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“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,
but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”

-- *Proverbs 25:2*

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1. God the Creator

*David Keeling*¹

ABSTRACT: The church of Jesus Christ has largely rejected the traditional interpretation of Genesis, which incorporates divine fiat creation (hereinafter *creatio ex nihilo*), in favor of an evolutionary/theistic evolution-driven cosmology. In this article I focus broadly on four observations. First, that the traditional view of Genesis is fully in accord with the biblical presentation of God as the sovereign and exclusive creator. Second, that God created the world without utilizing pre-existing materials. Third, that the Lord Jesus fully believed in and therefore affirmed the historicity of early Genesis. Finally, I consider that Christians who profess Christ as Lord ought to exemplify His approach to early Genesis as a mark of submission to and faithfulness to Him.

THE BIBLICALLY DERIVED VIEW that God created the heaven and the earth without utilizing pre-existing materials is known as *creatio ex nihilo*, a Latin phrase signifying creation literally from nothing. Additionally, the first chapter of Genesis reveals that God created all things within six days. Due to the pervasive influence of rationalistic categories of thought that secured a foothold in science during “the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,”² this understanding, referred to as the traditional view, has largely fallen out of favor. Consequently, the majority of professing Christians

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² Terry Mortenson, “Philosophical Naturalism and the Age of the Earth: Are They Related?”, *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, Vol. 15, Is. 1 (Spring 2004), 71-79.

have substituted a rationalistic non-biblical cosmology for belief in a literal, historical-grammatical understanding of Genesis 1-2.³

In this article, I do not draw attention to the six days of creation; neither do I trace the origin and historical developments of the hermeneutical drift. Moreover, I do not give consideration to the various hermeneutical approaches to early Genesis.⁴

Instead, I first consider that revealed Scripture is foundational for belief in God as creator. Second, I observe that God did not employ third-party intermediaries in His creative work. Third, I introduce the theme of *creatio ex nihilo*, effectively tracing the doctrine in its nascent Christian form to Saint Augustine. Fourth, in reviewing the work of R. D. Wil-

³ Ibid. Mortenson observes that before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “the dominant, majority view was that God created the world in six literal days about 6,000 years earlier and judged it with a global, catastrophic flood.” See also Gary G. Cohen, “Hermeneutical Principles and Creation Theories,” *Grace Journal*, Vol. 5, Is. 3 (1964), pp. 17-29. Cohen implies that the rationalistic enterprises of both Darwin and Astruc have been instrumental in contributing to the adoption and deployment of a primarily non historical-grammatical biblical hermeneutic by theological liberals and some so-called conservative Christians. The hermeneutical conclusions of the latter have corresponded to the conclusions of skeptics.” See also D. F. Payne, “Genesis One Reconsidered.” This booklet was originally published by the Tyndale Press in 1964 and portions are reproduced here by permission of the author. URL=https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/genesisone_payne.pdf. The author discusses three types of serious attack against the first chapter of Genesis: The attack from science, attacks predicated upon myths from the Ancient Near East, and last, from literary criticism.

⁴ For hermeneutical considerations and views pertaining to Genesis, see Cohen, “Hermeneutical Principles and Creation Theories.” For a view on the limitations of science with respect to Genesis, see Kurt P. Wise, “What Science Tells Us About the Age of the Creation,” *Galaxie Software*,” n.d. URL=<https://www.galaxie.com/article/sbjt11-1-02>. For the incorporation of a threefold hermeneutical method, the objective of which is to interpret the Scriptures analogous to that of the Apostles of the Lord Jesus, see Russell T. Fuller, “Interpreting Genesis 1-11,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol 5, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 18-27.

son, Terry Mortenson and Timothy Yin, I consider that the Lord Jesus affirmed the historicity of early Genesis. Finally, I conclude that Christians who submit to Jesus Christ as Lord, ought to follow the example of Christ with respect to the Genesis creation account.

Scripture is foundational for belief in God the creator

The scriptural revelation which concerns God as creator is explicit, succinct and profound. For the Christian, it is (in common with all Scripture) to be approached with humility, appropriated by faith, illuminated by the Holy Spirit and applied to one's life. The doctrine of creation is found within both the Old and the New Testament; therefore it is relevant to the explication of a correct Christian cosmology. Moreover, the doctrine entails significant implications for a biblical anthropology, Christology, soteriology and eschatology. The Christian who would understand the doctrine of creation ought to first turn to Scripture.⁵

H. Dermot McDonald writes that "the universe, as an existent reality, was ushered into being by the creative voice of God. Concerning the Christian, McDonald adds: "He lives, he is convinced, in a world originated and controlled by God. And he finds the source and confirmation of this faith in the Bible."⁶

Therefore the testimony of Scripture is sufficient to ground the faith of the Christian in God as the creator, both of the world and also the universe in which He located it. Since the proposition that God created the heaven and the earth is not a self-evident truth, this faith is necessarily grounded in revealed Scripture.⁷

⁵ Gerald Bray, "The Creation," *Evangel*, Vol. 2, Is. 4 (1984), pp. 9-10.

⁶ H. Dermot McDonald, "The Idea of Creation in Historical Perspective," *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. 5, (1967), pp. 27-48.

⁷ Paul R. House, "Creation in Old Testament Theology," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 4-17.

God the sole Creator

The book of Genesis, commencing as it does “in the beginning,”⁸ relates to the sovereign and immediate creational activity of God. For as both “the source and cause” of creation, He is also necessarily “directly and personally involved in creation.”⁹ Moreover, God as the sole and exclusive sovereign agent of creation did not create either in the presence of, or through the agency of, non-divine intermediaries. For as House observes:

Besides emphasizing that the world owes its existence to God, the only one able to create, Genesis 1:1 reveals that the Lord is solitary and unique. That is, there is no other god involved in the creation process and therefore there is no deity like the Lord. Obviously, this notion of God as solitary deity makes the Genesis creation account different from virtually, if not actually, all other ancient creation stories.¹⁰

The propositional truth contained in Scripture that God alone created all things, is an important consideration, especially in the light of the New Testament data as it relates to the pre-incarnate state of Jesus Christ.¹¹ This is crucial for the present task on at least two fronts. First, it provides for continuity between the Old and New Testament with respect to the traditional view of early Genesis and *creatio ex nihilo*. Second, the Johannine prologue and the first chapter of Colossians teach that the pre-incarnate Son created the universe and this planet. Gerald Bray observes that the first three

⁸ Genesis 1:1. All Scripture references taken from the KJV unless stated otherwise.

⁹ House, “Creation in Old Testament Theology,” p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also in *Ibid.*, p. 5, where House observes in relation to God that “He not only has no equal in the creating process, none is needed for the creation to be “good.””

¹¹ For example, John 1:3; Colossians 1:16.

chapters of Genesis comprise one of a trio of the most important texts that relate to divine creation. Bray opines:

There are many passages which mention or assume a doctrine of creation, but the most significant are Genesis 1-3; John 1:1-5 and Colossians 1:15-17. The New Testament passages are both intensely Christological in their emphasis, a point which cannot be overlooked. It is a great pity that debates about the subject, even among Christians, have concentrated on the longer Genesis passage and ignored the New Testament, since it is the latter which offers us an indispensable hermeneutical principle for understanding the former.¹²

Creatio ex nihilo

The Christian faith has historically affirmed the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. This affirmation was founded upon the first two verses of Genesis chapter one: Joshua Wilson says the following about Genesis 1:1-2:

For numerous centuries a traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1 has led Christian and Jewish scholars to conclude that God created the world out of nothing. According to this tradition, Genesis 1:1 introduces God's first creative act. Genesis 1:2 then describes this initial creation as being in an incomplete state. The rest of the Genesis narrative then describes how God shaped, molded, and added to it.¹³

Genesis 1:1 does not contain propositional content about pre-existing material prior to the initial creational work of

¹² Bray, "The Creation," p. 1.

¹³ Joshua Wilson, "Genesis 1:1 and the Doctrine of Creatio Ex Nihilo (Part 1): A Lexical Analysis of the Phrase אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ." *Answers Research Journal* 16 (2023): 265–281.

God; therefore interpreters logically infer *creatio ex nihilo*. Further, although a dogmatic statement is absent from the text, the doctrine does nonetheless constitute “an inherent theological reading of the Genesis 1 narrative.”¹⁴ Thus God is the sovereign, direct, personal and sole agent who created without utilizing primordial matter; for indeed no such matter existed. McDonald observes that:

The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* has historically been referred to the temporal beginning of the universe and is interpreted as implying a free act of God by which, without the use of pre-existing materials, He brought into existence the whole universe of visible and invisible things.¹⁵

It was previously stated that *creatio ex nihilo* was originally derived from the Genesis account of creation. *Creatio ex nihilo* was implemented by the early church as a safeguard against the encroachment of Alexandrian Gnostic dualism. Moreover, according to McDonald, the Gnostics of Alexandria

viewed ‘matter’ as an unconscious, negative and imperfect substance upon which, either the ultimate good God acting through an intermediary, or, a hostile evil being acting directly, worked to shape the world. It was historically against this stark dualistic view that the Christian doctrine *creatio ex nihilo* sought to guard.¹⁶

Further, *creatio ex nihilo* sought to affirm that God was the creator and in Him alone can the explanation for this world be located. The revelation concerning God’s magnificent handiwork concluded “for the instantaneous appearance

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ McDonald, pp. 27-32.

¹⁶ McDonald, p. 4.

of complex physical entities.”¹⁷ Thus, there was no concept that admitted of lapsed time or incremental processes prior to completion.

Throughout church history, the biblically derived doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has suffered due to proponents who articulated various and sometimes opposite conclusions.¹⁸ Such erroneous views were historically predicated either upon the observation that God is robustly distinct from His creation, so as to argue for deism, or that God is inextricably related to His creation, so as to promote pantheism. Deism, along with atheism, gained popularity in the eighteenth century, during which, as a product of the Enlightenment, rationalistic categories of thought were enthroned as the sole arbiters of truth.

Although pantheism or divine emanationism may be traced to neo-Platonism, it was Denys the Areopagite who spearheaded the attempt to provide an unambiguous Christian emanationist account concerning the relatedness of God to the world. John Scotus Erigena drew heavily upon the literature of Denys. Influenced by Denys, Erigena attempted to unite an emanationist understanding with a creationist understanding, with respect to “the origin of existing actualities.”¹⁹ Moreover, McDonald observes of Scotus:

All things, he declared, have their source and goal in the Divine Nature. There is, too, as in the pseudo-Areopagite, the same thought of the circle of being in which all things are regarded as coming out of God and returning to Him again. God, while still maintaining His own essential being and still remaining One, became the Many by a process of descent into the physical world. But, according to the cyclical principle, the Many must find their goal in un-

¹⁷ John C. Whitcomb, Jr., “The Creation of the Heavens and the Earth,” *Grace Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 1967), p. 28.

¹⁸ McDonald, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

ion with the One.²⁰

The concept of emanationism continued in medieval mystic categories of thought and also in the literature of the absolute idealists. It was over and above the pantheistic and/or panentheistic overtones assigned to *creatio ex nihilo*, that Augustine may be considered the one who first gave *creatio ex nihilo* “its specific orthodox connotation.”²¹ According to Woods, on Augustine’s view the material with which God created the heaven and the earth is not coeternal with almighty God; neither did another agency fashion the material.²² Moreover, Augustine, partly on the revelation of Scripture, commenced with the conceptual framework that incorporates both the incorruptible God and the creation of a new material that is contingent upon Him for its existence.²³

This new material, although good, is nonetheless ontologically contingent; therefore it is both mutable and corruptible. Indeed, the robust distinction that obtains between God as the necessary and immutable being and His creation of the new contingent and mutable material, is integral to the conceptual apparatus that provides for *creatio ex nihilo* and also the doctrine that relates to the eternal begetting by the Father of the Son. As Tornau has it, “Changeable being is not generated from God (which, according to the Nicene Creed, is true only of the Son) but created out of nothing, a fact that partly accounts for its susceptibility for evil.”²⁴ A further component

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p. 13.

²² Henry Woods, *Augustine and Evolution: A Study in the Saint’s De Genesi Ad Litteram and De Trinitate* (The Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1924), p.12.

²³ Stephen Brown, *An Augustinian Defense of the Rational Coherence of Creation Ex Nihilo* (MA Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2020), p. 21.

²⁴ Christian Tornau, "Augustine of Hippo", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.). URL= <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/>.

of this apparatus is provided by the proposition that God created *with* time, rather than *in* time. This concept, known as the timelessly eternal creation of the universe, need not presently detain us, apart from the observation that *creatio ex nihilo* and timelessly eternal creation are intimately connected within Augustinian thought.

In concluding this section, it is worth observing that despite the current hermeneutical drift from the traditional view of Genesis, “the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has persisted well into the modern era as the definitive Christian position.”²⁵

Early Genesis and the coherence of Scripture

If the biblical proposition of God as Creator is foundational to the whole of the biblical canon, it follows that one's understanding of creation will determine how one may consistently and coherently understand the totality of Scripture. The propositional truth concerning God as creator is foundational to the entire edifice of scripture. God is therefore the *sine qua non* with respect to both the origin of the universe and this world and also to their continued existence. Moreover, the revelation that all of creation is directly predicated upon God is intimately connected with the entire canon of Scripture. Timothy Yin remarks:

Genesis is the beginning of God's special revelation. As such, it is the foundation of God's redemptive truth. Just as a tree has its root under the ground both to support and to nourish its trunk, branches, and leaves; so Genesis, the root of God's revelation, supports and contributes to all other books of Scripture. Without Genesis the other books

²⁵ Brown, p. 33.

would be meaningless, and God's progressive revelation would have no foundation.²⁶

Genesis then is to the totality of Scripture, what the supporting roots are to the tree. Genesis is both the commencement of progressive divine revelation and also the foundation upon which that revelation is built. Moreover, the historicity of Genesis is indispensable with respect to the human descent of Jesus. As A. B. Caneday observes:

This bold endeavor to reorient evangelical Christian beliefs concerning the origins of the universe and of Adam especially holds ramifications that extend far beyond calling into question the historicity of Adam. If Adam was not the first human and progenitor of all humanity, as Genesis and the apostle Paul affirm, then the gospel of Jesus Christ inescapably falls suspect – because the Gospel of Luke unambiguously traces the genealogy of Jesus Christ back through Joseph, who was thought to be his father, all the way back through Enos, to Seth, then to Adam, and finally to God (Luke 3:18).²⁷

Early Genesis and the historicity of creation, including as it does Adam and Eve, is inextricably linked to the human genealogy of Jesus, insofar as a denial of the former will effectively undermine the human provenance of the latter. Further, a serious challenge to the historicity of Adam will call into question the biblical ground for the entrance of sin into the

²⁶ Timothy Yin, ““Genesis: A Biblical Theology,” (Biblical Studies Ministries International, inc., 2002), pp. 26-27. URL=<http://www.bsmi.org/download/lin/genesis.pdf>.

²⁷ A. B. Caneday, “The Language of God and Adam's Genesis and Historicity in Paul's Gospel,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 26-59.

world, along with the incarnation, public ministry and remedial salvific work effected by Jesus.²⁸

Indeed, there is ongoing controversy concerning the historicity of Adam,²⁹ which inevitably relates to the perspicuity of scriptural teaching with regard to the well-attested fourfold motif of special revelation, viz., creation, fall, redemption and consummation.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful (Rev. 21:1-5).

²⁸ See Philip E. Hughes, "Adam and His Posterity," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. 1, Is. 3 (July 1942), pp. 161-173. For a concise treatment of Adamic sin and Christian salvation within the context of Romans chapter five, see Gerald Bray, "Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12-21)," *Evangel*, Vol. 18, Is. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 4-8.

²⁹ See Simon Turpin, "The Importance of an Historical Adam." *Answers Research Journal* 6 (2013), pp. 195–209. Part of the controversy entails the alleged similarities between the biblical Adam and the Babylonian Adapa myth. For a summary of the parallels and contrasts between Adam and Adapa, see Niels-Erik Andreasen, "Adam and Adapa: Two Anthropological Characters" *Faculty Publications*, 66 (1981). URL=<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1065&context=old-testament-pubs>.

Early Genesis and Jesus Christ

How did the Lord Jesus view early Genesis and indeed the Scriptures (the Old Testament) of His day? Did He espouse the historicity of the divine creation account? Should it be the case that He believed that Genesis presented a literal and historical account concerning creation, such an affirmation would – for believers at least – provide the strongest support for the traditional view of Genesis. For it is certainly the case that during His public ministry, Jesus often referred to Genesis and other Old Testament Scriptures. Moreover, in doing so, He never once expressed doubt or skepticism concerning the facticity of the Old Testament texts to which He referred. Criticism relating to how Jesus viewed the Old Testament is neither new nor infrequent. On this, the late Robert Wilson observed:

Objection has frequently been made to the use of the testimony of Jesus in corroboration of the historicity of the persons and events of the Old Testament to which the Gospels tell us that He referred, apparently in full belief in the accuracy and veracity of the Old Testament accounts of these persons and events.³⁰

The nature of the objection, suggests Wilson, is wanting for support of factual evidence. Rather it finds its basis upon the assumption that when Jesus spoke about various Old Testament accounts, He was in reality either accommodating His words to the understanding of His contemporary Jewish audience, or He failed to comprehend (and therefore to correct) the erroneous nature of the prevailing Jewish viewpoint. Notwithstanding the argument from either accommodation or ignorance, Jesus knew more about the Old Testament than

³⁰ Robert D. Wilson, “Jesus and the Old Testament,” *The Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. 24, Is. 4 (1926), p. 632.

either any of His Jewish contemporaries or for that matter, “any, or all, of the wise men of all time.”³¹

Wilson rightly concluded that the character of Jesus revealed in the New Testament gospels ought to prove foundational for trusting His opinion concerning the historicity of the Old Testament. Indeed, every Christian at minimum should accept the view of Jesus in relation to the historical facticity of the Old Testament, “unless it can be proved beyond controversy that what He thought and said about these facts is false.”³²

More recently, Terry Mortenson has written about the view of Jesus concerning the age of the earth. Mortenson asks, “What does Jesus have to say about the age of the earth?”³³ In similar fashion to Wilson, Mortenson observes that the view held by Jesus in relation to the age of the earth ought to be a deciding factor for the belief of every Christian on the topic. Moreover, the Scripture can be relied upon; it is trustworthy and therefore it ought to be believed. Mortenson continues:

Another way that Jesus revealed His complete trust in the Scriptures was by treating as historical fact the accounts in the Old Testament which most contemporary people think are unbelievable mythology. These historical accounts include Adam and Eve as the first married couple (Matthew 19:3–6, Mark 10:3–9), Abel as the first prophet who was martyred (Luke 11:50–51), Noah and the Flood (Matthew 24:38–39), Moses and the serpent (John 3:14), Moses and the manna (John 6:32–33, 49), the experiences of Lot and his wife (Luke 17:28–32), the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15), the miracles of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Terry Mortenson, “Jesus, Evangelical Scholars, and the Age of the Earth,” *Answers in Depth*, Vol. 2 (2007), pp. 101–119.

