

# **Semănătorul (The Sower)**

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Semănătorul (The Sower): The Emanuel Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research, has been published for the past four years. Its aim from its inception is to be an international, peer-reviewed Journal which expounds and defends the historic Christian faith and guides regarding faithful ministry practice. The Journal includes valuable academic contributions from the English-speaking world and provides the vehicle to promote Romanian theological research to the global church family.

Until this point it has largely been used to report on the Theological Conferences held twice yearly in Emanuel in which International scholars and the local faculty participated. The Journal served as a means to publish the papers which were read and discussed and to make them available online on the Emanuel website.

We can now announce that with this edition the Journal has progressed to become a “stand-alone” publication promoting research, in which both local and international scholars continue to participate. This present edition of Semănătorul incorporates the articles which were collated in March 2020 relating to the chosen theme “Technology, Modern Culture and Social Change: Challenges and Opportunities for the Romanian Church.”

The production of this Journal was made possible through the commitment of members of the Emanuel faculty, the collaboration of Emanuel University Press, the Emanuel “Ethics and Society” Research Centre, and the co-operation of distinguished colleagues from the Irish Baptist College, UK and Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.

These journal articles include a range of papers on various aspects broadly related to the chosen theme endeavouring to communicate Christian truth in a modern culture. Any variations in style, vocabulary and in the English translations used, in the opinion of the editors should not detract from understanding or present any difficulties in profiting from them.

Dr. Hamilton Moore

Editor

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# **‘One Name Under Heaven’: Towards an Evangelical Response to Religious Pluralism**

David Luke<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

It is generally accepted that today we live in a pluralist society. It is not just that society is plural in its variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as something to be approved and cherished. The New Testament proclaimed the message of salvation through Jesus and the exclusivity of that salvation. The result of these exclusivist claims was that the relationship between Christianity and other belief systems was at odds with each other. The majority of Evangelicals have sought to maintain this historic exclusivist approach of the Christian message. This article will examine some of the options from Christian scholars who favour a less rigorist position. It will then deal with what remain key sticking points for Evangelicals. Finally, it will suggest a New Testament approach that can help to shape our understanding of other religions. First, however, there is brief survey of some of the factors which have led to the popularisation of pluralism as a way to think about religious faith.

**KEY WORDS** Religion, pluralism, exclusivism, Evangelicals, salvation.

Lesslie Newbigin<sup>2</sup> points out in much of Europe and the Western world today religious pluralism is not merely a fact it is something to be celebrated. Kosuke Koyama comments ‘that no one can hold the truth in the palm of his or her hand is the basic orientation of sound religious pluralism.’ As he rightly points out ‘This challenges the conviction of “no other name” (Acts 4:12) which has guided Christian theology for centuries.’<sup>3</sup>

From earliest times Christians proclaimed that Jesus is both God and man.<sup>4</sup> The consequence of this proclamation is that Jesus is both God’s ultimate revelation of himself in history and that it is exclusively through faith in him that salvation is to be found.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this message of salvation through Jesus and the

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<sup>2</sup> Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Kosuke Koyama. “A Theological Reflection on Religious Pluralism.” *Ecumenical Review*, 51 (2) (1999):160–171. 160.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. John 1:1-3; Colossians 2:9.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5.

exclusivity of that salvation was proclaimed from the outset in a culture where religious pluralism was both accepted and celebrated. In the New Testament we see that the result of these exclusivist claims was that the relationship between Christianity and other belief systems from the outset was one of conflict.<sup>6</sup>

This pattern of the message of salvation exclusively in Christ and conflict with other religious beliefs continued in the following centuries. There is no evidence that the early church sought to live with the belief that its message was compatible with other belief systems or that other belief systems were equally valid expressions of religious faith. At best, for writers like Justin Martyr, the truth found in other religions simply pointed to the one who Christians argued was ‘the truth.’ As a result Christians sought to convert all to be followers of Jesus Christ. In the ancient world no-one mistook the significance of the Christian proclamation that ‘Jesus is Lord.’ Furthermore, as Harold Netland has written, ‘Historically, exclusivism has been the dominant position of the Christian church.’<sup>7</sup>

This remained the case until the late twentieth century. The situation then changed, especially within the Western Church where, as Gavin D’Costa writes the situation is that ‘no major systematic theologian [now] holds a rigorist exclusivism.’<sup>8</sup> It seems that for many theologians today exclusivism has given way to the pluralistic vision that is embraced in the wider society.

Despite this tendency towards pluralism in the wider Christian academy the majority of Evangelicals have sought to maintain the historic exclusivist approach of the Christian faith which raises a considerable obstacle for them. For, as Alister McGrath writes ‘the central issue is this: given that there are so many religions in the market-place, how can Christianity claim to be true?’<sup>9</sup> Is rigorous exclusivism a sustainable position in the current pluralist climate?

This article will examine some of the options from Christian scholars who favour a less rigorist position. It will then deal with what remain key sticking points for Evangelicals. Finally, it will suggest a New Testament approach that can help to shape our understanding of other religions. First, however, there is brief survey

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<sup>6</sup> e.g. Acts 4:1-22; 19:23-41.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Netland. *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Gavin D’Costa. “Theology of Religions.” In *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* Second, edited by David Ford, 626-644. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), 629.

