v. 15), livestock (v. 14), and silver (v. 16) to Abraham, as well as his covenant with Abraham (Gen 21:22-32), which is clearly meant to ensure the continuation of their relationship. The best explanation for Abimelech's actions is that he intended to gain a relationship with God through diplomatic marriage into the family of God's prophet. Abimelech has a noble goal: good standing before God.

God's appearance to the king also argues for Abimelech's high moral character. In contrast to Pharaoh in the first instance of Abraham's ruse (Gen 12), Abimelech receives a verbal warning from the Lord himself. He is one of only three Gentiles in Genesis to experience a theophany. Leupold argues that Abimelech's encounter with God reflects his character. "There must have been something about Abimelech that set him above the level of the idolatrous Canaanites dwelling in the land, for God deigns to reveal Himself to this man."⁹

Indeed, this man's response to God's rebuke is a model of true repentance. His immediate obedience foreshadows Abraham's in chapter 22. When Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his only son, he "rose early in the morning . . . and went to the place of which God had told him" (Gen 22:3). Abimelech also "arose early in the morning and called all his servants" (Gen 20:8). The narrator characterizes both

⁶ Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 252. Moses "bolsters the king's defense by stating categorically that no sexual offense had occurred. It is enough for God, however, that the man took the woman, and thus she must be returned unharmed (v. 7)."

⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 18–50*, 59. Hamilton addresses the absence of the customary description of Sarah's beauty. He remarks, "Of course, such an omission may have been prompted by Sarah's advancement in age from sixty-five in 12:11 to ninety in 20:2!"

⁸ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 251.

⁹ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 582.

leaders as men who respond with prompt obedience and faith. Both are shown in stark contrast to their pagan neighbors, for Abimelech and his people's repentance at their treatment of God's prophet greatly contrasts with the violence and raging lust to the delegation of God's messengers by the Sodomites (Gen 19). They believe that God's words are true and will come to pass, and they act accordingly.

In both passages, the godly leader's posterity is at stake. The posterity of Abimelech is threatened through the closed wombs of his household; the potential loss of Isaac threatened Abraham's seed. These linguistic and thematic connections may indicate the narrator's intent to liken Abimelech's character to the great patriarch.

Abimelech's response reflects his strong belief in Yahweh. "Abimelech sets his rebuttal in the broad context of divine justice (v.4)."¹⁰ Abimelech cannot be appealing to the perfect justice of a pagan god, because such justice doesn't exist in the pagan mythos. In addition, Abimelech addresses God by the title אֲדֹנָי (*adonay*; Lord). Some suggest that this and the absence of אֱלֹהִים (*haelohim*; the God) in his response shows he is polytheistic.¹¹ However, he appeals to a "master" who is perfectly just. "He seems to know that the Deity is not a tribal god but has power over all individuals and all nations alike."¹² In fact, his appeal is akin to Abraham's in Genesis 18: "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? . . . Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen 18:23, 25). Abimelech knew that God could destroy any "nation" he pleased (Gen 20:4), and that he demanded complete obedience.

Abimelech already knew who the God of Abraham was. For instance, Abimelech knew that righteousness is required to please God. This is why he bases his defense on the purity of his heart; he says, "Did he not say to me" (Gen 20:5). Abimelech seems to believe in God's omniscience. He assumes that God knows his heart and that he heard what Abraham and Sarah said. An ignorant idol worshipper would not hold to these beliefs, but a God-fearing leader would.

Abimelech's commendable character shows itself again through his selfless leadership. Rather than fearing for himself, his chief concern was for the welfare of his people. He doesn't say, "Lord, will you kill me, even though I am righteous?" Instead, his concern is for the "nation" (Gen 20:4). He appraises the value of his life based on its effect on his constituents.¹³ This is why Abimelech asks Abraham, "What have you done to *us*?" (Gen 20:9; emphasis added). Abimelech's self-sacrificial concern for his people is a compelling argument for his high character.

Abimelech seems to be the God-fearing leader of Leviticus 4:22-26. His understanding of God, selfless leadership, and commendable character indicate his status as a converted Gentile. In addition, his claim of ignorance, pursuit of

¹⁰ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 253.

¹¹ Mathews, 253. "The king's appeal to the unspecified 'Lord' corresponds with the typical polytheism of the ancient Near East. He did not know initially which of the gods confronted him."

¹² Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 583. Leupold continues his analysis of Abimelech's knowledge. "Abimelech's address 'Lord' '*adonay*' (v. 4). As such, Abimelech had specifically acknowledged him; that is what He was accounted by Abimelech to be—Lord of all. Such fine discrimination in the use of the divine names shows beyond a doubt that they are all used according to the specific meaning that underlies each" (585).

¹³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 18–50*, 62. "He recognizes that his death determines the future of his subjects."

righteousness, and guilt exemplify Leviticus's definition of unintentional sin. Not only does Leviticus help to classify Abimelech's sin, it also helps to understand its severity.

Shared Understanding of the Severity of Unintentional Sin

God's dialogue in Genesis 20 mirrors Leviticus 4's teaching about the severity of a leader's unintentional sin. Despite the purity of his motivation, Abimelech's actions deserved death (Gen 20:7). As Leupold observes, "God was not predicting an inexorable doom but was declaring what Abimelech in reality had merited and what would out of necessity follow if Abimelech failed to give heed to the divine injunction."¹⁴ Leviticus 4 teaches that all unintentional sin merits a death sentence, but Abimelech's status as a leader increases his guilt.

Abimelech's sin is more severe because it affects his constituents. His sin caused the wombs of his household to be closed (Gen 20:18). Abimelech feared that the Lord would "kill a nation" (Gen 20:4) because of unintentional sin. Leviticus 4:22-26 indicates the greater severity of a leader's sin by requiring a male goat as a sacrifice, whereas the common person is to bring "a female [goat] without blemish" (Lev 4:28). The leader must bring a greater sacrifice to testify that his actions merit greater punishment. Genesis 20 vividly portrays the teaching of Leviticus 4 that the sin of a leader is more severe than that of a "common" person (Lev 4:27).

Genesis 20 shares Leviticus's instruction about the gradient nature of unintentional sin. Just as there are different penalties in God's law for intentional lying and premeditated murder, so there is a range of severity to unintentional sin. Leviticus 4 instructs the masses that unintentional sin must be dealt with according to its varying severity. The sin of an anointed priest merits a different penalty (Lev 4:3) than the sin of a leader (Lev 4:23).

What makes Abimelech's sin so egregious to God that both his life and posterity should be threatened? Context delineates the gravity of Abimelech's sin. In Genesis 18, God declares: "Is anything too difficult for Yahweh? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son" (Gen 18:14). Isaac's birth is recorded in Genesis 21, which means that during Genesis 20, the promised seed—the line of the Messiah—is at stake. If Abimelech sleeps with Sarah, there will forever be doubt that Isaac is the son of Abraham. By taking Sarah as his wife, not only is Abimelech threatening the seed, but he is also threatening the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant and thus, God's honor. Unwittingly, Abimelech could undermine the word of God. It is God's right to punish Abimelech according to the gravity of his sin.

The Perfect Justice of God

The severity of Abimelech's sin is matched by the severity of God's judgment. The man who threatens the household and posterity of Abraham only achieves the infertility of his own household! This is *lex talionis*, an "eye for an eye" in action. "Just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Lev 24:19-20).

¹⁴ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 585.

Accordingly, God ensured that the situation that seemed to threaten the Abrahamic covenant now serves as an illustration of its unassailability. Through this situation, Abraham can be a blessing by performing his role as an intermediary between the Gentiles and God. As Mathews explains, “In microcosm the treatment of Abraham and Sarah by the Philistine presages the divine blessing that Abraham as mediator will afford the peoples of the world. In this case, Abraham mediates divine healing, which enables the king’s wives to bear children; in Genesis, blessing typically means a numerous offspring (e.g., 17:20; 22:12; 26:24; 28:3; cp. 1 Sam 2:20).”¹⁵ Though Abimelech’s posterity was almost taken away, God worked through his sin. The Abrahamic covenant was put into action; the prophet became a blessing to Abimelech.

Thus, we can hold both facts to be true: God was just in punishing Abimelech, and Abimelech acted with integrity. God had every right to smite Abimelech as his egregious transgressions merited. Yet, instead of death he gave Abimelech access to himself through Abraham the prophet. This situation led to Abimelech and Abraham making a covenant with one another (Gen 21). In this way, God’s perfect justice seamlessly joins with his mercy, which not only facilitates a covenant with the prophet of God but also provides an opportunity for repentance.

Parallel Demands for Repentance

The similarities between Leviticus 4:22-26 and Genesis 20 do not stop at hamartiological classification, nor at theology; in both texts God expects repentance and contrition for unintentional sin. Abimelech is commanded to “return the man’s wife” (Gen 20:7). He must turn away from his sin and pursue the Lord—the definition of repentance. God also tells him to go to Abraham, “for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live” (v. 7). Abimelech must confess his sin, as Leviticus taught. The code instructs the guilty leader to slaughter the animal himself, “thereby confessing his sin, and transferring it to the sacrifice.”¹⁶ No sacrifice would be accepted that was not made from a repentant heart.¹⁷ Then, the leader must seek the intercession of a priest, who will complete the restoration of the sinner. Leviticus 4 is clear: the leader must fully acknowledge the depths of his sin.

Abimelech demonstrates that he understood the gravity of his sin. In his meeting with Abraham, Abimelech acknowledges that “you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin” (v. 9). He confesses that his sin is “great” before God. Abimelech’s subsequent actions prove he is not blame-shifting onto Abraham.

God demanded that Abimelech (1) return Sarah and (2) seek intercessory prayer from Abraham. He obeyed immediately. He also gave them livestock (v. 14), land (v. 15),¹⁸ and,

¹⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 253.

¹⁶ Gill, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, 1:555.

¹⁷ Hartley, *Leviticus*, lxxi. “The prophets, selected psalms, and the rabbinic tradition forcefully teach that personal remorse and contrition were essential for an expiating sacrifice to be effective.” One such example would be Proverbs 15:8, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.” Character is essential to an acceptable sacrifice.

¹⁸ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 591. “He gives ample proof of a friendly disposition by inviting Abraham to settle own wherever he pleases. From passages like 26:18, we gather that Abraham stayed

crucially, “one thousand pieces of silver” (v. 16). Walton explains the significance of this gift: “A thousand shekels of silver is exorbitant. We encounter the same number in the Ugaritic poem *The Betrothal of Yarikh and Nikkalb*, in which a thousand shekels of silver is part of the bride price paid among the gods . . . In weight it equals about twenty-five pounds of silver; in value it is more than a worker could expect to make in a lifetime.”¹⁹ Abimelech does this to ensure Sarah’s “vindication before all . . . before all you are cleared” (v. 16). His generosity also demonstrates his respect and reverence for God and his prophet, and that he fully understood the gravity of his sin. Abimelech’s confession matched the severity of his sin. Yet again, Abimelech exemplifies the leader of Leviticus 4:22-26, but these gifts are still not enough to atone for his unintentional sin.

Parallels in the Remedy for Unintentional Sin

Both passages demonstrate the need for confession and repentance, but atonement is not complete until the remedy is applied. In Leviticus, the leader’s sin is atoned for by priestly intercession. After his sacrifice, the perpetrator shall stand aside as the priest “shall make atonement for him in regard to his sin, and he will be forgiven” (Lev 4:26). Ultimately, forgiveness requires a mediator. In Genesis 20, God procures a remedy for Abimelech by providing him the opportunity for Abraham to pray on his behalf (Gen 20:6).

Abimelech obtained the remedy when Abraham prayed and interceded for him (v. 17). The covenant with Abraham should dispel any doubts as to Abimelech’s intentions. Abimelech’s chief goal is a relationship with God. He seeks intercessory prayer and makes a covenant with Abraham (Gen 21:22-23) to keep access to a mediator. Like the leader of Leviticus 4:22-26, Abimelech recognizes the need for priestly mediation: “According to the lovingkindness that I have shown you [Abraham], you shall show me and the land in which you have sojourned” (Gen 21:23). Throughout each step in the process of atonement which God prescribes for Abimelech, we see that Genesis 20 puts Leviticus 4:22-26 into action.

The Prevention of Unintentional Sin

Genesis and Leviticus illustrate that there is an atonement for unintentional sin, but the question remains: What prevents a man from committing this sin? After all, how can one know what he does not know? The nature of unintentional sin is that it is committed out of ignorance. Thus, there is no plan of action that can guarantee knowledge of all the variables needed to make informed decisions. This means that the sinner must receive knowledge from an external source to prevent unintentional sin. In Genesis 20, we see that God’s intervention stops Abimelech from consummating the marriage. Since God alone cannot unintentionally sin, praying to the one who knows all things is the only prevention against sins of ignorance.

sufficiently along in the neighborhood to necessitate his digging wells. The offer was made in good faith and accepted in good faith.”

¹⁹ John H. Walton, “Genesis,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 95.

David discusses this issue in Psalm 19:12-13a. Numbers 15 contrasts unintentional sin (v. 22) and high-handed sins (v. 30). David does the same, calling unintentional sin “hidden,” indiscernible “errors.” He contrasts these with “presumptuous sins,” or sins of willful, arrogant action.²⁰ “Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also, keep back your slave from presumptuous sins” (Ps 19:12-13a). According to David, the only hope for preventing unintentional sin is divine intervention on his behalf. Man’s only hope is to appeal to God to consider our helpless state and act to spare us from committing unintentional sin. Genesis 20 affirms this through example, teaching, as Hamilton notes, that “only the restraining providence of God, rather than any moral vigor on Abimelech’s part, deterred Abimelech from sleeping with Sarah.”²¹

Abimelech ought to have been beseeching God to reveal the “hidden faults” that he could not see. Scripture clearly teaches that preemptive prayer is man’s only hope to avoid unintentional sin. Prayer is, therefore, both the remedy and the vessel for the prevention of unintentional sin. In short, the way to avoid committing unintentional sin is by completely depending on God. But should Abimelech be held accountable for not practicing preemptive prayer? After all, he did not have access to Psalm 19, for it had not been written yet. Could Abimelech even have known to practice preemptive prayer?

Abimelech’s Theology

Abimelech had what he needed to develop this practice. He knew that God is holy, as God showed by creating a perfect creation (Gen 1) and destroying Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). Additionally, creation testified to Abimelech that God is his creator (Rom 1:20-21). From this, he could have logically deduced God’s sovereignty over his life. But the desire to pray to God to avoid unintentional sin would also necessitate a belief in God’s omniscience. Given that the history of humanity was full of demonstrations of God’s omniscience, Abimelech could have deduced God’s omniscience from the knowledge that he is the creator of all things. The creator of all things knows all aspects of his creation because he made them. Indeed, Abimelech’s appeal to God in Genesis 20:5 indicates that he believed in God’s omniscience.

Furthermore, Abimelech’s ability to deduce his need for preemptive prayer is supported by the beliefs of righteous Job. Based on these same foundational truths of God’s holiness, omniscience, and sovereignty, Job recognized his complete dependence upon and need for God. Despite also living with no written Scripture, he asks, “Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?” (Job 28:20). The answer? “God understands its way, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and *sees everything under the heavens*” (Job 28:23-24;

²⁰ Leon J. Wood, “547 תַּי,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 239. Wood gives three possible senses of תַּי (presumptuous): (1) Presumption: actions done out of the presumption that one does not need God’s help. (2) Asserting oneself too strongly to the point of undue authority. (3) The sinful propping oneself to authority willfully. This third sense “seems to explain David’s distinction between ‘hidden’ (KJV ‘secret’) and ‘presumptuous’ sins (Ps 19:12-13 [H 13-14]). He prays that he may be cleansed from the ‘hidden,’ thus admitting his guilt in that respect; but asks that he may be kept from the ‘presumptuous.’”

²¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 18–50*, 71.

emphasis added). The testimony of creation and God’s past actions are enough for Job to conclude that God is omniscient and the only source of true wisdom and understanding. It is enough for Abimelech too. This knowledge was also enough to make Job practice intercessory prayer on behalf of his children “continually” (Job 1:5). Job’s realization of his inherent frailty and God’s inherent ability led to a vivacious prayer life; it ought to have elicited the same response from Abimelech. Abimelech had enough information to recognize his profound dependence on God and practice the prevention to unintentional sin: preemptive prayer.

The Sin of Apathetic Independence

We may conclude that Abimelech’s lack of dependence on God in prayer greatly increased his susceptibility to unintentional sin. What is the cause of this inactivity? It stems from the root cause of unintentional sin: a spiritual state I term *apathetic independence*. For those who fear God and desire to follow him in all aspects of life, the possibility of unintentional sin is abhorrent. When the righteous understands his proclivity to unintentional sin, he will not cease to pray for God to intervene on his behalf. He would spare no effort in his attempts to please the God he loves. Abimelech showed his knowledge of God was sufficient to evoke this response. His failure and subsequent rebuke showed his flawed state.

Abimelech’s heart was in a state of apathetic independence. He did not consider that God alone has perfect prescience, nor that he is the only means to avoid unintentional sin. How foolish of Abimelech to know God’s power and not consider his creator worthy of his utmost reliance in prayer! Genesis 20 demonstrates the root cause of unintentional sin is a heart attitude: the sin of apathetic independence.

How does apathetic independence arise in the human heart? *Pride* is its dreadful source. Abimelech thought himself capable enough to make his own choices. He valued his own knowledge and the testimony of Sarah and Abraham as sufficient to justify his pursuit of marriage.²² The moment Abimelech became conceited enough not to consult God, he express-mailed an invitation for unintentional sin to dominate his life. Abimelech understood this marriage would affect his kingdom; this was precisely his goal, to form “an economic relationship with the Abraham clan.”²³ Through it all, Abimelech hoped to ensure his posterity, but his apathetic independence almost destroyed it. Considering God’s unique ability to know all things, Abimelech’s apathy toward consultation is egregiously foolish.

Abimelech moved quickly to ensure his access to God, for Abimelech would not again tolerate the threat of unintentional sin. In addition to bestowing illustrious gifts on Abraham, Abimelech sought to form a covenant with Abraham (Gen 21:22-23). In doing so, he obtained a lifetime of access to God through the prophet. His actions show his newfound dependence on God. God worked through these horrid circumstances so that Abimelech would intuitively understand the root cause of

²² Could Abimelech be excused for trusting the word of the prophet and his wife? God’s indictment of Abimelech leaves no doubt that he is still accountable. While the people of this time are not afforded the same access to God as New Testament believers, Hagar’s encounter with the angel of Yahweh (Gen 16) demonstrates that God does hear the prayers of the afflicted. Thus, Abimelech, like Job, knew enough to be practicing unceasing prayer and is liable for all the consequences of apathetic independence.

²³ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 251.

unintentional sin, and that the Abrahamic covenant would be shown to be inexorable. Indeed, Abraham's name is still made great despite his deception and doubt of divine protection (Gen 12:2). Even in Genesis 20 this truth remains; God fulfills his covenant despite the imperfection of its recipients. As Phillips observes, "Notice how the Lord orchestrated a genuine reconciliation. By praying for Abimelech, the patriarch gained an opportunity to make restitution and perform a ministry. Abimelech, in return, offered Abraham the privilege of protected residence on his lands . . . Genesis 21 will show Abraham and Abimelech living together in peace. And working out their problems in good faith."²⁴ God provided the means for Abimelech to avoid sins of ignorance in the future. His apathetic independence now exposed, Abimelech can now rely on God in prayer and live with Abraham. Clearly, unintentional sin was a vice to humanity in the Old Testament, but is it still a danger to New Testament saints who enjoy "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," such as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:3)?

Unintentional Sin in the Church Age

Few direct mentions of unintentional sin are found in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews references it in chapter 9: "Now even the first covenant had requirements of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary . . . only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance" (Heb 9:1, 7). In fact, he even contrasts it with intentional sin a chapter later: "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (Heb 10:26). But why mention unintentional sin specifically?

It is no accident that the author of Hebrews mentions unintentional sin in the same context where he stresses that Christ is the perfect "high priest" (v. 11), that he obtained "eternal redemption" (v. 12), that he is able to "cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (v. 14), that he is the "mediator," and that he was "manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (v. 26). Clearly, the apostles were aware of this issue. They recognized that Christ is the solution to unintentional sin. Through his death, he obtained for us eternal access to the divine courtroom through prayer, to ask God to intervene on our behalf. Our high priest's defeat of unintentional sin brings glory to God.

Thus, Jesus is not unaware of unintentional sin. In Luke 12, he distinguishes between unintentional sin and high-handed sins. In his parable, Jesus describes the punishment for slaves who fail out of ignorance and those who decide to disobey. "And that slave who *knew* his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many beatings, but the one who *did not know* it, and committed deeds worthy of a beating, will receive but a few (Luke 12:47-48; emphasis added). The saints of the modern church enjoy the intercession of the merciful Son of God who understands our proclivity to unintentional sin. Our tool of war against unintentional sin remains unchanged in the church age.

In fact, our sword of prayer is sharper than ever. Hebrews 10:19 urges us to use this sword: "Therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by

²⁴ Richard D. Phillips, *Genesis*, Reformed Expository Commentaries (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2023), 13.

the blood of Jesus . . . and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.” Christ’s death for us and his unceasing intercession on our behalf should drive us to our knees in prayerful adoration. The human frailty that drives unintentional sin is an obstacle that can be overcome in Christ. Christ’s death on the cross made a way for the Holy Spirit to indwell us, and the Spirit “helps our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26). The saints of the church age have the indispensable gifts of the indwelling Spirit and the Son of God who beseech the Father to intervene for us.

Yet, unintentional sin remains a threat, and so the church must practice preemptive prayer. Jesus said, “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41). Jesus calls believers to pray preemptively. Though we, like Abimelech, can intend good, we may still sin. Though we may have the character of a prophet like Abraham, we are still dependent on God for our holiness. Phillips’s admonition is timely: “Abraham’s twice-told lie thus serves as a caution against our own propensity to sin, and sin again.”²⁵ We must draw near to God in preemptive prayer, or unintentional sin and its dire consequences may draw near to us.

If we do not feel our profound weakness and helplessness in the fight against sin, then we have not understood Genesis 20 or Leviticus 4. Unintentional sin should drive us to our knees in proactive prayer, practicing it “at all times” (Eph 6:18). James teaches us the correct response to our weakness: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (Jas 1:5). Obtaining heavenly wisdom is our great hope in the battle against unintentional sin. God has not left the Christian without the tools to fight. Each believer must fight apathetic independence with preemptive prayer.

Conclusion

Genesis 20 illustrates the dynamics of unintentional sin. This narrative is not a redundant rehearsal of Pharaoh’s sin in Genesis 12, nor is it without application for the modern day. This passage teaches us the implications of unintentional sin through the example of Abimelech. This narrative is a reminder that mankind is prone to failure. It teaches us that though unintentional sins are committed in ignorance, God is perfectly just to punish those who commit them. Genesis shows that all unknowingly sin, but there is a great hope. Christ has secured our righteousness before God so that no unintentional sin can be imputed to our account. Abimelech’s example exhorts the reverent laity to forsake apathetic independence and heed the call to humble, unceasing preemptive prayer to their great High Priest to intervene on their behalf. Ultimately, the severity, remedy, prevention, and root cause of unintentional sin drive us to the cross. There we find forgiveness and the strength to fight the unknown. Let us take comfort in this: “Yahweh is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon him in truth. He will work out the desire of those who fear Him; He will hear their cry for help and He will save them” (Ps 145:18-19).

²⁵ Phillips, *Genesis*, 7.

**BOAZ’S PRAYER:
REFUGE AND REDEMPTION UNDER
THE WINGS OF YAHWEH**

Elizabeth Powell¹

* * * * *

In the time of the exodus, God revealed himself as Yahweh, the one who delivered and redeemed Israel on eagles’ wings, the personal yet transcendent God of the special covenant with Israel. In Boaz’s prayer that God would reward and provide for Ruth, Boaz refers to God as Yahweh under whose wings Ruth sought refuge—language taken from God’s revelation of himself during the exodus and in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. This article aims to show how Boaz’s metaphor of Yahweh’s wings highlights (1) the nature of Ruth’s faith in the God of Israel, (2) the character of Yahweh as the God who redeems, protects, and provides, and (3) the reflection of Yahweh’s character in Boaz.

Key words: Ruth, Boaz, exodus, wings, refuge, covenant, redeemer

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“Now it happened in the days when the judges judged that there was a famine in the land” (Ruth 1:1).² So begins the book of Ruth, set in the dark ages of the judges, a time of violence, Baal-worship, rampant immorality, apostasy, and oppression—a time when “there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25). Not even the judges whom God raised up to lead his people were righteous, many of them leading Israel back into idolatry and lives of blatant disobedience and unfaithfulness. Into this darkness glimmers the story of Ruth the Moabitess. The book of Ruth begins with a famine, a curse for covenant disobedience and an indication of the people’s rebellion (Deut 28:23-24).³ Rather than repenting in covenant faithfulness, a man named Elimelech moved his family to the detestable land of Moab to escape the famine, where he died with his two sons, leaving behind

¹ Elizabeth Powell is a senior majoring in Journalism and majoring in Biblical Studies with an emphasis in Christian Education and Ministry. She may be contacted at powellen@masters.edu.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the Legacy Standard Bible.

³ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 624.

his widow Naomi and his two widowed Moabite daughters-in-law. Rumors of God visiting his people with food brought Naomi and one daughter-in-law back to Naomi's hometown, Bethlehem. It is here, facing her mother-in-law's bitterness and the town's rejection, that the faith of Ruth the Moabitess, forbidden by virtue of her ethnicity to enter the covenant community of God (Deut 23:3), shines bright—a reflection of the faithful God to whom she has transferred her allegiance.⁴

This faith is highlighted in Boaz's prayer for Ruth in Ruth 2:12, which describes Yahweh as "the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge," language that is intended to remind the reader of God's special deliverance of Israel from Egypt, his redemption of them from slavery, and his protection and provision for them as his special possession. God's covenant faithfulness to his people is shown through Boaz's use of exodus language in his prayer for Ruth (2:12), which highlights the mighty promises and character of God and calls all people to respond by finding refuge under the wings of Yahweh, the God of Israel. This article will seek to better understand the meaning of Boaz's prayer in Ruth 2:12 by evaluating the meaning of the name "Yahweh," explaining the intertextual significance of Exodus 19:4 and Deuteronomy 32, and examining the significance of the author's use of wing language in Ruth 3:9.

The Name of Yahweh in Exodus 6:2-8

Boaz's prayer for Ruth begins and ends with the covenant name for the God of Israel, Yahweh: "May Yahweh fully repay your work, and may your wages be full from Yahweh" (Ruth 2:12). Though he revealed himself and established his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty, Yahweh is the name by which God made himself known to the Israelites as he remembered his covenant with them and delivered them out of Egypt (Exod 6:2-8).⁵ Blackburn observes that "the character of the Lord as expressed in 6:3 is one who is faithful to his covenant commitments. The fulfillment of the promises will bring with it an understanding of the Lord as one who fulfills his word."⁶ As such, the name Yahweh is tied to the covenant made with the patriarchs and developed in the exodus and Mosaic covenant—the name by which he redeems his people with an outstretched arm from slavery in Egypt (6:6).⁷

The name Yahweh speaks of transcendence, derived from the verb הָיָה (*hāyā*), "to be" or exist,⁸ denoting the utter self-existence of God; yet it also signifies nearness and a relationship, for by it he proclaims Israel to be his covenant people with the words, "I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Ruth: The Romance of Redemption* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1943), 16.

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 115.

⁶ W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 28.

⁷ David Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge: The Message of Ruth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 72.

⁸ Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Johann Jakob Stamm, Benedikt Hartmann, Zeev Ben-Hayyim, et al., trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 243–44.

that I am Yahweh your God” (Exod 6:7). By this name, Yahweh assigns to Israel a unique status as “his own people in a way that no other people were,” a special covenantal relationship that carries almost a familial tie and commitment.⁹ It is a name that is also tied to the inheritance, promised first to Abraham and the patriarchs by the name *El Shaddai*, but here confirmed and promised again to the children of Israel by the name Yahweh: “I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am Yahweh” (6:8). Wrapped up in Yahweh’s name is the covenantal relationship between God and his people, the redemption of his people, and their promised inheritance in the land. In light of the name’s meaning, it is significant that the first word Boaz speaks in Ruth is “Yahweh,” particularly in a time that is marked by turning away from Yahweh and his covenant (Ruth 2:4). It is this Yahweh that Boaz calls on to bless Ruth.

Boaz’s prayer for Ruth in the name of Yahweh is astounding, not the least because Ruth was a Moabitess and “Yahweh, the God of Israel” is so connected to the covenant, redemption, and relationship with his people. Such a prayer does not seem to fit with one who is excluded from the assembly (Deut 23:3), descended from the very people born of Lot’s incest, and whose people had historically been at great odds with Israel, even tempting the Israelites to follow false gods (Gen 19; Num 20, 25). Yet Boaz’s words make sense when considering the context of Ruth 1:16-17, which records Ruth’s oath of allegiance to Naomi, binding her to Naomi instead of abandoning her, as Orpah did, to go back to her gods and her people in Moab. Of Ruth’s oath, Hubbard writes,

Significantly, though the oath formula normally has Elohim, Ruth invoked the personal, covenantal name Yahweh—the only time in the book in which she does so. Since one appeals to one’s own deity to enforce an oath, she clearly implies that Yahweh, not Chemosh [the Moabite god] is now her God, the guardian of her future. Hence, while the OT has no fully developed idea of conversion, vv. 16-17 suggest a commitment tantamount to such a change.¹⁰

Ruth’s language in 1:16-17 is also remarkably similar to Yahweh’s words in Exodus 6:7. Yahweh declared to Israel, “I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am Yahweh your God” (Exod 6:7). Ruth now claims before Naomi, “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16), a direct reference to Yahweh’s oath of himself to Israel. Yahweh’s language in Exodus 6:7 of taking to himself a people and being to them their God is considered by scholars to be “covenant formula” language, “derive[d] from marriage and adoption formulas found in the Israelite and ancient Near Eastern world,” and thus carrying the weight and closeness of a familial relationship and bond.¹¹ Though

⁹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 172; Frank Moore Cross, “Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel,” in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 3–21.

¹⁰ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 120.

¹¹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 120; Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 103.

other occasions are recorded throughout Scripture where foreigners praise the God of Israel, Ruth's outright confession of loyalty to Yahweh can only be matched with Rahab's confession in Joshua 2:11 in its boldness and commitment.¹² Such a confession and change of loyalty by Ruth the Moabitess could hardly go unnoticed in little Bethlehem. It is clear that Boaz has heard of Ruth's kindness to her mother-in-law as well as her radical commitment and transferal of allegiance to Yahweh (2:11-12). Hence, he prays that Yahweh would repay and reward her, and he describes her as one who has taken shelter under the wings of the one true God.

The Wings of Yahweh in Exodus 19:4

The metaphor of wings is used of Yahweh only twice before the book of Ruth was written. Both times it is used in relation to the exodus. The language of Yahweh's wings first appears in Exodus 19:4, where God introduces the terms of the Mosaic covenant to Moses.¹³ In extending this covenant to the people of Israel, the invitation "is predicated on the great divine acts of the past which Israel has herself experienced."¹⁴ Hence, Yahweh describes his deliverance of Israel in these words: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself" (Exod 19:4). The action is the Lord's, not Israel's, and thus Israel could not take credit, "for her deliverance reinforces the message of the exodus: that the Lord is both willing and able to do Israel good."¹⁵ Yahweh's swift deliverance of Israel fulfilled his promise made in Exodus 6:6 to rescue and redeem his people with an outstretched arm from slavery in Egypt. The concept of wings in relation to deliverance and protection was used often among the Egyptians, who portrayed gods that offered protection as having wings of safety.¹⁶ It is no wonder that Yahweh, the one true God, chose to identify himself to his people, who once lived as slaves in Egypt, as having wings of deliverance that defeated the false gods of Egypt. It is also no wonder also that Boaz uses this phrase to describe Ruth's position and response to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Having once been outside the covenant because of her status as a foreigner, she, in abandoning her home and family and committing herself fully to Yahweh, has now found deliverance, protection, and a covenant relationship with him. In a particular way, she would later find redemption and inheritance through her request of Boaz to cover her with his wing—a request for him to marry her, coupled with the

¹² Hubbard mentions Naaman's confession in 2 Kings 5:15 as another bold example of a foreigner acknowledging and committing to the God of Israel. See Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 118.