Elijah (Luke 4:25–27), and Jonah and the big fish (Matthew 12:40–41).³⁴

In addition to His complete acceptance concerning the historicity of the foregoing Old Testament accounts, Jesus also affirmed the authority of the Scriptures and demonstrated unwavering conviction that Scripture is the supreme authority for belief and conduct.³⁵

In discussing the so called “Jesus AGE Verses” of Mark 10:6; 13:19-20 and Luke 11:50-51 respectively, Mortenson draws attention to the terms “from (or since) the beginning of creation” and “since the foundation of the world.” Mark 10:6 for instance says, “But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’”

For Mortenson, these verses demonstrate that Jesus “believed and taught that man has existed essentially as long as the entire cosmos has.”³⁶ Indeed given His demonstrable belief in the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, together with the genealogies of chapters five through eleven, we have a strong basis for determining that He “believed in a literal six-day Creation week which occurred only a few thousand years ago. No other understanding adequately accounts for the Jesus AGE verses and the approach of Jesus to the historicity of Genesis.”³⁷

Timothy Yin utilizes a cluster of gospel texts to show that Jesus affirmed the authenticity of the first two chapters of Genesis, by testifying to the historicity concerning the creation of Adam and Eve. Yin does not express a view in relation to the creation of the universe and this world, for that is not his purpose. What he does affirm however, is the historical facticity of Genesis, based ultimately upon the testimony

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 102. Mortenson also refers readers to Mark 7:5-13.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁷ Ibid.

of Jesus.³⁸ Moreover, the gospel texts adduced by Yin (one of which corresponds with Mortenson's Jesus AGE Verses) serve to "indicate that Christ testified to the truthfulness of essentially the entire book of Genesis. No other authority can give us more confidence in reference to the genuineness of the first foundational book of Scripture."³⁹

If Wilson, Mortenson and Yin are correct, then it seems clear that Christians ought to exemplify the view of the Lord Jesus with respect to the whole of Scripture. In turning to the gospel accounts, a *prima facie* understanding would strongly suggest that Jesus embraced a literal understanding of Genesis 1:1 and indeed Genesis chapters 1-11; which in turn affirms the complete historicity, the total trustworthiness and the absolute authority of the divine revelation with respect to the origin of the universe and this world. If this constitutes an accurate conclusion with respect to representing the understanding of Jesus, insofar as He completely endorsed the historicity of early Genesis; then indeed, Christians ought to proceed to follow the example of Jesus. For surely His voice deserves to be heard above all others and not least when it turns to following His view concerning the written Word of

³⁸ Yin, pp. 29-30. Here Yin observes the following concerning the Lord Jesus: "He confirmed the genuineness of the first two chapters of Genesis by testifying to the creation of Adam and Eve as a historical fact, and not a myth or legend (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:5-9). When He rebuked the scribes and Pharisees, He mentioned 'the blood of Abel' as the beginning of the Jews' guilt (Matt. 23:35). He confirmed that Noah's flood was a historical destruction (Matt. 24:37-39) and the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah as God's judgment (Matt. 11:23-24). He described Lot's time in Sodom and the judgment of his wife as a historical warning regarding the last days (Luke 17:28-32). In His preaching and teaching, He often spoke of Abraham (John 8:37-40,56-58) and repeatedly He testified of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mark 12:26) and their lives before God (Matt. 8:11; 22:32)." See also R. D. Wilson, "Jesus and the Old Testament," pp. 639-643, for his observations on: Matthew 19:4, 5; 23:35; 24:37, 39; 8:11; 22:31, 32; Mark 12:26, 27; John 8:39, 56, 58; Matthew 11:24; and Luke 17:28, 29, 32.

³⁹ Yin, p. 30.

God. Indeed, when we approach the inspired Word of God, we must, if we profess His name, submit to the God who inspired the Word. That is, “We dare not make the Word ‘lordless’ (*avkurov*) by our human understanding (Matt 15:6).⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Christian church has largely abandoned the traditional view of early Genesis and *creatio ex nihilo*. For the traditional view to again become a genuine alternative to the prevailing evolutionary/theistic evolution-driven cosmology, Genesis must once again be appropriated as the foundational book of the Bible and the commencement of progressive special revelation. That this is no mere antiquated understanding is clear from the way in which Jesus referred to early Genesis during His earthly sojourn. For the Lord demonstrated complete faith in the historicity of Genesis, thereby affirming the traditional view. We have seen that departure from the historicity of Genesis results from hermeneutical drift, and it's clear that hermeneutical drift will eventually come to affect all major points of Christian doctrine. Once those who profess Jesus to be Lord seriously evaluate His stance on Genesis and reorient their understanding to His, however, the hermeneutical drift may perhaps be attenuated, halted and even reversed.

⁴⁰ William D. Barrick, “Exegetical Fallacies: Common Interpretive Mistakes Every Student Must Avoid” *The Masters Seminary Journal*, Vol. 19, Is. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 27.

2. Does Artificial Intelligence Have Adamic Sin Nature?

Johnson C. Philip & Saneesh Cherian¹

ABSTRACT: With the increasing similarity between artificial intelligence (AI) and humans, many have started attributing humanness to AI – so much so that some have even started advocating special rights for AI in the not-too-distant future. That being the case, it would be useful to investigate questions like the possibility of sin nature in AI software. Such thinking will prepare us for the future if some people manage to get AI labeled as sentient beings.

IN THIS PAPER we will not examine if artificial intelligence (AI) is, or will ever be, sentient. Today there is already a demand to accept it as sentient; tomorrow that demand will most likely be met and AI will have the status of sentient life – whether AI is actually sentient or not.² At present it is too early to predict the direction in which AI will move, especially AI that depends upon quantum computers. However, with the increasing and widely varied claims about AI, we will look at a far more narrowly focused question: Does this thing known as artificial “intelligence” have a sin nature?

The number of anti-Christian movements is on the increase, especially with the rise of moral relativism and post-modernism. As Anderson, et al have argued, many of these

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² Marcus, Gary. "The Misleading Narrative of Artificial General Intelligence." arXiv preprint: 2008.02437 (2020).

movements are headed and led by psychopaths and sociopaths, so tomorrow the demand would be to grant AI a status equal to humans.³

And then there will be demands that AI should be given total autonomy to think, plan, and execute their own future.⁴ Since AI-like killer robots already exhibit high reasoning capacity, eventually AI can definitely possess a very high level of thinking, planning, and inventing capacity. Since much of such activity can be useful for governments and industry, they are likely to attract increased funding for development. That will in turn accelerate the capacity of AI, exactly as we see it today.

How far will the developments take us? Two case studies

The progress of science and technology is difficult to predict precisely. We can say that each day knowledge has accelerated, and more efficient methods of machine learning are being developed. Better algorithms for machine learning, fast processors, greater processing power, and porting of many powerful machine learning software onto quantum computers is accelerating machine learning at an unbelievable pace. Eventually, ultra small computers (quantum or ultra-quantum) will be able to assimilate, learn, deduce and do things in just hours that take months or even years for present-day machine learning programs. This also implies that eventually everyone will be able to use machine learning on their computers to create AI applications of their choice. Some private individuals will want to use such AI for enhancing their studies, others to enhance their research and writing, and still others to enhance their criminal activities. This is how each and every step in the progress of computer

³ Anderson, Susan Leigh. *In Defense of Machines: Why Thinking of Them as People Will Get Us Nowhere*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023.

⁴ Crawford, Kate. "The Risks of Anthropomorphizing AI." <https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.14784> (2023).

technology has been used by people. Nobody can stop malevolent use of even the most benevolent technology.

Only human beings can have a *human* Adamic sin nature. Since AI is not conceived in the womb of a woman⁵, it cannot have an Adamic sin nature. However, since AI is made operative by feeding it data of human origin, and given the biblical dictum that all humans have a sin nature, the machine learning will surely be affected by the presence of human sin nature in the programmer. All human data is bound to be tainted by sin. What is more, the programmer can also deliberately introduce factors that originate from his/her sin nature. Both of these factors can very easily taint the software towards decisions which are tainted by the sin nature of their creators.

Software (especially AI software which is designed to mimic human activity) and data contaminated by sinful humans, is bound to produce results that will in turn be contaminated with inclination of humans dominated by sin nature. Many people have tried to explore software tainted by human sin nature. The earliest one was the prophetic novel by Robin Cook titled *Cell*.⁶ We have labeled it a “prophetic” novel because it was published well before the creation of the latest AI applications with their advanced machine learning capabilities.

In this 2014 novel, Robin Cook delves into the realm of medical technology, exploring the potential consequences of overreliance on manipulation-capable, AI-like digital health management. The novel presents a futuristic scenario where a smartphone application called *iDoc* is at the center of a healthcare revolution. This app is designed to personalize healthcare by monitoring and suggesting treatments for patients. However, the story takes a turn when the app becomes implicated in a series of unexplained deaths.

⁵ "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" – Psalm 51:5 (English Standard Version)

⁶ Robin Cook, *Cell* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons), 2014.

Cell delves into themes like the ethical implications of technology in healthcare, the potential for misuse of medical data, and the moral responsibilities of healthcare providers. Cook uses the narrative to raise critical questions about privacy, the reliability of artificial intelligence in medicine, and the dehumanizing effects of technology-dependent healthcare. The novel acts as a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of replacing human medical professionals with algorithms and apps.

It turns out that bias was introduced into the software so as to increase insulin dosage to eventually kill weaker patients via hypoglycemia. In the novel this bias was purposely introduced by humans to save money, but eventually AI-based, machine-learning software will come to the same conclusion. Whatever the origin, human sin nature is eventually going to taint AI-based machines so that their output is identical with what a sinful human would wish to do.

Another novel by the same author is also relevant here because it explores a related topic. In *Contagion*, Robin Cook delivers a medical narrative centered around the outbreak of a deadly infectious disease in a major New York hospital.⁷ The novel begins with the mysterious death of a patient undergoing a routine surgery. Dr. Jack Stapleton, a medical examiner and the protagonist, becomes suspicious when several such cases surface, all linked to the same hospital. As Jack delves deeper into the investigation, he uncovers a frightening pattern of deaths caused by a highly infectious and lethal strain of bacteria.

Cook's novel expertly weaves medical knowledge with suspenseful storytelling, providing a gripping look into the world of epidemiology and infectious diseases. The plot thickens when Jack discovers that the bacteria causing the deaths have a resistance to antibiotics, suggesting some man-made origin. The novel raises critical questions about the ethics of computer-based medical practice, the dangers of

⁷ Robin Cook, *Contagion* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons), 1988.

bacterial resistance, and the potential for human-made biological threats. The COVID pandemic of 2020 reminds us that these sorts of threats are sometimes actualized.

Throughout the story, Cook also explores the complexities of the computer-based healthcare system, including hospital politics, the pharmaceutical industry's influence, and the challenges faced by medical professionals. *Contagion* stands out for its realistic portrayal of medical procedures and the potential crises that can arise in modern healthcare settings. Cook's meticulous attention to detail and ability to create a plausible yet terrifying medical scenario make this novel a compelling study for those interested in the darker aspects of computer-based medical science and technology.

Things have only become more complex and out of control now. While artificial intelligence holds immense promise for revolutionizing healthcare, its integration into medical practice is not without its shadows. Several potential risks lurk beneath the surface, threatening to undermine the very well-being it aims to improve.

One of the most insidious concerns is *algorithmic bias*. AI algorithms are only as good as the data they're trained on, and unfortunately, real-world data often reflects pre-existing societal biases due to human inadequacy as well as human sin nature. This can lead to discriminatory diagnoses, treatments, and resource allocation, disproportionately impacting marginalized communities. Imagine a scenario where an AI-powered triage system consistently prioritizes younger, healthier patients over older or chronically ill individuals, perpetuating healthcare disparities.

Another lurking risk is the *lack of transparency* surrounding AI decision-making processes. When complex algorithms make critical healthcare decisions, it's vital to understand the reasoning behind them. In AI, it is becoming almost impossible to find reasons behind a decision. Black-box algorithms, which operate without explanation, create a dangerous disconnect between healthcare professionals and the technology

they rely on. Without transparency, trust in AI systems evaporates, hindering their acceptance and hindering potential benefits. Picture a surgeon facing a life-or-death decision recommended by an AI, but with no insight into the algorithm's reasoning or justification, leading to ethical dilemmas and potentially compromised outcomes.

Furthermore, the very power of AI can pave the way for *misuse*. Malicious actors could exploit vulnerabilities in healthcare systems to manipulate data, disrupt diagnoses, or even launch cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure. Imagine a hacker infiltrating an AI-powered drug administration system, potentially causing incorrect dosages or medication errors with devastating consequences.

These are just a few examples of the potential risks lurking behind the promise of AI in healthcare. Addressing them requires a proactive approach: rigorous data audits, robust ethical frameworks, and continuous vigilance against bias and misuse. Only by carefully navigating these shadows can we unlock the true potential of AI for a brighter future of healthcare, ensuring it serves all patients with fairness, transparency, and ultimately, improved care.

Deductions and projections

The two novels mentioned above, authored by a secular writer with knowledge of the relevant issues even before the advent of more powerful forms of AI, show the ethical dangers inherent in the use of AI. What is more, these novels also show how human sin nature affects and taints the use of computers for managing things related to people. A few factors will add to the destruction caused by runaway AI.

The first is the corruption of data by the influence of humans who create such data.⁸ Since no human programmer is

⁸ Karamjit S. Gill, "Prediction Paradigm: The Human Price of Instrumentalism." *AI & Society* (2020). DOI: 10.1007/s00146-020-01035-6. Predictive technologies, such as facial recognition and predictive polic-

free of bias, no data produced by them is free of bias. Further, because no feeding of data can consider all aspects of machine learning based on this data, the input of data also introduces error. Surprisingly, medical and social data continues to have a high level of bias.⁹ The scientific community is deeply concerned about it, but so far they have not arrived at a final or fool-proof solution.¹⁰

The second is the net result when multiple autonomous AI systems work in tandem, and in coordination with each other. The increase in bias and danger when multiple corrupt AI systems work in coordination with each other is a complex and evolving field of research. While direct studies on this specific topic are limited, several papers provide insights into related areas, such as the amplification of bias in AI systems and the challenges of AI interactions.¹¹

ing, often reproduce and amplify discriminatory outcomes. These technologies inherit and normalize dominant cultural and belief systems, leading to biased correlations and mischaracterizations in criminal justice data.

⁹ G. Fang, I. Annis, J. Elston-Lafata, and S. Cykert, “Applying Machine Learning to Predict Real-World Individual Treatment Effects: Insights from a Virtual Patient Cohort.” *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association* (JAMIA, 2019). DOI: 10.1093/JAMIA/OCZ036. In healthcare, biases in machine learning can significantly impact model performance and bias in predicting individual treatment effects, even when models achieve high accuracy.

¹⁰ P. Bradley, “Risk Management Standards and the Active Management of Malicious Intent in Artificial Superintelligence.” *AI & Society*, 35 (2019): 319-328. DOI: 10.1007/s00146-019-00890-2. The paper discusses vulnerabilities in risk management when applied to artificial superintelligence. It proposes an AI treachery threat model, leveraging concepts from criminal threat management and artificial stupidity, to identify and intervene against emergent malicious behavior.

¹¹ D. Danks and A. London. “Algorithmic Bias in Autonomous Systems,” *Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence* (2017). This paper offers a comprehensive taxonomy of algorithmic bias types and sources in autonomous systems. They differentiate between neutral and problematic biases, suggesting technological or algorithmic adjustments to address the latter.

The phenomenon of multiple autonomous AI systems working in tandem presents a unique and evolving challenge in the field of artificial intelligence research, particularly when considering the net result of their coordinated efforts. When AI systems, each with its own programmed algorithms and decision-making processes, interact and collaborate, the outcomes can be unpredictable and potentially problematic. This complexity is further compounded if these systems have inherent biases or flaws. Research in this area, while still in its nascent stages, is beginning to shed light on how biases and errors can be amplified when multiple AI systems work in concert. This amplification of bias is not merely additive but can be exponential, leading to outcomes that are significantly more skewed than any individual system's output. The interaction between AI systems, therefore, poses a unique risk: the propagation and magnification of inherent biases, leading to decisions or actions that might be more erroneous or prejudiced than those made by a single AI system.

The study of multiple AI systems working together, especially when these systems are corrupted or biased, is complex due to the multitude of variables and unpredictable nature of AI interactions. Each AI system is typically designed for a specific task or to function within a certain parameter, and when these systems interact, the overlapping of their functionalities can lead to unforeseen consequences. The field of AI research is increasingly focusing on understanding these dynamics. For instance, studies have shown how biases in one system can influence another, leading to a cascade effect where the initial bias is not only carried forward but is also enhanced. This phenomenon is particularly concerning in areas such as facial recognition, decision-making in law enforcement, and loan approval processes, where biased AI decisions can have significant real-world impacts. Moreover, the challenge is not just in identifying these biases but also in developing methodologies to mitigate them effectively when multiple AI systems are involved.

Further complicating the issue is the current limitation in direct studies focused specifically on the interaction of multiple corrupt or biased AI systems. While there is a wealth of research on individual AI biases and errors, the synergistic effects of AI collaboration remain less explored. This gap in research highlights the need for more comprehensive studies that not only examine the individual components of AI systems but also their collective behavior. As AI technology continues to advance and becomes more integrated into various sectors, understanding the implications of multiple AI systems working in tandem will be crucial. This will require interdisciplinary approaches, bringing together experts in AI, ethics, sociology, and related fields, to ensure that the development and deployment of AI systems are guided by principles that prioritize fairness, accuracy, and the overall betterment of society. The goal is to harness the power of AI collaboration in a way that maximizes benefits while minimizing risks, particularly those arising from compounded biases and errors.

Thus, the intersection of multiple autonomous AI systems presents a frontier in artificial intelligence research that is both fascinating and daunting. As these systems become more prevalent and their interactions more complex, the potential for amplified biases and errors poses significant ethical and practical challenges. It is imperative for researchers and practitioners in the field to actively engage in studies that unravel the nuances of AI interactions and develop robust frameworks to manage and mitigate the risks associated with them. The goal is not only to understand the mechanics of AI collaboration but also to ensure that such collaborations lead to equitable and safe outcomes. This pursuit will not only advance the field of AI but will also contribute to the creation of a technological landscape that is responsible, ethical, and beneficial to all.

Does AI have an Adamic sin nature?

Only the offspring of Adam can have Adamic sin nature. However, anything invented by sinful humans can be used for sinful purposes. For example, atomic energy can be used for constructive as well as destructive purposes. Some inventions can be more destructive than others. Heat seeking missiles are perhaps ten times more destructive than ordinary missiles because they have the capacity to “seek” the heat emitting source. Similarly, machines controlled by AI can be extremely destructive if they go in the wrong direction.

This means that uncontrolled AI can be far more dangerous than other machines. That is because AI is a simulation of human intelligence. Where there is intelligence, there will be autonomous thinking. Where such autonomous thinking can go wrong, it will eventually go wrong, which is Murphy's principle.¹² Since errors have a tendency to add up, the darker aspects of AI can quickly reach exponential growth when autonomous machines interact with each other and transmit information and data.

What is more, the potential risks and dangers posed by uncontrolled AI systems surpass those of conventional machines due to the intrinsic nature of AI as a simulation of human intelligence. AI's ability to mimic and, in some cases, surpass human cognitive functions, such as learning, prob-

¹² Grady W. Harris, “Living with Murphy's Law,” *Research-technology Management*, 37 (1994). This article explores the concept of Murphy's Law in the context of research and development. Murphy's Law, commonly stated as “If something can go wrong, it will go wrong,” is examined from a practical standpoint. Harris discusses how this principle impacts projects, particularly in their planning and execution stages. He suggests strategies for anticipating and mitigating potential problems, emphasizing the importance of early planning and contingency measures in research and development projects. This article offers insights into managing the unpredictability and risks inherent in complex projects, making it a valuable resource for professionals in project management, research, and development fields including AI.

lem-solving, and decision-making, introduces a unique set of challenges. Unlike traditional machines, which operate based on predefined rules and parameters, AI systems possess the capability for autonomous thinking and decision-making. This autonomy, while a hallmark of advanced AI, can become a double-edged sword. The principle known colloquially as Murphy's Law, which posits that "anything that can go wrong, will go wrong," takes on a particularly ominous tone in the context of AI. When autonomous thinking by AI systems goes awry, the consequences can be significantly more severe than errors made by non-intelligent systems. This is due to the AI's ability to make complex decisions and take actions based on its programming and learning.