<sup>9</sup> A. McGrath, *Religious Pluralism*. Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.bethinking.org/truth/religious-pluralism> n.d.

of some of the factors which have led to the popularisation of pluralism as a way to think about religious faith.

## THE BACKGROUND TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

John Bowden has written:

For almost 1500 years the three great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have lived together, for better or worse, in relationships ranging from mutual respect and toleration to persecution. Moreover, the world into which they came knew of yet other religions, even if the Abrahamic faiths often dismissed these in disparaging terms as idolatry or superstition, and more new religions have emerged, or have been discovered, during the course of their history. So there is a sense in which religious pluralism as a phenomenon has always been with us.<sup>10</sup>

As he goes on to point out what sets contemporary religious pluralism apart is the impact of the Enlightenment. This in turn gave rise to the narrative of modernity. Following the impact of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century people in a society once dominated by Christendom began to think about religion in different ways. A number of developments lay behind this.

The first development was the growth of the state. After the tumult of the ostensibly religious wars unleashed by the Reformation there was, by the end of the seventeenth century, a growing desire for peace amongst many educated European people. In this period as the influence of the state grew many leaders, as Juan Pablo Dominguez notes, ‘aspired to reform churches and beliefs so that they ceased to be an obstacle to political stability, social harmony, economic growth and intellectual development.’<sup>11</sup> One approach to this was to enforce religious unity. The experience of the post-Reformation period, however, had demonstrated that this simply did not work. The answer was seen to be, rather reluctantly in some cases, religious toleration.

In order to promote religious toleration many people supported ‘doctrinal minimalism.’ In other words, it was more important for Christians to unite around the tenets upon which they agreed rather than dividing over the areas of disagreement. For example, did it really matter how a person celebrated the Eucharist? Was it worth going to war over this? John Locke wrote, ‘Men will always differ on religious questions and rival parties will continue to quarrel and

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<sup>10</sup> John Bowden, “Religious Pluralism and the Heritage of the Enlightenment.” In *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, edited by Roger Boase, (2005), 13-20. Aldershot: Ashgate. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Juan Pablo Dominguez. 2017. “Introduction: Religious Toleration in the Age of the Enlightenment.” *History of European Ideas*, 43 (4) (2017), 273-287. 275.

wage war on each other unless the establishment of equal liberty for all provides a bond of mutual charity by which all may be brought together into one body.’<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, many people began to look back to the model of the Roman Empire for how society should function. In doing so they observed that in Rome religion did not divide people but it served a social function of bringing people together. Lee Ward cites the example of Rousseau in this regard noting that in his view the ‘civil religion of the pagan cults has the salutary effect of melding service to the state with worship of the gods, and thus “unites the divine cult with love of the laws.”’<sup>13</sup> As a result, as Domínguez notes, the Enlightenment ‘aspired to reform churches and beliefs so that they ceased to be an obstacle to political stability, social harmony, economic growth and intellectual development.’<sup>14</sup> Again this was an approach that required doctrinal minimalism. One result of this approach was that religion was viewed as less to do with what a person believed than how a person behaved. Consequently, the idea of the practice of virtue rather than the idea of godly living emerged. This idea of virtue was rooted in the belief that people are essentially good and desired to contribute to the public good. As Frederick Eden opined ‘the desire of bettering our condition...animates the world [and] gives birth to every social virtue.’<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, whilst the Enlightenment was not intrinsically anti-religious there was a radical fringe of those who were either free-thinkers or atheists. Along with those who still embraced a form of Christianity there was amongst them a growing reliance upon ‘natural law.’ For Christian thinkers natural law was woven into the fabric of the creation by God. While the irreligious were not convinced by this many happily paid lip-service to the idea believing, perhaps rather cynically, that people were more likely to obey natural law if it came from God. As Dominguez notes ‘Voltaire even stated that the worst form of superstition was not as dangerous as atheism because most people would not follow moral and civic laws if they did not consider them to be divinely sanctioned.’<sup>16</sup>

Fourthly, as the West had more contact with other parts of the world so there was increased exposure to other religions. What tended to impress Westerners was less the religious views of others than the sophistication of their cultures. Many Westerners, even missionaries, came to have a new found respect of other

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Dominguez 2017, 283.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Ward. “Civil Religion, Civic Republicanism, and Enlightenment in Rousseau.” In *On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, edited by Kellow Geoffrey C. and Leddy Neven, 246-68. (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press. 2016). 248.

<sup>14</sup> Domínguez 2017, 275.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Roy Porter. *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment*. (London: W.W. Norton, 2000).17.