¹³ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 300.

¹⁴ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 115.

¹⁵ Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 88.

¹⁶ According to Keel, the Egyptian hieroglyph for a bird is different from the hieroglyph with a simple pair of wings—the latter represented protection. Moses, having grown up under Egyptian influence would have been well-acquainted with this symbolism and how the metaphor of Yahweh's wings would be significant to a people living in that context. See Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (New York: Seabury, 1978), 190–92.

call for him to redeem Naomi's property and ultimately redeem the inheritance that belonged to her husband.¹⁷

To return to Exodus 19, the goal of Yahweh's redemption of Israel was to bring Israel to himself, a phrase that speaks of intimate care and intentionality—Yahweh is setting Israel apart for his own purposes. These purposes are named in verses 5 and 6. If Israel would keep the terms of the covenant, they would be “My treasured possession among all the peoples... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:5-6). Such a calling made Israel distinct from all the other nations, yet also gave them the specific role of pointing those nations to Yahweh, the one true God, by virtue of being a “kingdom of priests” (19:6).¹⁸ As Childs notes, “The covenant responsibility encompasses her whole life, defining her relation to God and to her neighbors, and the quality of her existence.”¹⁹ It was the wings of God that not only bore Israel out of Egypt, but also that carried them to Yahweh to be set apart for Yahweh, an identity expressed in their new role as intermediary among the nations (19:4). His act of bringing Israel to himself describes “the entering into covenant relationship (which is ultimately a family relationship) with the only true God.”²⁰ Thus, Exodus 19:4 clearly relates the language of wings to Yahweh's redemption of Israel, his covenant relationship with them, and the familial care and protection that are tied to that covenant.

In the context of the book of Ruth, Israel is no longer acting in obedience to the covenant, nor are they living out their calling as a kingdom of priests who should extend to the nations the message of the one true God, through whom all the nations were to be blessed. Rather, Naomi tries to send Ruth and Orpah back to their people and their pagan gods, and the people of Bethlehem are unfriendly to Ruth the Moabitess.²¹ Yet, by God's grace, Ruth turns to him and takes refuge in him—in fact, she ends up bringing blessing to Naomi and the people of Bethlehem by her faithfulness to the covenant and her lovingkindness. Furthermore, it is through Ruth that the house of David would be built and the Messiah would come.²² In the face of

¹⁷ There is good reason to believe that the gesture of covering with one's wing signified a proposal in Ancient Near Eastern culture. See Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 482–83.

¹⁸ Rather than live in isolation from the peoples, Israel was given the role of an intermediary, a chosen people that functioned to not only make Yahweh known to the world, but also to make a way for the nations to have a relationship with Yahweh. Concerning Israel, Stuart (*Exodus*, 423) observes, “They were not to be a people unto themselves, enjoying their special relationship with God and paying no attention to the rest of the world. Rather they were to represent him to the rest of the world and attempt to bring the rest of the world to him.”

¹⁹ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 367.

²⁰ Stuart, *Exodus*, 422; Cross, “Kinship and Covenant,” 3–21.

²¹ Though the lack of welcome for Ruth is not explicitly stated, Block notes that when the widows return to Bethlehem, the townspeople speak only of Naomi, not recognizing the Moabitess who returned with her. Naomi then cries out that she has returned “empty,” though, indeed, her foreign daughter-in-law has just bound her life and allegiance to Naomi. Additionally, the account of Ruth's going to glean in Boaz's field exposes the less-than-friendly attitude of Boaz's workers toward the Moabitess. See Daniel I. Block, *Ruth: The King is Coming*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 104, 127–28.

²² The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy tracing back to Perez, the son of Judah, and ending with David, Ruth and Boaz's great-grandson (Ruth 4:18-22). Ruth's story ultimately displays God's faithfulness in preserving the line of Judah, through whom the promised seed and scepter would come (Gen 3:15; 49:10).

a nation which was not fulfilling its role as a kingdom of priests, this Gentile woman became the avenue through which Israel and all the nations would be blessed.

The Wings of Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32

Ruth's commitment to the God of Israel is tied to her finding shelter under his wings, a metaphor that is used after Exodus 19:4 in only one other place before Boaz's prayer, in Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses. Here again it is used in relation to God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. At the end of Israel's forty years of wandering in the desert, God commissioned Moses to write this song and teach it to the sons of Israel, for it would be "a witness for [Yahweh] against the sons of Israel" when they turned away from him to serve other gods and broke his covenant (Deut 31:19-22). The language of the song harkens back to the earlier promises and covenant passages in Exodus 6:2-8 and 19:4-6, that Yahweh bought back (redeemed) his people (Deut 32:6), that he set apart their inheritance in the land (Deut 32:8), and he chose them as his own inheritance (Deut 32:9), just as he had chosen them to be his own special possession in Exodus 19:5. Moses then employs the same language of Yahweh's wings, describing in more depth how God found Israel in the wilderness, encircled and cared for him and hovered over the nest. Then as an eagle, "He spread His wings and caught them; He carried them on His pinions. Yahweh alone guided him, and there was no foreign god with him" (Deut 32:10-11). The care of Yahweh for his people is sweepingly visualized from verses 6 to 14, for "Yahweh alone, and no pagan god, was responsible for their deliverance from Egypt, successful transit through the wilderness, and arrival at the plains of Moab."²³ Everything was due to his supernatural hand repeatedly at work.²⁴

Despite everything Yahweh had done for his people, the song predicts how Israel will reject God their Creator and serve strange and foreign gods, "treat[ing] the Rock of his salvation with wicked foolishness" (Deut 32:15). Israel's infidelity would provoke God to jealousy—their false worship to created images was detestable to the one who made and purchased Israel to be his own possession. Therefore, Yahweh says, "They have made Me jealous with what is not God... So I will make them jealous with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a wickedly foolish nation" (32:21). Paul later quotes Moses's words in Romans 10:19, making the point that the Gentiles who came to believe in Jesus the Messiah were to provoke the people of Israel, God's chosen people, to jealousy so that they would turn to him.²⁵

In light of Deuteronomy 32, the time of the Judges in which Ruth takes place would have been just the sort of time in which Moses's song was meant to be sung, a time when Israel had turned away from Yahweh and his covenant to follow after foreign gods; a time when Yahweh hid his face because of the wickedness of his people (Deut 32:16-20). Perhaps the author of Ruth had Deuteronomy 32 in mind as

²³ Michael A. Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Numbers to Ruth*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 784.

²⁴ Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," 784.

²⁵ John F. MacArthur, *Romans 9–16*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 89.

he wrote, for the setting, the language, and the story of Ruth correspond in many ways to Moses's song. Ruth, the Gentile Moabitess, had found refuge under the wings of God, though the nation of Israel had abandoned him. She, one of those who were "not a people" (32:21), was accepted into the covenant with Yahweh and pledged her allegiance and her life to him and to his people—and in fact would act as the instrument of blessing upon them, just as they ought to have done for her. By Ruth, Naomi would be physically provided for and would regain her family and her inheritance. Ruth would also bear a son who would produce the line of David, through whom the Messiah would come to bring true healing in his wings (Mal 4:2) and redemption to all who would trust in him.²⁶

The action of seeking refuge under Yahweh's wings should be considered. The root of this verb found in Ruth 2:12 is *ḥāsā* (הָסָא), meaning to seek protection or refuge, or to cover or hide oneself.²⁷ It is used often in the Psalms, carrying with it a sense of complete safety amid violence, anxiety, danger, and sorrow, and almost always in relation to taking refuge in Yahweh.²⁸ Yet the first time it is used in the Bible is in Deuteronomy 32:37: "And [Yahweh] will say, 'Where are their gods, the rock in which they sought refuge?'" This builds on the previous mention in the song of Israel abandoning Yahweh her rock (32:15, 18). Thus, to seek refuge in something is to put one's whole trust in it and give one's whole allegiance to it.

In seeking refuge under the wings of Yahweh, Ruth had transferred her spiritual and ethnic allegiance to Yahweh and his people Israel, something we know to be true from her confession in Ruth 1:16-17, where she clings to Naomi and determines to stay with her, even in her burial place, abandoning home, family, and gods in Moab.²⁹ Thus, Boaz in his prayer acknowledges her status as part of the covenant and prays that she would be repaid and rewarded in full by Yahweh for her kindness to her mother-in-law and commitment to Yahweh. Ruth's response of amazement recognizes the weight of Boaz's prayer and statement, that he would show kindness to a Moabitess who formerly had no share among God's people. Hence, she says, "You have comforted me and indeed have spoken to the heart of your servant-woman, though I am not like one of your servant-women" (Ruth 2:13). This connection between refuge under Yahweh's wings and comfort would be echoed in Isaiah 40, written to a people in exile waiting for the promised relief: "'Comfort, O comfort my people,' says your God," it begins, ending with the glorious promise that "those who hope in Yahweh will gain new power; they will mount up with wings like eagles; they will run and not get tired; they will walk and not become weary" (Isa 40:1, 31).

The Use of Wings in Ruth 3:9

It is likely that Ruth had Boaz's prayer (2:12) in mind when she spoke to him in 3:9, calling on him to "spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are a

²⁶ Brian T. German, *Haggai and Malachi*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2024), 519.

²⁷ Köhler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 337.

²⁸ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 512.

²⁹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 167–68.

kinsman redeemer.” It is widely recognized that the gesture of covering with one’s wing (sometimes translated as “garment”) signifies a marriage proposal, where the man becomes the sustainer and protector of the woman he covers. This terminology is found also in Ezekiel 16:8 with the same indication.³⁰ Block suggests that Ruth’s request was a play on words, both requesting marriage and asking Boaz himself to be the answer to his earlier prayer that Ruth would find refuge under the wings of Yahweh (Ruth 2:12). “Its meaning was clear in the Israelite context in which it was given. Translated literally, ‘to spread one’s wing over’ (עַל כַּנְף פָּרַשׁ) obviously plays on 2:12, where כַּנְפֵי יְיָ, ‘wings,’ had served as a metaphor for the refuge provided by YHWH, the God of Israel.”³¹ The author’s intentional language makes clear that Ruth, who has already found refuge under Yahweh’s wings, is asking Boaz to now let her come under his wings, and thus be the means in which Yahweh cares for her and Naomi. Her justification for asking him to spread his wing over her was that he was a redeemer, a *gōēl*—for the wings of Yahweh had always been a symbol of the redemption that he performed in delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt. Schwab makes the connection: “Ruth had sheltered under Yahweh’s wings. Now she asks Boaz to do for her what Yahweh has done. Here Boaz is in parallel relation to Yahweh as *gōēl*.”³²

Boaz’s role as a redeemer is most obviously articulated in his buying back Naomi’s land, though he would take a step further and seal that redemption by giving up his line in levirate marriage to Ruth, a tremendous act of lovingkindness for the sake of Naomi and Ruth.³³ In marrying Ruth, Boaz ultimately would lay down his own name to raise up the name of her deceased husband. And in buying back the land, Boaz would allow Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, to keep the inheritance of the land that rightfully belonged to their family—part of the inheritance guaranteed by Yahweh to his people through the covenant (Exod 6:7). It was the combination of these two actions which allowed Boaz to make the brilliant legal move he did in chapter 4, laying down his name in levirate marriage to Ruth and thus securing the inheritance, regardless of whether the nearer redeemer decided to purchase the property for himself. In the same way that Yahweh redeemed his people from slavery and made them his own possession (Exod 6:6-8), finding them in the wilderness and protecting them with his wings (Deut 32:9-11), so Boaz would act as Naomi and

³⁰ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 482–83.

³¹ Block, *Ruth: The King is Coming*, 182.

³² George M. Schwab, “Ruth,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Numbers to Ruth*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 1334. I disagree with Schwab’s view that this passage is plainly erotic and sexual in nature. The character of Boaz and Ruth and the context forbid such a reading of the text. However, Schwab’s thoughts on Boaz as the *gōēl* were helpful in grasping the parallels between Yahweh and Boaz.

³³ The responsibility of a kinsman redeemer is found in Lev 25:25, “If a brother of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his possession of land, then his nearest kinsman redeemer is to come and redeem what his brother has sold.” (See also the case of the inheritance of Zelophehad’s daughters in Num 27:1-11). The act of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10) obligated a man to marry his brother’s wife in order to bear children in his brother’s name and so keep his brother’s line alive. Levirate marriage is not inherently tied to the role of the redeemer, but in the case of Ruth, Boaz would willingly choose to let his name die to raise up Ruth’s deceased husband’s name, though he was not her husband’s brother and had no legal obligation to do so (Ruth 4:10). Though a nearer redeemer might buy back the land now, if Boaz had a son in the name of Ruth’s former husband, that son would become an even nearer redeemer—and in the year of Jubilee, the property and inheritance would then return to the family (Lev 25:23-28; Num 27:1-11).

Ruth's redeemer, buying back the inheritance and raising it up both through the act of redemption and the act of levirate marriage. Ruth would thus receive her reward in full from Yahweh, under whose wings she had come to find refuge. The ultimate prize would come after her marriage to Boaz, when Yahweh granted her conception. Ruth would bear a son through whom the seed of Genesis 3:15 would come to redeem the whole world, her own "kinsman redeemer today" whose name would be "proclaimed in Israel" (Ruth 4:14). Way points out that "while God is the ultimate *go'el* of his people (e.g., Exod. 6:6; 15:13), which is a major theme in Psalms, Isaiah, and the New Testament, God's people may also function in the same capacity for the benefit of each other."³⁴ Yet it is also God's people acting in this way that points them to the greatest Redeemer, Yahweh himself.

Conclusion

The language of the exodus, of God's spreading his wing over Israel and carrying her, redeeming her, and bringing her into a covenant relationship with himself—this language is fully embedded in the concept of finding refuge under Yahweh's wings in Boaz's prayer. This is language that sheds light also on Ruth's request that Boaz cover her with his wing, an answer to his own prayer and an extension of God's lovingkindness to Ruth through a human being, Boaz. The imagery is certainly found throughout the Psalms, as the psalmist cries out in hope that he might find refuge in the shadow of Yahweh's wings. Wilch suggests that "the motif of the LORD's sheltering wings appears in psalms by David (ET Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7), who may have been influenced by this passage (Ruth 2:12) in the narrative of his family history."³⁵ Ultimately, the language of wings points to Yahweh, the God of Israel, who redeemed his people out of slavery and lavished his care over this people who became his treasured possession and inheritance. Yahweh is faithful to the covenant and worthy of worship. How much more should we be compelled to find refuge under the wings of our great Redeemer, who redeems us from slavery to sin for himself (Rom 6:6), the one in whom we may truly find protection and deliverance.

³⁴ Kenneth C. Way, *Judges and Ruth*, Text the Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 203–4.

³⁵ John R. Wilch, *Ruth*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 224–25.

**PROTECTOR, PROVIDER, PROTOTYPE:
HOW BOAZ SETS THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION
FOR PROPER KINGSHIP**

Daniel Lim¹

* * * * *

The book of Ruth not only provides a stirring narrative of Ruth and Naomi but also presents a model for all the future kings of Israel to follow: Boaz, the mighty man of excellence. He lives in accordance with the commands for the king in Deuteronomy 17 and models the royal admonitions of Psalm 72 and Proverbs 31. He also selflessly sacrifices himself to redeem the land and the lives of those he loves, foreshadowing the coming king. Boaz provides a clearer picture of the ultimate redeemer, who will supersede his ancestor's work when he redeems all of creation.

Key words: Boaz, Ruth, *gibbor hayil*, kingship, redemption

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The book of Ruth has been referred to as “the Romance of Redemption,”² a title which highlights the love story that takes place after a destitute and widowed Moabitess, Ruth, commits her life to her mother-in-law Naomi and travels back to Israel with her. Commentaries and books on Ruth are replete with such romance-oriented accounts, and when they do cover another aspect of the story they often focus on Ruth’s courage and strength as a prime example of biblical femininity.³ While these are topics undeniably worthy of such study, one important character is often ignored: Boaz, the defender and provider, the man God uses to reverse the fortunes of Naomi and Ruth. Not only does he serve as the male protagonist of the story, he is shown to be something far deeper—a foreshadowing of the righteous individual whom God will anoint as his king. He is a man who sets the spiritual standard for all of Israel’s coming monarchs, a model of selflessness and sacrifice that future royalty would draw inspiration from. Boaz sets the theological foundation

¹ Daniel Lim is a sophomore majoring in Kinesiology with an emphasis in Pre-Allied Health. He may be contacted at limd1@masters.edu.

² M. R. Dehaan, *The Romance of Redemption: The Love Story of Boaz and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958); J. V. McGee, *Ruth, the Romance of Redemption* (Nashville: Nelson, 1982).

³ E.g., Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993).

for proper kingship by living in accordance with the commands for kings in Deuteronomy 17, modeling the godly king of Psalm 72 and Proverbs 31, and foreshadowing the Messiah through his selfless redemption in Ruth 4.

Commands for the King in Deuteronomy 17

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 is the only passage in the Pentateuch that lays down God’s statutes for the kings that will inevitably rule over Israel. Many have observed that Deuteronomy as a whole, and this passage in particular, provide a manual for Israel’s king.⁴ As Peter C. Craigie writes, “The legislation [of 17:14-20] does not expound in detail the character of the kingly office; rather it specifies the attitudes and characteristics that would be required of a king in a state that was primarily a theocracy.”⁵ Deuteronomy 17:14-20 can be divided into two sections: verses 14-17 command the Israelite king not to multiply horses, wives, or gold, while verses 18-20 instruct the king to copy out and read the word of Yahweh, that he might fear the Lord and keep his commandments.

While the first statute in 17:14-17 may appear to be a simple rule against the excessive accumulation of physical goods and pleasures, its true purpose was to guide where the king placed his trust. Ancient kings used horses as beasts of battle, pulling chariots and carrying cavalry to great effect in a time when infantry was the most common form of military force.⁶ They married many wives, especially from foreign nations, to build alliances with other kingdoms.⁷ Kings also hoarded gold and silver to expand the kingdom and showcase status. These three things were all essential to every ancient king, which is precisely why God forbade his chosen servant from amassing them. As Adolph L. Harstad commented, “Kings must not find their strength in hordes of horses and must not lead Israel back to Egypt to acquire horses. Kings are not to seek prestige and satisfaction by gathering harems. They must not seek their wealth in gold and silver. Rather, a king’s delight is to be in the Torah of Yahweh.”⁸ God’s appointed king, and subsequently his people, would have to rely on Yahweh for military, political, and commercial success. Rejecting worldly securities would not only be a unique characteristic setting Israel’s king apart from the monarchs of other nations, it would also ensure that the king’s heart would not be turned away from the Lord.

The king’s reliance on God’s word directly ties into the next set of commandments in verses 18-20. The king is instructed to write a copy of the Torah, to keep it with him, and to read it daily so that he may fear the Lord. He is to observe God’s law, not lifting himself above his brothers or turning aside, so that he and his descendants may prosper long in the land. The king was to be a man of God and of his word, leading his people in obedience to the covenant—both of which are exemplified in Boaz.

⁴ E.g., Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013), 539.

⁵ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 253.

⁶ Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 255.

⁷ Craigie, 255.

⁸ Adolph L. Harstad, *Deuteronomy*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2022), 490.

Boaz's Godly Conduct in Ruth

Throughout the book of Ruth, it is clear that Boaz loves Yahweh. Boaz is first introduced in Ruth 2:1, but the first time that he speaks is in verse 4, when he greets his workers with a blessing. This blessing begins with “Yahweh,” the Lord’s name, and thus, Boaz reveals what is first in his own heart. What a refreshing relief it is for a man’s first words to be the name of the Lord in a time when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25)!⁹ As Mary Wilson Hannah writes, “Boaz greets his field hands by invoking the Lord’s presence among them, to which they respond by petitioning the Lord to bless him (v. 4). This exchange portrays Boaz’s godly leadership in cultivating a gracious work environment, especially by seeking the Lord’s blessed presence among his supervisors.”¹⁰ This also highlights another reality: Boaz is not just leading himself but also his people in the way of the Lord, just as the king of Deuteronomy 17 should. A community that not only acknowledges God but blesses one another in his name in the time of the Judges is a testament to Boaz’s godliness.¹¹ And it is not just the workers in Boaz’s field who reflect such a reality, but also the people in Bethlehem. Boaz is first introduced in Ruth 2:1 as a *gibbor hayil*, a title used to describe men who were mighty in war, wealthy, or skilled.¹² As such, he exerts much influence on the city, even referring to the elders of Bethlehem as his own. This influence is evidenced in the way that the Bethlehemites respond when Boaz reverses the misfortunes of Naomi and Ruth. They invoke the name of Yahweh to bless Boaz and Ruth, and for their house to achieve excellence (*hayil*) and fame and bring forth children (Ruth 4:11). Furthermore, Boaz not only leads his people spiritually but also provides for them physically. He creates work and ensures his workers enjoy the fruit of their labor during mealtimes (Ruth 2:14). How wonderful will it be when Israel has a king like Boaz, one who fosters the love of Yahweh in the hearts of his people and showers them with the abundance of God’s earthly blessings!

It is also evident that Boaz loves God’s word and obeys it through his treatment of Ruth and his handling of the legal logistics of redeeming Naomi’s land. There are a number of passages in Torah that deal with sojourners and foreigners, commanding the sons of Israel not to oppress them but to leave provisions for them in memory of their own time of sojourning in Egypt (e.g., Exod 22:21-24; Lev 19:33-34; Deut 24:17-18). Boaz goes above and beyond what is required of him by the law in his dealings with the Moabitess Ruth, forbidding the people of his field from physically assaulting or verbally abusing her (Ruth 2:8-9, 16). He not only allows her to glean in his field, as is commanded in Torah, but even tells his workers to drop extra barley for her—an economic sacrifice that no ordinary landowner would make in a harvest taking place after a severe famine.¹³ Wilch neatly summarizes the situation:

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

¹⁰ Mary Wilson Hannah, “Ruth,” in *ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 2: Deuteronomy–Ruth*, ed. Iain Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 700.

¹¹ John R. Wilch, *Ruth*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 213.

¹² E.g., Josh 6:2-3; 1 Kgs 15:20; 1 Sam 1:9.

¹³ Wilch, *Ruth*, 213.

Boaz was only required by the OT laws and customs to allow a resident alien or Israelite widow to glean at her own risk and expense, but he went far beyond the letter of the Law by ensuring her safety from physical and verbal abuse, welcoming her to glean in his field throughout the harvest season, providing extra ears intentionally discarded, and furnishing free drink and food.¹⁴

In addition to his moral qualifications, Boaz also demonstrates his mastery of the law in the redemption of Naomi's land in chapter 4. Not only does he honestly offer the opportunity to redeem the property to the closer relative, he also expertly intertwines it with the responsibility of levirate marriage with Ruth. While the two matters are not inherently related, Boaz artfully merges the two into a package deal, ensuring not only the welfare of Ruth but also provision for Naomi and the continuation of Elimelech's line.¹⁵ He does this by stating that he has acquired Ruth, potentially providing a closer relative who would be able to redeem the land later even if Boaz could not do so that day (Ruth 4:5). Boaz's redemption of Naomi's land shows not only his knowledge of these commandments, but also his ability to apply them in an unconventional way to accomplish the original intent of the law.

The Royal Admonitions of Psalm 72 and Proverbs 31

Boaz's godly actions not only evidence his love for Yahweh and his word, but they also provide a model for future kings. This can be seen in the royal passages of Psalm 72 and Proverbs 31. Psalm 72 is a messianic royal psalm praying for the king to rule well—for him to be blessed and bring blessing. Beth Tanner observes that Psalm 72 “presents the job description of the king in hymnic form.”¹⁶ Psalm 72 emphasizes the king's justice to the weak: “He will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted also, and him who has no helper. He will have compassion on the poor and needy, and the lives of the needy he will save” (Ps 72:12-13). The psalmist then prays in verses 16 and 17, “May there be abundance of grain in the earth on top of the mountains; may its fruit wave like the cedars of Lebanon . . . let all nations be blessed in him; let all nations call him blessed.” The king is to uphold justice by protecting and providing for the needy, and he will usher in covenant blessings of abundance. His rule should be one that positively affects even the outside nations and causes them to praise Yahweh.¹⁷

These verses perfectly reflect what Boaz does throughout the book, for he protects the destitute, marginalized, and foreigner Ruth, ensuring she has justice and provision. It is in Boaz's fields that she and Naomi first find relief from the pangs of the famine, reflecting the covenant promise of abundance in the land when the people follow God (Lev 26:3-5). Furthermore, Boaz's grace and mercy indeed caused Ruth

¹⁴ Wilch, *Ruth*, 228.

¹⁵ Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 241.

¹⁶ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 573.

¹⁷ C. John Collins, “The Psalms,” in *ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms—Song of Solomon*, ed. Iain Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 375.

to worship Yahweh, who led her to Boaz’s field and provided for her and Naomi not only more than enough food, but also a redeemer for their family. Psalm 72, then, prays for a king with the characteristics modeled by David’s great-grandfather Boaz.

Proverbs 31:1-9 provides a similar model for kingship, as King Lemuel recalls an oracle that his mother taught him. In these verses, Lemuel’s mother calls her son to rule well by abstaining from unrestrained sexual gratification and careless drinking, and instead to uphold justice for the defenseless.¹⁸ Andrew E. Steinmann writes of this section, “The imperative of . . . ‘to judge,’ does not simply mean ‘to condemn,’ but ‘to carry out justice,’ including the rescue of the innocent, the acquittal and vindication of those who are unfairly oppressed.”¹⁹ Again, Boaz illustrates this righteous king. Naomi and Ruth were obviously destitute and forsaken by their neighbors, which necessitated Ruth’s gleaning, and they had no way to regain their land. But God, in his perfect providence, introduced his servant Boaz at just the right time in their story. As King Lemuel’s mother exhorted her son, so Boaz defended those who could not defend themselves and carried out justice for the poor and helpless—once again modeling the conduct of the just king.

Boaz the Redeemer

Furthermore, Boaz models ideal kingship in his selfless sacrifice of redeeming Naomi’s line. Psalm 72 prays that the nations will bring tribute to the king and praise him because he defends the needy and pities the helpless, because “he will redeem their life from oppression and violence, and their blood will be precious in his sight” (Ps 72:14). The godly king, in imitation of the God who is king, is supposed to be a rescuer.²⁰ And while Boaz rescues the widows from their physical plight of hunger and homelessness, he also redeems them in a far deeper, more lasting way—he saves their line.

Boaz had no obligation to perpetuate the line of Elimelech; levirate marriage was to take place between the widow and the blood brother of her deceased spouse. Levirate marriage was not necessarily a desirable union for the brother, either—this responsibility essentially destroyed his name, as he now continued his brother’s line and house in his brother’s name.²¹ Such a sacrifice was so rare that there are only two quasi-mentions of it in the Bible: once in Genesis 38, with Judah and Tamar, and the other in Ruth 4, with Boaz and Ruth. So, why would Boaz go through with such a marriage? Why would a man of such status and wealth be willing to transfer that from his own name to the name of Mahlon, Ruth’s deceased husband? Mary Wilson Hannah answers this burning question: “Boaz chooses to absorb that risk and extend costly, self-sacrificial loving kindness in order to advance the cause of the defenseless, namely, two widows and the deceased (who cannot perpetuate their own

¹⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 507–9.

¹⁹ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 620.

²⁰ Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary Volume 3: Psalms 51–100* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 275 and John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 389.

²¹ Konkel, *Deuteronomy*, 241.

name). In this way Boaz imitates the Lord, who ‘purchased’ his people to deliver and bless them.”²²

Boaz lays down his own life for Ruth, who in no way deserved it, and is willing to strike his name from the record of history for Naomi and her line. Jesus, then, is the second and better Boaz, following his ancestor’s model and far surpassing him in not only the sacrifice but also the glory.²³ Boaz, through this act of redemption, unknowingly cements himself into the genealogy of the kings, which runs all the way to Christ. In the way that Boaz is a redeemer to Naomi and Ruth, Jesus is the ultimate redeemer to all who would place themselves under his wings of salvation.²⁴

A Defense of Boaz’s Character

However, some have raised concerns that, if justified, would disqualify Boaz from serving as an ideal model of kingship. These questions arise from the description of Boaz’s night encounter with Ruth, in which “Boaz ate and drank and his heart was merry, and he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came secretly and uncovered his feet and lay down” (Ruth 3:7). Did Boaz become drunk, and did he have immoral sexual relations with Ruth? Both of these behaviors are most unfit for a king, as Deuteronomy 17 clearly states and King Lemuel’s mother warns in Proverbs 31.²⁵

These questions can be answered, however, through careful examination of the verse and its context. Some authors acknowledge that such language as “Boaz drank and his heart was merry” could be perceived that he became inebriated after a night of harvest celebration.²⁶ However, this could not be further from the truth. John R. Wilch writes, “Naomi anticipated that after Boaz finished his work he would be ‘eating and drinking’ (3:3), but she did not mean that Boaz might get drunk and lapse into immorality . . . only that he would be in good spirits, for, unless one was too poor, wine would be expected at a full meal, especially after the harvest season.”²⁷ Drinking wine was a common aspect of that culture, especially at such festive occasions as the final day of the harvest, and does not signify drunkenness. The major argument for Boaz’s sobriety, though, is his status as a *gibbor hayil*—Boaz is a mighty man of excellence. Drunkenness befits neither his character nor what has been seen of him in the past two chapters.²⁸

But what of the accusations of Boaz’s sexual purity? This is foundational to demonstrating the moral qualifications of a king, and a common accusation of Boaz’s character is that he was guilty of sexual promiscuity with Ruth. These serious allegations stem from the rather suggestive language of the verse, which harkens back

²² Hannah, *Ruth*, 718.

²³ Donald S. Fortner, *Discovering Christ in Ruth: The Kinsman Redeemer* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 1999), 121.

²⁴ DeHaan, *The Romance of Redemption*, 128.

²⁵ Ryan Patrick O’Dowd, “Proverbs,” in *ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms–Song of Solomon*, ed. Iain Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 996–97.

²⁶ Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry, Ruth and Esther (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 51.

²⁷ Wilch, *Ruth*, 265.

²⁸ Hubbard, *Ruth*, 208.

to Genesis 19 and the abominable incest that occurred between the drunken Lot and his two daughters.²⁹ The main argument, however, is found in the language of feet. George M. Schwab highlights this in his commentary, asking, “What then does it mean for Ruth to ‘uncover his feet’? ‘Feet’ is also a euphemism for genitalia (Jdg 3:24; SS 5:3; Isa 7:20; Eze 16:25), and ‘uncover’ also suggests sexuality (Eze 16:37; 23:29; Lev 20:11-21). How far up his legs was Naomi counseling the oiled and alluring Ruth to uncover?”³⁰ Additionally, it seems at least a little suspicious that Boaz urges Ruth to stay the night with him, and to leave secretly in the morning.

A closer look at the text, however, proves that Boaz’s integrity has not been compromised. While the word “uncover” in conjunction with the word “nakedness” often refers to illicit sexual relations, the object of “uncover” in this verse is “foot-places,” quite literally meaning the place around Boaz’s feet. This language avoids sexual connotations by saying Ruth uncovered the *place* of Boaz’s feet rather than Ruth uncovered Boaz’s feet.³¹ In addition, it is preposterous that Boaz and Ruth (both described as people of excellence) would engage in such illicit sexual activity.³² It is also important to note that the author of Ruth is perfectly capable of saying when Boaz and Ruth have sex, as he does in Ruth 4:13.³³ As for all the secrecy following the midnight meeting, propriety and protocol dictated that the two, though pure in their intention and conversation, were not seen together in such a setting.³⁴ If Boaz was seen with Ruth alone at night in a secluded area, rumors of sexual scandal would spread, which might complicate matters with the redemption of Naomi’s land. Their secrecy was done not out of shame, but out of prudence. Boaz remains as a pillar of virtue and purity, a man fit to be followed by kings.