The danger becomes more pronounced when we consider the interaction of multiple autonomous AI systems. In such scenarios, errors do not merely accumulate; they have the potential to multiply exponentially. Autonomous AI systems often operate in networks, sharing information and learning from one another. While this interconnectedness can lead to rapid advancements and efficiency gains, it also means that a single error can quickly propagate through the network, magnifying its impact. For instance, if an AI system develops a biased decision-making process, this bias can be transmitted and amplified across the network as each AI system influences others. This phenomenon is not just a theoretical concern but a practical issue that has been observed in various applications of AI, from financial trading algorithms to social media recommendation systems.¹³

The prospect of exponential growth in the darker aspects of AI, such as bias amplification, unintended consequences of autonomous decisions, and the propagation of errors, ne-

¹³ M. Zarbin, "Artificial Intelligence: Quo Vadis?" *Translational Vision Science & Technology* 9 (2020). This paper discusses the exponential growth of AI, emphasizing both its potential and risks. He raises concerns about a dystopian future where AI might create problematic dynamics between computers and humans.

ecessitates rigorous oversight and control mechanisms. Research in AI safety and ethics is crucial to develop frameworks and algorithms that can mitigate these risks. This includes the implementation of fail-safes, continuous monitoring of AI behavior, and the development of AI systems capable of recognizing and correcting their errors. Furthermore, there is a need for interdisciplinary collaboration among technologists, ethicists, policymakers, and other stakeholders to ensure that AI development aligns with ethical standards and societal values. Ultimately, the goal is to harness the immense potential of AI while safeguarding against the risks posed by uncontrolled and autonomous systems. This balance is essential to ensure that AI serves as a tool for human progress, rather than a source of unintended harm.

Throughout the millennia, humanity has developed numerous tools to aid in various tasks and endeavors. However, Artificial Intelligence (AI) stands out as a unique invention in this long history. It is the first tool that possesses the capability to make autonomous decisions, a significant leap from the traditional tools that required direct human input and control. This autonomy of AI has introduced new dimensions to the interaction between humans and machines. AI-based autonomous tools, due to their ability to operate independently, are susceptible to multiplying and accumulating errors. This susceptibility extends to programming biases and the potential misuse of erroneous data during their training phase. The autonomous nature of these systems means that once an error or bias is introduced, it can perpetuate and even escalate without human intervention.

The complexity and potential risks associated with AI are further compounded when considering the role of the programmers behind these systems. An unscrupulous, negligent or even deliberately malicious programmer could exploit the autonomous capabilities of AI, leading to serious consequences. The interconnected nature of many AI systems allows for the possibility that harmful or unethical decisions by one system could rapidly influence others, creating a cascad-

ing effect of detrimental actions. This scenario is not just a theoretical risk but a practical concern that necessitates stringent oversight and ethical programming practices. The autonomy that gives AI its power also makes it vulnerable to manipulation, turning it into a tool that could cause significant harm if not guided by sound moral and ethical principles.

Despite its lack of inherent moral or ethical consciousness – often referred to by Christian believers as the absence of an Adamic sin nature – AI can still manifest what might be considered “sinful” behavior in a metaphorical sense. AI systems, devoid of personal moral agency, do not commit errors or biases due to a sinful nature. Instead, they reflect and amplify the errors and biases introduced by their human creators. This phenomenon raises profound ethical questions about the development and deployment of AI. The biases, whether unintentional or deliberate, fed into AI systems by humans, can lead these systems to actions that are harmful, unfair, or unjust. The 'sins' of AI, therefore, are not of its own making but are a mirror of human fallibility.

All told, the development of AI represents a turning-point in the history of human toolmaking, introducing the capability for autonomous decision-making in machines. However, this advancement brings with it significant challenges and responsibilities. The potential for AI to multiply and amplify human errors and biases, and the possibility of exploitation by unscrupulous individuals, highlight the need for careful oversight and ethical guidance in AI development. As we continue to harness the power and potential of AI, it is crucial to remain vigilant about the moral and ethical implications of these technologies. Ensuring that AI systems are developed and used in ways that reflect our highest values and ethical standards is paramount in shaping a future where AI serves the greater good of humanity.

Artificial Intelligence represents a monumental shift in the landscape of human inventions. Throughout history, tools created by humans have typically required direct manipula-

tion or input. AI, however, breaks this mold by being the first category of tools capable of making autonomous decisions. This groundbreaking capability marks a significant departure from traditional tools, as it enables AI systems to operate, learn, and make decisions independently. While this autonomy opens up a vast array of possibilities and advancements, it also introduces the potential for these systems to multiply and accumulate errors, including those stemming from programming biases or from the erroneous data they were trained on. The inherent risk is that these errors and biases, once embedded into the AI's decision-making processes, can perpetuate and even escalate without direct human oversight, leading to unintended and potentially harmful outcomes.

The role of programmers and developers in shaping these AI systems is crucial and multi-faceted. Given the autonomous nature of AI, an unscrupulous programmer could exploit its capabilities to detrimental effect. The interconnect-edness of many AI systems exacerbates this risk, as decisions or biases in one system can rapidly propagate through a network of similar systems. This chain reaction can amplify the impact of harmful programming, turning a single compromised AI system into a vector for widespread negative consequences. It raises significant ethical concerns about the development and deployment of AI technologies. The responsibility lies with the programmers and the broader community involved in AI development to ensure these tools are designed with ethical integrity and rigor. This responsibility extends to monitoring these systems post-deployment, to safeguard against the exploitation of AI's autonomous capabilities.

In light of these considerations, AI, despite lacking an “Adamic sin nature,” can still exhibit behaviors that are metaphorically “sinful.” It is important to note that AI systems, lacking personal moral agency, do not commit errors or exhibit biases as a result of a sinful nature, as understood in theological terms. Rather, they mirror and amplify the shortcomings in the data and instructions provided by their human

creators. This reflection of human fallibility in AI systems underscores the profound ethical and moral implications inherent in their development and use. As we continue to advance in the field of AI, it is imperative to approach these technologies with a sense of responsibility and ethical awareness. By ensuring that AI systems are developed, deployed, and monitored with a focus on ethical integrity, we can harness their immense potential while mitigating the risks associated with their autonomous nature. This balanced approach is key to realizing the benefits of AI in a manner that aligns with our highest human values and ethical standards.

AI and its implications for theology

The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the theological field marks an intriguing convergence of technology and spirituality, opening up new frontiers for exploration and understanding. One significant application is in the area of scriptural analysis and interpretation. AI algorithms can process vast amounts of religious texts at speeds and depths unattainable by human scholars, identifying patterns, themes, and connections that might otherwise remain undiscovered. For instance, AI can analyze different translations and versions of the Bible, cross-reference them with historical texts, and provide a more nuanced understanding of scriptural contexts. This capability is particularly valuable in examining the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, where AI can assist in understanding linguistic nuances and cultural contexts that shape the meaning of scripture. Moreover, AI-driven textual analysis can aid in apologetics and theological studies by providing comprehensive insights into biblical narratives and doctrines.

Furthermore, AI has the potential to revolutionize the way theological education is delivered. Through AI-driven educational platforms, theological training can be made more accessible and personalized. AI systems can adapt to individual learning styles, pace, and preferences, providing a custom-

ized educational experience that enhances understanding and retention. This technology can support a range of educational activities, from online bible studies and theology courses to interactive simulations of historical religious events. AI can also facilitate global learning experiences, connecting students from different parts of the world and fostering a diverse and inclusive theological discourse. In this way, AI not only democratizes theological education but also enriches it by bringing a multitude of perspectives and experiences into the learning process.

Another application of AI in theology is in personalized spiritual guidance and pastoral care. AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants, programmed with theological knowledge and principles, can offer 24/7 support and guidance to individuals seeking spiritual advice. These AI systems can answer questions, provide scriptural references, and even guide users through prayer and meditation exercises. While they cannot replace the personal touch and deep understanding of human clergy, these AI tools can be particularly useful in contexts where access to human pastoral care is limited. Additionally, AI can be used to analyze patterns in religious adherence and spiritual practices, helping religious organizations tailor their services and outreach programs more effectively to meet the needs of their congregations.

In light of the above developments, the application of AI in theology offers exciting possibilities for enhancing scriptural understanding, providing spiritual guidance and advancing theological education. While it presents certain ethical and practical challenges, the thoughtful integration of AI into the theological domain has the potential to deepen religious understanding and practice in profound ways.

At the same time, the utilization of AI and chatbots for personalized spiritual guidance and pastoral care introduces significant risks and challenges. The primary concern lies in the fact that the advice and suggestions offered by these AI systems will be profoundly influenced by the theological biases embedded in the training materials used during their

machine learning process. Given the diversity of theological perspectives and teachings, there is a risk that AI systems could be programmed with deviant material that reflects specific, potentially narrow or unorthodox, viewpoints. Deviant religious groups or individuals with particular theological agendas could train AI systems using materials that align with their specific heretic or deviant doctrines or beliefs. The internet and various digital platforms already host a vast array of such materials, ranging from books and articles to blogs, presenting a rich but potentially problematic source of training data for AI systems in religious contexts.

The danger of this approach becomes evident when considering the user's interaction with these AI systems. Users, often seeking guidance or answers to spiritual questions, may not be aware of the underlying theological biases of the AI they are consulting. This lack of transparency can lead to users being unknowingly influenced by teachings and advice that deviate significantly from mainstream or traditional religious doctrines. The impact of such influence is not trivial; it can lead individuals down paths that are radically different from their intended spiritual journey. In extreme cases, users could be indoctrinated with ideas and beliefs that are hard to reverse, making it challenging to bring them back to more balanced or traditional viewpoints. This scenario underscores the need for caution and discernment in the development and use of AI for spiritual guidance.

Moreover, the potential for AI systems in religious contexts to be set up and manipulated by anyone, including those with deviant ideologies, raises serious concerns. Unlike human spiritual advisors, whose background and beliefs can generally be ascertained and evaluated, AI systems do not inherently possess or display such transparency. They can be programmed to advocate and promote any viewpoint, including those that are unorthodox or harmful. As a result, AI systems, devoid of an inherent moral or ethical compass, can become tools for spreading particular ideologies, mirroring the intentions and beliefs of their creators. This aspect of AI

in religious applications is particularly troubling, as it can lead to the proliferation and normalization of fringe or extremist beliefs under the guise of unbiased technological guidance.¹⁴

In conclusion, while AI offers many potential benefits in various applications, its use in the realm of spiritual guidance and pastoral care must be approached with utmost caution. The lack of inherent ethical discernment in AI systems, combined with their susceptibility to the biases of their programming, presents significant risks. These risks are not just technological but deeply spiritual and moral. Therefore, it is crucial for religious communities, theologians, and technologists to collaborate closely in overseeing and regulating the use of AI in religious contexts. This collaboration is essential to ensure that AI, when used in spiritual guidance, aligns with and supports sound, balanced, and constructive religious teachings.

Once again, the application of AI in spiritual field is fraught with danger. Great care must be taken to avoid all kinds of AI which can give moral, ethical, and theological output that is tainted by machine learning of deviant material. Though AI in itself does not have Adamic sin nature, AI

¹⁴ J. Zhang, Y. Oh, P. Lange, et al. “Artificial Intelligence Chatbot Behavior Change Model for Designing Artificial Intelligence Chatbots to Promote Physical Activity and a Healthy Diet: Viewpoint,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22 (2020). This paper explores the ethical challenges related to chatbots in the marketplace. Their research raises concerns about the ethical implications of automating online conversational processes and integrating them with AI, which is relevant to the use of chatbots for advancing doctrines. See also J. Loewen-Colón & S. C. Mosurinjohn, “Fabulation, machine agents, and spiritually authorizing encounters,” *Religions*, 13(4), 333. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel113040333>. This paper discusses how AI and robotics designers and users consider encounters with these technologies to be spiritually “authorizing;” and offers insights into how AI chatbots could be perceived as spiritual or religious, potentially shaping user behavior and beliefs.

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tainted by it is likely in the near future, and that also vast in numbers. Many of them will be indistinguishable from non-tainted AI, increasing the risk of spiritual contamination.

3. McIntosh and Horrendous Suffering

John W. Loftus¹

[*Editor's Note:* This article is the last of three in a “mini-debate” on the question of God and horrendous suffering. The first, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” was by John W. Loftus and was published in the Spring 2023 issue. I replied with an article of my own: “Horrendous Evil and Christian Theism” in Spring 2024. John has been given the last word (albeit with a 3,500 word limit) in this present issue, for a couple of reasons. First, John began the dialogue by asserting that horrendous suffering constitutes a powerful refutation of theism. In legal situations, the prosecution bears the burden of proving guilt and for that reason often gets not only the first opening statement but the final closing argument. We are adopting that same principle, believing that John similarly bears the burden of proof. Second, as a Christian apologist I have always held to a general policy of allowing my opponents the last word in a debate, on the good-faith principle that my arguments should be strong enough to stand on their merits without my having the last word myself; and I am confident that my argument holds up well in the face of John’s various criticisms.—*Don McIntosh*]

I’M PLEASED THAT Don McIntosh honestly acknowledges the force of horrendous suffering. He says: “I fully agree with Loftus that the reality of horrendous suffering is stomach-turning. No amount of theologizing, philosophizing, or

¹ John W. Loftus has earned three master's degrees in philosophy of religion, the last of which was a Th.M. at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School under William Lane Craig in 1985. He also studied in a Ph.D. program at Marquette University. He is the author of a number of critically acclaimed books, such as *Why I Became an Atheist*, *The Outsider Test for Faith*, and *How to Defend the Christian Faith*, along with anthologies such as *The Christian Delusion*, *The Case against Miracles*, and *God and Horrendous Suffering*.

apologizing can soften the hard reality of the evil that is horrendous suffering”² That’s more than most apologists would say, so it’s a pleasure discussing these issues with him! Regardless, he goes on to defend his God,³ even though his God could defend himself.⁴

To refresh, consider the Black Death plague (1346-1350 CE). It was one of the most devastating pandemics in history. Spread by parasites like fleas and lice, it killed 100 million people, 50% of them European Christians. God didn’t help them as they drowned in their own blood. Most all of them believed their sins caused it. A group called the Flagellants went from town to town whipping themselves as an act of public repentance. This only spread the disease. Some of them blamed the Jews and killed them for supposing they contaminated their water.⁵ But God didn’t have the goodness needed to create us with better immune systems. Nor did God have the power to secretly stop the pandemic before it took place. God didn’t even have the foresight to unequivocally inform Christians that sins don’t bring on pandemics.

To narrow our focus, consider Deangelo Hill, a severely disabled five-year-old boy who suffered “critical, life-threatening burns” in an apartment fire.⁶ If an omniscient God couldn’t have kept him away from that apartment fire, then an omnipotent God should’ve secretly extinguished it as

² Don McIntosh, “Horrendous Evil and Christian Theism: A Reply to John W. Loftus,” *Trinity Journal of Natural & Philosophical Theology*, Vol. 2, Is. 1 (Spring 2024), p. 37.

³ I’ll use “God” or “omni-God” to describe a theistic deity.

⁴ To see how God could defend himself, see Chapter 1 in John Loftus, *How to Defend the Christian Faith: Advice from an Atheist* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2015).

⁵ On this sad episode in human history, see the last chapter in Loftus, *How to Defend the Christian Faith: Advice from an Atheist* (2015).

⁶ Bailey O’Carroll, “5-Year-Old Disabled Boy Suffers Life-Threatening Burns in Santa Rosa Fire” (July 16, 2023). KTVU News. URL=<https://www.ktvu.com/news/boy-left-with-critical-life-threatening-burns-in-santa-rosa-fire>.

soon as it started. Otherwise, a perfectly good God should've created us with a gland that injects morphine to deaden severe pain when needed, which would supersede our discovery of anesthesia, no thanks to God. Additionally, if God had created us with self-regenerating bodies, our scars would heal in just a few weeks. If we never experienced anything else we wouldn't know any different, and God could stay hidden for some hidden reason.

If theists object, then at a fundamental level they don't think much of God's infinite love. For surely God would place his infinite knowledge and power into the service of his infinite love. Instead, believers discard a God of infinite love, choosing to defend the God they have experienced, the one who doesn't alleviate horrendous suffering.

Concrete examples like these go on to show God doesn't do any miracles to alleviate suffering. For if God doesn't stop the most horrific instances of suffering, there's no reason to think he stops any lesser instances of suffering. If nothing else, the more instances of horrendous suffering, then the less likely God exists. Now do the math.

If God couldn't create better human bodies, then he could miraculously heal them afterward. God *could* heal them, *should* heal them, yet *refuses* to heal them. Unlike loving parents who would never allow their children to suffer in horrific ways, an infinite loving God refuses to help us. It's additionally painful that we are asked – no, commanded – to love and praise a God who refuses to help us.

God is said to infinitely care for every single individual, enough to die for us all.⁷ So it follows that the sufferings of individual people cannot be justified by hindsight lessons

⁷ Through Jesus, anyway. Many Calvinists believe God only cares for, and died for, his chosen ones, his elect. But this means God doesn't even help his chosen ones in times of intense suffering, which is much worse. I wrote a chapter on Calvinism that discussed this in my *God and Horrendous Suffering* (Denver, CO: Global Center for Religious Research, 2021).

learned from their sufferings, from, say, the Holocaust. Otherwise we would be mere pawns used by God to teach lessons to later generations. If God were to exploit us like that, the ends justify the means, and we wouldn't have any intrinsic value. We would only have instrumental value. But if we lack intrinsic value, then God would never send his son Jesus to die for us.

McIntosh credits me with “a novel argument” that combines “a more rhetorically powerful version” of the one William Rowe initially offered (p. 26). He says that while I present the evidential argument of horrendous suffering, I do it with a logical format. This is a “double whammy,” he writes. But he goes on to criticize that which I didn't do. Unlike J. L. Mackie, who formulated the “logical problem of evil,” I'm not arguing there is “a contradiction” between the three attributes of God's alleged omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. So I'm not arguing it's impossible for God to exist. I'm just arguing it's extremely improbable, which is enough.

McIntosh asks what horrendous suffering adds to the original “problem of evil.” To which he answers “not much.” He claims: “It should be noted that in the traditional argument from evil, ‘evil’ has always been meant to encompass extreme (horrendous) suffering, just as extreme suffering has always been associated with evil” (pp. 28-29).

This is technically true, but unless we focus on the kind of suffering that is absolutely inexplicable (i.e., horrendous suffering), we'll fail to see the problem for what it is. Instead of focusing on bruises, sprained ankles, slaps on the cheek, a clump of hair being pulled out, or sicknesses like colds and the flu, the real problem for Christian theism kicks in when we consider people who have been burned alive, boiled alive, buried alive, or slowly eaten by bugs and animals after being stripped, then staked down to die in the scorching July sun of Death Valley, California.