<sup>16</sup> Dominguez 2017, 280.

religions and cultures. This created a greater openness to other faiths. This exposure to the wider world also cast doubt on the biblical worldview. For example, how could the biblical chronology be reliable when Chinese civilization was found to be older than this? This new information led to ‘a flood of questions [that] become increasingly impossible to ward off as time goes on, because they have their foundation in the changes in the world which anyone can see.’<sup>17</sup>

Finally, by the end of the nineteenth century the trend towards modernism set in motion by the Enlightenment led to a new way of thinking about religion entirely. This new approach argued that religion could be best understood as a sociological phenomenon. While many theologians still believed the Christianity was the highest form of religion it was nonetheless increasingly believed that it was only one expression of universal religious consciousness. It should, therefore, be studied as such using the tools of the emerging disciplines of the social sciences. As one of the leading figures in this field, Ernst Troeltsch, put it:

The Christian religion is in every moment of its history a purely historical phenomenon, subject to all the limitations to which any individual historical phenomenon is exposed, just like the other religions...If one should wish to say “Christianity is a relative phenomenon”, there is no reason to object to this.<sup>18</sup>

These are not the only factors involved in the changing way that people began to think about religion and the place of Christianity among the religions of the world. They do offer us, however, some orientation in understanding the factors behind the rise of pluralism in the Western world. Notably there was a crossover between the church and the academy in how religion should be understood. Some whose work was at the intersection of the two, such as Ninian Smart and John Hick, became leading advocates of religious pluralism which caught the mood of the late twentieth century.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

As Gavin D’Costa writes, ‘Christians in the modern world cannot ignore the existence of other religions.’<sup>19</sup> They have responded to the rise in religious pluralism in a number of ways. Some have accepted this reality rather reluctantly while others have tended to embrace it to a greater or lesser degree.

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<sup>17</sup> Klaus Scholder. *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology*. (London: SCM Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ernst Troeltsch. *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*. Translated by David Reid. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1971), 83.

<sup>19</sup> D’Costa, 1997, 626.

One response has been to simply accept the prevailing mood that all the world's great religions offer some perspective on the divine reality. To believe, as Gerald O' Collins puts it that 'that love, which inspires one cosmic plan of creation and redemption, discloses its presence in an endless variety of choices, ways, degrees and intensities.'<sup>20</sup> As John Hick, the foremost apologist for pluralism in the twentieth century wrote:

the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place.<sup>21</sup>

For such thinkers Christianity is only one option on the smorgasbord of religion.

Another response has been to embrace inclusivism. In some ways this approach is not dissimilar to that of pluralism but unlike pluralism it seeks to maintain the priority of Christianity. This approach argues that whilst salvation is to be found in Christ alone, those who have never heard the gospel may be saved through the sincere pursuit of their own faith.

Probably the best known proponent of this approach is Karl Rahner. Rahner who, despite being under suspension by the Vatican at the time, became a key architect of the documents produced by Vatican II. This included views on salvation that were much more inclusive than those previously held by the Catholic Church. Notably Vatican II speaks of those:

who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.<sup>22</sup>

Central to Rahner's theology is the belief that 'human persons in every age, always and everywhere, whether they realize it and reflect on it or not, are in relationship with the unutterable mystery of human life that we call God.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gerald O'Collins. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 328.

<sup>21</sup> John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989), 240.

<sup>22</sup> *Lumen Gentium*. Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Fred Sanders. 'The Trinity' In *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, edited by Kelly Kapic and Bruce McCormack. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). 37.

However, God is an incomprehensible mystery until he reveals himself primarily in Jesus. Salvation is found only through the grace brought to us in Christ.

Nonetheless he believes that grace may be mediated through non-Christian religions, albeit imperfectly. As such there may be what Rahner terms ‘anonymous Christians.’ He says ‘let us say, a Buddhist monk (or anyone else I might suppose) who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian.’<sup>24</sup> Rahner’s point is that while a person might be saved by sincerely pursuing another religion that salvation is still through Christ.

For Rahner it is possible to be saved through ‘lawful religions’ without an explicit encounter with the gospel of Christ. He argues that this was the case with Israel’s religion before Christ. However, once people of other faiths come into contact with the Christian gospel then they must accept its message. This gospel is mediated through the Church, which is a central Catholic concern.

While Rahner seeks to maintain the centrality of Christ he nonetheless seems to rest the possibility of salvation not upon Christ but on the sincere actions of men of faith, from any religion. Indeed, Pope Francis seemed to take this new Catholic approach further in 2018 when he suggested that a good atheist could go to heaven.<sup>25</sup>

Rahner’s approach further raises the question as to whether or not there are salvific structures in non-Christian religions. For example, if a Muslim sincerely follows the teaching of Islam and observes Ramadan does that contribute to their salvation?

Rahner’s approach also seems to raise the possibility of sweeping resistant non-Christians into the church through the back door!<sup>26</sup> As Hans Kung states it ‘It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an ‘anonymous Christian’ as presumptuous.’<sup>27</sup> It is for some an example of religious colonialism. Furthermore, Rahner struggles to balance the claim that there can be salvation in

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Rahner. *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews*, 1965–1982. Edited by Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons. Translated by Harvey D. Egan. (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 207.

<sup>25</sup> Heartsick boy asks Pope Francis if his atheist dad is in heaven. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/04/26/heartsick-boy-asks-pope-my-dad-heaven/553844002/>. Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> D’Costa, 1997, 635.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Kung. *On Being a Christian*. Translated by Edward Quinn. (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 93.

other faiths with the traditional Catholic claim that there is no salvation outside the church.