Conclusion

Boaz, in summary, sets the theological foundation for proper kingship. Throughout the book of Ruth, it is clear that he lives in accordance with the commands for kings in Deuteronomy 17 in his speech and conduct, which reflect his obvious love for Yahweh and his commands. Boaz’s defense of the helpless and his provision for the needy is the prime model for what the king should do, affirmed by the royal exhortations in Psalm 72 and Proverbs 31. More than that, Boaz functions as a foreshadowing of the future and better king, who would lay down his life not just for one family, but for the redemption of many. Boaz not only sets a standard for the kings of Israel, but he also sheds light on what the king to come will look like. Through his example the reader of the Old Testament draws one step closer to the character of the coming seed of Genesis 3:15, the Messiah who is the ultimate redeemer of all Creation.

²⁹ Wilch, *Ruth*, 269; Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry, Ruth and Esther (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 52.

³⁰ George M. Schwab, “Ruth,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Numbers–Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 1332.

³¹ Wilch, *Ruth*, 258.

³² Schwab, *Ruth*, 1337. Even Schwab admits that “feet” just might mean feet.

³³ Kenneth C. Way, *Judges and Ruth*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 204.

³⁴ Hannah, *Ruth*, 709.

**BEHOLD AND BECOME:
HEART TRANSFORMATION IN ISAIAH**

Hudson Lind¹

* * * * *

The book of Isaiah is more than a narrative of Judah’s hope and judgment. It is a transformational book designed to bring the reader through the deep darkness of their own hearts and into the great light of Jesus Christ. This article aims to trace Isaiah’s approach to heart transformation. To do this, we will descend with Isaiah into the lethal effects of idolatry, and rise with him into the life-giving hope of worshipping a holy and living God

Key words: heart, idolatry, guilt, deadened, behold, transformation, resemble, quickened, holy

* * * * *

The book of Isaiah shows us the mechanics of the heart.² Isaiah pops open the hood of our lives to display the inner workings of ourselves. To read, live, and pray the book humbly and expectantly is to have your heart calibrated to the glorious and holy God Isaiah portrays. Reader after reader has entered the book, been greeted with a grand story of Israel and their great God, and left with a better understanding of themselves. Through the gritty work of reading Isaiah, we encounter Judah in their hopeless rebellion, God in his astounding holiness, and ourselves in our desperate need of salvation. Who are we and what causes our condition? Isaiah weaves narrative, poetry, prophecy, and song to reveal something very important about ourselves: our hearts and therefore our actions will resemble what we revere.

Deadened Senses, Depravity, and Destruction: The Effect of a Dead Heart

A dead hearts makes deadly choices. The book of Isaiah opens with Judah experiencing the results of their deadly decisions. The book was written between 740

¹ Hudson Lind is a senior majoring in Biblical Studies with an emphasis in Biblical Counseling. He may be contacted at lindhf@masters.edu.

² In the context of Isaiah, heart and soul are used interchangeably, meaning the inner man. The non-physical part of our person that determines who we are and what we do.

and 681 BC, at the height of Assyria's power, as this Mesopotamian enemy conquered nation after nation, destroying their land and taking the inhabitants captive (Isa 10:13-14). They seemed to be an unstoppable force of violent and arrogant aggression, with the small nation of Judah being next on their hit list (Isa 10:11). Militarily speaking, Judah could never outlast Assyria. But this was not their only enemy, for Israel and Aram had also allied together to wage war on Jerusalem (Isa 7:1). Judah sat helplessly surrounded by these pressing dangers with no hope for escape.

Judah's king, Ahaz, was a weak man who led Judah into idolatry and rebellion against Yahweh. Isaiah 7 recounts how, when faced with either trusting the Lord or Assyria for deliverance, Ahaz chose to trust what he could see and, as a result, rejected God's salvation. In a desperate attempt to save his nation, he foolishly allied himself with Assyria. Ahaz, and therefore Judah, were "turning away from trusting God and becoming caught up in the trappings of human pomp, politics and power."³

But Judah's troubles didn't end with enemy nations and foolish rulers. The wickedness of Ahaz seeped down into his subjects. Isaiah writes about Judah as if it was full of men stumbling over each other, groping for something to hold on to, and unable to accurately perceive their own plight. In fact, dulled senses were one of the defining characteristics God used to depict his people. In Isaiah 56, God describes them as dogs with dead senses: "[Judah's] watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber" (Isa 56:10).⁴ They are a man staggering around in a dream: "Blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk but not with wine, stagger but not with strong drink! For the Lord has poured out upon you a deep sleep" (Isa 29:9-10a). They "grope for the wall like the blind," as if they "had no eyes" (Isa 59:10). Israel, as the servant of the Lord,⁵ was given every opportunity to succeed, glorify their God, and proclaim his glory to the nations, yet they still failed (Isa 42:19-20).⁶

Yet the most shocking and stark example of Judah's plight is given in Isaiah 6:9-10. This is the message Isaiah was sent to give to the people of Judah. But this wasn't just any message; this was a message designed to confirm them in their hardened hearts. "Keep on hearing, but do not understand, keep on seeing, but do not perceive, make the heart of my people dull, and their ears heavy and blind their eyes lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

The people of Judah have already rejected God. Their hearts were hard and resistant. Isaiah's ministry was to preach the truth in a way that demanded a response. Those who hardened their hearts against it received what they desired: deadened senses. The message of Isaiah was to confirm them in their desires.

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 7.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

⁵ In the book of Isaiah there are two prominent servants (especially in chapters 40-55). The first servant is the one referred to here as the nation, Israel. The second servant is Jesus, the perfected ideal servant who fulfills his mission and redeems the servant nation so they can fulfill their mission.

⁶ Isaiah 5 paints a powerful picture through a song in which it compares Judah to a garden that God cared for perfectly and gave every chance to succeed, only for the garden to grow weeds and wild plants, prompting God, the gardener, to destroy it.

By the time of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6, the senses of the people were already deadened. But what is the cause of this senseless living? Isaiah 44 gives crucial insight through a story meant to make us laugh at its foolishness. The story gives us a glimpse of a man busy at his craft of idol-creation. In humorous fashion, Isaiah walks us through his process in reverse order, ending at the beginning with the man choosing what part of the tree to worship and what part to burn as fuel. How can a man be so foolish as to trust and worship his own craft and creation? John Oswalt puts it well: "It is evident that the only reason why a person would not see the obvious contradictions in the picture he has just drawn is that, for some reason, they cannot."⁷ Isaiah would agree, for he writes: "They know not, nor do they discern, for [God] has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand" (Isa 44:18). They are blinded because they have chosen blindness.

Verse 20 then gives us the reason behind the deadening of their senses: "He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself." What has led him astray? His deluded and seduced heart.⁸ The heart is so deceived that it convinces a man to feed on ashes. What a picture! A man bowing down to his own creation, formed in his likeness, with its counterpart burning. He then scoops ashes from his burning wood and shoves them in his mouth. Only a dead heart can convince a man to trust in ashes for strength and sustenance. In Isaiah, Judah's desperate physical state was only a picture of their desperate spiritual state. The cause of their imminent destruction and their drunken, senseless living was a dead heart.

A Deadened Heart: The Effect of Worshipping Dead Idols

Isaiah has done a masterful job of showing what causes us to do what we do. In the process of painting a dreary picture of Judah's circumstances, we are given insight into ourselves. But Isaiah is not done yet. He takes us even deeper into the rebellious wickedness of the people, even deeper into the hopeless darkness of their hearts, and into their very treasure, the items they worship. If a dead heart causes deadened senses, then what causes a dead heart?

The answer is hidden in plain sight throughout the book. Isaiah 44:9 offers a glimpse: "All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do no profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know that they may be put to shame." The word translated "delight in" could also be translated as "the things they treasure," "desire," or even "their darlings."⁹ There are consequences for what you place as "the darling of your heart." If you make a worthless idol your god then your reward will be worthless. The rest of the passage goes on to show this worthlessness. Throughout the story in Isaiah 44:9-22, a very interesting thing happens: the idol-maker slowly becomes more like the idol he is crafting and worshipping. Just as the idol has no senses and has a dead heart, so does the man.

⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 184.

⁸ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah. An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 349.

⁹ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 346.

The same Hebrew word for “delight” found in Isaiah 44:9 is also found in 1:29-30: “For you shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired, and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden without water.” The people of Judah desired the oaks and the gardens, and in turn they will become like them. Just like the oaks they worshipped, they will become dry and withered.

Isaiah 42:17 presents the same truth: “They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, ‘You are our gods.’” The people of Judah placed carved, man-made idols as their gods and as a result, were put to shame. These man-made objects cannot save or deliver them and trusting them leads to destruction. Your fate follows the fate of the object you worship.

The futility of idolatry is detailed in chapter 46. In their foolishness and blindness, Isaiah’s people created idols in their own image expecting these lifeless idols to carry and save them. Instead, they themselves were the ones who had to carry the idols. They were weighed down with sustaining the very thing that was supposed to sustain them. “They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble” (Isa 46:7). The idols created to be a help and rescue became a burden and a dread that lead to destruction.

The most sobering example in all of Isaiah of Judah’s misplaced worship is found in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. There the coming Messiah is described as the messenger of salvation and the chosen and perfect servant of the Lord. However, he did not come as the people expected or wanted, but as a man with nothing to set him apart. Isaiah 53:2 describes him this way: “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” There it is: the same word for “desire.” In Isaiah 1 and 44, the people desired the oaks and man-made idols as their gods, setting them as the treasure of their hearts. Isaiah expands on this idea by displaying that when the Messiah did come, the only one who was worthy of their trust, the only one precious enough to be their treasure, they “despised and rejected” him (Isa 53:3).

The hearts of the people were so deceived and deluded that the only word left to describe their hearts is “dead.” They were deadened towards the true Messiah, the true God, because they were worshipping dead idols. A deadened heart is the direct effect of worshipping dead idols. The object one places at the center of one’s heart dictates the nature of that heart. But it doesn’t stop there, since, as we have seen, one’s actions come from the heart. If the heart is dead so will be the actions. Isaiah uses imagery of deadened senses to describe this; they were blind and deaf and stumbling around just as their hearts were, and just as their gods were.

Through this indictment, Isaiah was asking his people what they were placing at the center of their hearts? But the reader is not left as a passive observer; Isaiah turns the question on us. Our answer forces us into the hopeless darkness of our own hearts. Isaiah’s tour of the heart lets us sit a while in our own sin, our own hopelessness, and our own deluded state. He doesn’t shy away from bleak truths or deep guilt. Our hearts are deluded by our own state of wickedness. We do not have the desire, let alone the capability, to deliver ourselves or set our hearts on God. There is only one outcome of a hardened heart enjoying its defiance of the Lord—death.

A Quickened Heart: The Effect of Worshipping a Living God

But death is not where Isaiah or the Lord leaves the reader. This dark hopelessness and desperate need for salvation is meant to take them somewhere. God uses the deep guilt to wake sinners up and call them to repentance.

Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and he who has no money, come, buy, and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food,
Incline your ear, and come to me;
that your soul may live.
(Isa 55:1-3a)

Isaiah 55 is a grand invitation to life, love, joy, and satisfaction for everyone. The invitation letter is not sent to the wealthy sectors of the town. The welcome is extended to, and indeed created for, the low, the needy, the helpless, the rejected, the guilty, and the sinners. Isaiah writes, “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (29:19). Isaiah 41:17 extends the same offer: “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them.”

At the front of the invitation letter are the words, “Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Isa 55:3). Somewhere there is life! Somewhere there is hope! Our hearts do not have to stay on the dark path to death. All we have to do is . . . hear. But how? We are deaf. In fact, we “have never heard, (we) have never known from of old (our) ear has not been opened” (Isa 48:8).

These are the thoughts Isaiah intended the reader to have as they read this hope-filled invitation. Their senses are deadened; their hearts are dead. What good does an invitation do when it falls on deaf ears?

Isaiah has shown us the mechanics of the heart. First the heart, then the actions will resemble what one reveres. It all comes down to what one sets their heart on. If their heart is set on dead idols then their heart, and therefore their actions will also be deadened. But if they set their heart on the living God, their hearts will follow.

Isaiah writes the transformational words, “Our eyes will behold the King in his glory” (Isa 33:17). The phrase “eyes will behold” is oddly specific, and it almost repeats itself. This does not merely mean to look in his direction, nor does it even mean to notice or watch him. It means to set our eyes on him. To behold the King is to set him as the one our heart worships. This verse foretells the day we will worship him as King and thereby make him the King of our heart.¹⁰ In contrast to Isaiah 6, where “seeing the Holy King is a dangerous and fearful experience,” Andrew

¹⁰ Raymond C. Orlund, Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 192–93.

Abernathy points out that “it is a pleasant prospect to see the king in his beauty . . . the anticipation of seeing God, the king, in his beauty is a beam of light as they wait for God to act.”¹¹

There is, perhaps, not a more succinct way of putting it than Isaiah 17:7-8: “In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made either the Asherim or the altars of incense.” No more will man look on his own dead idols. In contrast to Isaiah 44, he will look to the one who created him. What is the result of looking on and worshipping a living God? A quickened heart that is alive and rejuvenated.¹² It is a heart that resembles what it reveres. Isaiah 40:31 explains that “they who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.” Their strength shall be the Lord’s strength. A few verses earlier he writes, “To him who has no might he increases strength” (Isa 40:29). Our strength will resemble the strength of our God, as we worship him. A heart that is worshipping the living God will be revived and live with him.

Awakened Senses, Joy, and Praise: The Effect of a Quickened Heart

What is the result of having a quickened heart? Awakened senses, joy, and praise. Isaiah 29:18 announces of the last days, “In that day, the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.” Eyes that were once closed and ears which were once deaf are finally restored. The “words of the book” refer to the promise of deliverance God has made. John Oswalt says, “No longer will the words of promise fall on hard, dry ground. Rather they will find lodging in a receptive soil where they can spring up to that luxurious growth.”¹³ J. Alec Motyer calls it a “picture of people with new faculties and new appetites, finding satisfaction in God’s book.”¹⁴

The awakening of man’s senses are directly linked to beholding the living God. Isaiah 32:1-3 provides an example: “Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice. . . . Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will give attention.” As a result of beholding the righteous King, their eyes and ears will be opened. And again in 35:4-6, “Be strong, fear not! Behold your God Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” As one beholds their God, their hearts become like him. As their hearts become like him, their senses will match.

Once more in chapter 42, this theme is displayed clearly. In verses 6-7, God speaks to the Messiah, “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you . . . to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

¹¹ Andrew T. Abernathy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 43–45.

¹² The word “quickened” is a term frequently used by the Puritan authors in the 1500s–1600s. The term describes being revived, rejuvenated, and strengthened spiritually.

¹³ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, 538.

¹⁴ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 242.

These passages all stand to reverse the curse of Isaiah 6:10. Because of the hard idolatry of their hearts and their chosen self-deception, their senses were closed off. But now as their hearts choose to worship the living God, their hearts are made alive and their senses are restored.

Isaiah repeatedly displays that the result of worshipping a living God is a quickened heart and the result of a quickened heart is the awakening of senses to correctly see and hear. “The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice, together they sing for joy; for eye to eye, they see the return of the LORD to Zion” (Isaiah 52:8). And now out of the compulsion of their own hearts, out of thankfulness and joy, the redeemed and transformed people sing for joy in praise to their God.

The whole of Isaiah 12 is the joyful song of the redeemed people praising their God. They proclaim his deeds among the people, telling his salvation to any nation that will hear. Isaiah 25:9 says, “Behold this is our God . . . we have waited for him, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” Isaiah 55:12 proclaims: “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace.”

Isaiah’s life himself also provides a vivid picture of restoration through worship. Chapter 6 gives us insight into his own heart like no other passage. It is the commissioning of Isaiah and his ministry. Isaiah has a vision of the Lord in his heavenly and holy throne room “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (Isa 6:1). As the prophet witnesses this majestic scene, the sheer holiness of his God grips him. He beholds God in his holiness and worships him, and the encounter has a transformational effect on his heart and life.

As Isaiah beholds the Lord, he compares his own dead and guilty heart to God’s holiness (Isa 6:5). All he can say is, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips!” Oswalt writes, “For the finite, the mortal, the incomplete, and the fallible to encounter the infinite, the eternal, the self-consistent and the infallible is to know the futility and the hopelessness of one’s existence.”¹⁵ What drives Isaiah to this conclusion? His “eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5). Beholding God’s glory shows him his dead heart, but it doesn’t leave him there. He is given a purified and living heart set on God. “Your guilt is taken away and your sins atoned for” (Isa 6:7). As Isaiah worships the living and holy God, his heart is transformed to resemble his God, living and holy. As a result of his quickened heart his actions spring forth. The result of a transformed heart is obedience. Isaiah obeys God’s call to him to minister to the people of Judah with the words, “Here I am! Send me” (Isa 6:8).

Isaiah’s heart was set on the one he was created to worship and as a result it was transformed. His actions and senses then sprung forth in alignment to what God created them to be. Isaiah’s heart represents the future heart of the people of Judah as well as our own. As one’s heart is quickened, it leaps forward into joy, praise, and obedience. First our hearts then our actions will resemble what we revere.

Conclusion: The Final Dilemma

We have traced the process of heart transformation as shown in the book of Isaiah. But a heart is not transformed in a lab. It is not merely a formulaic process; it

¹⁵ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, 182.

is a divine miracle, accomplished through ordinary, everyday actions. Only a holy and loving God can take a dead and rebellious heart and transform it into a heart beating for its Maker, resembling its Savior, and compelling a life of joyful obedience and redeemed perception. The question we must now ask is the same that the entirety of the book of Isaiah is designed to ask. The reader is meant to have their mind constantly plagued with this question, looming over every truth they learn in the book. How can a dead and guilty heart choose a holy living God?

The centerpiece of the book, Isaiah 52:13–53:12, is designed to answer this very question in an unexpected radical fashion.¹⁶ The living and holy God who created our hearts to need him is the same God who sent his perfect Son, the promised Servant-Messiah-King, to die for us. Jesus, the Son of the living holy God, took on flesh and lived a perfect life full of suffering and pain. “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (53:2). “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (53:3). Yet, in his suffering and rejection by the men he came to save he “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4). He submitted himself to suffering to the point of death. “His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance” (52:14). “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (53:5).

It was through his death that Jesus took on himself our dark guilt and our deserved death. With his blood he purchased and redeemed our hearts. Isaiah 53:10–11 point to his resurrection: “He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.” As we behold our risen and living Savior, our hearts will revive and live with him. Through the book of Isaiah, God calls every sinner to behold himself, and, in the process become like his Son.

¹⁶ Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the climax of the whole book, the hinge that the whole book swings on. Take out this chapter and the whole book collapses. This is also the clearest depiction of the gospel in the Old Testament.

**THE GREAT REVERSAL:
HOW ISAIAH 19:16-25 REVERSES EGYPT'S
EXODUS IDENTITY**

Tristan Ros¹

* * * * *

Egypt occupies a prominent place in Scripture as a nation associated with oppression, idolatry, and bondage. Yet Isaiah 19:16-25 presents a surprising vision in which Egypt becomes a worshiper of Yahweh. This article aims to demonstrate that Isaiah intentionally alludes to the Exodus narrative in order to portray a radical reversal of Egypt's identity. Isaiah depicts Egypt as undergoing a second exodus, this time as the redeemed rather than the oppressor, through the use of shared vocabulary, imagery, and theological patterns, including fear before Yahweh, crying out under oppression, divine deliverance, covenantal worship, and healing following judgment. This reversal culminates in Egypt, Israel, and Assyria united in worship, fulfilling Yahweh's redemptive purposes for the nations.

Key words: exodus, Egypt, redemption, covenant, worship, nations

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Few nations have exerted as profound an influence on human history as Egypt. From Genesis to Revelation, Egypt sometimes functions as a refuge from hardship—such as famine or the sword—yet far more often serves as a symbol of oppression, bondage, and sin. Yet, in his oracle concerning Egypt, the prophet Isaiah presents a vivid and unexpected reversal of this nation's identity. The very nation that once opposed Yahweh's redemptive plan, enslaved his people, and deified its own king will one day join Israel in worshipping the one true God.

When reading the Exodus account, it would hardly seem possible that this same Egypt would one day experience oppression followed by deliverance through a God-sent savior, or that an altar to Yahweh would stand within its land. Least of all would one expect Yahweh to call Egypt—the nation once commanded to “let My people go”—“My people” (Isa 19:25). Yet this is precisely the vision that Isaiah describes.

¹ Tristan Ros is a sophomore majoring in Biblical Studies with an emphasis in Biblical Languages. He may be contacted at rost@masters.edu.

Through deliberate allusions to the Exodus narrative, Isaiah 19:16-25 depicts a radical transformation and reversal of Egypt's identity in which the nation that once opposed God's deliverance in the exodus becomes a recipient of his redemption.

Trembling and Dread for the Hand of Yahweh

Isaiah 19:16 opens with the phrase "in that day," a formula repeated six times in this passage.² As Oswalt observes, it "makes it plain that the prophet sees these events as occurring in the end times, or at least at the point where God takes decisive action in world events."³ The first clear connection between Isaiah 19:16-25 and the exodus appears in verses 16-17. The Egyptians will tremble and be in dread (*pāḥaq*) at the waving of the hand of Yahweh of hosts (Isa 19:16). Not only will Yahweh's coming judgment terrify Egypt, but the land of Judah itself will "become a terror to Egypt" (Isa 19:17).

This recalls an earlier moment in Israel's history. Exodus makes it abundantly clear that the Egyptians were terrified of Moses and Israel. The Egyptians were already in dread of the sons of Israel as the people multiplied and spread despite the affliction imposed upon them (Exod 1:12), and the divinely imposed plagues later drove them to urge Israel to leave the land in haste after the death of the firstborn (Exod 12:33). "Egypt was glad when they went out, for the dread [*pāḥaq*] of them had fallen upon them" (Ps 105:38).⁴ God brought Israel out of Egypt "with trials, with signs and wonders and with war and with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terrors" (Deut 4:34). The same mighty hand that once delivered Israel in the exodus is now "waving" over Egypt in warning of impending judgment (Isa 19:16). Oswalt summarizes the parallel: "As Israel had been a source of horror to the Egyptians hundreds of years earlier, so now Judah will be also. And the reason will be the same in both cases. It is not because Israel then, nor Judah now, posed any military threat. Rather, it is because of the way in which Israel's God made, and would make, his power plain."⁵ Isaiah deliberately recalls the exodus by depicting Egypt once more trembling before the power of Israel's God.

The Language of Canaan in the Land of Egypt

The tone of the oracle shifts markedly in verse 18: Egypt, once trembling under judgment, is now envisioned as turning toward Yahweh. Isaiah declares that "five cities in the land of Egypt will be speaking the language of Canaan and swearing allegiance to Yahweh of hosts" (Isa 19:18). One of these cities will be called "the City of Destruction" (v. 18).⁶ This phrase has generated considerable interpretive discussion. Whether these are five literal cities or simply a number indicating a great amount or significant portion, the central claim is clear: Egyptian cities will openly identify themselves with the people of Yahweh.

² Isa 19:16, 18-19, 21, 23-24.

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 374.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Legacy Standard Bible.

⁵ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 376.

⁶ Or "City of the Sun" (Heliopolis), depending on the textual tradition.

This reversal is more profound than it might appear. In the Exodus narrative, the language of Canaan, Hebrew, was spoken in Egypt only by the Israelites who sojourned there. It marked them as a distinct people within a foreign land. In Isaiah's vision, however, Egyptians themselves speak "the language of Canaan" (Isa 19:18). The linguistic shift signals a striking reversal: what once distinguished Israel within Egypt now characterizes Egyptians within their own land.

The significance of this transformation becomes explicit in the accompanying phrase: they will be "swearing *allegiance* to Yahweh of hosts" (Isa 19:18). The prophet Isaiah speaks not merely of linguistic assimilation but of covenantal commitment. To swear allegiance to Yahweh is to acknowledge his sovereignty and to submit to his rule.⁷ They speak the language of the people of Yahweh because they now belong to that people.

Isaiah's use of the title "Yahweh of hosts" reinforces this point. The designation emphasizes divine supremacy, particularly in contrast to the utter impotence of Egypt's idols. In the exodus, Yahweh made his power known through signs and wonders, demonstrating his sovereignty over Egypt's gods and Pharaoh himself, who was regarded as divine. Now, in an astounding reversal, Egypt does not resist that sovereignty but confesses it. The nation that once opposed Israel's worship now becomes a community of worshipers united with Israel under the lordship of Yahweh.

An Altar and Pillar as a Sign and Witness

This reversal of Egypt's identity from oppressor to worshiper is further confirmed in verses 19-20 through the introduction of an altar and a pillar that function as a sign and a witness to Yahweh in the land of Egypt. This vocabulary of an altar (*mizbēah*), pillar (*maššēbā*), sign (*ōt*), and witness echoes the exodus narrative. In Exodus, Egypt is the site of false worship and the object of Yahweh's judgment against idolatry. Israel is commanded to destroy the altars of the nations, not to erect altars to Yahweh within them (Exod 23:24; 34:13). The only altar associated with Israel during the exodus is the one Moses builds in the wilderness after Yahweh's victory over Amalek (Exod 17:15). More broadly, throughout the Pentateuch altars symbolize covenant loyalty and proper worship; they are never located in Egypt, the paradigmatic land of oppression.

Isaiah therefore presents a striking reversal of Egypt's identity. Egypt is no longer the place Israel must escape in order to worship, but the place where the Egyptian people now worship Israel's God. The former oppressor becomes the worshiper. Rather than seeking to identify the altar with a specific historical shrine, Aster argues that its presence is theologically necessary within Isaiah's depiction of Egypt's national conversion. He writes, "The motif of the altar in v. 19 is a logical part of the conversion described in vv. 19–22, since sacrifice and altar construction are an integral part of biblical narratives of gentiles who become worshippers of YHWH (as can be seen from Jonah 1:16 and 2 Kings 5:17–18)."⁸ The altar, then, is not an incidental detail but the necessary expression of genuine conversion: Egypt's

⁷ Isa 45:23 and Zeph 1:5 distinguish swearing *by* and *to*.

⁸ Shawn Z. Aster, "Isaiah 19: The 'Burden of Egypt' and Neo-Assyrian Imperial Policy," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 3 (Jul–Sep 2015): 455.

transformation is enacted in patterns consistent with those that mark other Gentiles who turn to Yahweh.

Likewise, the pillar imagery in Isaiah 19:19 intensifies this reversal. Exodus 13:21 speaks of the theophanic pillar (*'ammûd*)—the pillar of cloud and fire that accompanies and guides Israel. This differs from the man-made stone pillar (*maṣṣēbâ*) at Egypt's border mentioned in Isaiah 19.⁹ Though the two terms belong to distinct semantic domains, they convey similar theological realities.

These theological parallels reinforce Egypt's transformation as an exodus-like reversal. First, both pillars signify Yahweh's presence. In Exodus 13:21-22, Yahweh's presence is manifested in the theophanic pillar (*'ammûd*); in Isaiah 19:19, his presence is acknowledged and commemorated by the erection of a stone pillar (*maṣṣēbâ*) to Yahweh within Egypt. Second, both pillars mark divine authority over territory. The pillar (*'ammûd*) in Exodus marks and guides Israel's movement through regions over which Yahweh demonstrates sovereign authority (Exod 13:21-22; 14:19-20); the pillar (*maṣṣēbâ*) in Isaiah 19 marks that the land of Egypt is also under Yahweh's rule. Third, unlike the mobile and temporary *'ammûd* whose purpose was to bring Israel out of Egypt, the *maṣṣēbâ* is fixed and permanent. It declares that Egypt now permanently belongs to Yahweh and stands as a lasting testimony of Egypt's incorporation into the covenant people. Young aptly summarizes: the *maṣṣēbâ* would show that “when one approaches Egypt and leaves Judah he comes into a land that is also the Lord's. He does not leave the Holy Land to enter a Profane Land, but simply continues in the land that is the Lord's and that worships Him.”¹⁰ The pillar thus permanently testifies that Egypt no longer functions as the land from which Israel must depart in order to worship.

This permanent testimony explains the phrase, “It will be a sign [*'ôl*] and a witness to Yahweh of hosts in the land of Egypt” (Isa 19:20). Throughout the plagues against Egypt, Yahweh repeatedly declares that his acts are “signs” (*'ôlôl*), performed so that both Israel and Egypt “will know that I am Yahweh” (Exod 7:3, 5; 10:1-2). The reuse of this vocabulary strongly suggests intentional intertextuality. Instead of signs of judgment *against* Egypt, the altar and pillar become signs *within* Egypt—signs of covenant worship, not destruction. In Exodus, Egypt is the object of Yahweh's signs; in Isaiah 19, Egypt becomes the bearer of Yahweh's sign.

This shift directly recalls Yahweh's promise to Moses: “Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign [*'ôl*] to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve [*'ābād*] God at this mountain” (Exod 3:12). In Isaiah 19, Yahweh is now with Egypt, and the Egyptians worship (*'ābād*) Yahweh—signaled by the altar and pillar erected in their land (Isa 19:21, 23). The Exodus sign that once proved Yahweh's saving presence with Israel against

⁹ Interestingly, in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, the people of Israel received the command to destroy the altars and pillars that they found while conquering the land of Canaan, as these pillars were dedicated to foreign gods and were made with cut stone (the altar and pillars erected by Jacob and Moses in Genesis and Exodus were made of uncut stone; Exod 20:25). See Stephane A. Beaulieu, “Egypt as God's People: Isaiah 19:19–25 and Its Allusions to the Exodus,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 40, no. 3 (2013): 210.

¹⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:38.

Egypt now testifies to his saving presence within Egypt itself. The old oppressor undergoes an exodus-like deliverance, but this time as the nation that is saved.

Knowledge and Worship of Yahweh After Deliverance

Isaiah declares that the Egyptians will cry out (*šā‘aq*) to Yahweh because of oppressors (*lāḥaš*), and that he will send them a savior, a champion, who will deliver them (Isa 19:20). The verbal and thematic connections to Exodus are unmistakable. These details are not incidental; Isaiah intentionally frames Egypt’s future redemption in the language of Israel’s exodus. Wildberger summarizes this perfectly:

The verb קָרָע [šā‘aq] is surprisingly common within the story of the exodus, when “crying out” to Yahweh is described (5:8, 15; 8:8; 14:10, 15; 15:25; 17:4; 22:22, 26). It takes on the status of a technical term when the “savior” Moses stands in the stead of Israel and “cries” to Yahweh. One cries because oppressors, לְחַשׂוֹת [lḥšm; root: *lāḥaš*], are present, just as Israel had cried out to Yahweh in Egypt because of the קָרָע [lāḥaš] (oppression) of its לְחַשׂוֹת [lḥšm; root: *lāḥaš*] (oppressors) (Exod. 3:9). The author of the present passage envisions some type of reenactment of the deliverance from Egypt, of course with one major and decisive modification: now it deals with the deliverance of the (Yahweh-believing) Egyptians themselves. Just as earlier, Yahweh would allow others to bring supplication to him and would send a deliverer, . . . a second Moses, whose activity would prove to be even more productive and expansive than the first.¹¹

This is a deliberate narrative reversal. Egypt experiences what Israel once experienced, as the recipient of an exodus-like deliverance by means of a savior, a second Moses.¹²

Deliverance in both Exodus and Isaiah, however, is not an end in itself. Its ultimate purpose is knowledge of Yahweh. Christ defined the nature of eternal life as knowing the Father—the only true God—and Jesus Christ whom the Father sent (John 17:3). This is precisely what Egypt comes to experience: “Yahweh will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know Yahweh in that day” (Isa 19:21). This again mirrors the Exodus narrative, where the knowledge of Yahweh is a central theological purpose underlying the plagues and deliverance (Exod 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:1-2; 14:4, 18). In Scripture, knowledge of Yahweh is not merely cognitive but experiential, grounded in his redemptive acts in history. In the Exodus narrative, Israel knows Yahweh in the context of deliverance, while Egypt knows him primarily through judgment. In Isaiah 19, however, this pattern is dramatically reversed: Egypt comes to know Yahweh not as the object of wrath but

¹¹ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, Continental Commentary, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 276.