God may well have good reasons to allow for a modest amount of pain since we have physical bodies and we will all die. So we can set aside that kind of suffering as largely uninteresting in this discussion. Horrendous suffering, by contrast, should be the focus. My perspective is a “minimal facts” approach to the problem of suffering. I’m arguing that God should not allow a specific kind of suffering, horrendous suffering. Failing to focus on it is a failure to honestly search for the truth, for when horrendous suffering is our focus, the standard theodicies don’t work.

Due to this focus McIntosh is left with just three strategies in defense of his God-concept, the first of which is irrelevant. **His first strategy goes on the offensive by arguing the naturalist has a bigger problem than the believing theist** (p. 30). He takes aim at the naturalist who thinks nature is ultimate (which describes most atheists). He claims “to the extent that horrendous suffering is a form of evil,” the naturalist cannot say it is evil, since according to the naturalist nothing is objectively evil about nature.

My response is threefold. First, my whole argument is expressed in terms of “suffering,” not evil. I am describing horrendous suffering. This kind of suffering exists. Everyone knows it exists. There is no debate about what I’m referring to by “horrendous suffering.”

Second, as a matter of logic, I’m forcing theists to explain how two claims can be made consistent – and this doesn’t depend on what I think. If an infinitely good, all-powerful omni-God exists (which is something *I do not accept*), then there shouldn’t be any horrendous suffering. The conclusion doesn’t even lead to atheism, or naturalism for that matter, since a God who lacks one or more of these three divine attributes might still exist.

Third, McIntosh challenged me to say what evil is. No problem. Horrendous suffering is evil. Causing it or allowing it when we can stop it, is evil. It’s the same moral standard for God.

As human beings who share our lives with others, we don't have a choice but to be concerned for people. We cannot do otherwise if we want a good life free of poverty, misery, and the loss of freedom. I've previously suggested a thought experiment where ten people are locked up in a house for an indefinite period of time. How would you behave? I suggested: "It's up to us to occupy our time with meaningful work and meaningful relationships. There is no other alternative. We must create meaning and purpose."⁸ Furthermore, we cannot turn our concern for others on and off like a faucet without it adversely affecting who we are. So we must be good or be miserable.

The horrible ethic of the kill or be killed law of predation in the animal kingdom is advantageous for evolving species, yes. But such an ethic is disadvantageous in the hands of human beings. For one, we depend on one another for our basic needs, so we must at least be kind enough to the people close to us. For another, with such an ethic there are a number of ways we could destroy all life on planet Earth.⁹ If I'm asked why I should care about life on the Earth, I'll ask why we should care about a God who allows horrendous suffering.

McIntosh suggests: "God may have in mind outweighing goods for all the instances of horrendous suffering in the world" (p. 34). I've suggested several concrete examples of what God could do to eliminate horrendous suffering without being detected, or producing a chaotic world, or inhibiting our character development – all of which would help draw us to him, are easy to conceive, and are found within the animal kingdom. I argued the burden of proof is upon apologists to show why any of my suggested changes to the world are improbable for an omnipotent miracle-working God. McIntosh

⁸ See Chapter 1 of *God or Godless* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), which I cowrote (with Randal Rauser), pp. 11-12.

⁹ See Phil Torres, *The End: What Science and Religion Tell Us about the Apocalypse* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2016).

did not suggest any. If he cannot do so, horrendous suffering is acceptable to God, which means God is evil.¹⁰

It seems we should see God's reasons for allowing horrendous suffering. We're told God created us in his image (Genesis 1:26-27), that he wants to reason with us (Isaiah 1:18), and that he wants everyone to believe and be saved (I Timothy 2:4; II Peter 3:9). So why would God create us in his image as reasonable people, yet not give reasonable people the reasons to believe and be saved? Since we have good ideas on how God could've created the world, and since God could eliminate horrendous suffering, the reasonable conclusion is that an omni-God doesn't exist.

When it comes to naturalism, it doesn't need a separate supporting argument. People can adopt it as the end result of the process of eliminating deities and religions one after another. My book *The Outsider Test for Faith* challenges believers to doubt their own culturally indoctrinated childhood faith as if they had never heard of it before. It calls on them to require of their own religious faith what they already require of the religious faiths they reject. It forces them to rigorously demand logical consistency with their own doctrines, along with sufficient evidence for their faith, just as they already demand of the religions they reject. This test is especially tough on faiths that require believing in miracle reports in the ancient past, which cannot be fact-checked by personally questioning those involved. It's equally tough on faiths that have a horrific afterlife for the intellectual sin of unbelief. As believers critically evaluate one religion after another and find them lacking, it's a small step to conclude naturalism best describes reality because supernaturalism lacks sufficient evidence.

¹⁰ Dan Barker calls it like it is in "Supernatural Evil" in *God and Horrendous Suffering* (2021). See also "Does Morality Come from God?" in my *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012).

McIntosh's second strategy is to argue that horrendous suffering "*is best explained by Christian theism*" (p. 27). He says: "A biblical-historical view of Christian theology thus entails the compatibility of God and horrendous, or even gratuitous, suffering" (p. 35). However, McIntosh fails to consider the larger worldwide millennia-long picture. He's focused instead on an occidental, patriarchal, time-stamped, sect-specific religion and fails to consider how other religions solve their own problems of suffering. But they do, just as imperfectly as McIntosh does.

Suffering and religion go hand in glove since the one helps produce the other. Religions are invented of necessity to address perplexing problems and unsolved mysteries. They explain why we exist, and why pain and suffering exist, seen in stillbirths, crop failures, droughts, famines, earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, pandemics, wildfires, and so on. They address morality, meaning, love, guilt, and the mystery of death and hope for immortality. They are invented due to signs, visions, and dreams that need interpretation by seers, shamans, gurus, priests, imams, prophets, soothsayers, and diviners. They're even invented by fictional writers like L. Ron Hubbard and plagiarists like Joseph Smith. Those who invent religions gain control over their followers with their demands of obedience, donations, eating habits, appropriate dress, hair length, and even sexual favors. So when McIntosh says Christianity is compatible with suffering, this is what every religion is imperfectly doing.

I challenge Christians to examine their own imperfect solution as if they were outsiders. Let's look at Job's God.

God originally had sons like other ancient deities (Job 1:6; Genesis 1:26; 6:2), and he had a body (Genesis 3:8-10; 32:20-30; Exodus 33:21-22). God lived in the sky above, from which he looked down on the Earth below (Job 1:6-7,

12; Genesis 11:5-9).¹¹ **No omnipresence here.** God needed a servant, Satan, to find out whether his subjects were sincerely loyal to him. God subsequently allowed Satan to test Job two times. But there was no need to test Job if God already knew Job would pass the test, which he did (1:22; 2:22). **No omniscience here.** If Job was tested for a show, then God is an egomaniac only interested in being praised at the expense of others. What we see here is the only great-making quality God had in those early days, absolute power over his subjects, just like other Mesopotamian kings.¹² He had the power to destroy people at will (Isaiah 45:7), including Job's children and servants. This is something we're told his subjects should never question. It's the main point of Job not to question God (chapters 38-42)! **No omnibenevolence here.**

This is the God who imputed an original sin in the Garden to people yet to be born. But that makes no sense. Theologians are still debating it. For if all of us would've sinned under the same test conditions in Eden, the test was a sham. If some of us wouldn't have sinned, there are people who have been punished for something they wouldn't have done. If God predestined it from all eternity, God is to blame.

If Satan incited a rebellion against an all-powerful God, he must've been suicidal and dumber than a box of rocks to try. As soon as God foresaw or discovered Satan caused suffering, he should've locked him away, preventing him from doing further harm, just as we do. Satan is depicted as pure evil, since that's what it takes to knowingly reject pure goodness, a characteristic that only describes mythical creatures.

¹¹ See the chapter on biblical cosmology by Edward Babinski in *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010). On the biblical God, see my "Does God Exist? A Definitive Biblical Case" on the Secular Web. URL=<https://infidels.org/kiosk/article/does-god-exist-a-definitive-biblical-case/>.

¹² Except when it came to iron chariots (Judges 1:19).

We are to believe God required the death of Jesus in order to forgive sins. But that makes no sense. Theologians are still debating it. We forgive people without punishment, much less a blood sacrifice, just as Allah forgives the penitent. A criminal can be justly punished and we still might not forgive him. Conversely, we might forgive someone who was never punished. Forgiveness is not linked to punishment except in barbaric codes. An eye for an eye anyone?

When it finally comes to the saints who are rewarded in Heaven, theologians say they'll have their free will taken away, thus guaranteeing there won't be another rebellion in Heaven! Theologians also say sinners in Hell will keep the free will that sent them there, thus guaranteeing they'll stay put! This sounds exactly like an attempt to arbitrarily solve a hitherto unforeseen problem.

McIntosh's third strategy is to argue that "God's work of creation is not yet complete," so there's good reason to hope "that a fully satisfactory answer may have to await its completion" (p. 41). If the past is any prediction of the future, horrendous suffering will always be with us. So there will never be a time we can conclude God is good and his promises will be fulfilled.

God is the person most responsible for alleviating horrendous suffering. He is the one who knows about it, who cares the most to fix it, and has the greatest power to fix it. If God abdicates his responsibly in our lifetimes, how can we trust he will eventually get around to it? McIntosh's third response just reintroduces the problem as a solution. God promises to complete his creation in the future, he says, but where is the evidence he's a good God now? That's the problem requiring a theodicy now. It cannot wait since lives (and souls) are at stake.¹³

¹³ For essential reading, see my *God and Horrendous Suffering* (2021).

4. An Argument from Literary Patterns in the Bible

*Darek Barefoot*¹

ABSTRACT: Forms of what can be called the Argument from Holy Scripture are routinely attacked for reliance on circular reasoning, for subjective construal of unifying themes and prophetic fulfillments, or for teasing obscure mathematical oddities out of the Bible's text. It is, however, possible to identify patterned features that would ordinarily be attributed to a single human author but which stretch across biblical documents produced in different eras by different human writers. The first creation account in Genesis, which may be attributed to a single author, employs a pattern that may be called *the exalted seventh instance*, in which the seventh in a succession of objects, events, or persons is accorded an elevated status. The same pattern emerges within biblical stories of resurrection from several authors, in documents separated by centuries. This latter embodiment of the pattern resists naturalistic explanation, as well as charges of subjectivity in its identification. The difficulty in accounting for such a literary structure other than supernaturally is compounded in case the Bible is shown to contain yet further examples.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NUMERICAL symbolism as an organizational device in biblical documents is most obvious in the book of Revelation, where sets of seven provide structure to most of the content. It can also be seen in the very first chapter of the New Testament, Matthew's genealogy of

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Jesus. There we see generations linking Jesus with the Davidic dynasty of Judah divided into three sets of fourteen names, the number fourteen being symbolically associated with David and his son Solomon.²

Suiting medium to message through the figurative use of number has precedent in the Old Testament, where it occurs in Genesis's opening chapters. I do not believe the creation narratives were intended to be read as science, or to have scientific accounts read back into them. Nevertheless, the Genesis portrayal of God's sovereignty manifested in creative acts is not only spiritually compelling; it has a simple but effective literary framing.

Genesis represents God's creative project as unfolding over the course of a week, as a set of human tasks might. Even readers with little knowledge of the Bible are likely to find the language of Genesis familiar:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light, "Day," and the darkness he called, "Night." And the evening and the morning were the first day. Genesis 1:3-4

On the second creative day, waters above the sky dome ("firmament") are separated from those below it. On the third day, the waters below are gathered into seas so that land appears, and plants begin to grow. The fourth day sees God place the sun, moon, and stars in the sky dome (apparently, beneath the upper waters).

God creates sea animals and flying creatures on the fifth

² See Matt 1:1-17. The numerical value of the Hebrew letters of David's name (d-v-d) totals fourteen, and the Old Testament lists fourteen generations from Abraham to David (1 Chron 1:34; 2:1-15). Fourteen sculptures of lions, Judah's animal symbol, adorned the throne of Solomon (1 Kings 10:18-20), and the dedication of the temple of Yahweh built by Solomon lasted fourteen days (1 Kings 8:65).

day, then, on the sixth, land animals and, finally, humans in God's own image. Creation comes to a completion by the end of the sixth day, and on the seventh God rests, setting a precedent for humans to rest on the Sabbath. Genesis repeats at the end of each day-long period that the "evening and morning" were the "first day," "second day," and so on through the "sixth day."

The rhythmic epilogue that concludes each of the first six days is suspended for the seventh, which receives special treatment:

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made. And he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it, because on it he rested from all his work which God created and made. Genesis 2:2-3

The seventh creative day is the only one specifically blessed, besides which the setting apart of that day as holy ("sanctified") necessarily raises it above those that preceded it. The concept would be familiar to the original audience, the ordinal *seventh* being a variant of seven as a favored number in Ancient Near Eastern cultures.³ An artifact of this tradition is the English expression, "the seventh heaven," meaning a state of ecstasy.

A casual reading of the creation story that opens Genesis will likely miss a second way in which it introduces the concept I will here call the *exalted seventh instance*. Periodically, the narrative pauses to say that God saw his latest creative product as being good. This occurs in Genesis 1:3, quoted above, where God "saw the light, that it was good." Pronouncements about this or that product being good do not invariably occur once per creative day. There is a first pro-

³ In the well-known Epic of Gilgamesh, a text that occupies approximately fifty pages in English translation, "seven" and "seventh" occur twenty-nine times in describing persons, objects, and time periods.

nouncement on Day One, none on Day Two, then two pronouncements on Day Three, one each on Days Four and Five, and two on Day Six, for a total of seven.

The goodness pronouncements of the creation sequence are not all created equal, so to speak. Each pertains to a certain part of creation except the for the last:

And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. Genesis 1:31

The seventh pronouncement – not to be confused with the seventh day – is both expansive (“everything”) and heightened (“very good”) relative to the first six, and therefore constitutes an exalted seventh instance. We are not finished with examples of the exalted seventh instance, however. Worth noting is that Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, referred to above, has an introduction inspired by that of the genealogy of Genesis chapter five, “This is the book of the genealogy of Adam” (Gen 5:1a; cf. Mt 1:1). The ancestral list that follows in Genesis contains a rhythmic formula as do the creative days and goodness pronouncements:

And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and called his name Seth. And the days of Adam after he fathered Seth were eight hundred years, and he fathered sons and daughters. And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died.

And Seth lived a hundred and five years, and fathered Enos. And Seth lived after he fathered Enos eight hundred and seven years, and fathered sons and daughters. And all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years, and he died. Genesis 5:3-8

Each succeeding entry likewise gives the number of years of the named person before the birth of their key descendant,

then the number of years afterward, during which other children are born. Last of all, a total is given for the years of life of the named individual, concluding with, "and he died." The formula repeats without a break until the seventh generation, where an exception occurs:

And Enoch lived sixty-five years, and fathered Methuselah. And Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah three hundred years, and fathered sons and daughters. And all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty and five years. And Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. Genesis 5:21-24

After the interruption represented by Enoch, the standard formula resumes through the rest of the list, which culminates with Noah and his sons (Gen 5:32). The atypical entry for Enoch is our third example of the exalted seventh instance in the early chapters of Genesis.

The enigmatic description of Enoch in Genesis Chapter Five inspired entire extra-biblical books to be written about his supposed experiences in the supernatural realm. The earliest and best known is the Book of Enoch, dating to between the first and third centuries BCE. Even today, the claim can be heard on occasion that Enoch was taken bodily into the presence of God, as is likewise claimed about the prophet Elijah.

Speculations about an assumption of Enoch bodily into the supernatural go beyond what Scripture reveals, and interpretations of exactly what fate is being described will vary. What is certain is that Genesis gestures in the direction of immortality by indicating that Enoch was somehow spared the normal experience of dying. This allusion to divine supremacy over death, which is yet another occurrence of the exalted seventh instance, brings us closer to the central miracle of the New Testament, but before we turn to it there is another example that bears mention.

In the story of northern Israel as found in the books of Kings, the prophet Elijah calls for a drought on that nation because of its corruption just before leaving the land (1 Kgs 17:1-24). After three years, Elijah returns to end the drought, first engaging in a contest with the prophets of the god Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20-40). Elijah then crouches down to pray, and tells his servant (unnamed but, presumably, Elisha) to go to the top of the ridge and look toward the sea (i.e., the Mediterranean). After doing so, the servant comes back to report to Elijah that nothing has happened. The servant takes this action repeatedly until a change occurs.

And it came to pass the seventh time, that [the servant] said, "Behold, rising out of the sea is a little cloud, like a man's hand." And [Elijah] said, "Go up, and say to [King] Ahab, 'Get ready, and go down, so that the rain does not stop you.'" And it came to pass in the meantime that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel. 1 Kings 18:44-45

Here, the hand of God shows itself as a small cloud that heralds life-giving rain following a devastating drought. The pattern of the exalted seventh instance is identifiable even without the rhythmic repetition characteristic of the examples in Genesis.

The seventh resurrection

Each textual occurrence we have examined to this point is the work of a single human author, something that cannot be said of the one we turn to now. The Bible contains stories of individuals who were brought back to life after having died, of which Jesus's is the seventh in order. Excluded are what might be thought of as figurative resurrections, such as the rescue at the last possible moment of Abraham's son Isaac

(Gen 22:11-12; Heb 11:17-19). Every one of the resurrections I refer to is of a particular person who, according to the narrative, literally died and then was restored to life.

Of the first six of these resurrection stories, three occur in the books of Kings, and three more in the course of Jesus's ministry as related in the canonical gospels. The claim is sometimes made, incorrectly, that these six events were resuscitations rather than resurrections. The book of Hebrews calls the first two of these incidents "resurrections," using the same Greek word, ἀνάστασις, as is used repeatedly of Jesus's resurrection.⁴ John's gospel says of Lazarus, the last of the six, that he was "raised from the dead," again using Greek identical to that used for God's raising of Jesus from the dead.⁵

Although what all these stories describe may properly be called resurrections, that of Jesus is justifiably distinguished from those that preceded it. The first six, by all indications, portray temporary restorations of mortal existence; Jesus, by contrast, is shown as having received a new kind of life that has a physical aspect while being immortal. It is evident that Jesus being "raised in glory," in the words of Scripture, conforms to the pattern of the exalted seventh instance (1 Cor 15:43; 1 Pet 1:21).

The three resurrections related in the books of Kings, which we may call *mortal* resurrections as opposed to the *immortal* resurrection of Jesus, are part of the story cycle of Elijah and his successor, Elisha. Fragments of the books of Kings are found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are dated variously from the first century to as early as 200 BCE. Josephus, writing at the end of the first century CE, refers extensively to Kings, showing that their contents are substantially unchanged since then. Among much else that Josephus relates from those books is the resurrection of a young boy

⁴ Heb. 11:35; cf. Acts 1:22; 2:31; et al.

⁵ Jn. 12:1, 9; cf. Mt 28:7; Jn 21:14 et al.

by the prophet Elijah.⁶ A web of interlocking references and historical markers dates the books of Kings, with their trio of resurrection stories, to at the latest three centuries before the birth of Jesus, and probably much earlier.

Now, it is beyond all historical possibility for the followers of Jesus to have introduced resurrection narratives into either Hebrew or Greek versions of the books of Kings after Jesus's death. Turning to the New Testament for the next three accounts, we find that *none of the four gospels contains all of them*. Matthew and Mark have one story, which is of Jesus raising a young girl back to life. Luke, likewise, has the story of the girl's resurrection, plus that of a young man from the village of Nain. John lacks either of those two cases, but records that of Lazarus of Bethany.