A variation on inclusivism has been the approach that might be described as optimism and which has found support among some Evangelicals. This view is associated most often with Clark Pinnock and his concept of ‘pagan saints.’<sup>28</sup> This approach argues that it cannot be said conclusively that no-one will be saved through the knowledge obtained through other faiths or indeed general revelation. God is gracious and He will reward those who earnestly seek Him and who seek eternal life, even if they do not commit themselves to the Christ of whom they have not heard. Here Pinnock draws heavily upon the OT in which he argues that there are many examples of ‘faith, which is neither Jewish nor Christian, which is nonetheless noble, uplifting and sound.’ E.g. Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba. He argues that we should be thankful for the wideness in God’s mercy.<sup>29</sup>

This optimistic view has also come to be associated with more prominent Evangelical figures such as John Stott who states:

I have never been able to conjure up (as some great Evangelical missionaries have) the appalling vision of the millions who are not only perishing but will inevitably perish. On the other hand...I am not and cannot be a universalist. Between these extremes I cherish and hope that the majority of the human race will be saved. And I have solid biblical basis for this belief.<sup>30</sup>

Another prominent Evangelical who argues for a more optimistic approach is JI Packer. He argues that:

We may safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker's mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far (cf. Acts 10:34f; Rom. 10:12f); (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the next world that he was saved through Christ. But what we cannot safely say is that God ever does save anyone this way.<sup>31</sup>

Those who adopt an optimistic approach argue for the finality and supremacy of God’s revelation in Christ. They also argue, like Rahner, that salvation is found in Christ alone. They do, however, leave open the possibility that those who have never heard the gospel proclaimed might be saved.

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<sup>28</sup> Clark H. Pinnock. *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 161.

<sup>29</sup> Pinnock 1992 92.

<sup>30</sup> David L. Edwards & John R. W. Stott. *Essentials*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 327.

<sup>31</sup> J.I. Packer, J.I., 1981, *God’s Words*. (Leicester: IVP, 1981), 210.

Many theologians, especially Evangelical Protestants, have continued to argue for the historic position that there is no salvation outside an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is a position, they argue, for which there is ample biblical support. Furthermore, it is this view that fuels the church's mission in the world. If exclusivism is not the biblical position then, they argue, why bother with mission? Indeed, as Hywel Jones argues, if a person can be saved by the sincere pursuit of their own religion telling them of Jesus might be risky. For if they hear of Jesus and reject him then they open themselves to condemnation.<sup>32</sup> Those who embrace exclusivism argue that what is needed is not dialogue between religions but proclamation of the gospel. There has to be a recognition that other faiths cannot save.

In a pluralistic culture is it still tenable to argue that a rigorist exclusivist approach is viable? For Evangelicals there are at least two major issues in terms of the pluralist vision of finding salvation in other faiths. These are the nature of religion and the person of Jesus Christ.

### *What is Religion?*

How a religion is to be defined is an important question that besets the pluralistic vision. As Woodhead and Partridge write 'there will never be an end to debates about the meaning of religion and how the term can be defined.' It is impossible to define it in a manner that would suit everyone. As Woodhead and Partridge note 'religion is always an open, empirical question, for religion is constantly being constructed in new ways.'<sup>33</sup>

We immediately see the problem that this creates for people like John Hick who writes of, 'the great religious traditions as different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine reality.'<sup>34</sup> Yet what is a religion? Animism is widely regarded as a religion but it does not acknowledge a single divine reality. Instead, there may be multiple divine beings and divine spirits. Or we might say that Christianity and Satanism are examples of 'religion.' Does this mean that these two religions that stand fundamentally opposed to one another are in fact just different ways of experiencing the same divine reality?

Even if one takes on board Hick's view that it is 'the great religious traditions' that contribute to our understanding of the divine that does not help. On what authority are the lesser 'religions', as he conceives of them, excluded? Why include Islam and exclude ancestor worship? Why include Christianity and

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<sup>32</sup> Hywel Jones. *Only One Way: Do You Have to Believe in Christ to be Saved?* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 1996), 135.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Partridge Woodhead, H. Christopher & Hiroko Kawanami. *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations.* (London: Routledge, 2016), 11,12.

<sup>34</sup> John Hick. *The Problem of Religious Pluralism.* (New York: St Martins, 1985). 102.

exclude Jedi Knights?<sup>35</sup> It also raises the question of the place of non-theistic belief systems such as new-ageism and atheism.

It further creates problems for inclusivism and optimism. Might God in fact save a person who sincerely pursues Satanism? Might he save the suicide bomber who sincerely believes that blowing up a church filled with Christians is the way to paradise?