¹² It is true that Moses is never referred to as a *yāšā‘*, (“deliverer/savior”); *yāšā‘* is the title used for the helpers whom Yahweh sent time and again to Israel when its people suffered under the terrible oppression of enemies (Judg 3:9, 15; 12:3; 1 Sam 11:3; 2 Kgs 13:5). Nonetheless, Moses still acts as a functional savior, sent by God to bring out his people from the land of Egypt. See Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 276.

as the recipient of redemption. Grogan helpfully articulates this distinction between Israel's and Egypt's forms of Yahweh-knowledge in the Exodus narrative:

The former knew the Lord in the context of his grace (e.g., Ex 6:7), the latter as a God of judgment (e.g., Ex 7:5). In fact, the latter is much more frequently declared than the former. The Lord will reveal himself to Egypt again, but this time in an entirely different way, much more after the pattern of his self-disclosure to Israel: on the basis of grace.¹³

Moreover, Isaiah's vision implies that the Egyptians will know God in a way that even the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not. Although the divine name Yahweh appears in Genesis and was known to the patriarchs, Exodus 6:3 indicates that they did not know Yahweh in the full sense of his covenantal self-disclosure. God revealed himself to them primarily as El Shaddai ("God Almighty"), and while they received the promises, they did not yet witness their decisive fulfillment. What had not yet been fully disclosed was the redemptive significance of the name Yahweh as the faithful, redeeming covenant God who acts in history to deliver his people. It is precisely this aspect of divine self-revelation that Egypt now receives. Isaiah specifies that they will know Yahweh, not merely as a general deity, but as Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, whose power and faithfulness are made manifest in redemptive action, and whom they now serve.

Deliverance and the knowledge of Yahweh necessarily culminate in worship. As Lange rightly observes:

Here is seen the remarkable advance that the LORD reveals Himself to the Egyptians themselves as Jehovah, that they, too, really know Him as such; serving Him in accordance with His law, they present sacrifice and oblation, *i.e.*, bloody and unbloody offerings, and make vows to Him which they scrupulously perform as recognition of His divine majesty and grace.¹⁴

The covenantal depth of Isaiah's language becomes explicit in the declaration that Egypt will "worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make a vow to Yahweh and pay it" (Isa 19:21). The sacrificial vocabulary—*zebah* ("sacrifice"), *minhā* ("offering"), and the language of vows—belongs unmistakably to the covenantal worship system inaugurated at Sinai (e.g., Lev 27; Num 30; Deut 12:6; 23:21; Jer 44:25; Ps 61:8; 66:13-15; 116:14, 18). This is especially significant in light of Exodus, where Israel was commanded to depart from Egypt in order to serve (*abad*) Yahweh through sacrifice (*zebah*) (Exod 3:18; 5:1, 3; 7:16). The narrative irony is striking: the nation that once resisted Israel's sacrificial worship (Exod 5:1-9) is now transformed into a nation of worshipers offering sacrifice to Yahweh (Isa 19:21).

The emphasis that the Egyptians "make a vow to Yahweh and pay it" (Isa 19:21) suggests not merely ritual participation but covenant faithfulness. Unlike the exodus

¹³ Geoffrey W. Grogan, "Isaiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah (Revised Edition)*, vol. 6, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 593.

¹⁴ John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Isaiah*, trans. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 229.

generation, whose vows were repeatedly broken, the fidelity of the redeemed Egyptians endures. This indicates not mere external conformity, but rather that they have been transformed inwardly and are thus enabled to keep the vows they make. Grogan therefore concludes that “the basis of their relationship with him is the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34), fulfilled in the death of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice (cf. esp. Heb 8:7–9:15).”¹⁵ Isaiah 19 thus anticipates not merely Egypt’s deliverance but its incorporation into the new covenant, in which this Gentile nation comes to know Yahweh and worship him in covenant fidelity.

Striking, Return, and Healing

Isaiah 19:22 functions as a summary of the entire oracle against Egypt. “Yahweh will smite [*nāḡāp̄*] Egypt, smiting [*nāḡāp̄*] but healing [*rāp̄ā*’]; so they will return [*šūb*] to Yahweh, and He will be moved by their entreaty and will heal [*rāp̄ā*’] them” (Isa 19:22). The Song of Moses, reflecting upon the exodus and Israel’s covenant relationship with God, professes that it is Yahweh who wounds and heals (*rāp̄ā*’; Deut 32:39). This dual reality—Yahweh as both wounder and healer—is put forth in Isaiah 19:22. While the verb used in Isaiah 19, *nāḡāp̄* (“to smite”), does not appear in the Song of Moses, the concept and theological truth are clearly present. The verb *nāḡāp̄*, however, does occur in Exodus. It is used both of the smiting of the plagues upon Egypt and of the smiting that follows Israel’s idolatry in the golden calf episode (Exod 8:2; 12:23, 27; 32:35). Isaiah’s use of *nāḡāp̄* directly recalls this earlier act of divine smiting, placing Egypt once more beneath Yahweh’s disciplinary hand. The lexical continuity signals that Egypt is being treated according to the same covenantal pattern previously applied to Israel: Yahweh strikes in order to effect a greater purpose, namely salvation and healing.

Likewise, the verb *rāp̄ā*’ (“to heal”) in Isaiah 19:22 is covenantal and deeply rooted in the Exodus account. Yahweh says to Israel at Marah, “I, Yahweh, am your healer” (Exod 15:26). At Marah, healing is promised exclusively to Israel as his covenant people, distinguishing them from the nation he had just smitten. Yet the prophet Isaiah now applies this same verb to Egypt. The God who once reserved this healing promise for Israel now extends it to the very nation historically defined by its oppression of Israel. In this context, the pairing of smiting and healing in Isaiah 19 does not represent contradictory actions but rather a unified pattern of divine activity in which judgment serves as the means to restoration. Yahweh’s smiting is not the terminus of judgment; it serves as the necessary precursor to Egypt’s repentance and reconciliation.

The theological significance of this pairing becomes even clearer when the sequence in the verse is examined. The sequence of actions—Yahweh strikes, Egypt returns, Yahweh listens, and Yahweh heals—reflects a well-known disciplinary structure in the prophetic literature, especially within Isaiah (e.g., Isa 1:5-6; 6:10; 57:17-19). Israel is frequently depicted as resisting this process: she was struck, but did not return, and therefore remained unhealed. Astonishingly, Egypt follows the pattern of response that Israel so often refused. As Smith observes, “This time, instead of hardening their hearts and suffering further destruction, the Egyptians turn

¹⁵ Grogan, “Isaiah,” 593.

to God and truly repent, so God will heal them.”¹⁶ The phrase “they will return to Yahweh” employs the standard covenant verb for repentance, *šûb* (“to return”). In Isaiah 6:10, *šûb* is likewise paired with *rāpā*, yet Israel is prevented from returning and being healed because of her hardness of heart. Egypt, by contrast, does return, and the significance is profound: the foreign nation responds to Yahweh as Israel ought to have done. Egypt, in effect, embodies the exhortation of Hosea 6:1: “Come, let us return [*šûb*] to Yahweh. For He has torn *us*, but He will heal [*rāpā*] us; He has struck [*nākā*] *us*, but He will bandage us.” Notably, this term *nākā* (“to strike”) is also used in reference to Yahweh striking the Egyptians with plagues in judgment (Exod 3:20; 9:15; 12:12, 13, 29; Num 3:13; 8:17; 33:4). Following judgment, Egypt turns to Yahweh—and is healed. The reversal in Isaiah 19:22 is striking: Egypt does what Israel in Hosea’s context failed to do.

A Highway Connecting Three Blessed Nations

The final portion of Isaiah’s oracle (Isa 19:23-25) culminates in one of the most theologically astonishing visions in the entire book: Egypt and Assyria—Israel’s ancient enemies and paradigmatic oppressors—are joined with Israel in unified worship of Yahweh. The imagery of a “highway” connecting Egypt and Assyria is striking (Isa 19:23). Although neither the imagery of a highway nor the nation of Assyria appears in Exodus, the theological vision of Isaiah 19 nevertheless draws deeply from the Exodus narrative. Whereas in Exodus Israel traversed the wilderness to escape Egypt’s dominion and enter Canaan, Isaiah envisions a highway that runs through that same wilderness, facilitating free movement, restoration, and communion among all three nations.

Historically, Egypt and Assyria were anything but neutral toward one another. They were frequently at war, and both, in turn, dominated Israel. Yet Isaiah foresees a future in which these rival empires worship not merely alongside Israel, but with one another. Just as Israel was brought out of Egypt to serve (*‘abad*) Yahweh, Egypt and Assyria are now drawn into that same act of worship (*‘abad*) (Isa 19:23). What was once the exclusive privilege of Israel becomes the shared inheritance of the nations.

When Isaiah states that Israel will be “a third *party*” alongside Egypt and Assyria (Isa 19:24), one might initially expect that Israel is being elevated to equality with these two former superpowers, who were far superior to Israel both geographically and militarily. Yet the text suggests the reverse: Egypt and Assyria are elevated to equality with Israel. Grogan observes, “The Egyptians are to be on equal footing with their erstwhile slaves, who had been so gloriously redeemed from their midst.”¹⁷ This unity of the three nations will be a “blessing in the midst of the earth” (Isa 19:24). Young rightly connects this back to the promise of the Abrahamic covenant and states, “In the fullest and truest sense, . . . Israel will become what she was destined to be, the land from which blessing flows to the entire earth.”¹⁸ Alexander adds, “Blessing here is used in a comprehensive sense, as denoting at the same time a

¹⁶ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 2nd ed., Christian Standard Commentary (Nashville: Holman, 2022), 421.

¹⁷ Grogan, “Isaiah,” 593.

¹⁸ Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 45.

source of blessing, a means of blessing, and an object to be blessed.”¹⁹ Yahweh thus fulfills the promise made to Abraham through the transformation of Israel’s former enemies, Egypt and Assyria, elevating them to stand alongside Israel.

This elevation is made explicit in the three covenantal titles bestowed in verse 25. The title “my people” is the quintessential designation for Israel (e.g., Exod 3:7; Lev 26:12; Hos 2:23). To apply this title to Egypt is nothing less than astonishing. Egypt is incorporated into the covenantal people of Yahweh. The land that once heard the command, “Let My people go, that they may serve [‘*abad*] Me” (Exod 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3), will now be called “My people” and worship (‘*abad*) Yahweh alongside redeemed Assyria and Israel (Isa 19:23, 25).

Likewise, the title “the work of My hands”—a designation applied to Israel in connection with her divine election and formation (Isa 29:23; 60:21)—is granted to Assyria (Isa 19:25). Finally, the title “My inheritance” is given to Israel. Young suggests, “The term could equally well have been applied to the other two nations but it is probably given to Israel to call to mind the fact that Israel was chosen of old.”²⁰ Israel retains her unique historical identity, yet Egypt and Assyria are fully incorporated into the covenantal family of Yahweh.

Conclusion

What is one to make of such a vision? Egypt struck, Egypt healed. Assyria once feared, now welcomed. Israel no longer stands alone but is placed in the midst of former enemies who now know Yahweh and have become fellow worshipers. The prophet Isaiah reveals what history would never predict: the oppressor not merely subdued but redeemed and transformed. The nations that once raged against Yahweh are gathered into his blessing. Egypt, the pragmatic oppressor of Yahweh’s people, is called “My people,” while Assyria is named “the work of My hands.” The first exodus revealed Yahweh’s power to save his people from bondage; Isaiah reveals a future and greater exodus, in which even the former house of slavery returns to Yahweh and is delivered by a savior, a second Moses. The highway that joins Egypt, Assyria, and Israel anticipates the day when the mountain of the house of Yahweh will be exalted and the nations will stream to him.

Until that day, Isaiah 19:16-25 demands expectation. It leaves the reader looking ahead, longing for the fulfillment of this promise, when Yahweh of hosts will be known, worshiped, and blessed among all peoples. The God who once brought his people out with a mighty hand will not abandon his promises. He will do it. He will gather every nation. He will be known and worshiped in all the earth. Until that day, let this be our prayer: come, Lord Jesus. Come, and make all things new. Maranatha.

¹⁹ Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 2:363.

²⁰ Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 46.

IDENTIFYING THE CORNERSTONE OF ISAIAH 28:16: THE INTENDED MESSIANIC FULFILLMENT

Samuel C. Vine¹

* * * * *

This study argues that the reference to the cornerstone in Isaiah 28:16 is intentionally messianic. While New Testament authors later identify this stone with Jesus Christ, a careful examination of the literary context, Isaianic stone imagery, and related Old Testament passages demonstrates that this cornerstone describes a figure who is paralleled with Yahweh yet remains distinct from him. This person can be none other than the Messiah. Such an interpretation coheres with Isaiah’s theology and would have been the intended interpretation for the original audience. Consequently, the New Testament authors did not reinterpret Isaiah 28:16 but correctly recognized its messianic fulfillment.

Key words: cornerstone, stone imagery, Isaiah, Messiah, refuge, king, priest, intertextuality

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Isaiah is widely considered the “prince of prophets” due to the vast breadth and depth of theology that his book encompasses, serving as a “miniature Bible.” Isaiah specifically focuses on the relationship of God to his chosen people of Israel as they transition between two major epochs within their history: the exodus and the exile.² The book of Isaiah supplies the foundation for many allusions in the Prophets, the Psalter, Jesus’s parables, and several New Testament metaphors. Isaiah unravels the mysteries of Yahweh’s redemptive plan for the entire world through the process of saving his people. It is not hyperbole to say that Isaiah is Scripture’s magnum opus.

There has been an abundance of research done in an attempt to mine the depths of this theologically rich book. Identifying where Isaiah is speaking about the Messiah tends to be the emphasis of many of these discussions. One of the numerous

¹ Samuel C. Vine is a senior majoring in Mathematics. He may be contacted at svine036@gmail.com.

² Based on Isaiah’s description of the exile, many scholars conclude that the people of Israel are still experiencing exile even though they are in the land. Thus, Israel’s history can be divided into the time from the first exodus until the exile, via Assyrian invasion, and from then until the second exodus when the Messiah establishes his kingdom.

disputed passages is Isaiah 28:16, which speaks about a mysterious cornerstone. Jesus Christ is repeatedly identified as the cornerstone by the New Testament authors. Christians, including some evangelical scholars, often take this interpretation for granted, assuming that the identity of the cornerstone in Isaiah 28:16 is a foregone conclusion, since Scripture interprets Scripture. However, this interpretation is still rejected by many, with the dissenters presenting a plethora of alternate interpretations. As Oswalt summarizes,

They are: the law (Eichhorn), the temple (Ewald), Yahweh's saving work (Feldmann), Yahweh's relation to this people (Duhm), the archetypal Davidic monarch (Delitzsch), true believers (Eichrodt), Zion (Childs), the remnant (Donner), Yahweh's promise (König), and faith itself (Kaiser, along with Marti, Fohrer, and Wildberger). To these may be added Yahweh Himself (Cheyne).³

While many interpreters allow that the New Testament sees fulfillment of the cornerstone in Christ, they assert that Isaiah's original audience would not have read this passage messianically. However, J. Randall Price notes that messianic prophecies can appear not to fit within the context, leading some interpreters to find a historical fulfillment in Isaiah's time. He observes that "while the historical audience may have been seeking an immediate solution to a historical crisis, the prophets are pointing to the ultimate solution, the Messiah."⁴ Isaiah 7 exemplifies this principle when, in the midst of the physical threat of the Aramean invasion, the prophet Isaiah gives Ahaz the Immanuel prophecy. While some argue that the context demands fulfillment in the time of Isaiah, it becomes clearer as we continue reading that this child must be the Messiah. This is Isaiah's style: he frequently introduces an essential piece of information, like a thread, that can only be understood by considering the entire text. As it is woven into a grand tapestry, the correct interpretation of the initial thread becomes clear as the whole picture is revealed. By continuing to read and eventually looking back, the intended meaning of the previous phrase is understood.⁵ While these prophecies could be fulfilled at any point in time, the faithful of Israel, eager for consummation, would compare their leaders to the promised deliverer, questioning whether they were the nation's promised deliverer, the Messiah. However, there is no doubt that the people would quickly conclude that their rulers were not their promised king.

Even interpreters who take a generally messianic approach to Isaiah are hesitant to read Isaiah 28:16 as a messianic text. However, the Targum, an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible written during the 1st century AD, shows that this

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 518.

⁴ J. Randall Price, "Isaiah 28:16: The Messianic Cornerstone," in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 591.

⁵ Consider the development of the "Branch" from Isaiah 4:2, whose identity is initially unclear. In chapter 6 there is similar language speaking about a "holy seed" being the stump which remains after Israel is judged. It is not until Isaiah 11:1 when everything culminates to show that this branch, stump, and seed are referring to a shoot that will spring from the stem of Jesse, the Messiah. These later references confirm that 4:2 should be understood messianically.

text was understood messianically by some conservative rabbis who rendered the verse: “Behold, I will appoint in Zion a king, a strong king, powerful and terrible.”⁶ This study will provide evangelicals with confidence that a messianic interpretation is best, understanding the passage in the same way that Jesus and the apostles did. The prophet’s words are not too vague for us to identify the cornerstone.⁷ This article will demonstrate that the New Testament authors correctly understood Isaiah’s original intention in identifying the cornerstone of Isaiah 28:16 as Israel’s Messiah by carefully considering the context, understanding the rock metaphor throughout Isaiah, and recognizing similar messianic language elsewhere in the Old Testament.

The Relationship Between Chapters 27 and 28

A thorough understanding of Isaiah 28 is impossible without complete comprehension of the context. Isaiah 27 is one of the few chapters in Isaiah 1–39 that highlight Yahweh’s restorative salvation, resulting in joy for the remnant through their current judgment. In this chapter, the vineyard judged by Yahweh in Isaiah 5:1–7 is restored. Yahweh, Israel’s maker, will cause his people to finally turn from their sin (Isa 27:9). Because of this, the nation will be immensely blessed and blossom, filling the whole world (Isa 27:6). The chapter ends with the sons of Israel being gathered from exile to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem, on the holy mountain (Isa 27:12–13). After reading this chapter, the reader is prompted to ask: What has caused this tremendous reversal?

This leads into a new subsection of Isaiah, chapters 28–33, which is often referred to as “the Book of Woes” due to its repeated pronouncement of deep lament because of the rebellious nation (Isa 28:1; 29:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1). Isaiah 28:1 declares woe upon the “proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim.” The word for crown, *‘āṭārā*, is strongly associated with kings and other leaders (2 Sam 12:30; Ps 21:3; Esth 8:15). This pretentious crown, which is representative of the leaders of Ephraim, is contrasted with the faithful remnant’s beautiful crown (Isa 28:5), which is the Lord.⁸ The language describing Ephraim’s crown as drunk recalls chapter 5, the judgment song of the vineyard. This is followed by six woes (Isa 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) addressing specific ways that Jerusalem has acted wickedly, a vineyard which produces worthless grapes (Isa 5:2, 5). In Isaiah 5:11–14, those who are drunk on much wine come under God’s wrath since they do not seek the Lord or any of his deeds, pursuing earthly pleasures (Isa 5:12), which results in Sheol swallowing Jerusalem whole. This is another similarity to Isaiah 28:15, where the rulers of Jerusalem make a pact with Sheol. The wicked drunkards of Isaiah 5 are being described here in Isaiah 27–28. In the wake of chapter 27’s hope of the future purification of this wicked nation, the reader is reminded of the vineyard’s current immorality. While reading chapter 28, the magnificence of this vineyard’s

⁶ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 41.

⁷ John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 156.

⁸ As the ruling tribe of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Ephraim represents the Northern Kingdom (11:13; 17:3).

regeneration becomes more apparent as the sinfulness of those leading God’s chosen people is further revealed.

There is also contextual parallelism between the references to Ephraim in Isaiah 28:1-13⁹ and Jerusalem in Isaiah 28:14-22, which shows that the whole vineyard, the entire nation of Israel, is guilty.¹⁰

Ephraim	Jerusalem
Woe upon the Southern Kingdom’s leaders (Isa 28:1)	Woe upon the Northern Kingdom’s leaders (Isa 28:14)
Their priests and prophets are drunk (Isa 28:7)	They do not believe that judgment is imminent (Isa 28:15)
Promise of exile if no repentance (Isa 28:13)	Promise of exile if no repentance (Isa 28:22)
The proud crown will be thrown to the ground by the raging storm (Isa 28:2)	The overwhelming scourge will beat down the scoffers (Isa 28:18)

In the midst of the cloud of judgment upon those who lead Ephraim, a bright ray of hope bursts through, as it is promised that Yahweh of hosts will eventually come as a beautiful crown (Isa 28:5). This is the hope of Yahweh, the transformative vinedresser (Isa 27:3), whose coming as a righteous king will lead to the peace and prosperity of Isaiah 27. In the same way that the two kingdoms’ judgment is mirrored, their hope is also mirrored. In Isaiah 28:14-22, the leaders of the Southern Kingdom are judged for making a pact with Sheol. After they are punished by Yahweh for choosing to hide themselves in a covenant of death, the hope of the cornerstone is presented. Through the parallel structure of the leaders being judged and the hope for a righteous future leader who brings blessing (Isa 27), the similarities between this stone and the righteous and beautiful crown of Yahweh become evident.

Isaiah’s message addressed to Jerusalem describes its rulers as scoffers (Isa 28:14-22). They believe that because of their pact with Sheol, they will survive the overflowing scourge that is coming. Although this false pact promises salvation, it will offer no real protection. Yet the leaders of Jerusalem are proudly proclaiming their treaty with Sheol as they reject the word of Yahweh. This “pact with Sheol” probably refers to Judah’s treaty with Assyria during the reign of Ahaz, when the king rejects God’s offer for a sign, choosing to put his hope in Assyria and rejecting

⁹ It is noteworthy that this is the last time Ephraim is mentioned in the book of Isaiah. This is probably because the destruction of Ephraim was in the middle of Isaiah’s ministry. However, in the eschatological chapters of Isaiah, when it says Israel or Jerusalem, it represents both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The inclusion of both names here, Ephraim and Jerusalem, is meant to ensure we are thinking of the nation as a whole, not just the Southern Kingdom.

¹⁰ They may be divided politically, but they are united in wickedness. The Northern and Southern Kingdoms are equally guilty and will equally receive judgment for their sins.

Yahweh of hosts.¹¹ In the midst of this rejection, Isaiah prophesies about the destruction of Judah, which will produce a remnant, out of whom Immanuel will come. This is supported in Isaiah 8:6-8, where the Euphrates River overflows, drowning Judah, who rejected the gentle waters of Shiloah. In the midst of chapter 8 as well, there are two of the clearest messianic proclamations in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 27 shows a glimpse of the future redemption of the vineyard from Isaiah 5, then swings back to the wicked leaders of Israel, causing the reader to think of the Messiah from Isaiah 7, 8, 9, and 11, who will cause this redemption to become reality.

Exegesis of Isaiah 28:16-17

This false refuge that the leaders are putting their hope in, the covenant with Sheol, is contrasted with a stone that Yahweh is laying in Zion. Blenkinsopp explains that some commentators consider Isaiah 28:16-17a as an editorial expansion since the “architectural metaphors . . . do not sit well with making a deal with death and the underworld.”¹² This understanding misses the intended contrast between what the people of Jerusalem are to be putting their hope in and the overarching parallelism between the leaders of Ephraim and those of Jerusalem. Although the architectural language may at first seem awkward, it fits with what would be expected from the context. There is a clear distinction between this rock and Yahweh himself, which is noteworthy since the rock cannot then be interpreted as Yahweh. This stone is something else, some other entity or organization that is being placed as part of God’s redeeming plan.

There are disagreements about whether this initial phrase should be translated in the perfect tense (“I have laid”) or in the future tense (“I am about to lay”). Kaiser notes that the tense is vague in the Hebrew, suggesting that the answer “can only ever be determined from the context.”¹³ E. J. Young suggests that “the context demands the past, as far as the laying of the stone itself is concerned, but what is built upon the stone is future.”¹⁴ Undoubtedly there is both a past and future facet to this Hebrew phrase, which leads to confusion between how to translate the verb, either as a participle or as a completed action. This is an intentional literary construction by the author to communicate this intricate theological concept based on God’s atemporality. Yahweh will place this stone in the future, but the promise of it is in the past. This is such a definite reality that it could be considered already done. Some older commentators call this the “prophetic perfect.” The time that this stone is placed is not the burden of this passage. To object to the messianic understanding of this passage because one interprets this stone as being already laid “has no weight, as the whole theocracy existed with a view to the coming of Messiah.”¹⁵ Regardless of

¹¹ The Assyrian threat was growing at this time, so Ephraim and Aram, as well as the other small nations in the Near East, banded together to defend themselves. However, Judah refused to join the alliance, leading to the invasion by the Northern Kingdom and the Arameans. Instead of this threat causing Jerusalem to comply and join the alliance, Judah allied with Assyria, hoping to hide behind their strength.

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 392–93.

¹³ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 253.

¹⁴ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 285.

¹⁵ Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 454.

whether it is looking toward his future reign or looking back at the historical reality of his promised coming, the hope can only be fulfilled in the messianic kingdom.

The stone's characteristics further clarify its referent. It says in Isaiah 28:16b that this is a tested stone (בִּתְּחִיל בִּיָּסָד, *bōhān 'eben*) and a costly cornerstone (יָאֲרָר פִּינָא, *yāqār pinnā*) used for the foundation (מִיָּסָד, *mūsād*). The idea of this first phrase is not that this stone is meant to test other stones, but that it has proven itself as a safe and solid rock on which to build.¹⁶ Calvin interpreted this phrase as indicating that this stone was a standard of comparison, but the “common explanation is more natural, which makes it mean a stone that has itself been proved or tried and found sufficient.”¹⁷ This stone is understood to be solid, something that is true, not a false refuge like the pact with Sheol. The description creates a clear contrast between those who believe in the stone that Yahweh is laying in Zion, and those who put their faith in a false hope, like the covenant with Sheol. This is the stone that alone can protect those who believe in it from destruction. It has been scrutinized and found to be emphatically “rock solid.”¹⁸ Those who trust in Yahweh will be saved from the murderous overflowing scourge.

This phrase of those who believe not being shaken (לֹא יִיָּרָס, *lō' yahish*) can be translated as “in a hurry.” Ibn Ezra suggests that this could mean that it “will be a long time before this prophecy is fulfilled.”¹⁹ More specifically, the idea is that this cornerstone's salvation is a future salvation which allows those who take refuge in it, those who believe, to have confidence in the present (cf. Rom 8:18). This stone, being the corner, suggests more than that it was simply a good foundation to build upon. E. J. Young says that this stone was in an essential position, “not merely one among others.”²⁰ This shows the preeminence of this firmly placed cornerstone.

This cornerstone will not only be a sure foundation but will make justice (מִשְׁפָּט, *mišpāt*) the measuring line and righteousness (שֶׁדֶק, *šedeq*) the level (Isa 28:17). Throughout Isaiah, justice and righteousness consistently appear together as a characteristic pair that defines holiness (Isa 1:27; 5:7; 9:7; 16:5; 32:1; 32:16-17; 33:5; 56:1). They are especially used in connection with the restoration of the nation to their intended role as a holy people. These two characteristics are intimately connected with the Messiah's coming, for he will bring justice and righteousness, establishing them throughout the world (Isa 9:6-7; 42:1, 53:11). However, in this context, this cornerstone does not bring justice and righteousness but is constructed by them. Wildberger claims that these terms being analogous suggests that there is testing taking place.²¹ While plausible, the emphasis is rather that this stone is found righteous and just.²² The idea is not necessarily that other stones are meant to be

¹⁶ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, Christian Standard Commentary (Nashville: Holman, 2021), 572.

¹⁷ Alexander, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 455.

¹⁸ This phrase *yāsād mūsād* could be translated, “a founded foundation.” The double emphasis is meant to exemplify the certainty of this firm foundation.

¹⁹ A. J. Rosenberg, ed. and trans., *Book of Isaiah Volume One: A New English Translation of the Text, Rashi, and a Commentary Digest* (New York: Judaica Press, 1982), 225.

²⁰ Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2: 287.

²¹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 41. Wildberger proceeds to compare this passage to Amos 7:7 where Yahweh stands on the wall with a plumb line.

²² These are both construction analogies: when a beam is level, it can be used to determine whether other beams are level based on the relationship between them; likewise, carpenters will often cut a wooden template piece to their desired length and use that to ensure the correct length of the rest of their cuts.

compared to this stone, but that it is the embodiment, the incarnation of justice and righteousness. In Isaiah, Israel is not just or righteous (Isa 1:21-23; 5:1-7; 10:1-2; 28:1-8), but through exile they will be purified and eventually produce these characteristics (Isa 1:25-26; 48:10). This cannot describe any of the leaders of Israel, since they are repeatedly described as wicked and those who greedily reject justice for personal profit. Even those who follow Yahweh are not entirely just or righteous. Apart from Yahweh's grace, believers are spiritually dead, needing to be revived through the pouring out of God's Spirit upon them (Ezek 37:1-14). This costly cornerstone is not Isaiah; he is not just, although he is cleansed by the burning coal in 6:5. Throughout the book, Yahweh alone is described as just and righteous during the pre-messianic kingdom era (Isa 5:16; 30:18; 33:5-6; 51:1-8; 59:14-17). The Messiah shares many similar characteristics with Yahweh and is the only other person with the ability to be these things. When he comes to rule, the Messiah is going to bring righteousness and justice with him, upholding peace throughout the land (Isa 9:7). In Isaiah 11:4-5, the Messiah judges the poor in justice and righteousness, and in Isaiah 42:1, the servant brings justice to the nations.

This overlap in Yahweh's unique attributes and the Messiah fits with the pre-trinitarian mystery that emerges through a careful reading of this book. Isaiah indicates a connection between the two, even though they are clearly distinct. Certain passages in the book of Isaiah provoke reflection about the relationship of the Messiah to Yahweh as their roles in redeeming, delivering, and saving mankind and ruling the world overlap. This is a natural byproduct of the yet-dim reality that the Messiah is the second person of the Trinity, being fully God while still being distinct from Yahweh. This allusion to the plurality of the Godhead is supported in several Old Testament passages (Pss 2; 110; Jer 23; Zech 9; 12-14) and is even found in Isaiah 48:16. In Isaiah 9:6-7, the child, who is identified as the Messiah, is called Wonderful Counselor (Isa 40:14 shows that there is no counselor higher than God), Mighty God (Isa 45:5-6 states that there is no other God besides Yahweh), Everlasting Father (Yahweh is the first and the last, there is no one like him [Isa 44:6]), and Prince of Peace (שָׁר־שָׁלוֹם, *śar-šālôm* can be translated as chief, overseer, or captain of peace, but Yahweh alone creates peace [Isa 45:7]). From this text, we are forced to conclude that this child, born of a virgin, is literally Immanuel (God with us). However, the reality that the Messiah and Yahweh are distinct must be upheld, and while hinted at in Isaiah, it will be further fleshed out in later revelation. The Trinity can never be comprehensively understood based on the nature of the infinite God, but it is still important to address, especially in this study.

This conflation between Yahweh and the Messiah fits within the parallel structure established previously, with the mention of the hope of Yahweh coming as king in Isaiah 28:5 and the interpretation of the cornerstone as the coming messianic king. Since the cornerstone is separate from Yahweh, we are inclined to interpret the stone as Immanuel, God with us.

Stone Imagery in Isaiah 26:4

This is not the only usage of stone imagery in the book of Isaiah, for several mentions of "rock" refer to Yahweh as a refuge. A classic example of this is Isaiah 26:4, where Yahweh is called the Rock of Ages (צֹר עוֹלָמִים, *śūr 'olāmim*). In the

context, the people of Judah have become righteous and faithful to Yahweh, humbly subjecting themselves to his authority (Isa 26:1-3). Their trust in Yahweh of hosts is well placed because he is the everlasting Rock. This identification of Yahweh is common in the Old Testament, describing a “rocky crag upon which a harassed person could climb, sheltering himself in one of its crannies and there being able to beat off all attackers,”²³ or wait out a severe storm. The context also compares Yahweh to a “strong city” that will outlast the arrogantly self-exalted cities (Isa 26:1). By appealing to the well-known metaphor of Yahweh as a rock of refuge, the contrast between him and the city, which presumes itself unassailable but will ultimately be brought low (Isa 26:5-6), is emphasized. The people are to take refuge in Yahweh within the walls of his saving arms (26:4), in whom the righteous will find salvation. This is what Yahweh has been begging Israel to do, but if they refuse God’s way of salvation, they will receive the same end as the arrogant city (Isa 26:11). Motyer clarifies that this is not a “once-for-all act of faith but an ongoing life of faith” that Yahweh desires.²⁴ The representation of God as a rock or refuge for his people to hide behind is simply a physical metaphor that describes a spiritual reality of reliance upon the unseen God. While this does not show a direct relationship, stating that the cornerstone is the Messiah, the usage of rock in reference to Yahweh causes us to be surprised by Isaiah 28:16, since there is an expectation for this precious cornerstone to be Yahweh, which is impossible since Yahweh lays this cornerstone.