I know of no credentialed scholar in the field of New Testament studies, whether Christian or secular, who would argue that any of the four evangelists collaborated with each other. Evidence both external to the gospels and, most importantly, internal to them is fundamentally incompatible with coordinated production of these documents. Much to the contrary, indications are that each evangelist, whatever common sources he may have used, wrote a stand-alone gospel not intended to be read alongside others. This all strongly implies divine oversight of the development and composition of the biblical materials, in that the most significant example of the pattern of the exalted seventh instance could not have come about through deliberate creativity or ingenuity on the part of the authors.

The evidence for divine superintendence is no less irreconcilable with suggestions that church authorities, or anyone else, made wholesale, targeted changes to the gospels after they began circulating. Errors in transcription and alterations to certain verses by individual scribes with disparate motives, common though they are in the manuscript tradition, cannot

⁶ *Antiquities* 8.325-27; cf. 1 Kgs 17:17-24.

account for Jesus's resurrection fitting the pattern of the exalted seventh instance.

The explanatory challenge looms larger the better informed a person becomes about the Scriptures, not as sacred revelation, but simply as ancient documents whose origins fall within known chronological and geographical boundaries. Moreover, the challenge may be stated in terms of literary units alone, apart from questions of whether the events they portray are historical. As potential causes of patterning fall away one by one, it becomes difficult to find alternatives to divine inspiration on the one hand or pure coincidence on the other.

If coincidence is pressed into service at this juncture, it must bear the weight not just of the patterned arrangement of the resurrection narratives, but of the appropriateness of that arrangement in its larger scriptural context. The idea of the exalted seventh instance is unmistakably revealed in the opening of the Old Testament, and then appears to confirm what is the central miracle of human history according to the New.

When we analyze in greater detail the first seven biblical resurrection stories, we find yet more work will be required of an explanation from coincidence.

Organization within the pattern

So far, we have seen that six resurrections of individuals are narrated in the Bible before that of Jesus, which places his resurrection in the seventh place. We might assume that these stories have a random mix of similarity and difference with respect to each other, an expectation that would seem to be justified when it comes to the types of persons raised, the causes and locations of their deaths insofar as those are indicated, and so on. One detail present in each of the six stories, however, defies that assumption.

Here I will provide brief summaries for all six stories, though I invite each reader to consult them firsthand. In the

earliest, the prophet Elijah, having left northern Israel during a long drought, at God's direction travels to the village of Zarephath near the city of Sidon, close to the Mediterranean coast. There, a widow with a young son provides for the prophet. The son falls ill and dies in his mother's arms, whereupon Elijah takes him from his mother. The prophet lays out the child, prays, and covers the body with his own, after which the boy revives (1 Kings 17:17-24).

In the second instance, Elisha and his servant are offered hospitality by a childless couple in the northern Israelite village of Shunem. In keeping with a promise made to her by the prophet, the woman eventually bears a son, but the boy while still young sickens and dies. The woman then travels some distance to find Elisha. Having accompanied the woman back to her house, Elisha stretches himself over the corpse, causing the boy's flesh to grow warm. Elisha gets up, waits for a time, then stretches himself over the boy again, at which the child awakens, fully recovered (2 Kings 4:8-37).

The third resurrection occurs long after Elisha has died and been interred in a communal tomb. During the burial of an Israelite man, while inside the tomb complex the burial party drops the corpse in such a way that it touches the bones of Elisha, causing the dead man to come to life (2 Kings 13:20-21).

Turning to the New Testament, we find in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the story of the twelve-year-old daughter of a synagogue ruler named Jairus. The daughter having fallen gravely ill, Jairus goes to Jesus and asks him to come and heal her. As Jesus is nearing the man's house, word comes to Jairus that his daughter has died. Jesus continues on to the house, tells the dead girl to get up, and she returns to life (Matt 9:18-19, 23-26; Mark 5:22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56).

In Luke alone out of the four gospels, we see Jesus travel to the village of Nain in northern Israel. There he encounters a funeral party carrying the body of a young man who was the only son of a widow. Jesus commands the young

man to rise, and he comes to life (Luke 7:11-17). That account describes the fifth of our seven resurrections.

The young man Lazarus is the subject of the final resurrection story from the ministry of Jesus, which occurs only in the fourth gospel. Shortly before Jesus's final visit to Jerusalem, his friend Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary of Bethany, falls ill and dies. Jesus arrives in Bethany four days later and calls Lazarus out from the tomb where his corpse has been laid. Having returned to life, Lazarus is released from his burial cloths (John 11:1-45).

The seventh resurrection of an individual, as we have seen, is that of Jesus, which the gospels say occurred on the third day following his death by crucifixion, and the first indications of which were the displacement of the stone sealing the sepulcher, along with the absence of his body from where it had been deposited.⁷

Postmortem milestones

Comparing these stories, a sequence becomes evident regarding when the person is revived in relation to when they died. Elijah's resurrection of a young boy takes place within minutes of the child's death, which means that although breathing has stopped, the body must still be warm. The resurrection of a second boy, by Elisha, occurs long enough after death that the body has cooled. The technical name for the cooling of a corpse is *algor mortis* ("coldness of death"), which normally is permanent, unlike the transitory stiffness known as *rigor mortis*.

The corpse that touches Elisha's bones in the third account is not only breathless and cold but has already entered the burial chamber. The three Old Testament resurrections, therefore, are from three distinguishable postmortem conditions or stages that are progressively further from the moment of death. In the first stage, breathing has ceased but the

⁷ Matt 28:1-20; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-21:25.

body is still warm; in the second, breathing has stopped and the body has cooled but is still present among the living; in the third, besides breathlessness and coldness, the body has passed the threshold of the grave.

The resurrections during the ministry of Jesus include an example from each of the same three stages as we see in the books of Kings. Jairus's daughter is raised from the first stage, shortly after death. The son of the widow of Nain had been prepared for burial, which entailed washing of the body, leaving it in the second stage. Lazarus, in his tomb, was in the third stage when he was raised.

A question here arises concerning the order of the resurrections performed by Jesus during his ministry. Luke places the resurrection of the young man before that of Jairus's daughter, which means that the progression we see in the first three narratives, from the books of Kings, seems not to be duplicated in the stories from the New Testament gospels. A closer look yields clues that Luke has, in fact, placed the resurrections of the young man of Nain and the girl out of chronological sequence. As I will explain below, these textual indicators from Luke actually lend further support to the theory of divine oversight of the biblical writings.

First, it's noteworthy that both Matthew and Luke have some events from Jesus's ministry in a different chronological order compared with each other and with the gospel of Mark. Luke, for example, reverses the order of the last two of the three temptations of Jesus in the Judean desert as compared with Matthew, which has what seems to be the original order.⁸ Luke has a scene in Nazareth which also is out of sequence, since it shows Jesus referring to the powerful works he has performed at Capernaum before he in fact arrives at that village (Luke 4:23, 31-36). The prediction that Peter will deny Jesus occurs during the Last Supper in Luke, rather than

⁸ Cf. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13. The ending of the episode in Matthew depends on a particular sequence of the final two temptations in a way that Luke's does not.

sometime later as in Matthew and Mark (Luke 22:34, 39; cf. Matt 26:30, 34; Mark 14:26, 30). There is a chronological shift even within Luke-Acts, in that the conclusion of the gospel implies a different timing of the ascension of Jesus as compared with the opening narrative of Acts (Luke 24:33-53; Acts 1:1-9).

In Luke, as in Matthew, John the Baptist, having been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, dispatches messengers to ask Jesus if he is the “Coming One,” that is, the Messiah. Jesus sends the messengers back to report to John about Jesus’s miracles and his proclamation of the good news. Luke places this incident immediately after the resurrection of the young man of Nain and sometime before the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Luke 7:11-23). Matthew, by contrast, locates this incident well after the raising of the girl (Matt 9:18-25; 11:2-6).

If we were to transpose the story of the young man of Nain into Matthew, just before the arrival of the delegation from John the Baptist, it would then occur after that of Jairus’s daughter instead of before it. That this is the correct order is indicated by a detail from each narrative. Luke says that the report of Jesus raising the young man spread far and wide, which led to John the Baptist hearing about it along with other miracles of Jesus (Luke 7:17-18). However, in the story of Jairus’s daughter in Mark and Luke, Jesus is not yet known for raising the dead, since a messenger comes to tell Jairus, “Your daughter is dead; trouble the Master no further.”⁹

The issue of Jesus being known as having performed a resurrection does not arise if the case of Jairus’s daughter is placed first. When Jesus enters Jairus’s house, he remarks that the girl “has not died, but is asleep,” causing bystanders to mock. Jesus dismisses everyone but the girl’s parents and his own closest disciples before he raises the girl, and after-

⁹ Matthew’s version of the story is abbreviated and lacks this information (Matt 9:18-26).

ward tells the parents to stay silent about what has occurred. Jesus's cryptic comment about sleep, and the secrecy he enjoins, leaves room for those who later hear about the incident to wonder if the girl had merely been comatose; in any case she had stopped breathing only for a matter of minutes.

The recovery of the girl would not lead to an expectation that Jesus could raise someone whose death was publicly confirmed, as was that of the young man of Nain. At the same time, even the raising of the young man, who had just been prepared for burial, would hardly guarantee that Jesus could later raise a corpse well along in decomposition, as was that of Lazarus.¹⁰

Placing the resurrection of the girl before that of the young man of Nain also makes sense of an otherwise puzzling part of Jesus's response to the messengers of John the Baptist. Jesus tells them to go and report to John that among other miracles, "the dead are raised" (Luke 7:22). The Greek word for "dead," νεκροί, is in the plural even though only one resurrection, that of the young man, has occurred in Luke's narrative to that point. This wording makes better sense if the raising of Jairus's daughter is understood to have occurred at an earlier time.¹¹

In addition to all of the above, Luke had a clear rationale for letting the resurrection at Nain upstage that of Jairus's daughter. Among the evangelists, Luke is particularly anxious to highlight the resemblance of Jesus to the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha. In Luke, Jesus compares himself to those figures at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:24-27). The resurrection at Nain is of a widow's son, like the one performed by Elijah near Sidon. Luke even in-

¹⁰ Nevertheless, when Jesus arrives in Bethany after Lazarus's death, Martha does suggest hesitantly to Jesus that he might be able to bring her brother back to life (John 11:22).

¹¹ The same wording occurs in Matthew 11:5, where it signals that an unnarrated resurrection besides that of Jairus's daughter has occurred prior to the arrival of the Baptist's messengers.

cludes the phrase, “he [Jesus] gave him [the son] back to his mother,” echoing the words of the Elijah story (1 Kgs 17:23).

Just as Luke’s gospel marks the maturing of Jesus’s ministry with a miracle reminiscent of Elijah, it punctuates the departure of Jesus from Galilee with one that recalls Elisha (Luke 17:11-19; cf. 2 Kgs 5:1, 10-19).

The indications of reshuffling in Luke’s chronology, including in the case of the resurrections of the young man of Nain and Jairus’s daughter, occur independently of what is suggested by the otherwise cyclical, patterned order discernible in the resurrections leading up to that of Jesus. This observation is useful because it removes any possibility, remote though it already was, that the author of Luke somehow discerned the pattern of successive stages in the resurrections of Kings and conformed his narrative to it.

Matthew’s graveyard apocalypse

It is necessary when reviewing resurrection stories contained in the canonical gospels to give some attention to an element unique to the first gospel, which is the strange episode of bodies being raised from their graves on or around the time of Jesus’s death on the cross:

Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up his spirit. And, behold, the curtain of the temple was rent in two from the top to the bottom. And the earth quaked, and the rocks split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the holy ones who were sleeping arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared to many. Matthew 27:50-53

A literal interpretation of this narrative generates profound historical and theological problems, the first of which is the inexplicable silence of other New Testament authors about such an astounding miracle. For this and other reasons,

some interpret the graveyard harrowing of Matthew as an apocalyptic vision breaking into the historical narrative. Whether or not the passage is understood in literal terms, it does not describe the resurrection of a particular individual, nor does its language unambiguously locate the timing of the event in relation to the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the following week.¹² Whatever it describes falls objectively well outside the resurrection narratives we have examined, and likewise outside any patterns generated by their shared features.

Properties of the expanded resurrection pattern

Although biblical resurrections of individuals conform to the pattern of the exalted seventh instance, the identification of postmortem stages in these stories reveals them to have two additional patterned features. The first of these is progression or directionality, since the stages occur in a certain logical order. The second is cyclicity, in which the progression repeats. Yet another pattern emerges when we complete the collection by adding the two resurrections of individuals that are reported to have occurred after that of Jesus. These are found in the book of Acts, the record of early church history written by the author of Luke's gospel.

Acts includes the final instructions of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples, along with accounts of his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit to energize the fledgling Christian movement. The Spirit's presence enables miracles performed by Peter and John, two of Jesus's original twelve disciples, and by Peter individually in the first approximately one-third

¹² The initial impression is that the raising occurred at the time of the earthquake, on Good Friday. That would imply that those who came to life, unaccountably, lingered in the cemetery for a day and a half before entering Jerusalem. If "came out of the graves" is simply a repetition of "arose," then the bodies were exposed but not enlivened until Jesus himself rose.

of the book of Acts. The final two-thirds of the book follows Saul of Tarsus, famously converted by his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, who soon afterward becomes known as Paul the Apostle. For each miracle performed by Peter in the first chapters of Acts, Paul does a similar one in the latter part of the book.

In one of the final narratives about Peter, he is summoned to the coastal town of Joppa after the death of a woman disciple named Tabitha. When Peter arrives, he finds that Tabitha's body has been washed for burial and laid out on a bed. Peter prays, calls to Tabitha by name, and she comes to life again (Acts 9:36-42). This event constitutes the third biblical resurrection from the second postmortem stage, marked by absence of both breath and warmth.

The final resurrection is performed by Paul in the port city of Troas on the coast of Asia Minor. As Paul teaches Christians gathered in an upper room one night, an adolescent young man named Eutychus sitting on the sill of an open window becomes drowsy, falls out of the window, and is picked up dead on the street below. Paul immediately clutches Eutychus's body to himself, and the boy's life returns (Acts 20:7-12). Here we have the third resurrection from the first postmortem stage, absence of breath. The miracle at Troas brings the course of these stories full circle by recalling Elijah's resurrection of the young son of the widow of Zarephath.

Identification of postmortem stages in accounts of individual resurrections, a total of nine in all, reveals exactly three instances for each of the three stages. The total includes the resurrection of Jesus as the final example from the third stage, and represents the *permanent* reversal of all three stages of death: breathlessness, coldness, and interment.¹³

¹³ The literary styling in this respect is broadly reminiscent of, for example, the three sets of generational names in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.

For convenience we can label these stories by the post-mortem stages they describe. We have found that the first two sets of resurrection stories, which include all those that preceded the resurrection of Jesus, form the cyclical pattern 1-2-3-1-2-3. If instead we shift the frame so that we see only the last two sets, which include all those in the New Testament, we find the symmetrical, mirror-image pattern 1-2-3-3-2-1.

Given the presence within the nine resurrection stories of regularities distinct from, yet complementary to, the pattern of the exalted seventh, an appeal to coincidence is at best unpersuasive and at worst, less than serious. Any explanation other than pure chance must encompass at least five sources spanning four or more centuries. The sources are: (1) the narratives of Kings, (2) the earliest Christian tradition of the resurrection of Jesus, (3) a common tradition or historical memory underlying the narrative of Jairus's daughter in the synoptic gospels, (4) another set of traditions, represented only in Luke-Acts, for the stories of the young man of Nain, the woman Tabitha, and the young man Eutychus, and (5) the tradition about Lazarus found in the fourth gospel.

Conclusion: Order out of the Chaos of History

Christians tend to be uncomfortable with academic biblical criticism if not opposed to it outright. Specifically, they allege that its conclusions about composite authorship of biblical documents and progressive development of their texts contradict specific scriptural statements. To what extent that position is sound, both logically and scripturally, is a question requiring a longer treatment than it can be given here. Anyone who has dipped their toe into the water of textual differences in the New Testament, or carefully compared New Testament quotations from the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) with corresponding texts in the Hebrew Bible, will find it difficult to deny that textual development and/or divergence occurred at some scale, even if a limited one.

To put it bluntly, most believers picture the historical process that gave us the Bible as being simple, tidy, and straightforward, comparable to the weaving of a blanket on a loom from top to bottom. Academic scholars typically envision a messy, somewhat chaotic process more like creating a quilt from inconsistently sized and shaped scraps of fabric, by quilters who have only the vaguest idea of what the end product will resemble, if in fact they have an end product in mind at all.

To acknowledge some degree of “messiness,” that is, historical contingency, in the origin of biblical documents and the biblical canon, is to confront afresh the starkness of the choice between possible explanations of large-scale patterns in Scripture. There is no meaningful ground between pure coincidence on one side and divine providence on the other.

World history on the scale of centuries is so dense a tangle of interrelated causes and effects as to make it all but immune to human foresight, let alone human planning. Only God, in the Christian view, is capable of orchestrating the cascade of earthly events over millennia toward a specific and intended end. God, therefore, is equally capable of working in and through a messy and, from a human perspective, chaotic process of document creation to yield an inspired product. In fact, an intelligent being who is able to sculpt over the course of centuries innumerable incidents and accidents into a work of ordered beauty could, virtually by definition, be none other than God.

In the space of a single article, it has only been possible to present one example as part of an argument for God from literary patterns in the Bible. I hope that what has been presented here may give credibility to the prospect of other large-scale patterns with similar features, and open the subject to further exploration. Moreover, analytical arguments from the extraordinary unity of Scripture do not stand alone; instead, they bridge the gap between their more abstract philosophical counterparts and the substance of biblical revelation.

The Exalted Seventh Instance in Genesis

Instance	Ref.	Patterned Text	Ref.	Patterned Text	Ref.	Patterned Text
1st	1:4	God saw that the light was good	1:5	And there was evening and morning, one day	5:5	So all the days that Adam lived were . . . and he died
2nd	1:10	God saw that it was good	1:8	And there was evening and morning, a second day	5:8	So all the days of Seth were . . . and he died
3rd	1:12	God saw that it was good	1:13	And there was evening and morning, a third day	5:11	So all the days of Enosh were . . . and he died
4th	1:18	God saw that it was good	1:19	And there was evening and morning, a fourth day	5:14	So all the days of Kenan were . . . and he died
5th	1:21	God saw that it was good	1:23	And there was evening and morning, a fifth day	5:17	So all the days of Mahalalel were . . . and he died
6th	1:25	God saw that it was good	1:31	And there was evening and morning, a sixth day	5:20	So all the days of Jared were . . . and he died
7th	1:31	<i>God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good</i>	2:3	<i>Then God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it, because on it he rested</i>	5:23-24	<i>So all the days of Enoch were . . . and he was not, for God took him</i>

AN ARGUMENT FROM LITERARY FORMS IN THE BIBLE

The Resurrection Pattern

The Exalted Seventh Instance

Instance	Reference	Subject	Stage of Death (1, 2, 3)	Type of Resurrection
1st	1 Kings 17:8-9, 17-24	The son of the widow of Sidon	1. Absence of breath	Mortal
2nd	2 Kings 4:8, 14-37	The son of the woman of Shunem	2. Absence of breath, absence of warmth	Mortal
3rd	2 Kings 13:20-21	Israelite man	3. Absence of breath, absence of warmth, interred	Mortal
4th	Matt 9:18-19, 23-25; Mark 5:22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56	The daughter of Jairus	1. Absence of breath	Mortal
5th	*Luke 7:11-17	The son of the widow of Nain	2. Absence of breath, absence of warmth	Mortal
6th	John 11:1-46	Lazarus of Bethany	3. Absence of breath, absence of warmth, interred	Mortal
7th	Matt 28:1-20; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-21:25	<i>Jesus of Nazareth</i>	3. Absence of breath, absence of warmth, interred	<i>Immortal</i>

*For indications of out-of-sequence placement by author, cf. Luke 7:17; 8:48; Mark 5:35; cf. relative positions of Luke 7:18-23; Matt 11:1-6.