### *The Person of Jesus Christ*

The person of Jesus Christ, who is central to the Christian faith, is also a stumbling block. In order to accommodate pluralistic views he must be removed from the centre of how Christians think about religion. This involves what the theologian Harvey Cox described as ‘soft-pedalling the figure of Jesus himself.’<sup>36</sup> So we see that pluralists have tended to steer the discussion away from Christology onto the doctrine of God. Since, as Alister McGrath notes they find the identity and significance of Jesus Christ ‘an embarrassment.’<sup>37</sup>

The Catholic theologian Paul Knitter is a universalist in terms of soteriology. In order to accommodate his views he writes of the need to distinguish between the ‘Jesus event’ which is unique to Christianity and the ‘Christ principle’ which is accessible to all religious traditions and stated in their own equally valid ways.<sup>38</sup> All pluralists are forced to admit, either implicitly or explicitly, that it is only by moving away from orthodox Christology that their views can be accommodated. As McGrath notes in order to fit Jesus into the new paradigms suggested by Hick and Knitter ‘it forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ.’<sup>39</sup>

Yet, in Christian theology Christ holds a unique place. The place of Christ in the New Testament is particular i.e. he is uniquely the mediator of salvation. Christian theology has historically maintained that Jesus is God incarnate. The Christian vision of God is inseparably bound up in the idea of the Trinity and of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. Since Christianity maintains a unique view of Jesus the question of how non-Christian religions view Jesus then becomes a critical issue. Are

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<sup>35</sup> In the 2011 United Kingdom census 177,000 people declared their religion as Jedi. *Jedi is not a religion, Charity Commission rules*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38368526>. Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Harvey Cox. *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths*. (London: Collins, 1989). 5.

<sup>37</sup> Alister E. McGrath. *A Passion for Truth*. (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 227.

<sup>38</sup> Alister E. McGrath. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought Second*. (Oxford: Wiley-Backwell, 2013), 230.

<sup>39</sup> McGrath, 1996, 227.

Christianity and other faiths speaking the same language when they talk about Jesus?

In Judaism from earliest times the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has been a complex one with much of the NT written against this background. Certainly from earliest times there have been Jews who have accepted that Jesus is the Messiah and embraced an orthodox Christology. However, there have also been those within Judaism who have strongly rejected the idea of Jesus as the Messiah. This continues to be the position within Orthodox Judaism.<sup>40</sup> More recently some Jewish scholars have attempted to highlight Jesus Jewish roots and to portray him as a significant Jewish figure. For example, Hyam Maccoby notes that ‘If the Jewishness of Jesus was acknowledged and understood, Christianity’s exclusiveness and claim to unique salvific power could be tempered sufficiently to allow for the validity of other faiths.’<sup>41</sup>

In Islamic thought Jesus is recognised as an important delete. He is only a messenger, however, like the many messengers such as Elijah who came before him. He is a man, a point emphasised by his frequent description in the Koran as the son of Mary. Opinion about Jesus is also divided within Islam. In orthodox Islam it is believed that Jesus was neither crucified nor did he die on the cross, although it appeared that way to the Jews. Instead, he was translated directly into heaven and some unnamed person died in his place.<sup>42</sup> In another view whilst Jesus was placed upon the cross he did not die on the cross but survived his wounds, recovered in the tomb and later died in Kashmir.<sup>43</sup>

In Islam God’s ultimate revelation of himself comes not through Jesus but the prophet Muhammed and is contained in the Koran. The view of Jesus presented in the Bible and the Koran clearly clash.

In Buddhism there is no God or gods. Rather people go through life seeking enlightenment and are trying to break free of the endless cycle of life and death with its suffering. The central figure in Buddhism is the Buddha. He is not a divine figure but the enlightened one. He is the one who has attained the enlightenment for which his followers are searching. In the views of most Buddhists Jesus is a figure comparable to the Buddha who can help them along

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Rabbi Stuart Federow. *Judaism and Christianity: A Contrast*. (Bloomington: Universe, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Hyam Maccoby. ‘The Jewishness of Jesus’ *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 28 (1) (1995): 52-62. 62.

<sup>42</sup> See for example Gabriel Said Reynolds. “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 72 (2) (2009): 237-58.

<sup>43</sup> See for example the Official Website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, <https://www.alislam.org/jesus/> for a defence of the case that Jesus lived in Kashmir. Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2020.

to road to enlightenment. For example, José Ignacio Cabezón notes that ‘What Buddhists find objectionable is (a) the Christian characterization of the deity whose manifestation Jesus is said to be and (b) the claim that Jesus is unique in being such a manifestation.’<sup>44</sup>

Hinduism is an umbrella term which recognises devotion to over 300,000 gods and goddesses. These are incarnated in various forms such as idols, rivers, trees etc. Hinduism is uncomfortable with the exclusive claims of the Christian faith that Jesus alone is the incarnate Son of God. Rather, it wishes to see Jesus as a figure comparable to the other manifestations of deity in its worldview.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear from this brief survey that the place Jesus Christ occupies in the Christian faith remains a significant obstacle to a pluralistic view of religion if orthodox Christology and its implications are taken seriously.

## DEVELOPING AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE

When it comes to developing a response to the issue of pluralism the aim of Evangelicals should be to consider not simply a philosophical response but they should seek to construct a scriptural response to these issues. The problem, however, has been that a scriptural response has often tended towards ‘proof texting’ and there are indeed many texts which raise significant issues for a pluralistic vision of religion. There is one important piece of Scripture, however, that is often overlooked in terms of providing us with a sustained treatment of how we should consider other religions. This is found in the opening chapters of Romans. There Paul makes a number of highly significant statements.