Stone Imagery in Isaiah 51:1

Although there is not a clear connection, there is a fascinating stone analogy in Isaiah 51:1 that could be relevant due to the intriguing relationship between the Messiah and Yahweh. In this text, those who pursue righteousness and seek Yahweh are called to remember from what rock they come. In verse 2, the rock is identified as Abraham, who is Israel’s father. Implied in the text is the reality that Yahweh will keep his promises to Israel because the promises to the father’s line naturally apply to those who come from him, his sons. This allows those living thousands of years after Abraham died to have confidence in God’s promises to keep his covenant with their forefather and thus with them.

This verse provides a unique way of understanding the relationship between a rock and its origin: a stone is intimately connected to the rock it was hewn from. The typical Hebrew word for rock when speaking of deity is צֶרֶף (*śûr*),²⁵ which symbolizes enduring firmness, like a cliff or large boulder.²⁶ This is the word used to refer to the Abrahamic rock, while the word for “rock” in Isaiah 28:16 is אֶבֶן (*’eben*), which has a variety of uses, including a precious stone, a single stone, building materials, and could also imply that it was hewn from a larger rock.²⁷ There seems to be a connection between Yahweh as the Eternal Rock and this cornerstone, which is

²³ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 437.

²⁴ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 214.

²⁵ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 906.

²⁶ Roger Good, “God as a Rock Provision, Protection, and Presence,” *Affirmation and Critique* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2015). https://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac_15_02.html.

²⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 906.

placed by Yahweh, possibly coming from him. However, the fact that this relationship is present in Isaiah does not necessarily mean that it is intended to be used in the interpretation of Isaiah 28. Regardless, this shows the possibility of a messianic interpretation. However, if this interpretive tool is used, then the cornerstone would have been carved from the Rock of Ages. This understanding of the Messiah being hewn from Yahweh could be seen as another way to communicate the overlap of their roles and character.²⁸

Stone Imagery in Isaiah 32:2

In Isaiah 32:1-2, there is an unidentified king who has established a government based on righteousness and justice. While the character of this passage is not developed here, there are clear messianic overtones present. Young observes:

It is probably correct to say that this is not a Messianic prophecy in the sense that it speaks of the Messiah personally. It speaks of a government, however, that can belong only to the Messiah and be ruled by Him, and in that sense may be labelled a Messianic prophecy.... The king will reign according to righteousness and the princes according to justice, the very opposite of what prevailed in Isaiah's day.²⁹

This king, who can only be the Messiah, is going to be so righteous and just that it is going to spill over into the princes ruling alongside him.³⁰ Not only is the king going to be righteous, but the entire government will be.³¹ Although this is a general promise, it can only refer to the messianic kingdom.³² Some argue against a messianic interpretation by saying that "the language is not nearly as idealized as it is in such undoubtedly messianic passages as 8:23–9:6 and 11:1-9."³³ However, the language is still very much idealized, and in "an age of unrighteous government, or when perhaps there was no king at all, his words would be bound to sound messianic to Jewish readers."³⁴

This passage's importance to this study is due to Isaiah 32:2, which describes how the people take refuge from the wind and storm behind a huge rock.³⁵ Motyer

²⁸ The application of similar language describing Yahweh's relationship with the Messiah and his relationship with his people aligns with the ambiguous relationship between Israel and the Messiah, also seen in Isaiah. Most notably, both Israel and the Messiah are called Yahweh's "servant," and they are both referred to as Yahweh's son in the broader Old Testament context.

²⁹ Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2:386.

³⁰ "The reference of [princes] to the apostles appears very forced, and is certainly not justified, much less required, by the promise in Matt 19:28" (Alexander, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 1).

³¹ Hezekiah could be considered relatively righteous, but not to this degree. Accentuating this is the fact that his government, specifically Shebna who was condemned in Isa 22:15, were not righteous like him. Shebna was not removed from the government and is present during Hezekiah's reign (Isa 36:3, 11, 22; 37:2).

³² Blenkinsopp has no commentary regarding the idea of Messiah or the importance of the rock imagery in this chapter (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 428–31).

³³ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 579.

³⁴ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 321.

³⁵ The Hebrew word here is *סֵלָא* (*sela'*) which can be translated as ragged cliff, exalted fortress, or rock. While the word is not the same as previously seen, the imagery is. The Messiah will protect the people, the typical role of Yahweh.

observes, “The thought seems to be that a man will be like a hiding place, and this man will be upon the throne.”³⁶ This king, whose throne is marked by righteousness and justice, is the total protector of his people and the one who tends to his people through beneficial care and refreshment.³⁷ This king is the rock which his people can hide within. This passage would have been understood in the context of the Messiah, especially with all of the earlier passages of Isaiah looking forward to such a king. This passage was written to make the nation loathe the selfish, unrighteous kings and rulers who were currently leading them and long for the coming Messiah.

Ultimately, this is realized in none other than Jesus Christ. In the overall context of Isaiah, using stone metaphors to describe the Messiah is reasonable. The imagery relating the Messiah to a rock, like Yahweh, fits within Isaianic theology and naturally flows from the nearly indistinguishable relationship between the Messiah and Yahweh established in this book.

Stone Imagery in Genesis 49:24

The broader scope of the Old Testament provides further support for understanding the cornerstone messianically. Genesis 49 contains Jacob’s blessings for his sons, with verses 22-26 focusing on the blessing of Joseph. Verse 24 ascribes Joseph’s protection to the Mighty One of Jacob, the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel, the God of his fathers, the Almighty. While these are names commonly used in reference to Yahweh throughout the Old Testament, several are used for the Messiah as well. For instance, shepherd “imagery is used of Israel’s king, who was designated by God to ‘shepherd’ (הִרְאָה, *rā’ā*) the nation (2 Sam 5:2; e.g., Jer 31:10).”³⁸ As a king of Israel, the Messiah would fulfill this role as a shepherd of the nation.

The next title is the Stone of Israel, which uses the Hebrew word יָבֵן (*‘eben*), for rock. This is considered a relatively unique word group, which could be the inspiration behind the usage of *‘eben* in Isaiah 28:16.³⁹ Having established that the stone cannot be God, this leaves the Messiah as a natural subsequent identification. Isaiah is pulling from this name of God to further hint towards understanding the mysterious proto-trinitarian relationship between the Messiah and Yahweh, which is further developed throughout biblical history.

Stone Imagery in Psalm 118:22

Firmer connections between the Messiah and this stone imagery can be established from Psalm 118. This hymn has no superscription, leading to uncertainty regarding whether it was written before or after Isaiah’s ministry.

³⁶ Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 386.

³⁷ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 257.

³⁸ Matthews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 906.

³⁹ Of the 273 times *‘eben* is used, only six refer to an individual: Gen 49:24, 1 Sam 7:12, Ps 118:22, Isa 8:14, Isa 28:16 and Zech 3:9. Based on the context of these references, the only possible referents are Yahweh or the Messiah. Some passages are more difficult to determine the identity of *‘eben*, like Gen 49:24, but the language of Isaiah 28:16 precludes identifying this *‘eben* as God the Father.

Regardless, it is an important psalm overflowing with allusions to a second exodus and connections to Isaiah.⁴⁰

This passage has a strong history of messianic interpretation and follows a king from the Davidic throne who is returning to Jerusalem victorious (Ps 118:19-20; 25-27). This messianic king represents the nation and is involved in diplomacy and military conflict on their behalf, despite being opposed by them. In the midst of praising Yahweh for his covenant *hesed* (steadfast love), the Davidic king describes himself in the third person as the stone which the builders rejected, contrasting mankind's intended treachery with Yahweh's divine election of this king. James Hamilton suggests that Psalm 118 is in a chiasmic structure,⁴¹ which, while not being accurate for the entire psalm, helpfully amplifies the intended parallel between verses 8-9 and verses 22-23. In Psalm 118:8-9, trusting in Yahweh is a surer refuge than putting one's faith in any human ruler, which reflects the message of Isaiah 28. The selection of this stone as the chief cornerstone is something that is done by the Lord and is marvelous in the redeemed nation's eyes (Ps 118:23). Initially, this stone is despised and tossed aside by Israel, who trusts in human rulers over Yahweh of hosts (Ps 118:9, 22). However, this spurning, which originally may seem like a blow to God's plan, is revealed to be the summation of all of redemptive history. Yahweh uses the rejection of the chief cornerstone to save the nation. In Isaiah 53:3, the messianic servant is despised and scorned by those whom he came to save. Through this offering for sin, the servant is going to justify many, bearing their iniquities (Isa 53:11). The Old Testament is clear that the rejected cornerstone is the Messiah.

The residents of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus believed this cornerstone was messianic as they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David," which is from this psalm (Ps 118:25; Matt 21:9). They believed Jesus was the Messiah who was going to free them from Roman oppression and lead them out of bondage into the messianic kingdom. When they realized that he was not there to incite a military coup, they slaughtered Jesus, fulfilling the servant prophecies (Isa 49; 50; 53). The people were blind and deaf, unable to realize that before the Messiah would come as a conquering king, he would come as a suffering servant. In the same way that the people of Israel refused to take refuge in Yahweh, they rejected Jesus Christ, the stone that God had placed in Zion. As long as Israel continues in rebellion to reject their Messiah, they will experience Yahweh's refining judgment. Eventually, they will look on him whom they have pierced and rest in the salvation found in the precious blood of Christ (Zech 12:10). On that day, the Anointed One of Israel will reign with his people victoriously.

Stone Imagery in Zechariah 3:9

The prophetic books of the Old Testament are intricately intertwined, each building on the ideas of earlier prophets. Zechariah, written a couple of hundred years after Isaiah, continues prophesying about the coming Messiah using extremely

⁴⁰ Christopher Ash, *Psalms 101–150* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 256.

⁴¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms: Volume 2* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 331.

similar language.⁴² Chapter 3 depicts Zechariah's fourth vision, in which Joshua, the high priest, is being accused by Satan in the presence of the angel of the Lord. From this text, as well as others (Gen 16:7-13), evangelical scholars have concluded that the angel of Yahweh is God, with some going further to suggest that he is a preincarnate form of Jesus.⁴³ In the context, there is a lack of distinction between Yahweh and the angel of the Lord, which fits with the Isaianic understanding of the Messiah. In this chapter, it is explained that the high priest and the whole priestly system were symbolic of something to come. Explicitly, they are preimages of the coming servant, also called the branch, which refers to the Messiah in connection with Isaiah (Isa 4:2; 11:1). In the following verse, this servant is referred to as the stone (אֶבֶן, 'eben) which is set before Joshua. This stone's connection with purification for the nation and as a symbol of the priestly system is seen through the parallel usage of "set before" (לִפְנֵי, *lipnē*) in verses 8 and 9, connecting the coming servant to the stone.

Zechariah 3 is replete with temple theology, specifically regarding a coming high priest who would accomplish what Joshua's priests were unable to do. Klein comments that the messianic interpretation of the stone relies solely on the connection between verse 9b and verse 8 while "excluding the remainder of the passage," and says that when one considers the whole passage, a messianic interpretation becomes less convincing.⁴⁴ However, Pusey shows that certain Jewish rabbis saw a relationship between the stone in this text and the cornerstone of Psalm 118:22.⁴⁵ The main reason that Klein rejects the messianic interpretation is the priestly emphasis found in this chapter. However, this connection between the offices of priest and king is already an established piece of messianic theology. In Psalm 110, David records the "LORD" speaking to his (David's) "Lord," which, like Psalm 2, can only refer to the Messiah. In Psalm 110:4, the messianic king is described as a "priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." Melchizedek is both king and priest (Gen 14:18), unifying the two roles and acting as a precursor to the Messiah, who would do likewise. Furthermore, in Isaiah 52:15, when the servant sprinkles many nations for the purification from sin, Isaiah himself connects the Messiah to priestly roles. While this stone is related to priestly purification, this would not have been mutually exclusive from a messianic understanding.

This stone is engraved with seven eyes, which has historically been a major hindrance in identifying this stone as the Messiah. However, the engravings fit with the rejection of the cornerstone in Psalm 118 and the wounds of the servant in Isaiah 53:3. The seven eyes (*šeba' ayin*)⁴⁶ could be an allusion to Exodus 28:21, where "the priestly vestment contained 14 stones."⁴⁷ However, it is likelier "symbolic of

⁴² This further indicates that the prophecies of Isaiah were not fulfilled in his time since Zechariah is still waiting.

⁴³ Although conservatives agree that he is divine, there is disagreement regarding which person(s) of the Godhead this is. Some posit that it is solely the preincarnate Son, while others identify the Son and the Father as possibilities.

⁴⁴ George L. Klein, *Zechariah: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 149.

⁴⁵ Charles L. Feinberg, *God Remembers: A Study of the Book of Zechariah* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1950), 65.

⁴⁶ This could be understood as "seven sets of eyes," which would result in fourteen total eyes.

⁴⁷ Klein, *Zechariah*, 150.

manifold intelligence and omniscience,”⁴⁸ which is a characteristic of Yahweh that has also been used to describe the Messiah (Isa 11:2; cf. Rev 5:6). Thus, this description does not hinder a messianic interpretation of this stone.

Excursus: Isaiah 8:14

Isaiah 7 and 9 contain two of the clearest messianic prophecies found in Isaiah—the Immanuel prophecy and the Prince of Peace prophecies, respectively. In the midst of this, chapter 8 seems to be out of place. However, there are several usages of עִמָּנוּ אֵל (*immānū’ēl*) in this chapter as well (Isa 8:8, 10), indicating that the Messiah is still the focus. In Isaiah 8:11, Isaiah is told not to be like Israel, who trembles at everything except Yahweh, fearing the Arameans (Isa 7:2). It is in this context that Yahweh will either be a sanctuary or a stone (אֶבֶן, *’eben*) of stumbling and a rock (צוּר, *šûr*) of offense (Isa 8:14). If the people put their hope in the Holy One of Israel, he will protect them, but if they reject him as their refuge, he will become a trap to them.

While Isaiah 8:11-15 seems to specifically refer to Yahweh, it is in a messianic context. Through further reading of Isaiah, one begins to question whether this could also be referring to the Messiah, who is often referred to in identical language to God. If all we had was Isaiah, it would be hard to confidently say that this stumbling stone refers to the Messiah, even though the stone in Isaiah 28:16 is messianic.⁴⁹ However, in 1 Peter 2:6-8, Jesus Christ is clearly described as the precious stone of Isaiah 28:16, the rejected cornerstone of Psalm 118:22, and the stumbling stone of Isaiah 8:14. Through this further revelation, it becomes clear that Isaiah 8 was also messianic imagery. This interpretation by the apostle Peter helps this passage fit nicely into the abundantly messianic context. J. Randall Price, speaking about Isaiah 8, says that when we get to Isaiah 28:16, we have already been presented with the divine Messiah (9:6) and Yahweh as the stone (8:14-15), which prepares the reader for “the divine-human character of the stone.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

The concept of the Messiah being referred to as a precious cornerstone is not foreign to the Old Testament. It is a metaphor that is developed, similarly to the shepherd analogy, to help Israel understand the character of their coming king. He will be a sure refuge, like Yahweh himself. A major theme throughout Isaiah is Israel’s need for better rulers who will lead the nation in justice and righteousness. In the book of Immanuel (Isa 1–12), the Messiah is presented as the king who will reign in righteousness and lead his people to follow Yahweh. Because of this, in the context of wicked leaders and the hope of future righteous leaders (Isa 28), we are conditioned to think of the Messiah. The stone imagery was developed throughout the Old Testament, at first used to speak about Yahweh, and then shown to be used

⁴⁸ Feinberg, *God Remembers*, 66.

⁴⁹ Joseph Canfield makes a bold argument that in Isaiah 8:11-15 Yahweh is addressing the Messiah who then speaks in verses 16-22, however, I am not fully convinced. Joseph Canfield, “The Voice of the Messiah in Isaiah 8,” *The Master’s University Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 53–66.

⁵⁰ Price, “Isaiah 28:16: The Messianic Cornerstone,” 592.

to explicitly refer to the Messiah (Ps 118:22; Isa 28:16; Zech 3:9). Throughout the Old Testament, other biblical authors build upon Isaiah's initial analogy to describe the Messiah as a metaphorical stone. Based on the context's demand for a king in Isaiah 28:16, and the usage of stone imagery in relation to the Messiah in Isaiah and the entire Old Testament, we can confidently conclude that Isaiah was intentionally prophesying about the coming Messiah in Isaiah 28, in whom Israel and the entire world are to put their hope.

All people, Israel and Christians alike, are to believe in the precious cornerstone, the rock of their salvation, the Messiah, who is Jesus Christ. Mere belief devoid of actively taking refuge in him is worthless. The Israelites knew Yahweh was real; they saw him perform many wonderful deeds, but it did not move them to active faith resulting in obedience. When threats came, they put their trust in covenants with other nations that ultimately led to death (Isa 30–31). It is foolish to put our hope in our own strength, rather than in the mighty hands of Yahweh of hosts alone, who is the only true refuge. One day, the costly cornerstone will come to reign forever, and Christians now must live in light of that glorious future reality. On that day, all those who believe in Christ will say, "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation" (Isa 12:2).

**TO WHOM WILL YOU LIKEN ME?
AN EXEGETICAL-THEOLOGICAL DEFENSE OF
CLASSICAL THEISM FROM ISAIAH 40–48**

Elijah Ko¹

* * * * *

This study offers an exegetical-theological defense of classical theism from Isaiah 40–48. Against freewill and open theist readings, it argues that Isaiah’s portrayal of Yahweh requires the divine perfections of aseity, immutability, and simplicity. The prophet’s polemic against idols depends on Yahweh’s absolute uniqueness and independence from time, knowledge, power, and human will. Without these perfections, Yahweh would be indistinguishable from the contingent idols Isaiah condemns, thereby undermining Israel’s hope of salvation. Isaiah 40–48 therefore not only coheres with classical theism but requires it as the basis of Israel’s redemption.

Key words: Isaiah 40–48, classical theism, freewill/open theism, aseity, immutability, simplicity

* * * * *

Who is God? The significance of this question cannot be overstated. A. W. Tozer famously wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”² Knowing God is of such importance that Jesus Christ claimed it was the substance of eternal life (John 17:3).³ Therefore, it is no surprise that Scripture is saturated with statements regarding the nature and character of God, not least in the book of Isaiah. John Oswalt argues that “of all the books in the OT, Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequalled. Its scope is unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched.”⁴ There are many lofty doctrines promoted in Isaiah, but nothing compares to Isaiah’s emphasis on God’s

¹ Elijah Ko is a senior majoring in Biblical Studies with an emphasis in Biblical Languages. He may be contacted at koef@masters.edu.

² A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 1.

³ All Bible quotations are from the Legacy Standard Bible.

⁴ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

absolute, transcendent separateness, especially as witnessed in Isaiah 40–48.⁵ Craig Carter emphasizes this theology:

Isaiah’s message is not fundamentally political or ethical or even religious in the sense of ritual and cult; his message is primarily theological. Hope is possible because God says so, because this God says so, and because this God is a certain kind of being. It is the nature of God that is the basis of everything else, and this is true of the book of Isaiah as a whole. It is one of the most profound meditations on the nature and being of God ever written.⁶

Isaiah’s high theology is not only a “profound meditation,” but it is deeply practical for Israel. From the start, Israel has questioned whether to trust worldly powers or Yahweh. Does Yahweh have the power to save, or should they rely on the surrounding nations and their idols?⁷ Isaiah argues that they should trust Yahweh because of his character. Yahweh is the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, and no nation or idol can be likened to him (Isa 48:17). He is eternal, self-existent, and everything depends on him (Isa 40:28). He is the unchanging and immovable rock on which Israel can depend (Isa 44:8; 46:4). He is unique and singular in essence, saying, “I am He,” and “There is no god besides Me” (Isa 43:10; 44:6). And he is most certainly independent of and unaffected by man (40:17; 45:9). These texts, and many more, reveal a clear distinction between a transcendent God and his transient creation, which is the foundational claim of the system commonly termed classical theism.⁸ Isaiah 40–48 presents Yahweh as the transcendent Lord whose saving purposes presuppose and support aseity, immutability, and simplicity—perfections later articulated within classical theism and essential to distinguishing him from the idols he condemns.

A Spectrum of Views

Classical Theism

Many perspectives on who God is and how he relates to his creation have been proposed. The historic orthodox position is commonly referred to as classical theism which promotes the transcendence of God, advocating for God’s simplicity, immutability, eternity, and self-existence, all of which will be defined later in this article.⁹ This is the common historical position that the church has confessed for

⁵ Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 12; John N. Oswalt, *The Holy One of Israel* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014), 21.

⁶ Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 125.

⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 28.

⁸ Carter, *Contemplating God*, 16–17. See 15–82 for a history of the classical view of God and opposing views.

⁹ Carter, 16; James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 1. Dolezal would also suggest impassability, but it is really a significant subdivision of immutability.

centuries.¹⁰ Many historical figures including “Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas” all supported and advocated for classical theism.¹¹ These theologians and many more of the greatest minds in church history affirmed these transcendent perfections of God and believed they were clearly revealed in Scripture.¹²

The main emphasis of classical theism is fundamentally relational. Carter states that “the relationship is not between two entities of similar being but between the immutable and perfect self-existent God, on the one hand, and the world of change and imperfection that is itself wholly dependent on God, on the other.”¹³ God is distinct from his creation and he remains unaffected by it, for he is already perfectly complete in himself.¹⁴ God is not just above us or the highest being on a list of many, but he is of a completely different kind.¹⁵ There is no man, beast, idol, or created thing that is able to properly represent God because he is, in himself, entirely unique. Even the highest words and thoughts fail to encompass God in his fullness.¹⁶ To put it in the words of Isaiah, “To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal?” (Isa 40:25).

The Spectrum Within Freewill Theism

For much of church history, the foundational claims of classical theism functioned as the dominant theological consensus, only encountering sustained and significant challenge in the modern period.¹⁷ Now, many theologians claim that there is a contradiction between the sovereignly transcendent God of classical theism and the personal and relational God of the Bible who “speaks and acts in history to judge and save.”¹⁸ John Sanders, who supports an alternative view to classical theism, synthesizes the main issues:

The great watershed divide between classical and freewill theisms is (1) whether or not some of God’s decisions and actions are contingent upon or influenced by creatures and (2) whether God exercises general or meticulous providence. These are the most important issues. Once you affirm that God genuinely responds and enters into give-and-take relations with us, the remaining issues are a matter of logical tidiness.¹⁹

¹⁰ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 1. Dolezal notes that classical theism is the common position of many “older Protestant confessions such as the Belgic Confession, Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, Westminster Confession of Faith, and Second London Confession of Faith.”

¹¹ Dolezal, 1.

¹² Matthew Barrett with Fred Sanders, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 11.

¹³ Carter, *Contemplating God*, 16–17.

¹⁴ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 155.

¹⁵ Barrett, *None Greater*, 21–22.

¹⁶ Peter Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC, 2023), 14.

¹⁷ Carter, *Contemplating God*, 17.

¹⁸ Carter, 18.

¹⁹ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 196. Sanders gives a helpful definition and brief theological history of both classical theism and freewill theism from the perspective of a freewill theist.

Although there are many small distinctions between views, for the sake of simplicity, Sanders's summary of this "give-and-take" relationship will suffice.²⁰ Another influential theologian is Clark Pinnock, whose writings shaped and defined "open theism" as it is known today.²¹ Pinnock argues that, although the world is dependent on God, "God has also, voluntarily, made himself dependent on it in some important respects."²² Others agree, arguing that "love is the most important quality we attribute to God, and love is more than care and commitment; it involves being sensitive and responsive as well."²³ Simply put, God must change in some way to become a dynamically relational and loving God. Bruce Ware, presenting a less extreme view, advocates for "relational mutability."²⁴ He argues that God does not change except in his relationship with mankind.²⁵ Dolezal accurately points out that Ware's view still falls short of biblical orthodoxy by promoting a "give-and-take" relationship between God and man, thus agreeing with the underlying emphasis of all freewill theism.²⁶

The debate between these views is heated. Some argue that all views short of classical theism "diminish God" and make him to be a creature and "member of the universe."²⁷ Others have fought back, arguing that if God is love he must change, and that his dependence upon man and the universe actually enhance his greatness.²⁸ Some have dared to say that certain freewill theists are not saved and that what they promote is paganism.²⁹ So, what is the biblical view of God? Isaiah 40–48 clearly answers that question.

The Context for Isaiah 40–48

Isaiah 1–39

Understanding the theology of trust in Isaiah 1–39 helps highlight the significance of chapters 40–48. The book of Isaiah begins by condemning Israel for transgressing against Yahweh (Isa 1:2). They are a wicked and worthless vineyard and are anything but God's servant (Isa 5:4).³⁰ In Isaiah 6 God's holiness is put on display and Israel's sin is put into perspective (Isa 6:3). Israel needs salvation and atonement for their sin, but only Yahweh can provide it (Isa 6:6-7). The question is, will they trust him?

²⁰ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 1–8. Here Dolezal gives a helpful assessment of the differing models of theism.

²¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 3.

²² Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 31.

²³ Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, by Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 15.

²⁴ Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 (1986): 438.

²⁵ Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation," 438–39.

²⁶ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 1–2.

²⁷ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Chapman, 1987), 18.

²⁸ Rice, "Biblical Support," 16.

²⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 16.

³⁰ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 54.

This sets up the book for chapters 7–39, which deal with the recurring theme of trust.³¹ In these chapters, Israel’s faith in Yahweh was tested in two important ways (Isa 7, 36–39).³² The first test comes in chapter 7 when Judah faced opposition from the north. The northern kingdom of Israel had joined forces with Aram to attack Ahaz and the southern kingdom.³³ In the face of danger, Ahaz was commanded to trust Yahweh, who was greater than these two “smoldering firebrands,” yet Ahaz ignored Yahweh and chose to trust in worldly security instead (Isa 7:4, 12).³⁴ Ahaz believed that “Assyria was more able to help him against Israel and Syria than God was.”³⁵ Because of Judah’s sin, Yahweh promised to use Assyria as a rod to punish them (Isa 10:5).³⁶

Chapters 36–39 present Judah with a second chance. Hezekiah is placed in a similar position to his father Ahaz.³⁷ Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, had finally come up against Judah and Jerusalem (Isa 36:1).³⁸ Israel was faced yet again with the question: will they trust Yahweh or some other nation?³⁹ Sennacherib’s blasphemy of Yahweh led Hezekiah to his knees, where he urged Yahweh to save Judah and Jerusalem so that Yahweh’s name would not be blasphemed and all would know that he is Yahweh (Isa 37:14-20). Hezekiah’s prayer was answered, and Yahweh personally slaughtered the Assyrian army, ultimately saving Jerusalem and demonstrating his power (Isa 37:36-38). Despite Yahweh’s faithfulness to Jerusalem, Hezekiah later failed to trust in Yahweh. When Babylon came to visit, Hezekiah sought their favor by boasting in his riches (Isa 39:1-2). Because of his pride and failure to exalt Yahweh, God promised judgment on Judah by the hand of the very nation Hezekiah sought favor with (Isa 39:6-7). Thus, Hezekiah fell into the same sin as his father Ahaz, repeating the cycle of judgment, leading to exile. But through it all, Yahweh remained faithful, and he promised to demonstrate his glory by saving his people again.

Isaiah 40–48

Isaiah 40–48 opens with that same promise of salvation. “Comfort, O comfort My people” is Yahweh’s consolation to the exiled nation. The time of Israel’s punishment has been fulfilled, and Yahweh is going to save them. The people are wondering if Yahweh has the power to save them or if he has been defeated by the Babylonian gods.⁴⁰ As Oswalt summarizes, Isaiah tells the people that “God has not only not abandoned them but has especially chosen through them to demonstrate his superiority over the Babylonian deities. This superiority will be seen in his ability to destroy those idols, to redeem his people from their sins, and to bring those people

³¹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 55.

³² J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 18–21.

³³ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 19.

³⁴ Motyer, 19.

³⁵ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 55.

³⁶ Oswalt, 55.

³⁷ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2021), 690.

³⁸ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 20.

³⁹ Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 690.

⁴⁰ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 58.

back to their homeland.”⁴¹ These chapters provide comfort to Israel by demonstrating who God is.⁴²

God’s character is central to these chapters because it is the basis of his trustworthiness. Trust was the key theme of Isaiah 1–39, and it remains the same for Isaiah 40–48. Yahweh is going to discredit the idols of the nations, so that Israel is compelled to “recognize, trust, and glorify the incomparable God.”⁴³ Yahweh is not like the gods of the nations, as Sennacherib claimed (Isa 36:18). Yahweh is “of a completely different order from his creatures.”⁴⁴ He is not dependent on anyone for anything as the idols are.⁴⁵ He is the one “for whom mighty Cyrus is an errand boy (45:1-5). The nations of the earth, great and small, are but tinder in his hand, a drop in a bucket (14:22-23; 40:15, 21-23; 47:1-4). He is the ‘I am’ before whom idols fade to nothingness (2:6-22; 43:8-13).”⁴⁶ He is Yahweh who ever remains himself, and with the first and the last he is the same (Isa 41:4; 43:10; 46:4; 48:12).⁴⁷ He is the trustworthy redeemer and the only God able to save (Isa 43:11, 14). Therefore, Israel’s salvation depends on who their God is. Is he competent to bring them out of exile? Isaiah answers this question by means of God’s very nature.

A Methodology

Before examining the heights of Isaiah’s theology of God it is important to understand how theology is derived from a text. Theology is both the simple restating of the text and the derived implications of the text that are not explicitly named.⁴⁸ Just because a theological term is not in the Bible does not exclude it from being a biblical teaching. Consider the well-accepted construct of the Trinity. The word “Trinity” never appears in the text of Scripture, yet Christians have always confessed one God who exists as three consubstantial, coequal, co-eternal persons who subsist in one unified divine essence. Moreover, Christians have always insisted that their warrant for believing in a triune God is derived, not from Greek philosophy, but from the biblical text itself. Similarly, aseity, immutability, and simplicity—defining affirmations of classical theism—though not explicitly named in Scripture, are no less true of God than his love or holiness. Dolezal explains this methodology of constructing doctrine:

We might liken the work of the theologian to that of a builder, who first gathers materials for the construction of a building and then proceeds to erect the structure. Some of the materials are easily collected, while others are obtained with much difficulty. But the work is not finished when one has gathered the various resources. There remains the difficult job of arranging them in their proper order so that the building holds itself together.

⁴¹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 14.

⁴² Allan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), 31.

⁴³ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2025), 72.

⁴⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 33.

⁴⁵ Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 44–45.

⁴⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 32.

⁴⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, God and Creation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 153.

⁴⁸ Carter, *Contemplating God*, 53.

The task of theology proper is similar. After gathering the various truths about God that are spread throughout nature and Scripture, one is faced with the challenge of intelligibly arranging the doctrines so as to form a single coherent doctrine of God.⁴⁹

In this way, the “materials” within the book of Isaiah must be gathered and constructed to form a harmonious “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Some Bible-believing Christians are wary of systems such as classical theism because they do not want to impose a foreign system on the Scriptures. However, as will be demonstrated, the doctrines of classical theism, while not explicitly stated, naturally arise from a careful, comprehensive reading of the Bible. In fact, Isaiah’s presentation of God in Isaiah 40–48 requires that Yahweh be the God of classical theism. Otherwise, Israel would have no reason to trust Yahweh over the idols of Babylon.

Aseity in Isaiah 40–48

The first defining doctrine of classical theism is aseity. Aseity is crucial to Isaiah’s argument because it assures that Israel’s salvation is contingent on the God who is not contingent on anything or anyone other than himself. The term aseity comes from the Latin phrase *a se* which simply means “from oneself.”⁵⁰ Gavin Ortlund writes, “Positively, aseity means that God is self-existent; negatively, it means that God exists independently of anything other than himself.”⁵¹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue give a more expanded definition, explaining that “God is independent of all things. He is perfectly self-sufficient, not depending on anything outside of himself for anything, and is therefore the eternal, foundational being, the source of life and sustenance for all other beings.”⁵² Every created thing has an origin, but this is not the case with God.⁵³ While creatures derive their existence from another, God is the only being that exists in himself.⁵⁴ As a result, everything that is not the independent God, is by definition creature, and therefore dependent on God for existence.⁵⁵ God’s independence is supported in Isaiah in no less than five ways.