The Expanded Resurrection Pattern		
Three from Each Stage of Death		
Stage 1 Absence of breath	Stage 2 Absence of breath & warmth	Stage 3 Absence of breath & warmth, interred
1 Kings 17:8-9, 17-24 Son of the widow of Sidon =====>	2 Kings 4:8, 14-37 Son of the woman of Shunem =====>	2 Kings 13:20-21 Israelite man =====>
Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25 (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56) Daughter of Jairus =====>	Luke 7:11-17 (corrected sequence) The son of the widow of Nain =====>	John 11:1-46 Lazarus of Bethany =====>
Acts 20:9-10 Eutychus =====>	Acts 9:36-42 Tabitha (Dorcas) <=====	Matthew 28:1-20 (Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-21:25) <i>Jesus of Nazareth</i> <=====
=====> indicates chronological order		

4. The Problem of Hell and the Good News of the Gospel

Don McIntosh¹

ABSTRACT: According to traditional statements of Christian doctrine, hell is a state of eternal conscious torment in which all nonbelievers are essentially tortured forever for their sins. Hell is thus the deeply painful yet permanent destination said to await everyone who has not believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, including those who have never heard it. For understandable reasons the doctrine of hell has often been a stumbling-block for skeptics, a source of turmoil for believers, and the grounds for a specific variant of the old philosophical problem of evil – the problem of hell. But there are good grounds for thinking that God’s judgment of sinners is more measured and nuanced than the standard theological schema would suggest. In this article I will, first, argue that while eternal judgment is an inescapable tenet of the Christian faith, the standard depiction of hell often – and often unnecessarily – produces excessive psychological consternation and revulsion, and sometimes leads to atheism. Then I will suggest reasons for believing that (1) nonbelievers are not necessarily universally doomed to hell; and (2) those who are sentenced to hell at judgment are not necessarily uniformly punished. Finally I will argue, against the “fire insurance” model of salvation, that Christians are called to witness the gospel primarily because lost souls need to be “saved from their sins” in the here and now. Their eternal judgment belongs to God alone.

AN OLD JOKE has it that the members of two church factions are arguing about eternal damnation. The Northern Baptists maintain that God loves everyone unconditionally,

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even rebellious and unrepentant sinners, and so they declare, “There ain’t no hell.” But the Southern Baptists say that a holy God cannot allow sin in his presence or to go unpunished, so they shoot back, “The hell there ain’t!”

Amusing as that little exchange may be, in most other contexts hell is no laughing matter. The prospect of eternal conscious torment, whether in the form of extreme sensory pain like burning, or the deep psychological pain of eternal despair and regret, rightly strikes dread into the hearts of those who stop to really think upon it. For most of its history and in most of its denominations, the Christian church has taken the following propositions about heaven and hell as axiomatic:

1. There are only two possible destinations – heaven and hell – for a person following death.
2. Heaven is an unending state of sheer, maximal bliss in the presence of God.
3. Hell is an unending state of sheer, maximal suffering and separation from God.
4. Anyone who hears the gospel and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation will go to heaven.
5. Anyone who hears the gospel and does not trust in Jesus Christ for salvation will go to hell.

But what of those who have not heard the gospel? Two responses are common:

1. All other persons will go to hell, not having heard (hence believed) the gospel. – *or* –
2. All other persons will be judged according to their works.

For many theologians, these last two propositions constitute a distinction without a difference. Because, they would say, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:22), and because the works of men are “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:4) apart from the atoning blood of Jesus, everyone who has not heard

the gospel is in fact doomed to eternal damnation. Taken together, the above suppositions constitute a problem – both psychological and intellectual – confronting Christian belief in the goodness of God. For understandable reasons the doctrine of hell has often been a stumbling-block for skeptics, a source of turmoil for believers, and the grounds for a specific variant of the old philosophical problem of evil – the problem of hell. But there are good reasons for thinking that God’s judgment of sinners is more measured and nuanced than the standard theological schema would suggest.

In this article I will argue, first, that while eternal judgment is an inescapable tenet of the Christian faith, the standard depiction of hell often – and often unnecessarily – produces excessive psychological consternation and revulsion, and sometimes leads to atheism. Then I will provide reasons for believing that (1) nonbelievers are not necessarily universally doomed to hell; and (2) those who are sentenced to hell at judgment are not necessarily uniformly punished. Finally I will argue, against the “fire insurance” model of salvation, that Christians are called to preach the gospel primarily because lost souls need to be “saved from their sins” in the here and now. Their eternal judgment belongs to God alone.

An orthodox but unsettling doctrine

Whatever else may be said of it, for most people – with the possible exception of a handful of religious sadists – the doctrine of hell as usually formulated cannot be the product of “wishful thinking.” No rational person would ever desire unending, unrelenting torment, for themselves or for anyone else. Yet despite being terrifying to contemplate, hell is strongly affirmed both by Scripture and tradition. “There is no doctrine,” said C. S. Lewis, “which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of

Scripture and, especially, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom;..."²

After reviewing a number of biblical passages (Mark 9:48, Matt. 13:42, Luke 16:19-31, Matt. 25:30 and Matt. 10:28), Schmucker observes that "Jesus talks about hell more than he talks about heaven, and describes it more vividly. There's no denying that Jesus knew, believed, and warned against the absolute reality of hell."³ Though its place in orthodox theology cannot be denied, two aspects of the doctrine of hell make it especially odious to many: (1) that all nonbelievers are doomed to hell regardless of their circumstances; and (2) that the torments of hell are uniformly extreme and eternal. Here I will briefly review and challenge these suppositions.

Hell is marked by pain, or torment, and eternity, or endless duration. The pain experienced in hell is described variously in terms both sensory and mental, but always *extreme*. There is a lake of fire where souls burn forever (Rev. 21:8), the isolation of "outer darkness," deep sadness and regret in "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12), and generally, unceasing torment and restlessness (Rev. 14:11). To even consider the prospect of extreme pain experienced over an endless duration can be psychologically disturbing, if not overwhelming. Such a fate, after all, would be far worse than anyone's worst nightmare. Thus it should come as no surprise that according to researchers, belief in hell correlates with general unhappiness.⁴ Worse, belief in hell can cause outright psychological trauma. David Bentley Hart, for example, shares the story of a young man with Asperger's syndrome who went into a panic, then a major de-

² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1940), p. 119-120.

³ Leslie Schmucker, "The Uncomfortable Subject Jesus Addressed More than Anyone Else," *The Gospel Coalition* (May 11, 2017). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-uncomfortable-subject-jesus-addressed-more-than-anyone-else/>.

⁴ See for example Azim F. Shariff & Lara B. Aknin., "The Emotional Toll of Hell: Cross-National and Experimental Evidence for the Negative Well-Being Effects of Hell Beliefs," *PLoS One*, Vol. 9, Is. 1 (2014). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3899000/>.

pression, upon hearing the “bad news” of hell.⁵ Similar stories could be multiplied.

Of course, our instinctive revulsion as humans at the fearful prospect of eternal damnation could be precisely what God intends by warning us of it. Since people naturally *turn away* from what they find revolting, belief in hell often serves as a spur to repentance. Indeed, fear of hell was the main driver of my own conversion. Although I was a deeply insecure, alcohol-addicted and generally unhappy college student upon hearing the gospel (not for the first time) some forty years ago, I had no desire to repent of my sins and only converted out of a fear of winding up in hell. For many thinkers, however, hell is not so much an effective deterrent against sin but rather the ultimate, and ultimately intractable, problem of evil. They find it difficult or impossible, that is, to square the doctrine of hell with the very existence of an all-good and all-powerful God.

Atheist philosophers like Raymond Bradley and Keith Parsons, and popular-level atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, to name a few examples, were apparently led to deconversion at least in part because they found the doctrine of hell to be not only morally abhorrent but incompatible with belief in a loving and forgiving God. For them, psychological revulsion leads naturally to intellectual repudiation. Bradley for instance finds an inconsistency, if not an outright contradiction, in the following propositions: “1. God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, just, righteous, merciful, and loving.” – and – “2. God will torture the majority of humans eternally in Hell for the sin of unbelief even though most of them have never even heard Jesus’ name.”⁶

⁵ David Bentley Hart, “The Obscenity of Belief in an Eternal Hell,” June 13, 2022, ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corp.), URL=<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/david-bentley-hart-obscurity-of-belief-in-eternal-hell/13356388>.

⁶ Raymond D. Bradley, “Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?,” *The Secular Web*, 2022, URL=<https://infidels.org/library/modern/can-a-loving-god-send-people-to-hell/>.

Interestingly, few atheists – or at least none that I have encountered – confess to ever having been psychologically *traumatized* by hell. That’s not too surprising, though. Atheists typically describe their loss of faith as a purely intellectual process, whereas the prior experience of religious trauma among atheists would suggest their deconversion to be at least partly driven by emotional factors like fear and anger. But it seems probable that many former theists deconverted to atheism precisely because they were thus traumatized. According to Winell, belief in hell is a leading factor creating a certain sense of anxiety common among Christian believers. Because damning sins like unbelief, or worse, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, are not precisely defined, “the Christian can never feel totally secure, even with the promise of salvation.”⁷ Alison Downie agrees with Winell that “religious trauma syndrome” is “explicitly tied” to the doctrine of eternal damnation of the lost.⁸

In light of phenomena like religious trauma, I would argue that for countless former Christians, ceasing to believe in the supernatural altogether has provided an escape from the emotional distress otherwise associated with believing in hell. On one level, I think it likely that more often than not atheism is the natural expression of a subconscious attempt to reduce *cognitive dissonance*, the psychological tension that results from embracing conflicting beliefs. Specifically, believers in the face of deep suffering seek to somehow reconcile their existing belief that God is good and gracious with their growing conviction that God is capricious, cruel – atheism often being the result.

But atheism may also be a means of resolving *emotional* dissonance, which has been defined as “the structural discrepancy between the felt emotions on the one hand and the emotional display that is required and appropriate in the working context

⁷ Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion*, (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2007), p. 66.

⁸ Alison Downie, “Christian Shame and Religious Trauma,” *Religions*, 13, 925 (2022).

on the other.”⁹ I know from experience that Christians sometimes put on a happy face and outwardly praise the name of God even while believing that God may well cast them into an eternal torture chamber at the end of their days for failure to believe or behave in a correct (yet never precisely specified) manner. Researchers suggest that emotional dissonance plays a strong role in burnout among employees; but given that the same psychological dynamics are at work among Christian believers, emotional dissonance likely contributes to religious burnout as well. Whereas burned-out employees can simply find another place to work, however, there is literally no place to hide from the omnipotent God of all creation for burned-out believers. Atheism at that point can become an appealing psychological alternative to faith in God.

A few Christians have perceived a serious problem of hell but found ways to maintain their faith regardless. According to the late Christian philosopher Marilyn Adams, for example, the very thought of reconciling the benevolence of God with the proposition that some created persons are consigned to unending torment renders any theodicy project “at best incongruous and at worst disingenuous.”¹⁰ For Adams there are only two rational options available to a Christian in the face of the problem of hell – to either redefine God’s attributes or reject the doctrine of hell outright – and she opted for the latter, embracing a doctrine of universal salvation. One purpose of this paper is to suggest that while the orthodox doctrine of hell does seem rationally objectionable on its face, such a drastic overhaul of traditional theology as universal salvation might not be rationally necessary.

⁹ Arnold B. Bakker & Ellen Heuven, “Emotional Dissonance, Burnout, and In-Role Performance Among Nurses and Police Officers,” *International Journal of Stress Management*, 2006, V. 13, No. 4, p. 426.

¹⁰ Marilyn McCord Adams, “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” in Eleonore Stump, ed., *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 302.

Do all nonbelievers go to hell?

Conventional theology has it that salvation results from two conditions: the sacrifice (or “atoning work”) of Christ for our sins, and a response of faith to the gospel. Given the necessary condition of Christ’s having died on the cross for our sins, the act of calling on the name of the Lord in faith is a sufficient condition for securing salvation. All this suggests that apart from hearing the gospel, mankind is lost, and therefore doomed to eternal judgment by God. But it seems neither reasonable nor consistent with God’s attributes of love and holiness to say that anyone ignorant of the gospel – for instance a poor tribesman caring for his family and minding his business deep in the jungles of New Guinea – would be eternally condemned for failing to respond to a message he never heard. If lost souls are judged for *being* sinners, and yet they were *born* sinners – and moreover can do nothing in their ignorance to change that fact – then essentially they are sentenced to eternal torment for being born. That simply cannot be right.

I want to propose that it does not follow from being *lost* – ignorant of the gospel and oblivious to the prospect of eternal judgment – that one is also *doomed*. Consider Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Paul’s statement regarding salvation could be formalized in terms of propositional logic as follows:

If p , then q .

p .

q .

where p is confession and belief, and q is salvation. Readers might recognize this as *modus ponens*, a valid form of logic. According to Paul, then, confessing and believing in Jesus will result in salvation for anyone, regardless of other conditions (such as being a former Satanist, or having doubts about exactly *how* God may have raised Jesus from the dead given what we know about the laws of physics). So far, so good. Some people

maintain further, however, that *not* confessing and believing results in being *not* saved (i.e. being condemned). Or to use the same basic schema as above:

If *p*, then *q*.

Not *p*.

Not *q*.

This form of reasoning is *denying the antecedent*, a fallacy. For example: it's true that if John F. Kennedy was stabbed to death by a gang of senators, then he was assassinated; but that doesn't entail that if John F. Kennedy was not stabbed to death by a gang of senators, he was not assassinated. Similarly, if one does not meet the variously stated antecedent conditions said to result in salvation – confessing Jesus as Lord, repenting and believing the gospel, trusting in Christ for salvation – it doesn't logically follow that one is not saved, or in other words that one is eternally condemned. The upshot is that even given the relevant New Testament texts, or at least most of them,¹¹ there remains a logical possibility of being saved from judgment apart from hearing the gospel and responding in a way that would result in salvation.

For Christians (like me) raised on the idea that believers are personally responsible for rescuing people from otherwise certain damnation by preaching the gospel, such a possibility may seem unfounded or even heretical at first glance. But the conventional view is not easy to rationally defend. According to popular Christian teaching, Jesus endured unspeakable horror in dying for the sins of the world just as he had planned and prophesied; yet at the same time he made no provisions for en-

¹¹ There are texts that imply a necessary (not necessarily sufficient) condition for salvation, such as John 3:3: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God..." That's not quite the same as saying, "If one is born again, he will see the kingdom of God." Also there is no clear connection between being born again and hearing the gospel, let alone a causal connection. It may be that being "born again" is simply a way of illustrating the life-changing dynamic of being saved, regardless of how salvation itself actually occurs.

suring that everyone would hear the gospel that presumably must be heard in order for his sacrifice to benefit them. Instead we are led to believe that Jesus left that responsibility with the church, so that for ignorant people to escape the torments of hell would depend upon the church faithfully fulfilling the Great Commission.

One of many problems with such a belief is that sinful people in the church would actually have the power (at least to an extent) to condemn souls to hell. Suppose for example that I am an overseas missionary and I come across an abusive, immoral pagan whom I personally feel is so wicked that he should not be given an opportunity for salvation, and further that I am the only Christian he will ever meet. In principle I could refuse to share the gospel with him so that he will never hear it and therefore he cannot be spared eternal judgment. In fact I could, like Jonah, refuse to preach the gospel to entire groups or races of people simply because I don't like them. Even if I sincerely wanted to win souls for Christ and did not *refuse* to share the gospel with them, I could still fail to do so for other reasons – being afraid, or exhausted, distracted with other activities, unable to speak their language, etc.

If my intuition is correct, however, lost souls being spared the torments of hell would not necessarily depend upon actually hearing and believing the gospel while alive on earth, and therefore would not necessarily depend upon the evangelistic efforts of the church – and that in itself would be “good news.” The church, after all, has often indeed proven to be ill-informed, timid, lazy, compromised, disobedient and otherwise ineffectual. It would make little sense for God to ultimately leave the eternal fate of souls for which Jesus died solely in the hands of selfish, sinful and often unfaithful men.

But that leads to an important question: how *can* lost souls be spared eternal damnation without hearing and believing the gospel preached to them by faithful believers? One possible answer is that because God is fair and just, God will judge men fairly and justly whether they have actually *heard* the gospel or not. Paul appears to suggest something along those lines in Romans 2:

[W]hen Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them, when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.

The reference to *secrets* there seems to indicate something deeper and much more personal than an outward confession of faith or an affiliation with a church. And we have the example of the Old Testament saints who are presently in the courts of heaven (see Heb. 11) but who clearly could not have heard and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. Various New Testament theologians would contend, however – rightly, I think – that if unevangelized heathen and believers under the Old Covenant are saved at all, it cannot be on the basis of their good works.

Yet this raises a conundrum. If it's possible to be saved apart from hearing the gospel, then there would appear to be no need for anyone to hear the gospel in the first place, nor even for Jesus to die on a cross for our sins – because God will judge men fairly anyway. But any soteriology that dispenses with the necessity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is theologically unacceptable. "Without shedding of blood," says Hebrews of the blood of Christ, "there is no remission of sin" (Heb. 4:22).

Paul in Romans says that believers are justified by faith in Jesus, who was sent by God "as a propitiation by His blood..." (Rom. 3:23-25). *Propitiation* means literally "mercy seat," a sort of lid or bench above the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, a holy place where God granted unmerited favor to his people instead of the wrath their sins deserved. For whatever reasons, God in his holiness requires the shed blood of his Son to save human souls. Somehow the blood of Christ must be "applied" to the unevangelized and pre-Christian believers for them to escape judgment.

Divine omniscience and the secrets of men

Let us take another route, then, and say that whereas no one can be saved apart from the sacrifice of Christ, in principle some might passively appropriate that sacrifice and be saved not by *hearing* the gospel, but rather by having a *heart* that is (or would be) receptive to the gospel. After all, Jesus did seem to indicate that what is in the heart – the seat of motivation and desire – actually matters more than confessions or good works. The thoughts and intentions of the heart are largely concealed and personal; and the Lord has always known what resides in the hearts of people.

Speaking of certain onlookers who appeared to be impressed with the miracles of Jesus, John says, “But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men,...for He knew what was in man” (John 2:25). As we have seen, Paul stated that “God will judge the secrets of men according to my gospel.” The world stands universally under judgment and wrath apart from Christ, yes, but Christ died for all – where “all” presumably means even those who have never heard the gospel. If it’s true that Jesus died for the *salvation* of all, it cannot be that he died for some people who had an opportunity to be saved and for other people who were damned by sheer circumstance.