In 1:16-17 Paul makes what is arguably the key statement in the letter when he writes ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”’ This statement is the heartbeat of Paul’s argument where he goes on to contend at length that Jew and Gentile alike are made righteous only through depending on Christ.

This statement then leads Paul to demonstrate that both Jew and Gentile need God’s righteousness gifted to them. He begins in 1:18 to focus first of all on the Gentiles, those who are not part of God’s covenant people and who worship other gods. First of all in 1:18-20 he makes clear that while the righteousness of

<sup>44</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, “Jesus through a Buddhist's Eyes.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19 (1999): 51-61. 56.

<sup>45</sup> See for example N. Sheth. “Hindu Avatar and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison.” *Philosophy East and West*, 52 (1), (2002), 98–125. Sheth suggests that Hinduism and Christianity can learn from each other and even offer mutual correction.

God is revealed in the gospel the wrath of God is revealed against all unrighteousness. The reason for this is that in their unrighteousness people have ‘suppressed’ the truth about him. This suppression of the truth about God is Paul’s diagnosis of the human condition. For, as he continues, the knowledge of God and his nature can be clearly perceived in the world that he has made. Notably the consequence of this for Paul is not that people might believe, as advocates of general revelation might argue, but that everyone is ‘without excuse.’

Paul continues his argument in 1:21-23 by pointing out that all humanity is in sinful rebellion against God, turning away from him and descending into idolatry. This type of worship does not honour God and it is foolish. For Paul religions/belief systems are not signs of humanity’s search for God but of rebellion against God. Therefore, God is not to be found in the world’s religious systems, contrary to the pluralist vision, because their design is to suppress the knowledge of God. They are signs of the sinful rebellion that lies in the human heart.

In 1:24-25 Paul is emphatic that where people do not worship the God who reveals himself in Scripture they are embracing not true worship but false worship. They are also engaged in the dishonouring thinking and behaving to which God has given them over, which he mentions three times (1:24,26,28). If the apostle’s view of worship that is rooted in man-made traditions is correct then those who engage with these systems are not on a different path to God but are on the wrong path completely. As he goes on to point out in 1:28-31 they are subject to the same universal problem of a corrupt heart that produces all kinds of unrighteous behaviour.

In 2:12-16 Paul points out that those from a Jewish background who seek to live by the Law condemn themselves by their inability to keep the law. Likewise, those who do not have the Law bring condemnation upon themselves because they fail to live up to the dictates of their own consciences. This is something that will be revealed on the day when all people are called to give an account before God.

While this is far from being an exhaustive exegesis of Paul’s thought in these two chapters it is sufficient to demonstrate that Paul has a view of religion that is far removed from that advocated by those in favour of pluralism. It also offers us the prospect of thinking about the issue of religion not from the point of view of the philosophy of religion but from a biblical standpoint.

## CONCLUSION

The pluralist viewpoint is one that has often been driven less by theological considerations than the liberal humanist concerns of the wider culture. The embrace of religious pluralism by some theologians has only been possible as a result of a significant departure from orthodox Christology. Where orthodox Christology is maintained even those who adhere to other belief systems acknowledge that it is a significant stumbling block to them developing a closer relationship with Christians. All faiths are agreed that to suggest that they are simply perspectives on the same divine reality demands, on the part of Christianity, a willingness to depart from orthodox Christology and to move Jesus himself from the centre of the Christian belief system. Those who wish to maintain an orthodox Christology consequently find themselves committed to exclusivism.

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# **Roots, Shoots and Fruits: character, commands and consequences in biblical ethics**

Paul Coulter<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses upon ethical issues, the challenges to Christian faith and witness in the present postmodern culture. It notes how with the present generation, there has been a shift towards moral relativism, with the State protecting the rights of autonomous individuals to choose their own path in life. In such a society there is a need for clarity about the nature of biblical ethics and its relationship to the gospel and the mission of the Church. This article provides a brief historical overview of ethical theories, which are grouped into three major types, depending on whether their primary concern is the character of the person, duties to which the person is bound, or consequences of the person's actions. It aims to provide a biblically faithful framework for approaching ethical issues, using the image of a fruit tree which is developed in a way that integrates virtue, deontological and consequentialist concerns. Reference is made to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and Paul's ethical teaching in Ephesians 5. Good roots in the character of God, can, through obedience to the Scriptures, produce good shoots which can result in good fruits, for the glory of God and the good of others.

**KEY WORDS:** Postmodern culture, Biblical ethics, the character of God, obedience to the law, the Spirit.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary Europe, ethical issues are among the greatest challenges to Christian faith and witness. Most obviously in the area of sexual ethics, there is a clear divergence between the values of the predominant culture and the policies of nation states and traditional Christian ethics. Throughout the modern period, from the sixteenth century onwards, ethical standards were broadly agreed between Christians and non-believers. The predominant idea was that certain behaviours are inherently wrong because they are contrary either to God's law (for orthodox Christians) or the nature of things (for Deists and atheists). Things changed during the twentieth century with the declining influence of Christianity, the growing influence of critical theory with its suspicion of power,

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and the emergence of a radicalised individualism that sees the autonomous self as supreme in morality.