Monotheism

The first of these arguments is rooted in the prophet’s clear monotheistic description of God in Isaiah 40–48.⁵⁶ Isaiah writes the words of Yahweh, “Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none;” “I am Yahweh,

⁴⁹ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 37.

⁵⁰ Gavin Ortlund, “Trinity and Aseity,” in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 296.

⁵¹ Ortlund, “Trinity and Aseity,” 296.

⁵² John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 168.

⁵³ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 25. This is the rhetorical point of Genesis 1.

⁵⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 152.

⁵⁵ Ortlund, “Divine Aseity,” 296.

⁵⁶ Ortlund, 307.

and there is no other; besides Me there is no God;” “Before Me there was no god formed, and there will be none after Me” (Isa 44:8; 45:5; 43:10). These statements clearly establish that Yahweh alone exists as God and there is no other god who could have caused or added to his existence. The pagan gods were “formed” and “created,” but Yahweh “proceeds from none and is succeeded by none, existing from the beginning, without superior or inferior, one only God.”⁵⁷ God is the one who was made by none, for there was none before him to be his maker.⁵⁸ For God to exist and not be *a se* (of himself), there would need to be something preceding him on which he would need to depend.

According to these texts God is clearly independent before creation, but the problem occurs once creation and humanity enter the equation. Some, such as Pinnock, would agree that “the world is dependent on God,” but would also argue that God has “voluntarily made himself dependent on [the world] in some important respects.”⁵⁹ He would even argue that God has created lesser powers which he must consider and contend with. Yahweh seems to think differently when he says, “There will be none after Me” (Isa 43:10). This verse alludes to the reality that Yahweh is not only independent in eternity past but also in the present and forevermore. He is forever in a different ontological category than the rest of creation (40:18). Bavinck writes, “Creatures, after all, do not derive their existence from themselves but from others and so have nothing from themselves; *both in their origin and hence in their further development and life*, they are absolutely dependent,” but God is “exclusively from himself” from “*eternity to eternity*.”⁶⁰

Independent of Time

The second argument supporting God’s aseity is his eternity and timelessness. This is a more disputed point of classical theism. Thus, many classical theologians would list eternity as its own divine perfection alongside aseity, immutability, and simplicity.⁶¹ Eternity states that God has no beginning or end.⁶² God is “the Everlasting God, Yahweh, the Creator of the ends of the earth” and “the first and the last,” the one existing before all things and after all things (Isa 40:28; 44:6). Isaiah often pairs God’s eternality with his singularity (e.g., Isa 44:6). This is because God’s independence requires that he also be eternal. Charnock once wrote, “You have always been God, and no time can be assigned as the beginning of your being ... God is his own eternity. He is not eternal by grant and the disposal of any other but by nature and essence.”⁶³ As with monotheism, God’s eternity ensures that nothing is before or after him on which he could depend (Isa 43:10). Thus, God’s eternality requires that he also be self-existent and independent.

⁵⁷ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 335.

⁵⁸ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 25.

⁵⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 31.

⁶⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 152; emphasis added.

⁶¹ Barrett, *None Greater*, 139–60; Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 77–88.

⁶² Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 78.

⁶³ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, ed. Mark Jones (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 1:414, 425.

Classical theism also claims that God is timeless, meaning that there is no succession of moments in God and that he is outside of time altogether.⁶⁴ Sanders strongly opposes the timelessness of God, naming it as the first of two major disagreements between freewill and classical theists.⁶⁵ Essentially Sanders reasons that God cannot know what is present if he is not within time and thus, he cannot interact in the present.⁶⁶ Sanders seeks to point out a humanly perceived flaw in the idea of God's timelessness, yet his argument is directly opposed to divine revelation. Isaiah presents God as both independent of time as well as wholly involved in and sovereign over it.

Isaiah says that there was no other god that existed before Yahweh (Isa 43:10). In other words, God created all things *ex nihilo* (from nothing), and since time falls under "all things," then it must be a "created entity."⁶⁷ (Isa 44:24; 45:18). Augustine elaborates on this:

How could those countless ages have elapsed when you, the Creator, in whom all ages have their origin, had not yet created them? What time could there have been that was not created by you? How could time elapse if it never was? You are the Maker of all time ... You must have made that time, for time could not elapse before you made it.⁶⁸

Isaiah 46:9-10 states that Yahweh has declared the end from the beginning. Being the creator of time and all things within it, God determines what will happen from beginning to end. Yahweh is sovereign over time so that nothing within time is outside of his control. Isaiah does not present a God who is ruled by time but a God who rules over it. To say that God exists within his "created entity" is to exalt the creation over the creator. John Mackay argues that Isaiah 40:28 supports that God is not constrained by a succession of moments.⁶⁹ This is in contrast to the idols who are created in time, acted upon within time and space by humans, and are subject to decay as a result of time passing (40:19-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 46:6-7). If Yahweh is not atemporal, the rhetorical thrust of Isaiah's argument is invalid. Bavinck notes that "in God's eternity there exists not a moment of time" and this is because God is outside of it.⁷⁰ God is not able to be measured by time because he is unsearchable (Isa 40:12-13).⁷¹ E. J. Young writes, "He who has measured the creation cannot be measured by the creation."⁷²

Even though God is outside of time, Isaiah still portrays him as acting within time, thereby refuting the complaint of Sanders and other freewill theists that the classical God doesn't act in time. This is clearly seen throughout the book of Isaiah.

⁶⁴ Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 78.

⁶⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 199.

⁶⁶ Sanders, 202. "A key problem for the combination of timelessness and the dynamic theory is that it implies that God does not know what is happening right now, he is unaware what day or year it is presently."

⁶⁷ Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 79.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 262-63.

⁶⁹ John L. Mackay, *A Study Commentary on Isaiah* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2008), 2:44.

⁷⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 156.

⁷¹ Barrett, *None Greater*, 144.

⁷² Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 44.

Yahweh is the one who comes with might to reward his people (Isa 40:10). He reduces rulers to nothing (Isa 40:23). He leads and guides Cyrus's every action (Isa 45:1-7). And he even forms Israel in the womb (Isa 44:24). This is only a sample of Yahweh acting within time. He is both independently and eternally outside of time while simultaneously sustaining all things and acting within time.

Independent of External Knowledge

Isaiah also portrays God as the one who has determined and knows everything (Isa 40:13-14; 46:10). This aligns with the classical doctrine of omniscience, that "God perfectly and exhaustively knows everything about Himself and His creation: past, present, and future."⁷³ Tozer adds, "He possesses perfect knowledge and therefore has no need to learn... it is to say that God has never learned and cannot learn."⁷⁴ This is well attested to in Scripture and "Scripture nowhere even hints that anything could be unknown to [God]."⁷⁵

Yet this point of theology is extremely debated by freewill theists. Sanders names it as the second major disagreement between freewill and classical theists, and Boyd has devoted an entire book to the topic of God's omniscience and foreknowledge from the perspective of freewill theism.⁷⁶ Sanders helpfully highlights the divide:

Though all freewill theists affirm divine omniscience (God knows all that is knowable) they disagree about what is knowable. They differ over foreknowledge, not omniscience. Many freewill theists affirm the simple foreknowledge view whereby God "looks ahead" and "observes" what humans will do in the future. Accordingly, God has definite knowledge of events that will happen. Others affirm dynamic omniscience whereby God "observes" what we are doing as we do it and anticipates (but does not have definite knowledge of) what we will do in the future. However, both views want to affirm that God has granted humans the freedom to resist what God would like us to do. Both positions affirm general providence as opposed to meticulous providence... In simple foreknowledge God "observes" what we will actually do without determining what we do. However, in classical theism God does not passively observe what will happen. Rather, God foreordains or determines what we will do and that is why he knows what will happen.⁷⁷

According to the freewill perspective, God allows history to unfold without intervention until the point that he decides to pause the tape and insert his own actions into history. He then continues to watch the film to see how mankind reacts to his

⁷³ Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 131.

⁷⁴ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 55.

⁷⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 192.

⁷⁶ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 199. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

⁷⁷ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 199.

interventions.⁷⁸ Boyd declares that “God is so confident in his sovereignty... he does not need to micromanage everything,” but “he chooses to leave some of the future open to possibilities, allowing them to be resolved by the decisions of free agents.”⁷⁹ Pinnock adds: “[God] is certain about what he has decided to do and what will inevitably happen but less certain about what creatures may freely do.”⁸⁰ Simply put, God does not determine every detail of the future, but chooses to leave some of it open. Though many find these arguments attractive, they conflict with Isaiah’s depiction of God.

First, Isaiah depicts God as the one in whom all knowledge resides. In the words of Isaiah 40:13-14a, “Who has encompassed the Spirit of Yahweh, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He take counsel and who gave Him understanding?” Isaiah clearly teaches that God is complete in his knowledge, lacking nothing, and is therefore in need of no counsel. John Goldingay disagrees, arguing that this reading of the text is too “literalistic” and “prosaic” because other texts, such as Genesis 1:26 and Proverbs 8, demonstrate God taking counsel. But this idea does not take the flood of monotheistic texts within Scripture at face value.⁸¹ Isaiah and other texts of Scripture clearly refute Goldingay’s concept of God. In fact, it is possible that Isaiah 40 is a polemic against the very idea that Goldingay suggests. Mackay comments that, “Yahweh has no need of advice before he acts, and none is competent to give it.”⁸² God already knows everything for everything exists because of him. If he is the creator and sustainer of everything, then there is nothing that can act independent of him. Bavinck argues from Isaiah 40:13 that his knowledge is not “susceptible of increase.”⁸³ If mankind can act freely, in such a way that God learns what they will do, then Isaiah’s message is false and God needs information that man’s free will withholds. Isaiah’s entire rhetoric in 40–48 depends on God possessing complete knowledge of all things in order to rescue his people from exile. God must retain absolute knowledge of everything, not just “what is knowable.”⁸⁴

Second, since God is eternal and timeless, the creator of time and everything within, it follows that he has already declared the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10). If a person is misled to believe that God is within time, then it would make sense to conclude that he must meet the future in successive moments, but this is not the case. Charnock writes, “Though there be a succession and order of things as they are wrought, there is yet no succession in God in regard of his knowledge of them. God knows the things that shall be wrought and the order of them in their being brought upon the stage of the world, yet both the things and the order he knows by one act.”⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 212.

⁷⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 31.

⁸⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 47.

⁸¹ John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 41. “Isaiah 40 lacks the idea of God depending on a heavenly council altogether, though it may be too literalist or prosaic to understand the prophet as actually opposing the idea of God’s taking counsel in connection with the creation as this appears in the text of Gen. 1.26. Proverbs 8, too, has Wisdom present with Yhwh during the course of the creation... which might denote an expert adviser at the earthly court and its heavenly equivalent.”

⁸² John L. Mackay, *A Study Commentary on Isaiah* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2008), 2:30.

⁸³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 193.

⁸⁴ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 199.

⁸⁵ Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:424.

To put it simply, although things happen to us in time, God already determines and knows those things outside of time. Isaiah presents this concept as God's "declaring the end from the beginning" (Isa 46:10). Boyd acknowledges that the "strongest statements in all of Scripture regarding the foreknowledge of God come from Isaiah," but seeks to explain this verse in a way that aligns with freewill theism.⁸⁶ He argues that this verse does not imply that everything about the future is settled in the mind of God:

The Lord is not appealing to information about the future he happens to possess; instead, he is appealing to his own intentions about the future. He foreknows that certain things are going to take place because he knows his own purpose and intention to bring these events about... The point is even more emphatic in the next sentence: "I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it" (Isa 46:11). The Lord's announcement that he declares "the end from the beginning" must be understood in the light of this specification. He tells us that he is talking about his own will and his own plans. He declares that the future is settled to the extent that he is going to determine it, but nothing in the text requires that we believe that everything that will ever come to pass will do so according to his will and thus is settled ahead of time.⁸⁷

Boyd's analysis of the text is unsupported and ignores a key feature. Note that Isaiah 46:9 is of no significance if God is not determining the future. Any man can declare his intentions, but only God can determine what will come to pass. Israel will find no comfort in a God who desires to do something; they need a God who determines what will happen. Oswalt, commenting on the word "declaring," notes that "the character of the participle as a timeless verb is particularly appropriate to a God who works within time but is never subject to it."⁸⁸ Motyer, observing a similar reality, writes, "[God] dictates the purpose within history" and "what will happen ... He is sovereign, his purpose/'plan/counsel' is inalterable and is the product not of whim but of his pleasurable will ... In a word, he is a God who is God."⁸⁹

As a third argument, Isaiah portrays God as not only knowing the generalities of the future, but also the details. This is best seen in Yahweh's prediction of Cyrus (Isa 44:28–45:7). Cyrus is named nearly 160 years before the prophecy was fulfilled.⁹⁰ He will subdue nations before him and loose the loins of kings (Isa 45:1). He will have a title of honor and will succeed (Isa 45:2, 4). He will do Yahweh's will and free the nation of Israel (Isa 45:13). All these details are declared beforehand so that all will know that Yahweh is God and there is no other besides him (Isa 45:6). Even Isaiah 46:9-11 alludes to Cyrus as evidence of Yahweh declaring the beginning from the end when it mentions the "bird of prey from the east and the man of My counsel." It is precisely because he knows and determines the future that Yahweh sets himself

⁸⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 24.

⁸⁷ Boyd, 30.

⁸⁸ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 236.

⁸⁹ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 370.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, 268.

apart from the pagan idols. Yahweh explicitly states that the reason he declared the future to Israel is so that they would not be able to say, “My idol has done [it]” (48:5). God does not guess the future; he determines it. God knows everything because he is *a se* and he himself sustains all things within time—past, present, and future.

Independent of External Power

Similarly, Isaiah supports Yahweh’s divine aseity by arguing that he is independent of external power. He is not in need of strength or power from another because he is the origin of all power and life. This is best expressed by the classical doctrine of omnipotence. This doctrine declares that God has “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable power” and is “able to do whatever He, in His perfect wisdom, has decided to do.”⁹¹ Tozer argues that “God possesses what no creature can: an incomprehensible plenitude of power, a potency that is absolute.”⁹² Bavinck claims that the infinite extent of God’s power is so clear in Scripture that it hardly needs to be addressed.⁹³

Despite Bavinck’s opinion on the clarity of this point, freewill theists still challenge God’s omnipotence. They would agree that God has a great amount of power, but they would reject two major points presented by classical theism. First, they would argue that God has a lot of power, but not complete power over everything. Some would say that God is secure enough in his sovereignty to give power to other creatures.⁹⁴ Sanders says that “God is free to sovereignly decide not to determine everything that happens in history. He does not have to because God is supremely wise, endlessly resourceful, amazingly creative and omniscient in seeking to fulfill his project.”⁹⁵ Second, while classical theists would argue that God is the only supreme power, open theists argue that there are other lesser powers that affect God. Pinnock is a prime example:

God is not the only power in the universe; he created other powers. Not only does God have to rule with them in mind, but he may also even have to contend with them. The point is that God is not viewed as being completely in control and exercising exhaustive sovereignty. Though no other power can match God’s power, each has a degree of influence that it can exercise. The situation is pluralistic: there is no single and all-determining divine will that calls all the shots.⁹⁶

Sanders is suggesting that God does not have complete control over his creation, but he does have the wisdom to figure out a way to get things done. Isaiah, however, sees God’s power differently.

⁹¹ Sammons, *The Forgotten Attributes of God*, 143.

⁹² Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 65.

⁹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 245–46.

⁹⁴ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 111. Tozer agrees with the classical doctrine of God in almost every area, but he falls short regarding sovereignty and defers to a more open view of God’s interaction with mankind. This will be addressed in more depth later.

⁹⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 174.

⁹⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 53.

First, Yahweh's power is inherent to his being and all power originates in him. Yahweh says that the nations of the earth will one day say of him, "Only in Yahweh are righteousness and strength" (Isa 45:24). This statement of "exclusive character" demonstrates that "Yahweh is the one divine power who has these traits."⁹⁷ Calvin points out that this verse demonstrates that righteousness and strength cannot be found in humanity but only in Yahweh, thus, they must seek it in him alone.⁹⁸ Both Motyer and Lessing agree that the plural use of the noun righteousness intensifies it and demonstrates the close connection between Yahweh's righteousness and strength.⁹⁹ So it is clear that Yahweh's strength resides in himself (aseity) and he possesses all strength (omnipotence).

Yahweh's power in creation also supports his aseity. Yahweh is the maker of all things, and he is the potter who molds the clay (Isa 44:24; 45:9-11). He is the one who made everything; therefore, everything depends on his power and his strength. In Isaiah 44:9-20, Isaiah describes the tedious process of forming an idol. Men form, cast, shape, cut, hammer, extend, outline, make, raise, and plant, so that their idol might be formed. The result is that these men hunger, thirst, lose power, and become weary over their creation. But the eternal God and creator of everything, including the idols and their makers, never grows weary or tired (Isa 40:28). His power is limitless and cannot be challenged.

Isaiah similarly supports God's self-existence and independence by comparing God to the idols. In Isaiah 46:7, the idols are borne away on the backs of their people. These man-made gods have no power to save—rather, they must be saved. Yahweh, only a couple verses prior, states, "Even to your old age I will be the same, and even to your graying years *I will bear you*" (Isa 46:4).¹⁰⁰ Watts comments on this verse, "Yahweh calls Israel to note the contrast. Instead of carrying idols, they have been carried by his providence from before they were born, i.e., before they were a people."¹⁰¹ Calvin expands on this, thinking it absurd that God should have to carry full grown men, "but if any one shall examine it properly, it will be found that we never make so great progress as not to need to be upheld by the strength of God, for otherwise the most perfect man would stumble every moment."¹⁰² Isaiah depicts a God who has the power to forever bear his people because he is already the one on whom all else depends.

Isaiah finally reveals God as the one who gives power to those who need it. He writes, "He gives power to the weary and to him who lacks vigor He increases might" (Isa 40:29). Yahweh has plentiful power and "far from being weary Himself, God is the One who gives strength to those who are weary."¹⁰³ As creatures mankind is

⁹⁷ Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, 301.

⁹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters 33–66* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 8:429.

⁹⁹ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 367; Reed R. Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 373.

¹⁰⁰ Emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 166.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Isaiah*, 438.

¹⁰³ Young, *Isaiah*, 367.

weak, frail, and totally dependent on God, who is the giver of all life and strength.¹⁰⁴ In him is all power to do all things, and he contends with none.

Independent of the Will of Man

God's independence of mankind and his will is easily the most disputed point under classical theism's view of aseity. It seems clear that God knows and determines everything, including man's actions, and he sovereignly controls and sustains all that he has created, including mankind, yet freewill theists continue to fight for man's free will. Due to this, God's independence of mankind shall be addressed as its own point.

The classical perspective of God states that God is "subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. So His own Word expressly declares."¹⁰⁵ The pushback from freewill theism is immense. Pinnock argues:

God in grace sovereignly granted humans significant freedom to cooperate with or to work against God's will for their lives and to enter into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with himself. It places the emphasis upon the genuine interactions that take place between God and human beings: how we respond to God's initiatives and how he responds to our responses. It implies that God takes risks in such give-and-take relationship but is endlessly resourceful and competent still to work toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals and sometimes he works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit changing situations. God wants input from creaturely agents and does not control everything that happens. God invites us to participate with him in loving dialogue, to bring the future into being.¹⁰⁶

Pinnock would say that God is dependent on man, affected by man, and uncertain of man's future.¹⁰⁷ Sanders argues that God must wait to see how man responds to his actions before he can continue with his divine will for history.¹⁰⁸ Even Tozer relinquished ground by arguing that God guides the ship of history yet is not concerned about the specific happenings aboard the ship.¹⁰⁹ The future is only partly determined, and God has only partial sovereignty, because he "does not foreknow future free events."¹¹⁰

But this is not Isaiah's view of God's sovereignty over man. As the one from whom all things receive their being, God ordains all things, including mankind's smallest decisions; therefore, God can be trusted to save his people. As discussed previously, Isaiah portrays Yahweh as the potter who forms and fashions the clay as

¹⁰⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 152.

¹⁰⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 32.

¹⁰⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Pinnock, 31–32.

¹⁰⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 212.

¹⁰⁹ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 110–11.

¹¹⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 11, 16–17.

he wills (Isa 45:9-11). Men are simply vessels in the hand of God to be wielded as he would desire. Smith writes:

The clay is subject to the will of the Potter and does not determine what the Potter's hands do with it. The clay is not the Potter and does not have authority over him. Likewise, people are God's servants and cannot take God's place and try to determine their own destinies. They must accept God's plan and do God's will, for the clay has only one purpose—to be formed and used according to the will of the Potter.¹¹¹

God has supreme jurisdiction over his creation, which does not have any power to oppose his will. If these statements in Isaiah are read correctly, then humans are extremely limited, existing “solely as an expression of the will of God.”¹¹² Inasmuch as he is the source of life, he is also the sovereign of it.

Isaiah also describes mankind as insignificant before God, writing, “All the nations are as nothing before Him; they are counted by Him as non-existent and utterly formless” (Isa 40:17). Charnock expands on this idea, stating that “all creatures may cease from being if it be the pleasure of God.”¹¹³ Can the “non-existent” nations really be outside of God's will? Oswalt draws helpful implications from this verse, arguing that “God is of another order of being” and “not on the same plane of existence.”¹¹⁴ Thus, the nation's desires are simply a subset of what God has already determined for them.¹¹⁵

This sovereignty over individual lives is best seen in the examples of Cyrus and Babylon. Oswalt writes, “Effortless sovereignty is apparent in the statement that God has given Cyrus his honorific titles of ‘shepherd’ (44:28) and ‘anointed’ (45:1), when Cyrus knew nothing of the Lord. It is not necessary for the Creator to have the permission of someone's faith before that person can be given a front-rank position in God's plans. He is the Lord, and we will serve him.”¹¹⁶ Motyer, commenting on Isaiah 45:13, argues that God's “divine sovereignty in creation,” as seen in verse 12, “is matched by equal sovereignty in history,” as seen in verse 13.¹¹⁷ Babylon's case is similar. They exalted themselves to the point of declaring, “I am, and there is no one besides me. I will not sit as a widow, nor know loss of children” (Isa 47:8). They quickly learned that they were only a tool in the hand of God to punish Israel and that Yahweh remained on his throne (Isa 42:23-25).

Finally, God is not challenged even by the will of his people. Israel had become weary of their God (Isa 43:22). They were deaf and blind lawbreakers (Isa 42:18-22). Yet because of God's sovereignty even over the will of his people, he can declare that they will return to him and he will wipe away their transgressions (Isa 43:25).

¹¹¹ Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, 181–82.

¹¹² Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 208–9.

¹¹³ Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:425–26.

¹¹⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 62.

¹¹⁵ This would agree with the message of Isaiah 10. Assyria boasts in their ability, when in reality God is the one who ordained their success.

¹¹⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 202.

¹¹⁷ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 362.

God will demonstrate his glory through the restoration of his people.¹¹⁸ God is not a God who needs Israel; Israel is a people who needs God.¹¹⁹

Concluding Aseity

Contrary to what freewill theists argue, aseity does not make God stiff and unrelatable. Gavin Ortlund concludes, “God is not only the source of our existence, but of certain qualities of our existence as well. The God who is *a se* is not only the one in whom we ‘have our being’ (Acts 17:28), but the one in whose presence ‘there is fullness of joy’ (Ps 16:11).”¹²⁰ God’s self-existent independence is not a harsh doctrine, but one that ought to inspire hope and peace in the people of God. Despite what the freewill theists say, if Yahweh were not *a se* he would be no better than the idols of the nations. He would be finite. He would have no knowledge of the future because much of the future is left to the free will of man. He would be unreliable in his power because other powers could influence his course of action. Therefore, in the end, Israel would be left with a god that they must bear upon their own backs, rather than a God who declares he can and will bear them forever.

Immutability and Simplicity

The doctrines of immutability and simplicity are rooted in Isaiah’s theology, but they can only be discussed briefly here, noting especially how they flow from God’s aseity.

From Aseity to Immutability

Classical theism affirms that God does not change in his essence, word, or relations. If Yahweh is *a se*, existing wholly by himself, then immutability necessarily follows. Any change would imply either improvement or diminishment: improvement would suggest prior imperfection, while diminishment would corrupt perfection.¹²¹ Yet in Isaiah 40:13-14, Yahweh is depicted as needing no counselor and receiving no instruction, entirely complete in himself.

Change also implies dependence and adaptation to the world of time, a notion incompatible with Isaiah’s portrayal of Yahweh. Throughout Isaiah 40–48, Yahweh repeatedly identifies himself as “I am He,” an expression that echoes Exodus 3:14 and signifies true, unchanging being (Isa 41:4; 43:10).¹²² If God is to be the one who is, then he cannot undergo alteration without ceasing to be who he eternally is.¹²³

Because Yahweh is immutable, his word is reliable and his promises cannot fail. No man or idol can bring about change in him, for he alone is self-existent and all else depends on him. Thus, Israel may trust Yahweh precisely because he is

¹¹⁸ Oswalt, *The Holy One of Israel*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Barrett, *None Greater*, 61.

¹²⁰ Ortlund, “Divine Aseity,” 305.

¹²¹ Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 155.

¹²² In their commentaries, John Oswalt, Alec Motyer, E. J. Young, Reed Lessing, and Gary Smith all mention the clear connection between Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 40–48.

¹²³ Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:478.

unchanging in his essence, his word, and his dealings with his people—unlike the nations and their idols, which are inherently unstable and unreliable.

From Aseity to Simplicity

Closely related to the doctrine of aseity is the doctrine of divine simplicity, which aseity both supports and requires. Simplicity affirms that God is not composed of parts, for any part is necessarily less than the whole.¹²⁴ While creatures exist as composites, Isaiah's God simply is—one in essence and undivided in being. This is why Isaiah consistently portrays Yahweh as the only uncreated being and insists that there is none other than him (Isa 45:5-6). If he alone stretched out the heavens and created all things, it necessarily requires that he is the ultimate reality (Isa 44:24).

If God were not simple, he would depend upon constituent parts for his existence, a notion incompatible with Isaiah's portrayal of Yahweh as *a se*. Yahweh depends on nothing outside himself, nor even on components within himself, for he alone is self-existent. This sharply distinguishes him from the nations and their idols, which are constructed, assembled, and ultimately dependent on what is not themselves.

Because Yahweh is simple and independent, Israel may trust him without fear of division, loss, or instability. His being is not sustained by anything external to himself, and therefore his existence and faithfulness remain secure. In this way, divine simplicity safeguards the uniqueness and reliability of Isaiah's *a se* God.

Conclusion

It is important not to get lost in the flood of Isaiah's doctrine. What is the point of it all? Why can Israel find comfort (Isa 40:2)? Israel can take comfort and find rest in their God because he is who he is, Yahweh, the only savior (Isa 43:11). He is not limited as his creatures are. He is independent of all things because he is the one who sustains all things. There is nothing outside of his knowledge or control, therefore no one can prevent him from saving his people. Yahweh is unchanging and nothing within or without can effect change in him. His word is eternally unchanging and thus Israel can trust it. And Yahweh is wholly one, with no division or distinction, completely who he is. Therefore, he will certainly save his people because he has declared it. Israel can cast aside their false hope in the nations and their idols because Yahweh has proven that only he can save. There is truly no one like Yahweh.

¹²⁴ James E. Dolezal, "Divine Simplicity," in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 258.

THE WORD OF GOD: CHRIST AS YAHWEH INCARNATE

Carys Janzen¹

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In John 8:31-59, Jesus Christ discourses with an unbelieving Jewish crowd, using the Greek word logos to make five claims about himself, his word, and his identity as the Logos of John 1. In this, Jesus establishes his word as the final source of true freedom from sin and death, and the only way one enters a greater relationship with the Father. In contrast, rejection of the Word results in submission to the father of lies, the devil, and spiritual death. In his final statement, Jesus references Exodus 3:14, establishing himself, the Word, as the great I Am who spoke to Moses. This is the crux of Christ's argument: that to deny his word is to deny the pre-existent God of the Old Testament, Yahweh.

Key words: Word of God, John 8, deity of Christ, Exodus 3:14, unbelief

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As a theologically astute defense of the deity of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of John sets itself resolutely apart from the very beginning, deviating from the pattern of the Synoptics. While Matthew and Luke begin with narratives of Jesus's birth and childhood, and Mark begins with his baptism, John reverts to the incomprehensible reality of eternity past. This reflects a central tenet of John's writing: defending the deity of Jesus Christ as the eternal God made flesh. This argument structures the entire Gospel, rooting each chapter in the unwavering affirmation of who Christ is as the Son of God.

In one of these core passages, John 8:31-59, Jesus speaks with a hostile group of Jews in the temple, debating those who question his divinity. Throughout this discourse, Christ makes five claims regarding the Greek *λόγος* (*logos*), a word used throughout the Gospel of John to declare Jesus as the Word: the ultimate, divine revelation of God on earth, come to proclaim the Father's sovereign will to humanity.

¹ Carys Janzen is a junior majoring in Biblical Studies with an emphasis in Biblical Counseling. She may be contacted at janzencm@masters.edu.

In each of his five claims concerning the Logos in John 8:51-59, Jesus establishes himself as the ultimate definition of truth and the only way for condemned humanity to obtain eternal life (John 14:6-7). These claims build to a climactic claim: Jesus's final and total assertion to deity and pre-existence, using the name of I AM. This pronouncement directly correlates Christ with the name by which God identifies himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14—Yahweh. In John 8:31-59, Jesus claims to be Yahweh and, in doing so, accuses everyone who rejects his truth of rejecting Yahweh's ultimate authority. By denying the Word of God, the Jews repudiated the God of the Old Testament, the same God who gave the Law, guided their patriarchs, and spoke through the prophets.

Λόγος: The Word of God

The Greek word *λόγος* (*logos*) has its origin in ancient theories of reason and philosophy, most notably in Grecian pre-Socratic philosophers, who sought explanation for the deep questions of life apart from theism. Originally, *logos* was used as a reference to rationality and the means by which the universal order holds together.² While later philosophers rejected this concept of *logos*, the Stoics—one of the philosophical sects encountered by the apostle Paul in Acts 17—embraced this view of *logos* as the “controlling Reason of the universe, the all-pervasive mind.”³ However, for Greek theists, who rejected the concept of *logos* as mere rational reasoning, the term referred to the means by which a supreme being revealed himself to the tangible universe.⁴ Additionally, the Jewish understanding of *logos*, the Aramaic מִמְרָא (*meimera*), was often used by the authors of the targumim as a replacement for the name of God; for Aramaic speakers, this use of *logos* would have been familiar.⁵ While examining this understanding of the meaning of *logos* in extrabiblical literature is valuable, John's use of the word in his Gospel is most determinative in identifying its significance.

The biblical understanding of *logos* draws from the beginning of John's Gospel, which commences not with narrative or prophecy, but with a poetic introduction to the person and work of God the Son. John 1 presents the second person of the Trinity, who took on flesh for the sake of humanity and displayed the glory of God for all to see (John 1:14). This passage boldly declares that this Word is of equal essence to the Father; there is nowhere in all of Scripture where the divinity of Christ is more staunchly defended, or a place more assailed by those who wish to deny it.⁶ In these verses, the deepest truths of Christ's deity are declared:

² Douglas Estes, “Logos,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Logos Bible Software.

³ Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 62.

⁴ Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 7.

⁵ Estes, “Logos,” Logos Bible Software.