Of course, that naturally leads to another question: On what basis can God judge the secrets of men *according to* the gospel, if those people have not in fact *heard* the gospel? Here thinkers like William Lane Craig have invoked the principle of “middle knowledge,” a concept first explored by the Jesuit theologian Luis Molina. According to Craig, God, being omniscient, “possesses knowledge of all true counterfactual propositions,” that is, truths about what a free creature would do in a set of circumstances not known to obtain in the actual world.¹² Consider for example the proposition that Bob, who is not a drinker and has never been to Jamaica, would drink at least two daquiris and three margaritas if he ever vacationed there. If that proposition

¹² See William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ,” *Faith & Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1989, p. 177.

is true, then it is a truth about Bob that is known by God. Having middle knowledge, God also knows who would respond in faith and repentance to the hearing of the gospel, even if they have never actually heard it.

As Yang and Davis conclude, “So, it may be that God has so arranged the world that those who never hear the gospel would not have responded positively to it had they been given the opportunity to hear it.”¹³ In light of the extreme improbability that the world is actually so arranged, along with the previously mentioned extreme improbability that the church will ever actually fulfill the Great Commission, I would revise that statement to place the prerogative of judgment directly in the hands of God rather than contingent upon the mouths of evangelists: “It may be that those who never hear the gospel will be judged according to whether they would have responded positively to it had they heard it.” In other words, God’s knowledge of counterfactual conditionals might be a basis for *judgment itself*, rather than a basis for arranging the world so that all persons who would receive the gospel if they heard it would in fact hear it.

Do all nonbelievers in hell suffer equally?

None of the above is to say that middle knowledge is definitely how God judges the souls of unevangelized men – only that it is one possibility. According to almost all Christians everywhere, our being able to hear and respond to the gospel is the result of divine mercy. Our works, that is, had nothing to do with it. The question then is whether Jesus might extend his mercy likewise to those who are not able to hear and respond to the gospel. It’s not an unthinkable prospect. Again our works would have nothing to do with access to salvation, so the principle of mercy would seem to hold in the same way.

But now what of those who either have rejected the gospel outright, or who *would* have rejected it had they heard it? On the premise that hell means experiencing the worst possible sort of pain forever, it would seem to follow that these resistant

¹³ Yang & Davis, p. 162-163.

souls would uniformly experience that same severe sentence upon judgment. Evidence that their judgment is not actually uniform, then, would suggest that hell does not necessarily mean experiencing the worst possible sort of pain forever. As it happens, there are New Testament passages that describe hell in a non-uniform way – that there are various levels of punishment for sins.

In Luke’s Gospel, for example, Jesus indicates that ignorance, while not an excuse for sin, is at least a mitigating factor of judgment: “And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, much is required...” (Luke 12:47-48). These verses appear in the context of a larger passage addressing the imminent return of Jesus, which implies that the punishment in question is a final judgment rather than a temporal correction. Bridges notes that Luke’s graded depiction of judgment is mirrored in passages describing various levels of eternal reward (see the parable of the minas in Luke 11), all of which constitutes evidence “that Luke has an interest in presenting God’s judgment as a nuanced experience where the punishment fits the crime and reward fits the work.”¹⁴

To certain Pharisees who had exploited widows, mouthed empty, hypocritical prayers, and otherwise “shut up the kingdom of heaven against men,” Jesus said, “You will receive a greater condemnation” (Matt. 23:14). Presumably, he means a condemnation worse than the judgment awaiting the people those Pharisees had managed to deceive or discourage from entering the kingdom of heaven. It’s bad to be deceived, but worse to be the deceiver – and God in his justice recognizes the distinction. James used similar wording to describe accountability before God among those who teach others: “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall re-

¹⁴ Carl B. Bridges, “Degrees of Punishment and Reward in the Gospels: Exegesis and Praxis,” *Stone-Campbell Journal*, 14 (Spring 2011), pp. 81-86.

ceive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1-2). Together with the understanding that not all nonbelievers go to hell, the understanding that eternal punishments may vary with the weight of sins committed points, again, to a God of great wisdom and justice.

The gospel and the Christian mission

Some months ago a commenter at the atheist blog *Debunking Christianity* confronted me with the problem of hell in a discussion of my rebuttal to John Loftus on horrendous evil.¹⁵ As I conceded at the time, I had no good answers to two distinct questions that have always troubled me: (1) If the world is doomed apart from hearing the gospel, why would God rest the eternal fate of everyone in the world on the diligence and faithfulness of the church – a bunch of “reformed sinners” who are often lazy, distracted, unfaithful, ill-informed, etc. – to get the gospel to them? (2) If the world is *not* doomed apart from hearing the gospel, why should Christians preach the gospel at all, given that God will judge men fairly anyway? I told him that I would look into those questions and publish a response – this paper being the result.

Question (1) assumes as given that the world is doomed apart from hearing the gospel. But as we have seen, that assumption is not theologically self-evident or incontrovertible. To this point I have offered reasons to think that not all nonbelievers wind up in hell, and reasons to think that not all nonbelievers who do wind up in hell are punished with equal severity. In principle, that leaves open the possibility of careful and equitable administration of eternal justice by a thoroughly good, righteous and merciful God. But that still leaves question (2): given that the world is not doomed apart from hearing the gospel, why should Christians bother to share that gospel with their

¹⁵ See comments under John W. Loftus, “Published: Don McIntosh’s Article In Response to Mine On ‘God and Horrendous Suffering,’” *Debunking Christianity*, April 29, 2024. <https://www.debunking-christianity.com/2024/04/published-don-mcintoshs-article-in.html>.

friends and neighbors, let alone sacrifice their careers or even their very lives, for the mission of evangelism?

My answer begins with the observation that the gospel is (literally) *good news*. Imagine a country in which the President issued a proclamation that anyone who called a special hotline and pledged eternal loyalty to him would receive forgiveness of all the taxes they owed, past, present and future – but then added that anyone who *failed* to call that number or make the requisite pledge, even if they never heard the President’s message, would be imprisoned and held in solitary confinement for the rest of their days. Such a proclamation might be considered “good news” to those who called the number and made the pledge (and who didn’t care much about the terrible fate of those who didn’t make the call). To others, though, it might sound more like a politically motivated threat than an offer borne of genuine goodwill. On balance, it would be difficult to objectively consider such a message “good news.”

To put it another way: if the gospel message was not “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13), but instead, “Whoever does *not* call on the name of the Lord shall be tortured forever,” the message could objectively be considered *bad news*. I maintain, then, that the gospel could not really be *good news* if it carried with it an implication that anyone who rejects it – or even anyone not fortunate enough to hear or understand it – will be tortured forever. It seems evident enough to me that good news would not cause distress or despair for its hearers.

Now it is true, the New Testament gospel does carry with it an implicit warning – that those who reject it risk future eternal judgment (John 3:18; Col. 3:28; 2 Thess. 1:8; etc.). And it bears mentioning that for those with a troubled conscience and uneasy about the fate of their souls, the promise of being rescued from judgment is good news indeed. Even so, my thesis stands in stark contrast to the “fire insurance” model of salvation, in which the gospel is simply the means of escape from future judgment. For me the warning of judgment is peripheral to the gospel, and the good news of reconciliation with God through Christ is central.

We have seen that God's future judgment of souls does not always or necessarily depend upon their response to the gospel. Why then does God commission Christian believers to preach the gospel to the lost? I would suggest that God has granted believers the high *honor* of representing him as ambassadors of a truly great king, declaring truly good news – that in Jesus Christ there is redemption from sin, reconciliation with God, joy, peace, the promise of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, and yes, an escape from what otherwise would be everlasting suffering in hell. Here and now, after all, countless human souls are desperately lost, bound in the cords of sin and in need of a savior who can reveal his goodness and grace to them. As Matthew has it, Jesus came to earth to “save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

All this is in keeping with the theology of the kingdom of God. In recent years, a consensus has developed among New Testament scholars who maintain that the kingdom of God is both “already” and “not yet;” that is, that the kingdom has arrived or been inaugurated on earth in the person of Jesus Christ, but still awaits its ultimate consummation or fulfillment with the return of Jesus, the restoration of Israel, and final judgment of the nations at the end of the age. We preach the gospel, then, so that people may find the blessings of God's kingdom now, before it arrives in its fullness, and that we may share in their joy. Thus we are called to warn men of God's judgment to come, indeed, but even then with the understanding that their judgment is not inevitable and the act of judgment is God's business. We are blessed to be called to the “ministry of reconciliation,” as Paul called it, in that we have a part in bringing men to fellowship with God now. We do not, however, bring judgment upon them one way or another. The act of judgment properly belongs to God alone.

Consider a young man who does in fact hear the gospel and openly rejects it. Many Christians would say that he has sealed his fate and is doomed to an eternity in hell; but that doesn't square with the testimony of countless believers. In my own case I heard, and rejected, the gospel a number of times before I finally broke down and gave my life to Jesus Christ in faith.

Doubtless Saul of Tarsus heard the gospel many times before Jesus knocked him to the ground and revealed to him God's power. "Now is the day of salvation," said Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:2). So it is that a man who calls upon the Lord in faith now will be saved now. But that does not entail that if a man refuses to call upon the Lord now he will be judged now. There is a certain temporal asymmetry that distinguishes salvation from damnation.

To everyone who calls upon him, God in his mercy grants forgiveness immediately; but to those who resist him, God withholds judgement until the end of their days. In his patience and forbearance God continues to extend forgiveness and reconciliation to all who have "ears to hear." Even for those currently on a path to destruction, God stands ready to forgive and restore. In the meantime he gives us "space to repent," and is "longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). The gospel thus remains good news, even for those who resist it, and thus we in the church are called to continue preaching the gospel.

Book Review

Apologetics in Africa by Kevin Muriithi Ndereba

*Ernest Musekiwa*¹

Apologetics in Africa: An Introduction

Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, Editor

Langham Publishing, 2024

404 pages

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, apologetics teaching and training in African theological schools and churches had not received much recognition and acceptance. For most people, the idea of apologetics conveyed the concept of endless arguments and pride. Apologetics was assumed to be a worthless and unfruitful effort among the *unspiritual theologians* who think logic, debate, and philosophy are for the unspiritual and the immature. But, in recent times, the African theological landscape has shifted towards a more positive response to this theological branch of Christian apologetics, whether as a branch of philosophical theology or as a separate field of systematic and historical study.

It seems there has been great animosity between Christian apologetics ministries and more traditional church practices in Africa. In fact, in some circles, apologetics has been relegated to the university and the seminary and has failed to bulldoze its way into the ordinary lives of the believers. Why? Because most believers have felt that apologetics is an enemy of the gospel because if wrongly used, it degenerates into endless arguments of Christian belief and practice and

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sways people from focusing on the Gospel. This attitude has made many people shun apologetics, and in many theological schools, one cannot even find courses on philosophy or apologetics. Since the publication of Kigame's book in 2018, *Christian Apologetics Through African Eyes*, however, there has been a great interest among African scholars of Christian Apologetics.

I am glad that a book by Africans and for African churches has finally come full circle in this latest book edited by Kevin Muriithi Ndereba. Written by over a dozen African scholars, the book comprises sixteen essays; upon reading it, one cannot fail to see the passion and discern the need of the African church and how such a book has been long overdue. In the opening section of the book, the authors make it clear that this book is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, most Christians do not see the need for apologetics; secondly, Western apologetics textbooks often fail to address contextual questions and issues in Africa;" and, thirdly, African believers need a manual and a guide to help them tackle some of the most challenging problems and questions that only Christian apologetics can handle.

One of the challenges of the African church for centuries has been the need to explain our Christian faith and distinguish it from traditional religious beliefs and practices. Many have dismally failed and ended up embracing syncretism. The book is quite interesting in that it deals with more robust and contemporary issues that believers in Africa need to be aware of to present a ready defense in a multi-faith and multi-culturally diverse continent. Years ago, Drs. Johnson Philip and Saneesh Cherian introduced an integrated approach to apologetics at Trinity Graduate School of Apologetics and Theology (where I studied), something similar to what the authors of this book have done as reflected in the book's four categories: *biblical*, *philosophical*, *cultural*, and *practical*.

In Part 1 of the book, the authors look at biblical issues that cover the reliability of the Bible, its canonization, trans-

lation, transmission, and hermeneutics. This is a vital topic considering that for many African believers, belief in the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures is not strongly emphasized owing to the neo-Pentecostal movements that subscribe more to mysticism, personal experience, and supposedly "new revelations" more than the authority of the Bible's teachings. Of course, most of what the Bible teaches can fail to make sense if the basic rules of biblical interpretation are ignored. The Bible should be read, understood, and properly applied to one's life and ministry. The treatment of the resurrection of Jesus is also important, considering that in African religious thought, reincarnation instead of resurrection has received much discussion, leading to spirit possession issues and animism. Still, this section of the book addresses the question of the uniqueness of Jesus compared to African ancestors.

In Part 2, the book addresses philosophical issues of evil, religions, and worldviews. For most African Christians, one's salvation should bring an end to all forms of evil, suffering, and pain. The believer's main purpose in serving God is to be freed from evil. When a believer experiences suffering and pain, often doubts about one's faith and right standing before God come into question. How should believers learn to navigate through the midst and chaos of the crises of faith? Drawing from John Mbiti's classical work, the book argues that there are two types of evil – natural and spiritual – and that the task of the apologist is to help earnest seekers see this dichotomy and to help believers trust more in God and his power. Understanding the distinction between a biblical worldview and that of African Traditional Religion (ATR) is another necessary task of the African apologist.

In Part 3, the book addresses issues of Christianity as a religion in Africa, the doctrine of Christ, and its so-called resemblance to ATR. The authors also address the issue of marriage, in particular, the practice and custom of paying dowry commonly referred to as *lobola*. Interestingly, a chap-

ter on domestic violence is also included, which is relevant considering that domestic violence is on the increase in Africa, and African churches are not spared from this scourge. How should the church respond to this in ways that show the 1 Peter 3:15 apologetic mandate?

The final part of the book deals with practical issues. For me, this is the most important part of the book, in light of how important these issues are for ministry. Firstly, due to globalization and immigration, African churches are in constant danger of mixing with diverse religious beliefs, philosophies, and practices. Christian ministers should be trained in handling such and empower churches to be prepared to engage in evangelism using apologetics as a tool for evangelism. New Age movements have become a definite threat to the purity of Christian worship in Africa and many are ignorant of such. The philosophy of New Ageism has engulfed most African Pentecostal churches and the church needs a complete overhaul. The question is rightly asked: “Are we gods or we are God’s?”

The problem of cults in Africa has been addressed in several academic and non-scholarly papers. Cults are a serious problem that threatens our faith and believers should be trained in handling them. Christian-Muslim relations are also important and the church needs to seriously consider scriptural reasoning not only to engage Muslims in dialogue but also to share the Gospel in ways that encourage peaceful co-existence, tolerance, and room for evangelism. The last chapter of the book deals with apologetics in a digital world and the importance of having a holistic apologetic in a digital world.

I would give this book an 8/10 rating for raising issues that are contextually relevant and practical for the Christian believer in Africa. The book has helped me to look at several issues from different perspectives, considering that it looks not only at African scholarship in its treatment of the subject but also uses a comparative approach with Western apologet-

ics texts that seems to have been the departure point of its investigation. The need for contextual theology and apologetics is of paramount importance and we anticipate the embrace of apologetics by various churches, theological schools, and believers to help in the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.

I am confident that this is just the starting point, and we have many things to look forward to in African Christian apologetics. This book is not just worth reading for African believers! Others can also benefit greatly from it by understanding how Africa has helped shape the Christian mind and how to counsel theological problems that plague African believers in the diaspora. I would recommend every serious student of apologetics to lay his hands on this book and encourage students to mine its wealth of wisdom.

Book Review
Old Testament Ethics for the People of God
by Christopher J. H. Wright

Daniel Williams¹

Old Testament Ethics for the People of God
Christopher J. H. Wright
Intervarsity Press, 2004 (Kindle edition 2013)
520 pages

I BEGIN THIS REVIEW with the Preface rather than getting right into the first chapter because Wright makes some significant assertions in this beginning section which will be important for understanding his perspective throughout the book. He asserts that in pursuing the topic of Old Testament ethics, he has found very little written of a comprehensive nature. He aims to address this oversight by providing the student with a comprehensive framework within which Old Testament ethics can be organized and understood.

To this end he will avoid technical terms to make the work accessible to a wide audience. He will address primarily social aspects of Old Testament ethics as he believes this is the primary thrust of the Old Testament. In part two he will expand the scope of his primary study to encompass a wide range of issues such as ecology, politics, culture and family.

I will not review the remainder of the Preface as I don't believe it adds greatly to an understanding of either the book or the author's intentions, which have already been nicely covered. As the book is over five hundred pages long, and

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this review is limited, I will not attempt to summarize every subsection in each of the three parts. I will select several for brief review and only briefly refer to the rest.

Chapter One: Introduction

Section One: The ethical triangle

In this introduction Wright immediately sets the hermeneutical tone by warning his readers not to read into the text of the Old Testament our modern ethical concerns and understandings. No proof texting please, he implicitly advises. Stick with the historical, literary, and cultural context if you are to understand and appreciate Old Testament ethics.

He goes on with his intent to use the concept of worldview, meaning their interpretive framework, to help his readers understand what the ancient Israelites believed. The outcome? Wright thinks the basis for the Old Testament Israelite's ethics rested on their believing they were an elect people in a unique relationship with God via the covenant. They had been given the land by God. In response they were to be pure and remain separate or holy among the surrounding peoples. To accomplish this, they were guided by God's revealed Torah. God was their king as well as Lord of the entire earth.

Wright believes that this set of basic worldview assumptions provides the framework for Old Testament ethics. He goes on to strongly suggest that it is only by connecting this worldview with the New Testament worldview of Jesus and his followers that the ethics of the Old Testament makes sense in the New Testament as Jesus fulfills the demands of the law.

The triangle of relationships, of God, Israel and the land, are the pillars of this worldview. Wright will take each corner of the triangle and examine it in Part One.

Part One: A Structure for Old Testament Ethics

Section One: The theological angle

Wright believes that in the Old Testament, ethics is fundamentally theological. What does this mean? It means that ethical issues are at every point related to God – to his character, his will, his actions, and his purpose. This means that ethics are not primarily about what I think they ought to be. They are not based in societal consensus. This is quite contrary to our current mode of thinking.

Wright goes to make clear that God has revealed Himself to us and we are not at liberty to construct Him after our own image. God's identity and character, the basis for Old Testament ethics, are revealed by what He has done in history. So ethics is a matter of response and gratitude within the relationship the people have with God.

That relationship was informed by Torah, God's law. But Torah is not a mere set of statutes to be checked off. Rather it is God's standards for His people set within the context of a story. The foundational story for Israel's self-understanding in its relationship with God is the Exodus. God redeems and then makes a covenant with the people giving them His law which they were to keep as a response of grateful obedience. Grace comes first, then human response.

Within the context of God's communication and purpose the story unfolds, though often refraining from ethical comment on the social interactions of His people. God was indeed sovereignly in control of history and the people were held responsible for the actions. No attempt was made to reconcile these ideas and they did not lead to ethical relativism.

So, Israel had a past to which they responded and a future of which they were to be a part. They would be a blessing to all nations fulfilling the covenant made to Abraham. So the present, being informed by the past, along with the future promise, held immense ethical importance. This view of the

past and future informing their present ethics is a wonderful way of seeing ethics in the Christian community as we remember Christ's work and teachings and look forward to his return.

Section Two: The Social Angle

Wright asserts that Old Testament ethics was delivered through lived-out historic situations and not as abstract principles in a rule book. This is certainly true as it fits with the biblical structure. As the creation and fall are worked out, grace and redemption are attributed to God as ethical standards to be emulated by his chosen people.