This ‘postmodern’ turn rejects the idea that absolute moral principles can be known with certainty, arguing instead that all moral judgements are culturally conditioned. From moral absolutism – there are standards of right and wrong that apply to everyone in all circumstances – the predominant culture, especially among younger generations, has shifted towards moral relativism – what is right for you may not be right for me. The role of the State is not to promote a vision of the good, but to protect the rights of autonomous individuals to choose their own path in life. The only absolute standard, although there is no clear explanation as to why it should be an absolute when all other absolutes are rejected, is that no one should interfere with another person’s freedom. By this measure, some of the things that Christians regard as great evils, such as murder, rape and abuse, are still recognised as wrong, but any actions, words and, increasingly, even attitudes that are construed as judging actions between consenting adults as morally wrong can be added to the list of major evils.

Buffeted by this powerful cultural wind, some professing Christians and churches are departing from biblical sexual morality. They claim that Christian ethics boils down to love and it is unloving to deny others love. Other Christians, whilst holding to a biblical position, are toning down their language around ethical issues. They fear the legal consequences and loss of influence that might result if they speak clearly and prefer to focus on the ‘gospel’ in their engagement with culture rather than on morality. A third group is not afraid to be countercultural and to speak clearly, but sometimes struggles to know how to frame ethical decision making on issues concerning which there is no clear biblical command. These are challenging times for individual believers as they seek to be faithful to God and for the Church as it seeks to bear testimony to the truth.

In this moment, then, the need for clarity about the nature of biblical ethics and its relationship to the gospel and the mission of the Church is urgent. This article aims to provide a biblically faithful framework for approaching ethical issues, using the image of a fruit tree.

### THREE SCHOOLS OF ETHICS

Ethical theories can be grouped into three major types, depending on whether their primary concern is the character of the person, duties to which the person is bound, or consequences of the person’s actions.

The first ‘school’, **virtue ethics**, has long historical roots, being especially associated with the Greek philosopher Plato in the fourth century BC, who described four main qualities of character that later came to be known as the ‘cardinal virtues’: prudence, courage, temperance and justice. The primary concern of virtue ethics is with character: good people do good things. Actions that express and promote good character are moral. Perhaps the most obvious problems for virtue ethics are that virtues are general and non-specific. They may set a broad standard that can influence our actions, but they aren’t easily applied to challenging ethical questions and we may end up with different views about what a righteous person would do in any given situation.

The second school, known as **deontological ethics** (from the Greek *deon*, ‘duty’), is concerned with standards of right to which people ought to conform. Such duties could derive either from laws given by the Creator (divine command) or simply from the nature of things. Deontological ethics is attractive in its appeal to a standard that is external to the individual, but it raises the intractable problem of the origin of morality. How can universal rules exist, and how can we know them with certainty? It is true that certain moral standards seem to be common across cultures and innate in human nature, as cultural studies and developmental research demonstrate, but how can we be certain that these are universal and what about those people within any cultural grouping who reject a standard that is generally accepted? More importantly, how does the fact that something reflects the nature of things turn into a duty to align oneself with it? How does an ‘is’ become an ‘ought’ if there is no one to hold the person to account, no lawgiver and judge?

The third school, **consequentialist ethics**, is concerned primarily with the results of actions.<sup>2</sup> An action is deemed to be good if it has positive consequences. This approach raises some obvious questions. In a world of variability and uncertainty, how can we know with enough certainty what will result from our actions to make a judgement? What period of time should we measure the outcomes over? Should we be concerned with consequences simply for ourselves, for those within our group or for everyone? Is it legitimate to derive some ethical rules from judgements about consequences, or must we simply test every single action for its likely outcomes? And, perhaps most importantly, which outcomes do we judge to be good? Most consequentialist ethicists have thought in terms of outcomes of actions for everyone – a perspective known as Utilitarianism, which inevitably involves weighing up positive outcomes for

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<sup>2</sup> Some theorists use the term teleological ethics, from the Greek *telos* ('end'), in much the same way as I speak here of consequentialist ethics. Others, however, use the concept of teleology to refer not to the outcomes of the action but the motivation from which it springs (the intention behind it), which is closer to virtue ethics than consequentialism.

some against negative outcomes for others – but there is no agreement over what we should be measuring to know what outcome is ‘good’. Should we aim to maximise pleasure alone or should we include other qualities that may conflict with pleasure but seem instinctively to most people to be right (such as loyalty to a spouse)?

This brief historical overview of ethical theories goes some way to explaining why contemporary culture has seen a shift from agreed standards of morality. Deontological ethics only makes sense if we believe there are universal standards of morality that can be known reliably. Postmodernism rejects the idea of certainty of knowledge and there can be no ‘ought’ in ethics other than the principle of harming no one else without a lawgiver and judge who is above the competing interests of individuals. Why should it matter to an individual if something is deemed by others to be good, or even right? Why should the individual feel compelled to conform to it if no one else is hurt?