⁶ J. C. Ryle highlights the vital importance of understanding this text: “It is not, perhaps, too much to say, that not a single word could be altered in the first five verses of St. John's Gospel, without opening the door to some heresy.” See J. C. Ryle, *Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 1:1-10:9* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 6.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4).⁷

The apostle John begins his Gospel as Moses began Genesis centuries before, the first of many parallels between this Gospel and the opening book of the Pentateuch.⁸ This beginning focuses the reader’s mind on creation as well as the complete and infinite frame of Christ’s existence in eternity past, present, and future. He was present in all of this, sustaining and empowering the work of creation (Col 1:15). The Word, the *logos*, was the agent of creation present as the Father spoke the initiatory words, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3).⁹

Christ’s nature as creator is solidified in the explicit declaration of the Word’s divinity in John 1:1. John makes use of the definitive article in the Greek, so that this phrase could accurately be translated as “The Word was *the* God.” The multiple uses of *logos* in this passage give additional insight into John’s intent in applying this title to Christ; in doing so, he declares Jesus as the “expressed thought of God, the accurate expression of the Father, the supreme Communicator.”¹⁰

Jesus is not one of many gods, but the one and only God, the eternal God of Israel. He is fully God in essence, yet distinct in personhood.¹¹ This establishes the equality of deity, essence, and substance between the Son and Father, for “as the Father is God, so also the Son is God.”¹² Despite Christ’s condescension to earth through the incarnation, he maintained perfect unity and equality with the Godhead (Col 2:9).¹³ As the Word of God, Christ expresses and reflects the perfect character of God to humanity through his every word, deed, and motive. He is the essence of God incarnate. John’s prologue acts as a thesis statement for the whole book, centering on this as its core focus.

The following verses in John 1 emphasize this claim to divinity, establishing the Word as the agent of all creation and the one who holds all of reality together (Col 1:15-16; John 1:10; Heb 1:3). This image is especially powerful when considering the crucified Christ, who, even while hanging on the cross of Calvary, secured all that he created—a world filled with the same rebellious men who rejected and condemned him (Isa 53:3).

This condemned humanity are those to whom Jesus Christ came to deliver to the true light, another central theme in the Gospel of John. This light was not only personified and delivered to man by the Word, but it brought true life to darkened

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

⁸ Douglas Estes, *The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel: A Theory of Hermeneutical Relativity in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 107–13.

⁹ Murray J. Harris, *John, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015), 18.

¹⁰ Harris, *John*, 18.

¹¹ Newman and Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 8.

¹² Ryle, *Expository Thoughts*, 3:9.

¹³ A. W. Pink emphasized this, remarking, “Not only was Christ the Revealer of God, but He always was, and ever remains, none other than God Himself. Not only was our Savior the One through whom, and by whom, the deity expressed itself in audible terms, but he was Himself co-equal with the Father and the Spirit” (Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], 19).

humanity (John 1:4; 1 John 1:7). This life was not only the hope of eternity, but also the reality of superior life on earth through submission to the authority of the Godhead.¹⁴ This life has its only source in Jesus, the perfect Word, in whom the full deity of God the Father dwells, the agent of creation, and the One who condescended to live as a man. This was the Word—the purveyor of truth and giver of life—who spoke with the riotous Jews in John 8 and sought to expose their sin and free them from the father of lies (John 8:44). He was and is the Son of God, but their blind eyes could not recognize him just as their hard hearts could not believe (John 1:11; 1 Cor 2:14).

εἰς: The Marker of True Belief

The eighth chapter of John falls at a pivotal point in the Gospel of John. The ministry of Christ had spread from Galilee to Judea and all of Israel with opposition from the religious elites increasing chapter by chapter. Chapter 8 includes Christ's sixth discourse within John; it is here that Christ declares himself to be "the light of the world" and promises "the light of life" to all who would follow him (John 8:12). He also establishes Jewish legal standing for his claims to deity, as his witness of himself does not stand alone but is corroborated by the Father.¹⁵ This debate proceeds as much of the crowd struggles to understand Jesus's meaning. However, this section and the following contain an important distinction.

The end of John 8:30 ("and many believed in him") appears nearly identical in meaning to the following verse, in which Jesus addresses the crowd of those "who had believed him" (John 8:31). However, there is a crucial difference in the Greek: the use of the accusative case and the word "εἰς" (*eis*) in verse 30, versus the lone dative case in verse 31. While these details in grammar may minimally impact the appearance of the English translations, they vastly affect the interpretation and contextualization of the following verses.

The word "believe" is used 98 times in the Gospel of John, both to describe genuine faith as well as those who profess, but do not possess, faith in Christ. However, πιστεῦω (*pisteuō*), the Greek word for "believed," when paired with *eis*—a word consistently translated as "in," meaning entrance into a certain state or condition—will always be accusative, directing the verb towards the direct object. In this case, the direct object is Christ, and the verb is "believed," indicating that the crowd's belief was toward, or on, Christ (see John 8:30). In John, this will nearly always indicate true, saving belief.¹⁶ These clues in the syntax structure reveal that 8:30 speaks of those in the crowd who enter a true, faith-filled, and personal relationship of reliance on Christ; in short, these are true believers.

However, John 8:31 crucially deviates, reading, "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him." This phrase uses the same verb (*pisteuō*), but is missing *eis*, which directs the object of this belief towards Christ. By using the dative case for "him,"

¹⁴ Newman and Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 11.

¹⁵ The Jewish legal system required the evidence of two or three witness for a claim to be substantiated as per Deuteronomy 17:15; Jesus repudiates the Jews' assertion that his claims are unfounded.

¹⁶ The combination of *eis* and *pisteuō* occurs several other times in John to indicate true belief, such as 1:12, 3:15, 16, 18, 36, 4:39, 6:29, 35, 40, 7:31, 38, 39, 48, 9:35, 36, 10:42, 11:25, 26, 45, 48, 12:36, 42, 44, 46, 16:9, and 17:20.

the author does not indicate that these Jews have entered into a new state of being in “him,” or Christ. While those in 8:30 have been made new, those in 8:31 have not been changed by their belief. Thus, it can be determined that those in 8:31 are not genuine believers but have a purely intellectual understanding of Christ and his message. These grammatical clues establish essential context for the following verses, in which Jesus addresses those in the crowd who are still hard-hearted and rebellious against himself, the Word of truth.

The Word Is the Truth Which Frees

In the first section of this discourse, John 8:31-34, Christ establishes for all listening that which is essential for true biblical discipleship.¹⁷

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:31-34).

In verse 31, Jesus implores the crowd to “abide in my word,” stating one of the proofs for genuine believers presented in John 15. By this belief, they will “know the truth, and the truth will set [them] free.” As Christ addresses this hostile and unbelieving audience, he points to the *logos*—his word—as the source of all truth and the freedom which liberates man from slavery to sin (Rom 6:17-19). It delineates what characterizes a true disciple from an insincere one. A genuine believer “remains in Jesus’ ‘word’ (*logos*), his teaching: *i.e.* such a person obeys it, seeks to understand it better, and finds it more precious, more controlling, precisely when other forces flatly oppose it.”¹⁸

This declaration from Christ contains varied nuances, both to the original hearers and to those whom the apostle John addressed in his writings. For the Gentile Christians scattered across the Roman Empire in the late first century, this perspective of freedom through the *logos* would have contradicted the widespread philosophies of the Stoics and Epicureans who promised freedom through intellectual pleasure, enlightenment, and liberty of thought. This is not the true freedom that Christ brings. He is not offering the crowd liberation from the “bonds of ignorance,” but something altogether better.¹⁹

Nor is Jesus referring to the Jewish understanding of bondage and freedom, which was irrevocably intertwined with their understanding of the Law. In *A Handbook of the Gospel of John*, Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida write: “According to Jewish teaching, the truth was found in their Law, and the study of the

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 455.

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 348.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 456.

Law made a man free. Here, the truth referred to is the revelation of God that Jesus brings.²⁰ This understanding of freedom, juxtaposed with Israel's shameful past of slavery and exile to foreign kingdoms, fuels the crowd's defensive response to Christ's claim, saying, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (John 8:33).

This reply exposes their blindness to Jesus's offer. They insist that as offspring of Abraham, they have never been enslaved to anyone. This is an absurd sentiment coming from Jews who have continuously been dominated by foreign powers throughout the past centuries. This leads one to consider that these Jews refer not to physical subjugation, but to "spiritual, inward freedom and privilege."²¹ The crowd's response reveals the masterful self-deception of the unregenerate heart, which refuses to acknowledge superior truth when it is presented.²² They do not understand that Christ desires their freedom from the "guilt, burden and dominion of sin... freedom from the heavy yoke of Pharisaism."²³ Though they are burdened by the heavy yoke of legalism, these Jews are ignorant to the nature of what Christ is offering. Their minds cannot fathom the relief of living water, the sustenance of the bread of life, or the brilliance of the light of the world (John 4:13-14; 6:35; 8:12). They are the people of Jeremiah 6:16, seeing the good way of the Lord laid out before them, one promising rest, and refusing to walk in it.

The deliverance which Christ provided was that which delivers damned humanity—both Jew and Gentile—from the brink of hell, not from dangers of ignorance or physical captivity; this truth was completely encompassed in his life and ministry (Gal 3:28-29).²⁴ Jesus taught a fully redemptive transformation of the heart and mind, not desiring further knowledge, but regenerate life as a new creation (1 Cor 5:17). This is not only proclaimed in Jesus's verbal declaration of the gospel message, but in the incarnate revelation of God through his Word.²⁵

It is important to note John's use of *logos* in contrast to *λαλία* (*lalia*) in this instance. If used here, *lalia* would refer to one's language or speech and would place the fault for a failure of understanding on the speaker, Christ.²⁶ However, John's use of *logos* emphasizes the essential meaning of what Jesus is saying. *Lalia* would indicate that Christ was unable to communicate effectively, while *logos* reveals that the people were hard-hearted and unwilling to understand; it was this "fundamental unwillingness to accept that message which prevented them from understanding."²⁷

This inherent stubbornness exposes their political understanding of freedom. Despite their insistence that they were not slaves, the Jews were burdened by their Roman occupiers and placed their hope for physical deliverance in the coming Messiah. It was not freedom from sin which they sought, for their clear slavery to sin

²⁰ Newman and Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 278–79.

²¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 349.

²² Carson, 349.

²³ Ryle, *Expository Thoughts*, 543.

²⁴ Ryle, 456–57.

²⁵ Ryle, 294.

²⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 353.

²⁷ Newman and Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 285–86; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 353.

blinded them to their need for it.²⁸ Jesus implores these Jews to abide in him—the Word—to be set free from that which truly binds them, the pervasive power of sin.

The Word Falls on Deaf Ears

Christ's second claim addresses the Jewish religious elites' mounting hostility towards him, which intensifies throughout the first eight chapters in John. Their desire to harm him exposes that his Word has no place in them (John 8:37). While Jesus does the bidding of his Father, they follow in the steps of their father, the devil.

“The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God” (John 8:35-41).

Christ contrasts the firsthand knowledge he has through his Father with that of the crowd, children of the dark, who follow blindly in their father’s steps.²⁹ While the people may be physical descendants of Abraham, their response to the truth of Jesus proves that they do not follow in Abraham’s legacy of faith (Gal 3:7; Heb 11:8-10).³⁰

The Jews rejected Christ’s arrival as the fulfilment of their patriarch’s deepest hopes for the future—the day when God would fulfill his covenant promises to their fathers and bless all the world through their line (John 8:56; Heb 11:13). In this, they denied the faith of Abraham altogether in their deeds, exposing themselves as children of the devil through their practice of unrighteousness; this is revealed chiefly in their intense desire to kill Jesus (1 John 3:10).³¹ For the Jews, to be told that they are not descended of Abraham is to be accused of idolatry, motivating the crowd’s hasty denial that they have committed any sexual immorality.

The Jews’ response reflects a strict defense of their legitimacy as children of Abraham and heirs of the covenant promises made to him in Genesis 12. Thus, they repudiate Jesus’s attempts to separate them from their patriarch, as this separates them from their blessed position as the children of God.³² The account in John 8

²⁸ Morris speaks on this concept, saying, “The man who sins is a slave to his sin and this whether he realizes it or not. This means also that he cannot break away from his sin. For that he needs a power greater than his own” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 458).

²⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 460.

³⁰ D. A. Carson writes, “If the Jews are falsely claiming Abraham as their father, Jesus is rightly claiming God as his: he is passing on what he has seen in his Father’s presence. Jesus’ conduct displays his true paternity” (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 349).

³¹ R. C. Sproul, *John: An Expositional Commentary* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019), 167.

³² Edward W. Klink, *John*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 418.

clearly contrasts these Jews with the true children of God as described in the Gospel's prologue (John 1:12).³³

This response also reflects an Old Testament understanding of idolatry as seen through the writing of the prophet Hosea, who likened idolatry to "spiritual harlotry."³⁴ The Jews of the first century were appalled at this comparison, for surely their only Father was God himself, as reflected in the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4.³⁵ Surely, in their strict adherence to the Law of Moses, they proved their true lineage. The people could not fathom that, in their exaltation of these statutes, they would overlook the One for whom the patriarchs and prophets longed. In their legalism and selfishness, they rejected the Messiah who brought this freedom from the clutches of sin.

The Word Opposes the Father of Evil

Christ persists in his claims throughout this passage, connecting the hard-hearted Jews to their spiritual leader—Satan, the father of lies and deception.³⁶

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:42-48).

Their submission to demonic authority has allowed these Jews to deceive themselves through a religious system which spurns the true importance of one's heart posture before Yahweh; it has allowed them to be justified in their own eyes and yielded great pride in their hearts (Luke 18:10-14). This sickness of heart has carried them to the point where they "cannot bear to hear [Christ's] word" and, instead, submit to the lusts of their hearts (John 8:43). The truth of the gospel—the truth of the *logos* of God—is utterly repulsive to them (Jer 17:9).³⁷

The pervasive power of Satan to grip the fallen human heart is not unique to these Jews but traces to the first murder committed. Following his assertion that

³³ Klink, *John*, 418.

³⁴ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 135.

³⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 135.

³⁶ The people proved that they were "incapable of accepting the truth which [Christ] brought. In both respects, they made it plain that they were children not of God, but of the devil. God is the life-giver and the fountain of truth; the devil is the life-destroyer and the father of lies" (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 201).

³⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 463.

children of lies have no desire for the truth, Christ establishes that their father, the devil, was a “murderer from the beginning,” alluding to Genesis 4 where the first brothers were torn apart by the depraved proclivity of man to envy, lust, and disregard the word of God. The father of lies who provoked Cain to strike his innocent brother is the same one at work in the stubborn Jews before Christ. These people who reject the truth align themselves with Satan, who is utterly opposed to the truth.³⁸ D. A. Carson corroborates this, observing that “the children of God will so love the truth that they will believe in Jesus; the children of the devil will be so characterized by lies that they will not be able to accept the truth, precisely *because it is the truth*.”³⁹ The truth has no place in them; therefore, it is because the Word of truth is being proclaimed to them that they deny him (John 8:44).⁴⁰

This sets the escalating tension into motion, for Christ Jesus clearly establishes that their inability to accept his word exposes their unrighteousness before the holy God. These Jews are unjustified, their sins uncovered before their omniscient God, with no mediator to plead for them (Job 9:30-33; 1 Tim 2:5). Damned as children of the devil, they desperately need a sinless representative before God the Father. Jesus proves that he fits these qualifications in John 8:46, where he asks, “Which one of you convicts me of sin . . . if I tell you the truth, why do you not believe me?” This is a stunning claim to sinlessness, one which is left unchallenged. Leon Morris details this paradox: “If there was no sin, then he was indeed speaking the truth and if he was speaking the truth, then they should have believed.”⁴¹ At this, the hypocrisy and foolishness of the Jews is exposed, for their unbelief is as illogical as it is innate in their unregenerate minds.

In a desperate attempt at rebuttal, the crowd can only insult and jeer, accusing Christ of being possessed by a demon and comparing him with their historic enemies, the Samaritans (John 8:48). This was akin to the greatest insult, for the Jews despised the Samaritans as heathens with no loyalty to the true God.⁴² Their response proves that Christ has defeated them in argument, their best arguments having been thwarted.

Additionally, these hasty accusations reflect the previous issues discussed. Jesus had accused the Jews of spiritual idolatry, which they equated with the Samaritans, and of being children of the devil, equated with demon possession.⁴³ This deterioration into sneering reveals that the Jews have no rock to stand on—their stubborn clinging to the heartless legalism of the day is the sinking sand washing away beneath their feet. They are in desperate need of the *Logos*’ truth.

The Word Brings True Life

As the crowd slanders and scorns him, Christ continues to preach the truth in love, declaring that those who abide in his word will never taste the sting of death.

³⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 464.

³⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 353–54; emphasis original.

⁴⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John*, 202.

⁴¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 465.

⁴² Ryle, *Expository Thoughts*, 566.

⁴³ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 52.

Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” (John 8:49-53).

Christ circles back to their original discourse on truth and freedom, declaring that the truth of the *logos* will free them, not only from sin, but from the power of death itself.⁴⁴ He is unwavering in this proclamation, while extending grace to the scoffers who mock him. This promise of eternal life is a precursor to the divine claim of Jesus which ends this discourse. There is no human with the ability to deliver anyone from the taste of death, for this conquering power over sin is possessed only by Israel’s covenant God, Yahweh. Yet, Jesus promises this same victory over life and death for those who are obedient to his word.

The people understand a facet of what Jesus is claiming but think him insane. They still do not understand that Jesus speaks of spiritual death, responding as though he speaks of the mere physical.⁴⁵ Their only response is that such a promise is impossible to fulfill. If the greatest prophets and patriarchs perished, how could this man before them claim to establish eternal life? How could they submit to Christ in apparent defiance of those on whom their entire religion depended? G. R. Beasley-Murray explains:

The craziness of the saying is emphasized by the Jews in adducing the holiest of their forefathers, Abraham, and all who have spoken in God’s name, as men who yet experienced death as the rest of humankind. Whom then is Jesus making himself? Observe that this is more than asking, “Who does he think he is?” It is a case of what he is exalting himself to be. They had an answer earlier: he was making himself equal to God. God alone is eternal and can give eternal life. Jesus then is verging on blasphemy.⁴⁶

They were blind to the truth of Christ’s words and completely disregarded the possibility that he could be the One of whom their Scriptures spoke, the One anticipated for millennia who would redeem and restore, arising from the dust to stand upon the earth in human flesh (Job 19:25; Phil 2:5-8). They were blind to the man David longed for in Psalm 16:10, who would conquer death and corruption through glorious resurrection. Though they memorized the writings of Israel’s prophets, they did not understand Yahweh’s declaration in Jeremiah 31:33: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” Their hearts of stone prevented them from seeing the One through whom they could be renewed and

⁴⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, ed. Arthur Westcott (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 24.

⁴⁵ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 355.

⁴⁶ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 137.

restored to the newness of life, transferred from the kingdom of darkness to that of the King of light (Rom 6:4; Col 1:13). There was no concept in the mind of these Jews of the life Christ was offering them.

Along this vein, the stubborn crowd poses an ensnaring question to Jesus, asking if he makes himself out to be greater than Abraham and the prophets (John 8:53). This question is clearly meant to illicit a negative response and reassure the crowd that Christ is not serious in what he is claiming.⁴⁷ This denial, however, never comes. The crowd does not understand that Jesus makes this claim with a full understanding of its drastic ramifications.⁴⁸

The Word Perfectly Knows the Father

Christ's response to the outraged crowd solidifies what they deny about his four previous claims. He is not asserting these things by his own authority, but—just as he declared earlier in chapter 5—he is glorified by the corroborating and confirming witness of God the Father (cf. Matt 3:17-20; John 5:37-38).

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple (John 8:54-59).

In the end of this passage, Jesus clarifies that his Father is the same God which these Jews claim as their own. There is tragic irony in the intention of these hard-hearted Jews to kill Jesus and that, through his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, he would be supremely glorified (Heb 2:9). It is through his ultimate obedience to his Father that Christ proves he truly knows God and keeps his word (John 15:10).⁴⁹ In this, the Jews condemn themselves, for they profess to know God, but do not follow him with genuine obedience as Christ does (John 8:55).

In addition, their claim to be the true descendants of Abraham is undermined once again as Jesus declares that the patriarch "rejoiced that he would see [Christ's] day" (John 8:56). Their response to Christ exposes their lack of faith and reliance on the Word of the Lord. If they rightly claimed the covenant lineage of Abraham, the Jews should have rejoiced at the coming of Christ, seeing him as he was, rather than scoffing derisively at the truth he proclaimed. This assertion is interpreted by the crowd as a literal statement—to which the unbelievers respond with further derision. They mock Christ's age, declaring that someone under fifty could never have witnessed the time of Abraham (John 8:57). There is a deeper cultural significance

⁴⁷ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 356.

⁴⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 470.

⁴⁹ Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 26.

to this response, for the age of fifty was the point at which Jewish men achieved full manhood and were regarded with higher respect.⁵⁰ The Jews point out that Jesus is not old enough to be considered an elder, let alone equal to the patriarch himself.⁵¹

However, Jesus's answer unravels their opposition to him, a divine declaration and condemnation presented together. He pronounces the truth, displaying a thorough understanding of the Scriptures on which these Jews depend, exposing their religiosity for the selfish fraud that it is. In John 8:58, Jesus boldly declares, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was I am."

The preposterous nature of this claim cannot be exaggerated, and neither can the magnitude of the outrage this would have elicited from a Jewish crowd. It mirrors the very words of God to Moses recorded in Exodus 3:14, where he declares that his covenant name is "I AM WHO I AM," and identifies Jesus as Yahweh, the God of their fathers. This is the very name by which the God of the Old Testament is identified as the saving God of Israel, who brought his people out of Egypt into the Promised Land and delivered them from the Canaanites. Yahweh is the God of Isaiah 43, who will never forsake his chosen people, who declares supremacy over the false gods of all nations, and who forms a people for himself, promising to "blot out [their] transgressions for [his] own sake" and swearing to forgive their debt of sin against him (Isa 43:25). This Yahweh is the first and the last, the God set apart from all other gods (Isa 44:6; 46:9; 48:12). He is the eternally self-sustaining, omnipotent and holy God of the Old Testament. In this, Christ claims to be the fullness of God in flesh.

In response to this assertion, E. Stauffer wrote, "This means: where I am, there is God, there God lives, speaks, calls, asks, acts, decides, loves, chooses, forgives, rejects, hardens, suffers, dies. Nothing bolder can be said or imagined."⁵² In John 8:58, Jesus declares himself to be the Yahweh of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who pre-existed before the dawn of time and will prevail into eternity (Exod 3:14-15).⁵³ This assertion to pre-existence draws the reader back to John 1:1, where Jesus Christ is first declared to be the Word of God.⁵⁴ Additionally, he declares supremacy over all things, for though Abraham succumbed to death, Christ claims to be the giver of true, eternal life; while Abraham was a mere man, Christ is the Living God (cf. John 10:30).⁵⁵

Recognizing that Jesus has made a complete claim to divinity, the Jews' only response is to seek to stone Jesus for blasphemy as their understanding of the Law demands.⁵⁶ They understand the implications of what he has claimed, but they are foiled by divine timing, for he escapes from harm as it is not yet the hour at which Christ is to give up his life (cf. John 7:30; 8:20).

⁵⁰ Harris, *John*, 183.

⁵¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 472-73.

⁵² Ethelbert Stauffer, quoted in Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 474.

⁵³ Harris, *John*, 183.

⁵⁴ D. A. Carson writes, "In conformity with John's Prologue, Jesus takes to himself one of the most sacred divine expressions of self-reference, and makes the assumption of that expression the proof of his superiority over Abraham" (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 358).

⁵⁵ Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 26.

⁵⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 358.

Conclusion

Through each of Jesus's claims in John 8:31-59, he asserts that there are corresponding blessings and curses for those who either follow or reject the Word of God. However, this final assertion of deity, which traces backward through the Old Testament from the prophets to the Pentateuch, establishes a damning accusation against these Jews: in rejecting the Messiah, the *Logos* standing in front of them, they deny the one and only true God, Yahweh, of the Old Testament.

In their hard-heartedness, these sinful people despise and scorn the One who has carried them through the fires of oppression and exile, of drought and famine. They commit apostasy against their God, the One who defines the nature of truth and whose word will not return void (Isa 55:11). They set themselves against him who is the greatest opposition to the father of evil, who delivers everlasting life, and who perfectly knows and obeys his Father. This is the one true God in human flesh, who they not only fail to recognize and worship, but to whom they hurl the stones of blasphemy (John 8:59).

In doing this, this group of unbelieving Jews seal their judgment, for their eyes are blind to the works of God performed and Word of God spoken in their midst (Luke 16:29-31; 1 Cor 2:6-8). They reject Christ, the *Logos* of God, and in doing so reject Yahweh himself.⁵⁷ They are not true children of Abraham, but those marred by the faithless, depraved nature of man, subject to the sting of sin and death, and whom, without Christ, are destined to live in an eternity separated from dwelling with the only God (Rom 3:23; 6:23).

However, despite the tragic rejection of the Jews, this passage also expresses the great hope the Christian has in this unwavering declaration of Christ's deity. This truth is sure: the all-powerful, pre-existent, and glorious God of the Old Testament emptied himself and was born into the world he created. He healed the sick, spoke truth to masses who scorned him, and perfectly carried out the will of his Father, before suffering a humiliating death as the ultimate propitiation for sin. There is great rejoicing in this, for now sinners can be justified before a holy God. However, it is in his resurrection from the dead where eternal hope lies, for Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death, and will one day return to gather his Church—those who follow, cherish, and seek his word, joyously anticipating the day when faith will be made sight.

⁵⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 470.

THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE ESCHATON: ACTS 1–2 AND THE FUTURE KINGDOM

Matthew James Wineke¹

* * * * *

For numerous scholars, the events of Acts 1 and 2—Jesus’s commission and ascension, the Twelve’s reconstitution, and Pentecost—indicate the full or partial fulfillment of Old Testament kingdom promises. This article, however, contends that Acts 1–2 neither supports nor demands such interpretations. In its Old Testament background and literary context, Acts 1–2 anticipates the consummation of the eschatological kingdom. In fact, these chapters uphold hope for an entirely future earthly kingdom under the rule of Jesus the risen Messiah, the one to whom believers are called to witness to the ends of the earth until he returns.

Key words: kingdom, Joel 2, inaugurated eschatology, Pentecost, Acts 2

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The long-expected hope of Israel was a royal Messiah—a king from the Davidic line that would enact Israel’s restoration and inaugurate the eschatological kingdom, fulfilling all God’s covenant promises and bringing blessing to the entire world. Jesus of Nazareth is that king, and when he began his ministry, he was proclaiming this kingdom, for he was “sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43). The kingdom is thus the central focus of Jesus’s ministry shown in the Gospels, and Luke is no exception. Yet, in the beginning of Luke’s second volume, the king departs and ascends to the Father’s right hand (Acts 1:1-11). The physical absence of the king, however, does not mean the kingdom is no longer central. Indeed, Acts is framed with kingdom references: “kingdom” begins Acts (1:3, 6), ends it (28:23, 31), and is found at pivotal moments in the development of the narrative (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25). The kingdom is still of utmost importance in the book of Acts.

Acts 1–2 has often been recognized as being the foundation for the rest of the narrative. It is in Acts 1–2 that we find the birth of the church, the commission of the apostles, the promise of the Spirit and his outpouring, the ascension of Jesus, and

¹ Matthew James Wineke graduated in May 2025 with a degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. He may be contacted at winekemj@gmail.com.

much more. Moreover, we find the first reference to the kingdom of God in Acts 1:1-8, which signals its importance from the start. In this way, Acts 1-2 becomes the lens through which the nature and timing of the kingdom is to be understood after Jesus's ascension. Acts 1-2 is composed of four crucial accounts: prologue and commission (1:1-8), Jesus's ascension (1:9-11), the Twelve's reconstitution (1:12-26), and Pentecost (2:1-47). These four initial narratives are anticipations of the eschaton's consummation, demonstrating that the kingdom's establishment on earth awaits a future moment, yet there is a present mission to witness the risen and ascended Messiah to the end of the earth.

The Apostles' Commission — Acts 1:1-8

From the outset of his work, Luke makes clear that he intends to further his Gospel account. "Began" in verse 1 indicates that what was recorded in the Gospel was merely the genesis of Jesus's messianic ministry.² Before his ascension, Jesus taught his disciples concerning the kingdom of God and commissioned them to be his Spirit-empowered witnesses to the far reaches of the earth. This commission is steeped in Isaianic texts (Isa 32:15; 43:10, 12; 49:6) and supplies the reader with a rough outline of the following narrative. Thus, in his programmatic introduction, Luke relates the kingdom of God to the apostles' commission, providing the reader with a lens in which to understand the kingdom in the rest of Acts.

Acts 1:6-8 as Programmatic

Acts 1:6-8 is widely held to be programmatic for the book of Acts. The apostolic mission in the ensuing story of Acts is shaped around Jesus's command to be "witnesses" in "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth." In Acts 3-7, the apostles are proclaiming the good news in Jerusalem; in Acts 8-12, the mission focus shifts to Judea and Samaria; and in Acts 13-28, the gospel goes to the Gentiles and "the end of the earth." The book even ends with a statement that the Gentiles will hear of God's salvation (Acts 28:28; cf. Luke 3:6).³ Scholars debate the exact referent of "the end of the earth" in 1:8. Some suggest a purely geographical meaning, with Rome or Spain being "the end of the earth." Others would understand this phrase ethnically, with Gentiles being "the end of the earth." However, it seems best not to constrict its meaning to simply geographic or ethnic boundaries, but to understand the phrase as inclusive of both factors.⁴ The kingdom message will spread to all the earth, to both Jerusalem and Rome, Jew and Gentile.⁵

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 195.

³ Acts 28:28 most likely alludes to Luke 3:6, thus bracketing the two-volume work.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 65.

⁵ David Pao contends that the "end of the earth" is geographic and ethnic, but it is also theopolitical. He argues that contained in the phrase "Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8) is the outline, not just of Acts, but of the "Isaianic New Exodus Program": (1) "the dawn of salvation upon Jerusalem"; (2) "the reconstitution and reunification of Israel" (Judea and Samaria); and

The Apostles' Question, Jesus's Answer

Acts 1:6-8 is vital in understanding the portrayal of the kingdom in Acts. In verses 7-8, Jesus responds to his disciples' question of when the restoration of the kingdom to Israel will take place. The disciples had just received forty days of kingdom instruction from Jesus himself, so their question was most likely prompted by Jesus's promise of the Spirit, an eschatological Old Testament promise. Jesus in turn tells them that it is not for them to know when the kingdom will be restored, and having been empowered by the Spirit, they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. There are three common views on Jesus's answer: (1) Jesus's answer is a rebuke, and the kingdom will not be restored to Israel;⁶ (2) Jesus's answer is a postponement, and the commission is what the apostles are to do in the interim period;⁷ and (3) Jesus's answer simply explains the disciples' role in the process of Israel's restoration, which is currently happening.⁸

The rebuke view can hardly be supported from the text. The disciples had just received forty days of kingdom instruction from Jesus himself, so it follows that their understanding of the nature of the kingdom was not misguided. Their question pertained to the timing of the kingdom, of which Jesus simply answered that it was not for them to know.⁹ The third view is appealing, yet it seems to read too much into the text, drawing too much connection between the establishment of the kingdom and the apostles' commission. The question pertains not to the nature of the kingdom, but the timing. The text does not suggest that Jesus offers a redefinition; rather, he provides their mission while they await restoration.¹⁰ Other Lukan texts further suggest an interim period before the Messiah returns to restore Israel (Luke 13:35; Acts 3:18-21).¹¹ The most natural reading of the text coheres with the postponement view.¹² Jesus's answer, then, indicates that the timing of kingdom restoration is

(3) "the inclusion of the Gentiles within the people of God" (David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016], 94-95). Thus, according to Pao, through the apostles' witness, they are bringing about Israel's restoration as prophesied through Isaiah.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 40-45. John B. Polhill, (*Acts*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 84-85) believes that Jesus "depoliticized" the kingdom, and "the disciples were to be the true, 'restored' Israel, fulfilling its mission to be a 'light for the Gentiles' so that God's salvation might reach 'to the ends of the earth.'"

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 63.

⁸ Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 27 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 108. So, also, Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 95-96; Patrick Schreiner, *Acts*, Christian Standard Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2021), 87-88; cf. David L. Tiede, "The Exaltation of Jesus and the Restoration of Israel in Acts 1," *Harvard Theological Review* 79, no. 1-3 (1986): 278-86.

⁹ Bock, *Acts*, 61-63.

¹⁰ Contra Schreiner, who says that Jesus "endorses their expectation of restoration but *reinterprets* renewal in light of the promised Spirit and the birth of the church in v. 8" (*Acts*, 87; emphasis original).