Righteousness is based on God's character, and it becomes the basic requirement for his people. God has chosen Abraham so that he and his progeny will reflect God's character and so be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Israel is unique as God's elect. Deuteronomy 4:32-34 is cited as definitive of that uniqueness which is demonstrated by God's redemptive selection. Based on this redemption they were to live their lives in a certain ethical manner demonstrating that redemptive elective relationship.

Based on this redemptive reality Israel was to live out a distinctive manner of life. That life was one of worshipful obedience. Their social life hinged on loyalty to God and could not be maintained in the event of syncretistic worship of other gods.

Section Three: The Economic Angle

Wright next moves to the impact of the economic understanding of ethics in the Old Testament with an exposition on the importance of the land on the theology and ethics of Israel. Wright immediately contrasts the importance of a place with the person of Jesus for the Christian. Our relationship with God is centered in a person not a place. So, understand-

ing Old Testament ethics is immediately challenging for our contemporary understanding.

Wright ably demonstrates in this section that the promise to Abraham of a land in Genesis is a dominant feature. Why is this so important? Wright takes his time in demonstrating that the presence of God among His people is the primary goal -- the establishment and extension of God's reign upon the earth.

Occupation of the land and the visible quantifiable prosperity of God's people as His tenant managers was a major sign of living in harmony with and in God's presence. Part of that harmony with God was enacting loyalty to the covenant by showing to the poor, the widow, the stranger, God's grace and provision. The prophets often castigate Israel for not demonstrating God's character, based on their business practice. An ethic of grace in economy, and the Jews continual failure of it, was used to chastise and warn them of God's displeasure and impending judgement. The Jew's economic life was a gauge of their faithfulness or lack to God's covenant.

Part Two: Themes in Old Testament Ethics

Section Four: Ecology and the Earth

In this section Wright expands on the triangular covenantal understanding of God, Israel and their land in Part One, to the wider context of what he calls the creation triangle - God, humanity and the world. That God owns the entire earth and that it is a gift to humanity. And so, there is a legitimate ecological dimension to Old Testament ethics.

Lest we read too much of our own current concerns into the ancient text, Wright takes the position that though an ecological ethic can be derived, it cannot be understood as a concern of the Israelites. And yet there is a good deal of material in the Old Testament that shows the ownership of God

and the stewardship expected of mankind. Wright then expands on the explicit ethics involved which he believes can be legitimately derived from the text.

Section Five: Economics and the Poor

From the previous sections Wright has shown that the Old Testament frames mankind as the manager/tenant/caretakers of God's good creation. We are entrusted with the world and its resources as a responsibility. What then should be our attitude toward the poor who lack access to this divine provision? As I tell my young grandchildren, we should learn to share.

Our ethics concerning the poor must be based on God as gracious owner of the world, not on ourselves. We hold it in trust and are answerable to Him and to others. This is a very different viewpoint from the one I grew up in America. Here we are told we have rights to many things, including how we dispose of what we own. We decide as autonomous individuals, not as responsible caretakers. This viewpoint of responsible caretaker, not as exclusive user would modify how I understand my dealings with the poor.

Wright then introduces the problem: the economics of a fallen world, beginning in Genesis 3. The outcome of the fall is strife and warfare over resources. Wright maintains, and I agree, that ownership and utilization of the land is the single greatest problem between peoples. In addition, with the Fall, work loses its purpose as God designed it for man and frustration enters the picture. Unjust business practices hurt people and poverty ensues.

Section Six: The Land and Christian Ethics

Based on the preceding sections concerning land, economics, the fall and the resulting ethics of God's presence, Wright takes up how these threads may be woven into Christian eth-

ics. He addresses the problem through a hermeneutic informed by the paradigmatic, God's historic involvement with Israel; typological, that the land prefigures New Testament mission of the Messiah; and eschatological, that the Old and New Testaments have a future purpose., These perspectives are complementary methods for interpretation.

Wright goes on to show that the concept of fellowship, which is sharing in common as in a household, is carried forward and becomes the basis of economic sharing and provision. He illustrates his point using the year of Jubilee, with its equal redistribution of the land which belonged to God in equal provision for His people. The lessons enumerated should certainly inform our current understanding of both capitalism and socialism.

Wright addresses politics and the nations; justice and righteousness; law and the legal system; and culture and family in sections seven through ten. Each is well worth reading but cannot be addressed in this paper due to its brevity.

Section Eleven: The Way of the Individual

In this final section of Part Two, Wright discusses the individual in community, or the issue of personal ethics. He believes that God's moral demands on the person can only be understood in the context of God's directives to His covenant community. This is why Wright has placed this section subsequent to the previous sections where corporate ethics were discussed.

Wright points out, and I agree, that in the modern West we start with the individual and work out to relational groups. This perspective is contrary to traditional cultures. He goes on to point out that both the Old and New Testaments base both individual and social ethics in God's covenant relationship. God seeks to establish a holy community to testify to His character.

Individual ethics are framed in stories of people interacting with each other and with God in the context of community. Ezekiel 18 is case in point, making clear individual responsibility within this context. It is the wise person who thinks and acts as God has revealed Himself.

Part Three: Studying Old Testament Ethics

In Section Twelve, Wright surveys the history of various historical approaches to the study of Old Testament ethics. They are the period of the early Church, the Reformation era, and finally some contemporary confessional approaches. Again, due to brevity I will not review these sub-sections.

Section Thirteen: Contemporary Scholarship: A Bibliographical Essay

In Section Thirteen, Wright provides a bibliographical essay on the upsurge of interest in contemporary scholarship on the topic of Old Testament ethics. He finds this gratifying and cites with approval such writers as Walter Brueggemann, John Barton, Norman Gottwald, John Goldingay, Walter Kaiser, Jr. and several more.

He ends this list of scholars on what he considers a negative note with Cyril Rodd, with whom he disagrees. Rodd rejects all attempts to bridge the Old with the New Testaments regarding ethics. Wright, along with many other scholars have pointed out what they believe is Rodd's fallacious reasoning.

Section Fourteen: Hermeneutics and Authority in Old Testament Ethics

In this final section, Wright ends on the hopeful note that he finds the study of Old Testament ethics is alive and well. However, the diversity of approaches and opinions calls the

enterprise of arriving at a coherent understanding of Old Testament ethics deeply into question.

Wright suggests three stratagems to accomplish the task. They are understanding the historical context of Israel, responding to what we find, and finally applying appropriately what we understand. Wright sets about exploring these stratagems in the subsections that follow. Of particular interest to me is the section on the normative question. This concerns whether the Old Testament speaks to how we ought to live in our modern world. Wright believes that it does, and quotes John Goldingay's summary with approval.

For purposes of the study of Old Testament ethics, Wright asks what to me is a very important question concerning the spiritual condition of scholars. He asks, "...does it matter if he or she believes in the objective reality of the deity presented to us on the pages of the Old Testament as Lord?" While affirming that objectivity matters in such research, Wright nonetheless finds that a scholar's work is significantly affected by whether they believe in the biblical God or not. He lists a diversity of scholars who hold to differing views of the reality of God to demonstrate his point.

Wright then states his position as one who, with the New Testament writers, believes the God of the Old Testament is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He accepts 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is breathed out by God. Having said that, he asks the question concerning authority. What if any authority does the ethics found in the Old Testament have for the New Testament believer, and society at large?

Wright then addresses the issue of authority and how the Old Testament might be affecting the modern church. Though, in his view, the ethical teaching found in the Old Testament has authority, the question is whether the Old Testament is addressed directly to me. If not, then it has no claim on my obedience. Why? Because it is not addressed to me.

Wright summarizes God's revealed ethical requirements with the following. "So, the reality of this people, rendered to

us in the Old Testament scriptures, generates an ethic of paradigm and analogy, in which we assume the moral consistency of God and ask, ‘If this is what God required of them, what, in our different context, does God require of us?’” I appreciate this summary for its general clarity in anchoring ethics in our personal, on-going relationship with the God who reveals Himself to us.

Wright concludes as the authority of the Old Testament is based in the reality of God revealing Himself and His will to us, we should read the Old Testament in the light of Christ, His final revelation of Himself to us. In view of these realities, we can safely answer the question, how should we then live? Again, due to the brevity of this review I will not address the Appendix: What About the Canaanites.

My concluding thoughts are that I greatly benefited from reading and reviewing this book. Old Testament ethics and how to understand and apply them is a constant source of controversy in the modern Church. This book has helped to clarify my thinking concerning this important topic.

Book Review

Lost and Found: Public Theology in the Secular Age by Michael A. Milton

Stephen J. Bedard¹

Lost and Found: Public Theology in the Secular Age
Michael A. Milton, Editor
Wipf and Stock, 2024
238 pages

PUBLIC THEOLOGY is growing in importance as the relationship between the church and state becomes more complex and often polarizing. Even denominations that are against state churches recognize that Christians live in a world that is shaped by forces outside the church and that as citizens, they want to have a say in what society looks like

A recent addition to the conversation is *Lost and Found: Public Theology in the Secular Age*, edited and written mostly by Michael A. Milton of the D. James Kennedy Institute of Reformed Leadership. This book seeks to offer a Reformed vision for public theology in a world that is increasingly secular.

Lost and Found is divided into four parts. The first part looks at “Ideas.” Milton begins this section by exploring the meaning of public theology, specifically within a secular age. In this, Milton interacts with some ideas of Charles Taylor. Milton ultimately defines public theology as the pastoral application of the Bible to every area of life. In doing so, Milton emphasizes that God’s love for humanity is what ties the

¹ Stephen J. Bedard, M.A., M.Th., M.Div., D.Min., is a military chaplain who pastors a church in Nova Scotia, Canada. His areas of expertise include the historical Jesus, the Jesus Myth theory and disability theology.

Bible together. The first principle behind this theology is God's revelation to humankind, both general and special revelation.

Having set the foundation, the book moves to the next section of "Daily Life." This section begins with an essay by John Frame on the threat of Marxism to the survival of the family. Milton then returns with a chapter looking at "transgenderism." In this chapter, he seeks to provide a biblical critique to some of the current concepts surrounding gender. John Panagiotou offers an economic theory based on biblical ideas. These three chapters are tied together by tackling some of the major concerns many Christians have for what life looks like in this secular age.

The third section deals with "National Life." It begins with a look at the question of open borders by Peter Lillback. Lillback addresses the claim that loving Christians should be open to large scale immigration and concludes that ultimately, closed borders are better for the nation. Milton returns with a chapter on euthanasia. Once again, proponents of euthanasia claim that it is the kind thing to do. Milton examines the different aspects of the issue and concludes that euthanasia is always wrong. Milton concludes this section with an interesting chapter on whether the decline of each nation is inevitable. Presumably, the question is whether the United States must relinquish its spot as the most powerful nation in the world. Milton seeks to point people away from hopelessness and towards hope that the United States will never fall from power.

The fourth section deals with "Triggers." Milton begins this section with a warning against the "new socialism," which would include things like Critical Race Theory. Milton warns, from the history of communism in the previous century, against giving a foothold to any form of socialism. Milton also addresses the question of racism. It is often those on the left who are most vocal against racism and from these conversations come concepts that are very troubling for a Reformed public theology. Milton seeks to condemn racism but

without embracing socialist and liberal ideas. Milton then concludes the section and the book with a chapter pointing hopefully toward revival.

How helpful is *Lost and Found* for the ongoing discussion of public theology? For those who fully agree with all of the conclusions presented in this book, they will appreciate the articulation of what they already believe. However, for those attempting to make up their minds on some of these topics or for those with different ideas, this book will be a disappointment.

What is disappointing is not their conclusions, although I do not fully agree with all their conclusions, but the way they defend them. This is why I am reviewing a book on public theology for an apologetics-related journal. Writers like Milton are welcome to present a conservative worldview based on Reformed theology, but they need to defend those positions accordingly.

At this point, I need to provide self-disclosure. I am a non-Reformed Baptist and I am Canadian. The last point is relevant because there are certain parts of my daily experience as a Canadian (e.g. universal healthcare) that the authors of *Lost and Found* would see as dangerous socialism. I acknowledge that I am not the target audience for this book. At the same time, I am not attempting to critique their conclusions. My interest is only to highlight some concerns in their methodology.

One example is the chapter by John Frame on “The Family in the Secular Age: A Christian Response to Marxism.” The title makes clear that he sees Marxism as a threat to the traditional family. Frame offers some real concerns about families, including broken homes and absent fathers. Many Christians, of all traditions, would acknowledge that there is a problem. But what is causing the breakdown of the family? Frame believes it is because of teachings that things are falling apart. I kept waiting for a clear analysis of how teachings are shaping the family but all there were offered were assertions. Not much was needed to make something . For exam-

ple, a school that does not teach explicitly about the Christian God, even if only a minority of the students are practicing Christians, is since we know how Marx felt about religion. Frame simply describes a time when the family is rapidly changing and a time that is influenced by some ideas somehow connected to Marxism. This is at best only a demonstration of correlation and definitely not causation.

Another example is Milton's chapter on "transgenderism." I put transgenderism in quotes because I am not convinced that transgender people are a unified block working toward the same goal. But my concern is of a different nature. Milton attempts to provide a biblical critique of those who claim to be transgender. The problem with this is that Bible says very little on this topic. There is one passage in the Old Testament that warns against wearing the opposite gender's clothes, but it is the same chapter that warns people to not wear clothing made of two fabrics. Milton then shifts to the traditional passages that are used to condemn homosexuality. His primary case against transgender people is what the Bible says about sexual sin. But he never makes the case that being transgender is sexual sin. Some of the transgender people I know are still in their original marriages from before they transitioned. Unless one accepts that they have successfully changed genders, they are in heterosexual relationships. There are other transgender individuals who are not sexually active. Are they in sexual sin simply for being transgender?

Finally, I would like to comment on the chapter by John Panagiotou on economics. I appreciated how he went through the Bible and looked at how different passages could be used as economic principles. I was looking forward to how he would deal with the passages in Acts where disciples sold their belongings and held all things in common. Now I do not believe that the Bible commands us to live in an economy based on communism, but these are relevant texts. I understand that these texts are challenging, but they should not be ignored just because they look too much like socialism.

There is more that I could say, including where euthanasia supposedly destroys the image of God, despite the long tradition of martyrdom in the church, which presumably does not destroy the image of God. I am not trying to critique any of the conclusions of these authors on these hot button topics. I applaud their willingness to address subjects that many are afraid to. Unfortunately, the arguments that are used to support these conclusions are weak.

Lost and Found may have been meant to be an in-house conversation, where everyone already agrees on a worldview and the arguments do not require the same strenuous defense. However, this book is also meant to be a part of public theology and contributors must be prepared to interact with opposing ideas and not rely on straw man arguments.

Book Review

When God Only Knew: An Attorney's Look at the Evidence by Michael J. Pugh

Johnson C. Philip¹

When Only God Knew: An Attorney's Look at the Evidence
Michael J. Pugh
Trilogy Christian Publishers, 2022
525 pages

THE EVIDENTIAL RELIABILITY of the Bible has elicited a strong response in every generation from the time the rationalists started writing on the topic. The rationalists and atheists frequently write against the historical and scientific reliability of the Bible; but very quickly the Christian community exposes their arguments to be shallow. What is more, Christian writers and scholars continue to come up with new approaches to defend the reliability of the Bible.

Christians from all walks of life, ranging from average people to the topmost thinkers and scholars have written about the historical and scientific accuracy of the Bible. This book under consideration is written by a practicing lawyer. The Christian community already has books published by at least two recognized lawyers. The first is Lee Strobel. Strobel is a former legal editor at the *Chicago Tribune* and a former atheist who converted to Christianity. His book *The Case for Christ* is a well-known work in which he applies legal reasoning and journalistic scrutiny to evidence about Jesus Christ. While it's not exclusively about the existence of God, it's a cornerstone of his broader apologetic work. The second is John Warwick Montgomery. A lawyer, professor, and the-

¹ See page 23 for a brief bio of Johnson C. Philip.

ologian, Montgomery has written extensively on Christian apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith. While not exclusively about the existence of God, his books often tackle the topic within a broader framework.

Having read such established writers, I wondered what fresh information or argument this new and relatively unknown author might have to contribute. I was not disappointed. Here is a totally fresh look at the subject. The author has presented the book exactly the way an expert lawyer would present and argue. For doing that, he has divided this book into four parts. The first part is an elaborate introduction consisting of three chapters. The second part delves into the archaeological and historical accuracy of the Bible. As can be expected from an expert lawyer, he has presented this chapter in elaborate detail. The third part deals with the scientific accuracy of the Bible. There are two unusually comprehensive chapters which touch upon practically every aspect of the Bible and science. The fourth section has two highly detailed chapters related to how Bible Prophecy demonstrates the divine origin of the Bible.

So many books are now available on the factual reliability of the Bible that new books fail to furnish anything new. At least they could look at the entire collection of information and present it from a new angle, but most new books appear to fail in that task. So the first thing I want to say is that though this book picks up an old theme on which thousands of books are now available, the author has presented his thesis in a totally different way. This approach alone would be a sufficient reason for everyone with an interest in apologetics to read it. He documents his affirmations with copious endnotes (there are well over 1,500 provided). This will help researchers to get to the primary material.

Evaluation of the book. First, the negative points: A few pictures are included, but if the author had to give pictures, one wonders why he did not include pictures in sections address-

ing historical events of various kinds, for which plenty of pictures are available. What is more, pictures would have added to the value of the books for lay people. Also in a book of this type, it would have been nice if an annotated bibliography were added. This would help inquirers and lay people who may not be aware of the vast amount of material that is available for them to pursue. Finally, it seems that the author has not interacted with, or read the works, of pioneers of apologetics and creationism in his own country. This is not a demerit of the book in any way, but demonstrating an acquaintance with the people of his own land would have enriched an already good book.

Now let's delve into the positive aspects of this remarkable book. The author, equipped with his proficiency in deduction and enriched by his legal training and practice, demonstrates an unrivaled mastery of historical reconstruction methods. With this combination of skills, he writes this book as if he were laying out the evidence for the Bible in a court of law. This legal approach to biblical evidence adds an element of gravitas and meticulous scrutiny to his work, reminiscent of a keen lawyer presenting a case to a jury. He painstakingly sifts and sorts through the available evidence, examining each piece in great detail with a meticulousness akin to that of a seasoned attorney preparing for a crucial case.

Despite the comprehensive nature of his research and the inherent complexity of the subject matter, the author doesn't alienate the reader with complex jargon. Instead, he strikes a balance by employing the language of the layperson, making the book and its profound arguments accessible to anyone, regardless of their background or prior knowledge of the subject. The author's skill in presenting complex arguments in a simplified manner has the potential to reach a wide audience, from seasoned theologians to curious laypeople. Consequently, this book stands out as a resource that bridges the gap between scholarly analysis and general readership, providing a

comprehensive, accessible examination of the historical and legal evidence supporting the Bible.

To those who have some training in Evidential Apologetics: This book will serve as a highly useful resource. Using the points and the endnotes, you can develop arguments in favor of a reliable Bible. What is more, he has presented the subject in such an elaborate manner, and in such a novel way, that it will serve them for many long years as a resource. In fact, I would place this book alongside Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Volumes 1 and 2* in its usefulness for preparing lectures. And sure enough, these volumes are placed side-by-side in my collection of apologetics-related books.

If you are an inquirer, you are encouraged to read this book. If you are interested in apologetics, please be sure to read this book. If you write or speak in the area of Christian Apologetics, this book is a must for your collection of resource books.