¹¹ In Luke 13:35, Jesus states that they will not see him "until" (ἕως) Israel welcomes him with the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Dale C. Allison, "Matt. 23:39 = Luke 13:35b as a Conditional Prophecy," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18 [1983]: 75-84). Similarly, Peter calls Israel to repentance in Acts 3:18-21 so that "[God] may send the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things."

¹² For a more thorough argument, see: John A. McLean, "Did Jesus Correct the Disciples' View of the Kingdom?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 602 (1994): 215-27.

known only by the Father, but in the meantime, the focus should be to witness the risen and vindicated king to the ends of the earth.¹³

Allusions to Isaiah

Scholars have noted an Isaianic background to Acts 1:6-8, particularly texts such as Isaiah 32:15, 43:10-12, and 49:6. In Acts 1:8, the phrase “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (ἐπελθόντος τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς) resembles LXX Isaiah 32:15: “until a Spirit comes upon you from on high” (ἕως ἂν ἔλθῃ ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς πνεῦμα ἀφ’ ὑψηλοῦ). The key phrase missing from this statement (“from on high” [ἀφ’ ὑψηλοῦ]) can be found in the parallel passage in Luke 24:49.¹⁴ Furthermore, “you will be my witnesses” likely alludes to Isaiah 43:10 and 12, in which Yahweh says, “you are My witnesses.”¹⁵ The significance of these allusions is perplexing. In Isaiah 32:15, the outpouring of the Spirit occurs in a kingdom restoration passage, and “you are My witnesses” in 43:10-12 is directed to Israel. If these are valid allusions, then does the outpouring of the Spirit not indicate the kingdom’s arrival at least in some capacity? Indeed, Schreiner writes, “These allusions affirm Israel’s restoration is happening now.”¹⁶ Pao also comments, “The Isaianic context [of 32:15] suggests that the coming of the Spirit will . . . introduce the coming of the new age . . . The coming of the Spirit thus signifies the dawn of the Isaianic New Exodus.”¹⁷ Jesus, however, draws a separation between the outpouring of the Spirit and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Moreover, the function of the Holy Spirit that is most emphasized in Acts is its enablement of the apostles for mission.¹⁸ As Craig Keener writes, “Although the Spirit is also an eschatological gift associated with Israel’s restoration, the aspect that Luke emphasizes more in his narratives in Acts is the empowerment for mission *that must precede that restoration*.”¹⁹ What was not revealed in the Old Testament was that the fulfillment of God’s kingdom program would occur in two comings of the Messiah,²⁰ and thus with that knowledge, it appears that the pouring

¹³ The postponement view does not mean that the parousia is to be viewed as far off in the distant future. Hans Conzelmann has famously argued that Luke wrote to explain the delay of the parousia (*The Theology of St. Luke* [New York: Harper & Row, 1960], 131). This, however, should not be overstated. The parousia’s timing is unknown, yet it could happen at any moment—in the twinkling of an eye. Luke 12:40 says to “be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.”

¹⁴ “And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you, but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high [ἐξ ὑψους]” (Luke 24:49). Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 92.

¹⁵ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 78. So, also, Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 93.

¹⁶ Schreiner, *Acts*, 91.

¹⁷ Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 92–93.

¹⁸ This is not at the expense of other functions of the Spirit. Luke simply emphasizes the Spirit’s empowerment for mission more than other roles.

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 690; emphasis added.

²⁰ Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1997), 55.

out of the Spirit and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth should not be conflated in Acts 1:8.²¹

The last and perhaps most important allusion lies behind the phrase "the end of the earth" (1:8). The phrase has long been recognized as an allusion to Isaiah 49:6, where the Servant is sent to be a "light of the nations" and salvation "to the end of the earth." That Isaiah 49:6 is in view here is corroborated by Paul's citation of Isaiah 49:6 in Acts 13:47, other allusions to Isaiah in Acts 1:6-8, and Luke's broader affinity for the book of Isaiah in his Gospel and Acts.²² In Acts, the apostolic mission is thus understood in terms of the Isaianic Servant's mission.

The book of Isaiah itself already laid the foundation for such an understanding.²³ In Isaiah, the Servant is "a covenant for the people," "a light of the nations," and salvation to the end of the earth (Isa 49:1-13). His mission is necessary for the establishment of the kingdom, as it provides the salvation requisite for admission.²⁴ This Servant is called Israel (Isa 49:3) and therefore functions as their representative. As John Oswalt rightly notes, "He will be for Israel, and the world, what Israel could not be."²⁵ After suffering and dying vicariously for the many, the Servant is promised "seed" that he will see and be satisfied with (Isa 53:10-11). "Servants" occurs eleven times in Isaiah 54-66.²⁶ The servants are those who accept God's glorious invitation to "come to the waters" and eat of what satisfies (Isa 55:1-2).²⁷ Just as the Servant was called to be a light to the nations, so too do the servants attract the nations with their light (Isa 60:3) and "declare [God's] glory among the nations" (Isa 66:19). The

²¹ Keener writes, "The two stages of the kingdom meant that the disciples should occupy themselves with their eschatological mission but leave the time of Israel's restoration to God" (*Acts*, 1:693).

²² Book, *Acts*, 65.

²³ What follows has been noted by many, including: Wim Beuken, "The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah, 'the Servants of YHWH,'" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15, no. 47 (1990): 67-87; Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom: A Thematic Theological Approach*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 40 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 156; Matthew Harmon, *The Servant of the Lord and His Servant People*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 54 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2021), 137; Brian J. Tabb, "Sharing the Servant's Mission: Isaiah 49:6 in Luke-Acts," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 65, no. 3 (2022): 509-22; Michael A. Lyons, "Paul and the Servant(s): Isaiah 49,6 in Acts 13,47," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 89, no. 4 (2013): 345-59.

²⁴ It is important to note *one of the ways* in which the Servant accomplishes redemption for Israel. In Isa 40-55, the people—"captive Zion" (Isa 52:2)—have suffered the prescribed punishment (exile, which is likened to death [Deut 30:15-20; Ezek 37:1-14]) due to their sin and covenant violation (Lev 26; Deut 4; 28; 31-32). The Servant was thus called by Yahweh to restore Israel and free the captives (from exile). Isa 53 uses the language of these covenant curses to depict the Servant as the one who bears the sins of the people and participates in their punishment (e.g., comp. LXX Isa 53:5 with LXX Lev 26:18, 23, 28; cf. Paul T. Sloan, *Jesus and the Law of Moses: The Gospels and the Restoration of Israel within First-Century Judaism* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2025], 193). Anthony R. Ceresko, too, compares Isa 53 with the curses of Deut 28 ("The Rhetorical Strategy of the Fourth Servant Song [Isaiah 52:13-53:12]: Poetry and the Exodus-New Exodus," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 [1994]: 42-55). The Servant's death, then, is a participation in Israel's punishment, and his vindication, the accomplishment of Israel's restoration, for "by his wounds we are healed."

²⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2 vols., New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2:291.

²⁶ Isa 54:17; 56:6; 63:17; 65:8, 9, 13-15; 66:14. Tabb, "Sharing the Servant's Mission," 513-14.

²⁷ Oswalt writes, "The 'arm of the Lord' has been revealed against what has separated them from God: their unatoned-for sin. The only thing that they must do is to accept the sin offering that the Servant has made (in prospect) and receive the mercy of God that that offering entails. If they do this, they are indeed able to be servants of God in the world" (*The Book of Isaiah*, 2:434-35).

servants suffer shame like the Servant for Yahweh's name's sake (Isa 66:5). Yet they also will be vindicated as the Servant was (Isa 54:15-17; 66:5).²⁸ The Servant thus creates servants who conform to his image and share in his mission.

Luke-Acts appears to follow Isaiah's servant motif.²⁹ Luke's infancy narrative marks Jesus as the suffering Servant of Isaiah. Simeon called baby Jesus, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa 49:6). Later, Jesus heralds himself as the Anointed One of Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isa 61:1-2) and the Suffering Servant (Luke 22:37; cf. Isa 53:12).³⁰ Now, after having accomplished his mission as the Servant, Jesus extends his mission to the apostles in Acts 1:6-8.³¹ Paul will later apply Isaiah 49:6 to himself as a command from the Lord (Acts 13:46-47). The apostles' mission is thus based on the "literary strategy" of Isaiah.³² Jesus, the Servant, gives the apostles—the servants—his mission foretold in Isaiah.³³

The several Isaianic allusions in Acts 1:6-8 significantly impact how we understand the role of the apostles and the nature of the kingdom in Acts. First, as the Servant's mission precedes the kingdom and is necessary for its establishment, the apostles' mission does likewise. The apostles carry on the Servant's "pre-kingdom" mission by proclaiming what the Servant has accomplished to the ends of the earth. Second, the apostles seem to function *like* Israel. Yahweh called the Servant "Israel" in Isaiah 49:3, and the Servant fulfills Israel's vocation as "light to the nations," while being distinct from the nation. The apostles are also given this mission and act like Israel by witnessing the Servant to the ends of the earth. In fact, Paul later quotes from Isaiah 49:6 explicitly stating that the Lord commanded them to be a "light for the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46-47). Corroborating this is the already noted allusion to Isaiah 43:10-12 where Yahweh says to Israel that they are his chosen servant (just like the individual Servant [Isa 42:1]) and his "witnesses." In the context of Isaiah 40-55, these witnesses are to witness Yahweh's redemptive work through

²⁸ Lyons, "Paul and the Servant(s)," 352.

²⁹ Tabb, "Sharing the Servant's Mission"; Lyons, "Paul and the Servant(s)."

³⁰ Contra Abernethy (*The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom*, 169), several connections suggest that the Servant of Isa 40-55 is also the king of Isa 1-39 and the anointed one of Isa 61: endowment by the Spirit (Isa 11:1; 42:1; 61:1); righteous characterization (9:7; 11:4-5; 42:6); establishment of justice (9:7; 11:3-5; 42:3-4); "light" (9:1-7; 42:6; 49:6); birth language (7:14; 9:6; 49:1); lowly beginnings (7:14-15; 11:1; 53:2); arboreal imagery (11:1; 53:2); "mouth" used as a weapon (11:4; 49:2). Furthermore, both the Servant and the Anointed One free captives, release prisoners (Isa 42:7; 49:9; 61:1), and comfort afflicted ones (49:13; 61:1).

³¹ See note 24. Significantly, the NT depicts Jesus's death and resurrection as the cause of Israel's restoration, as Isaiah arguably does. The Gospels clearly depict Jesus as the Servant, and there is ample reason to see that Jesus interpreted his death as a participation in Israel's punishment (e.g., Luke 24:21, 25-27). And, in light of passages like Ezek 37:1-14, where Israel is depicted as dead but then "resurrected," Jesus's death can be understood as participation in Israel's punishment, and his resurrection as the symbol and embodiment of Israel's restoration (see Sloan, *Jesus and the Law of Moses*, 189-209). See also Mark S. Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen: The Resurrected Messiah, the Jewish People, and the Land of Promise* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 21-22, 54-55, where Kinzer calls Jesus's resurrection the "pledge" of Israel's ultimate redemption. This is significant for our purposes because it shows that Jesus's mission was Israel-oriented, and the proclamation of the risen Messiah in Acts continues to bear significant ramifications for the nation of Israel. In this way, the kingdom has not arrived, Israel has not been restored, for Jesus has gone as the "first of the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 26:23), and will return when Israel repents (Acts 3:18-21), and cries out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 13:35).

³² Lyons, "Paul and the Servant(s)," 358.

³³ *Ibid.* Cf. Tabb, "Sharing the Servant's Mission," 516-22.

the Servant (cf. Isa 44:8). If the allusion here is valid, then the apostles would be functioning analogously to Israel in this regard.

The commission given in 1:8 provides a fitting introduction and shapes the rest of the narrative. In this way, Acts 1:6-8 also provides a lens through which to understand the rest of Acts: the kingdom is still in the future, but, until then, the apostles will be empowered by the Spirit to carry out the Servant's mission, proclaiming salvation to the ends of the earth.³⁴ The pouring out of the Spirit does not prove the establishment of the kingdom or its progressive fulfillment, as Jesus distinguishes the two in 1:7-8. Later, Peter will make even more clear that the "restoration" the apostles inquired of will not happen until the Messiah returns from heaven (3:18-21). But despite Jesus's physical absence, the return of Christ to reign is still assured, as Acts 1:9-11 will show. Now, as Jervell writes, the focus shifts from "when will the kingdom appear" to "whom is the kingdom given."³⁵

Jesus's Ascension — Acts 1:9-11

Jesus's ascension is detailed in both Luke 24 and Acts 1, thus binding the works together.³⁶ Yet, where Luke's Gospel ends with the ascension, Luke's second volume begins with it. The ascension is not just the end of Jesus's earthly ministry. It is, rather, the beginning of Jesus's heavenly ministry, where he has been made Lord at God's right hand. Jesus is the king—his death, resurrection, and ascension are proof of that; and he will soon pour out the Spirit, providing further evidence of his messiahship. In this way, Acts 1:9-11 signals an epochal shift in salvation history with the ascension marking the transition.

Having just informed his disciples that they are not to know when the kingdom will arrive, but they are to be his witnesses throughout the world, Jesus's ascension assures them the parousia is imminent. As David Peterson notes, "The ascension of Christ is a guarantee that the end will come and all God's purposes will be fulfilled."³⁷ Jesus will return just as he left to restore the kingdom to Israel (cf. Acts 3:18-21).³⁸ Kingdom hope thus forms the backdrop for the apostolic mission, and it will later characterize their message, becoming the "apostolic kerygma" (8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).³⁹

³⁴ That the apostles are carrying out Israel's mission does not entail that Israel is forever rejected and the church replaces the nation. They are to function *like* Israel while ethnic Israel persists in its rejection of the Messiah. Acts 3:19-21 and Rom 9-11 show that once "all Israel" is saved, then the Messiah will return. See also note 11 and the discussion below.

³⁵ Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 107.

³⁶ See Mikael C. Parsons, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts: The Ascension Narratives in Context*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 21 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987).

³⁷ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 116.

³⁸ See note 31. Several OT passages speak to the Messiah's coming, but perhaps, though not explicitly cited, Zech 14 is lurking in the background. Jesus's ascension occurred on the Mount of Olives, as the disciples "returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet" (1:12). Zech 14:4 says that the Lord will "stand his feet on the Mount of Olives" to deliver Israel from their enemies, splitting the mountain in two.

³⁹ Following Acts 1:6-8, "kingdom" only occurs as a summary statement regarding the message of the apostles (8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), with one exception (14:22). C. H. Dodd noted six elements which characterize the apostolic kerygma, the kingdom message: (1) "the age of fulfillment" has dawned;

Reconstitution of the Twelve — Acts 1:12-26

The nature and function of the Twelve in Luke-Acts is widely debated.⁴⁰ Jesus initially formed the Twelve in Luke 6:12-19, and in Luke 22:30 they are given authority to rule the twelve tribes of Israel in the eschaton. Yet with Judas's betrayal and death, they are left one apostle short. In Acts 1:12-26, Peter leads the charge in reconstituting the twelve apostles, filling that void. Luke's emphasis in this pericope is on the number twelve. The apostles are numbered (1:13), Judas was "counted" among them (1:17), and Matthias was added to the eleven (1:26). The question that naturally arises is how the apostles are related to the twelve tribes of Israel and Israel's restoration. Do the apostles represent new Israel, composed of the church? Does the reconstitution of the Twelve signify the beginning of Israel's restoration? Thomas Christensen concludes that "the church is Israel in the last era of redemptive history" and that "Jesus, the new Moses and Davidic king of Israel, chooses twelve apostles to signal and inaugurate the promised re-gathering and re-constitution of Israel."⁴¹ But contra Christensen, the surrounding context of Acts 1:12-26 and the account itself suggests that Israel still holds a place in God's redemptive plans, and that the kingdom's establishment is still to come.

The previous two sections of Acts have assured the reader that God's plans are still in motion. Jesus is departing, but the Spirit will be poured out and empower the apostles for kingdom witness. Israel will be restored in accordance with Old Testament promises, though the Father is the only one who knows when this will take place (Acts 1:6-8). Previously, at the Lord's supper (Luke 22:30), Jesus gave the Twelve a preeminent place in the kingdom—thrones over the twelve tribes of Israel. The Twelve are therefore leaders over Israel, not Israel itself.⁴² Furthermore, Luke has previously expected what Acts later confirms multiple times: that ethnic Israel will be restored through the Messiah. The infancy narrative expected that the Messiah would accomplish redemption (λύτρωσιν) for Israel and Jerusalem (Luke 1:68-69; 2:38). The disciples, too, believed that Jesus would be the one to "redeem" (λυτροῦσθαι) Israel (Luke 24:21). Jesus affirms the disciples' expectation, and states that he does so through his death and resurrection in accord with the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).⁴³ Acts 3:18-21 demonstrates that once Israel repents, the Messiah will

(2) this fulfillment age has been ushered in through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; (3) Jesus, now resurrected, has ascended to the heavens; (4) the Holy Spirit is the sign of Christ's presence and power in the church; (5) the consummation of the kingdom will happen at the parousia; and (6) a call to repentance always closes the message (*The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 21–24).

⁴⁰ Perhaps the most influential work on this subject is Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1972).

⁴¹ Thomas Michael Christensen, "Luke and the Nature of the Twelve New Tribes," *European Journal of Theology* 30, no. 2 (2021): 296.

⁴² Patrick Schreiner understands the reconstitution of the Twelve as the partial fulfillment of the promised reunification of the twelve tribes (Isa 11:13; Ezek 37:15-22) ("The Old Testament in Acts: A Macro Perspective," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 [2021]: 61–62).

⁴³ See notes 24 and 31. Jesus has embodied Israel's restoration in his resurrection, but he has gone as the "first of the resurrection of the dead," and Acts 1:6-8 shows that national Israel's restoration will take place at a later point.

return to reign (cf. Luke 13:35).⁴⁴ Paul also testifies before Agrippa that the “twelve tribes” hope to attain the promises (Acts 26:7), and he later claims that he is in chains for “the hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20). Given that Jesus confirms a restoration of Israel in Acts 1:6-8, gives the apostles authority over the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30), and that Luke-Acts consistently upholds a future for Israel,⁴⁵ the reconstitution of the Twelve is not a beacon indicating Old Testament promises have been fulfilled in the church, but it anticipates a future restoration of the kingdom to Israel. In accord with Luke 22:30, the Twelve, then, are the leaders of eschatological Israel—that is, restored Israel in the kingdom.⁴⁶

The election of Matthias to reconstitute the Twelve in Acts 1 suggests that the kingdom program is on track. Israel will be restored, and the Twelve will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. As Fuller states, “Luke’s emphasis on the Twelve is, in effect, a concern for Israel’s restoration.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Twelve’s reconstitution is necessary for kingdom restoration. A twelfth apostle was needed to fill the twelfth throne promised in Luke 22:30. Without a twelfth apostle, a throne would be left empty, and the twelve tribes could not be restored, in effect hindering the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Israel’s kingdom restoration has clearly been in view thus far in Acts (1:1-8). The reconstitution of the Twelve—the foundation and leaders of eschatological Israel (cf. Rev 21:14)—provides assurance that the plan of God has not been hindered. Jesus will return to establish the kingdom (1:9-11), the twelve tribes of Israel will be restored, and they will be judged by the Twelve. With the Twelve now established, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost can take place.

Pentecost — Acts 2

Acts 1:4-8 established that the apostles are to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the promise of the Father—baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then, they will be empowered by the Spirit to witness the risen Messiah to the ends of the earth. Jesus has now ascended to the heavens, and the twelve leaders of Israel’s twelve tribes have been established. In Acts 2, the Spirit is now poured out in fulfillment of what Jesus promised in Acts 1. Acts 1 has merely been climbing to the summit that is Acts 2.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Kinzer notes that “those who ‘repent’ and ‘return’ must themselves already *be* Israel in order for their repentance and returning to have eschatological significance” (*Jerusalem Crucified*, 158).

⁴⁵ See Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 279–89, where Bock demonstrates that Luke-Acts consistently refers to Israel as ethnic Israel and holds a future hope for ethnic Israel. See also Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified*, 21–159.

⁴⁶ Andrew Clark calls them the “nucleus of restored Israel” (“The Role of the Apostles,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 173). See also Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel’s Re-Gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 243.

⁴⁷ Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel*, 259. E. P. Sanders also writes, “‘Twelve’ would necessarily mean ‘restoration’” (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 98; emphasis original). See also Richard Bauckham, “The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts,” in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Perspectives*, ed. James M. Scott, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 469.

⁴⁸ “Luke begins by noting it was when the day of Pentecost was ‘fulfilled’ (*sumplēroō*), suggesting an end to anticipation” (Schreiner, *Acts*, 109).

Peter's sermon at Pentecost is an explanation of the filling of the Holy Spirit that was causing the *glossolalia* phenomenon (2:1-12). Many began to mock them, saying, "They are full of new wine" (2:13). Yet Peter took his stand and defended them, explaining from the Scriptures what was taking place. Old Testament citations abound in this sermon, with quotes from Joel 2:28-32 (and possibly an allusion to Isa 2:2), Psalm 16:8-11, Psalm 132:11, and Psalm 110:1. And while Peter's sermon is not intended to outline an eschatology, it is certainly significant in understanding the kingdom post-ascension.

Ingathering of Exiles

After the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jews who lived in Jerusalem observed what was happening and became "bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:5-6). In verses 9-11, Luke includes a list of nations where those in the crowd came from. What is perplexing, though, is that Luke marks the crowd as predominantly Jewish (2:5-6). How then is it that many from the crowd could be from those foreign nations? Pao suggests that the "best way to account for both the universal and particular aspects is to take Acts 2 as describing the ingathering of the exiles from the Jewish Diaspora."⁴⁹ That Acts 2 should be understood as the "ingathering of exiles" can be further supported by the fact that Luke describes the Jews in verse 5 as being "from every nation."⁵⁰ Rebecca Denova also suggests that the list of nations is a "similar list for a similar purpose" to Isaiah 11:11, and "points to the promised ingathering of the exiles who reside in all these nations."⁵¹ Yet, Acts 2 can hardly be the fulfillment of such Old Testament promises (Isa 11:11-13; Jer 23:7-8; Ezek 37:15-22).⁵² Acts 1:6-8 has already made clear that kingdom restoration awaits the future. Moreover, in Isaiah 11 and Jeremiah 23, the exiles are regathered as a result of the establishment of the Davidic king's reign on earth. Jesus has ascended to the heavens, but the establishment of the kingdom is in the indefinite future—a time only known by the Father (cf. 1:6-8). But if this Old Testament background is valid, then this "ingathering" is best understood as anticipatory, as much of Acts 1–2 has been. The "ingathering" of Jews from the diaspora in Acts 2 does not appear to be the fulfillment of kingdom promises; rather, these Jews are representative and anticipate a future ingathering.⁵³

⁴⁹ Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 130.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Rebecca L. Denova, *The Things Accomplished Among Us: Prophetic Tradition in the Structural Pattern of Luke-Acts*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 141 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 173.

⁵² The hope of ingathering is attested to outside of the Old Testament. For example, Baruch 4:37 says, "Look, your sons whom you sent forth are coming, gathered from east to west by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the glory of God."

⁵³ David Seccombe is right in stating that "Peter thus stands to address a representative gathering of Jews" ("The New People of God," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 352).

Joel 2

The Joel 2 quotation in Acts 2:16-21 is a key text for those who hold to a realized or inaugurated eschatology. For Schreiner, “This reference to the ‘last days’ clues in readers to Luke’s emphasis—the pouring out of the Spirit and the prophetic utterances of the disciples were not a result of new wine but the fulfillment of the eschatological age when the house of the Lord will be established.”⁵⁴ Many who hold similar views identify points of connection between the prophecy of Joel and Luke-Acts: (1) “signs” and “wonders” characterize Jesus’s ministry (2:22) and the apostles’ (2:43); (2) the sun darkening and the blood in 2:20 is the darkness at Jesus’s death (Luke 23:45); and (3) blood, fire, and smoke somewhat resemble the descent of the Spirit in 2:1-4.⁵⁵ This is all predicated on the belief that Peter quotes from Joel to indicate the prophecy’s fulfillment. Indeed, Schnabel writes, “The fact that Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32, prefaced with the announcement that this has now been fulfilled, suggests that the Joel citation is used to explain more than just the Pentecost phenomena.”⁵⁶ Ben Witherington also comments, “The working of the Spirit is seen as the sign that the eschatological age has begun, and that the promises of the OT era are being fulfilled in the lives of those who follow Jesus.”⁵⁷ Closer examination of the text, however, indicates that Peter does not introduce Joel with a fulfillment formula, nor does he intend to show its fulfillment at Pentecost.

When introducing the Joel citation, Peter says “this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel.” What he does not say is that “the Scripture is fulfilled” as he does elsewhere in 1:16. Yet, others would contend that no explicit fulfillment formula is needed to indicate fulfillment. However, nothing in the Joel prophecy can be firmly connected to any events in Luke-Acts. In fact, all that can be related to the Joel prophecy is the outpouring of the Spirit and the call to salvation.⁵⁸ The connections shown above between the Joel citation and the events of Pentecost are weak, and not all the components of the prophecy can be accounted for.⁵⁹ Further, if Acts 1:6-8 has shown that there is a separation between the Spirit’s outpouring and the establishment of the kingdom, then that separation is maintained, as there is no fulfillment of Joel in Acts 2. Peter quotes Joel not to signal its fulfillment at Pentecost, but to explain that the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost was “analogous to Joel’s prophecy, as

⁵⁴ Schreiner, *Acts*, 123–24.

⁵⁵ Schreiner, 125–26. Cf. Turner, *Power from on High*, 274, where Turner admits that “while a fulfillment in the passion is probably envisaged, it is unlikely that Luke thought that series of events entirely exhausted the language, which must at least also stretch back to the ministry.”

⁵⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, 138.

⁵⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 140.

⁵⁸ R. Bruce Compton, “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (2003): 46.

⁵⁹ Marshall writes, “At best it has some weak coincidences with Joel 2, which clearly is the decisive basis for the sermon” (I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 533).

well as to show that the offer of salvation mentioned by Joel was available to those present at Pentecost.”⁶⁰

Psalm 110

After demonstrating from the Scripture that Jesus was raised from the dead (Acts 2:22-32; Ps 16), Peter cites Psalm 110 to show that Jesus’s ascension to God’s right hand was also foretold by David. Some would consider the use of Psalm 110 here as an indication of Jesus’s “already not yet” reign. Schreiner comments, “Christ has been raised and exalted, and he rules over all, yet the kingdom has not come in its fullness for the enemies of Christ are still at work.”⁶¹ Psalm 110, however, portrays a waiting period until the Messiah’s reign is established and his enemies are under his feet. Psalm 110 does not delineate an “already not yet” reign, as Jesus is not “already” ruling over God’s kingdom on earth as Davidic king. The Messiah, in Psalm 110, is to sit at Yahweh’s right hand *until* his enemies are placed underneath his feet (Ps 110:1-3), then he will conquer militarily and render justice among the nations (Ps 110:5-7). Jesus is now at God’s right hand, waiting for all his enemies to be put under his feet, then he will descend and establish his kingdom.⁶²

Eschatological Anticipation

If the events of Pentecost are not the fulfillment of Joel 2, what then are their significance? The outpouring of the Spirit and its results are a foretaste of the future kingdom, that day when Joel 2 will be fulfilled. Luke clearly signals that these events took place on Pentecost (Acts 2:1). Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, is an Israelite celebration in which the first fruits of the harvest were to be offered to Yahweh as commemoration for what Yahweh has done, particularly in the events of the exodus (Lev 23:15-22; Deut 16:9-12). In this way, the events of Pentecost, being analogous to Joel 2, are the first fruits of what will be experienced in the last days. Put simply, Pentecost is a “foretaste of things to come”—“an event of eschatological anticipation.”⁶³ The church now becomes the “firstfruits of what is to come.”⁶⁴ Believers are those “upon whom the end of the ages have arrived” (1 Cor 10:11)—the proleptic sign and witness of God’s eschatological redemption.⁶⁵ The

⁶⁰ Compton, “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” 46. Compton argues that the outpouring of the Spirit is *participation in* and not *fulfillment of* the new covenant. Acts 2 is in support of this as no explicit fulfillment language is used. The church participates in the new covenant but does not fulfill or partly fulfill it. On the other hand, Max Turner argues that Acts does signal Joel 2’s fulfillment and the repeated association of the Spirit with gifts in Acts connects back to the Joel 2 citation in Acts 2 (“The ‘Spirit of Prophecy’ as the Power of Israel’s Restoration and Witness,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 333–35).

⁶¹ Schreiner, *Acts*, 135.

⁶² The author of Hebrews agrees: “But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him” (Heb 2:8).

⁶³ Arie W. Zwiep, *Judas and the Choice of Matthias: A Study on Context and Concern of Acts 1:15–26*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe* 187 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 179.

⁶⁴ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 159, 162–63.

⁶⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996) 131, 198.

“ingathering of exiles” from the diaspora and the outpouring of the Spirit, with the Twelve functioning as “rulers” over “regathered Israel” are, therefore, anticipations—indeed, first fruits—of the fulfillment in the eschaton.⁶⁶

The purpose of the Pentecost sermon is more than an explanation of the Spirit’s outpouring. The sermon’s focal point is Jesus—the crucified, but now risen, Messiah who has ascended to the heavens and been made both Lord and Christ. And even more, this Jesus—whom they crucified—has gone forth as the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead,⁶⁷ and he now summons Israel and the nations to repentance in light of his imminent return.

Conclusion

Luke does not present us with four seemingly disparate narratives in Acts 1–2. These four accounts are related and provide necessary information upon which the rest of Acts is built. Acts 1:1-8 constitutes the prologue and introduction, laying the groundwork for the rest of the narrative. Jesus has shown he is the Messiah through his ministry, death, and resurrection. Now, he must depart and sit at God’s right hand until his enemies are subjugated to him. The establishment of the kingdom is thus placed in the future. In this interim period, the kingdom message must be spread beginning in Jerusalem and out to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:9-11 provides greater assurance that Jesus will return to establish the kingdom. Acts 1:12-26 anticipates the future restoration of Israel, with the Twelve ruling over the twelve tribes just as Jesus promised (Luke 22:29-30). Acts 1–2 climaxes at Pentecost, where Jesus’s promise of Acts 1:6-8 is fulfilled. With Israel’s leaders restored to twelve, Jews from throughout the diaspora gathered to Jerusalem to celebrate the day of first fruits. The Messiah, the resurrected Son of David, now pours out the Spirit on his people from his exalted position at God’s right hand. The events of Pentecost are just the first fruits of Jesus’s eschatological kingdom, when all Israel will be ingathered, when Joel 2 will be fulfilled, and when Jesus will fulfill the remainder of Psalm 110, crushing his enemies and lifting up his head in total triumph.

⁶⁶ Schreiner has argued that Luke has ordered his narrative in such a way that “follows and fulfills the promises of the OT” (“Old Testament in Acts,” 58). Acts 1–2 thus mirrors and fulfills the eschatological program laid out in the OT. The Davidic king has been enthroned (1:9-11; Isa 9:6-7; 55:3), Israel has been reconstituted (1:12-26; Isa 11:13; 49:6; 63:17), exiles have been ingathered (2:5, 9-11; Isa 35:8-10; 40:11), and a community of the Spirit has been formed (2:1-4; Isa 32:14-17; 44:1-4) (“Old Testament in Acts,” 60–61). However, as this article has contended, Acts 1–2 does not signal the fulfillment of OT promises in the church. If Luke has intentionally ordered his narrative in this way, then this would illustrate that the beginnings of the church are the firstfruits of the eschaton—anticipations of what will be fulfilled at Christ’s return.

⁶⁷ See note 31. Paul defends himself in Acts 26:23, stating that he bears witness to precisely what Israel’s Scriptures said would take place: that the Messiah would suffer, die, and go forth as “the first of the resurrection of the dead,” then proclaim light to the Jews and the Gentiles. Significantly, in Paul’s other “trial speeches,” he claims to be on trial for the “hope of Israel” (28:20), the “hope of the promise made by God to our fathers” (26:6), the promise “which the twelve tribes hope to attain” (26:7). Paul seems to associate the death and resurrection of Jesus with the “hope of Israel.” Luke 24:21, 25-27 arguably makes the same point.



THE MASTER'S UNIVERSITY

21726 Placerita Canyon Road, Santa Clarita, California

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