### *Biblical ethics*

Having surveyed ethical theories, we now turn our focus to biblical ethics. Which of the three schools of ethics does a biblical approach fall into? Perhaps most Christians would, until recently at least, have said it must be the deontological school. After all, the Bible contains rules and codes of duties. The Old Testament, especially, records many commandments from God that were binding on Israel and careful students of the New Testament rightly recognise that, while not all of those commands are binding on Christian believers, many are repeated. Indeed, a biblical understanding of God demands that there must be a standard of ethical behaviour that is consistent throughout the Testaments because God is unchanging. Moral standards are not arbitrary – they do not become right just because God says them – but reflect the character of the eternal God who alone is good – He commands them because that is who He is.

At this point, however, we cross the line into a different ethical school. The mention of the character of God suggests that biblical ethics have something to do with virtue. Indeed, throughout much of Christian history, from Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth, virtue ethics was probably the dominant school. The connection between the character of God and the behaviour of his people is clear in the Old Testament law, which repeatedly calls Israel to be holy because God is holy,<sup>3</sup> in the expectation of the prophets that God’s people would have transformed hearts, and in the New Testament epistles, especially those of the apostle Paul, which expect growth in Christlike character by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> See Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7.

The ethical school that may appear most at variance with the Bible is consequentialism. Some liberal theologians have suggested that the New Testament emphasis on love leads towards a Utilitarian ethic. American Joseph Fletcher, for example, argued that Christ's command to love others is the only duty binding on the Christian and the right course of action in every situation is what will be the most loving outcome (the ends justifies the means).<sup>4</sup> From this starting point, Fletcher argued that abortion, euthanasia and eugenics may be acceptable. Those who hold to a high view of Scripture rightly reject such thinking, but in reacting against it they should not neglect the fact that biblical ethics has something to do with consequences. Love is not, as Fletcher claimed, the only command in Scripture that is binding on the Christian, but the command to love cannot be fulfilled without considering the impact of our actions on others.

Biblical ethics, then, cannot be reduced to just one of the three schools. Scripture integrates the emphases of each into a holistic ethic that is concerned with godly character, obedience to divine rules and thoughtfulness about the impact of our actions. Indeed, these three aspects are often found within the same biblical passages. In what follows, I will consider two— the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ in Matthew 5-7 and Paul’s ethical teaching in Ephesians 5.

One of the most famous sayings of Jesus is His version of the so-called ‘Golden Rule’, towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which commands his followers to, “do to others what you would have them do to you”.<sup>5</sup> This principle cannot be applied without considering the consequences of our actions and how others will feel about them. It would, however, be wrong to suggest on this basis that Jesus was a consequentialist. The sermon that contains this principle begins with Jesus saying that He had not come, “to abolish the Law or the Prophets [...] but to fulfil them”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, He described the Golden Rule as summing up the Law and the Prophets. For Jesus, the commands of the Law were inseparable from the need for careful evaluation of the impact of one’s actions. Between these two statements, the Sermon on the Mount also contains Jesus’ restatement in distinctively Christian terms of the Old Testament call for God’s people to be holy because God is holy: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”.<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, then, includes elements of virtue, duty and consequences in His ethical standard.

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<sup>4</sup> J.F. Fletcher. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 7:12.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:17

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:48

We find these same three elements in Ephesians 5, where Paul begins with a virtue approach (“Be imitators of God [...] and live a life of love”, verses 1-2), then adopts a deontological approach by listing things the believers must not do (verses 3 and 4), before charging them to live wisely in every situation (verses 15-17), which must entail a consequentialist approach. Indeed, this is the consistent shape of Pauline ethics: a godly person (character), obeys God’s commands (duty) and lives wisely in every situation (considering the consequences of one’s actions).<sup>8</sup> Paul knew that the Christian is free in Christ, but this freedom must be used to maximise the glory of God (love for God) and the good of others (love for others).<sup>9</sup>

### *Roots, Shoots and Fruits*

I have argued that Scripture expects us to integrate the three ways of approaching ethics into a whole.<sup>10</sup> I suggest the image of a fruit tree as a metaphor for what this may look like. This picture is, of course, influenced by the Scriptures. The righteous person is depicted in Psalm 1 as, “a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season”, the Lord Jesus likened the disciple to a fruitful branch abiding in the vine, and the apostle Paul described the qualities the Spirit produces in believers as fruit.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I will develop this image in a way that integrates virtue, deontological and consequentialist concerns considered as the roots, shoots and fruits of biblical ethics.

The purpose of the tree – its *telos* – is to bear fruit that glorifies God and blesses others. In order to achieve this purpose, it needs deep roots in the right soil and a strong and healthy trunk and branches (shoots) that can support the weight of the fruit. This is an image of organic growth in us as we depend on the transforming and empowering work of the Spirit in our lives, who may be

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<sup>8</sup> I suggest that in this logical flow, Paul is merely following the flow of the Old Testament from God’s self-revelation to the Patriarchs in loving covenant, confirmed in the redemption from Egypt, to the giving of the law through Moses, and the provision of wisdom literature to show the expansive application of the fear of God to righteous living in all of life within the limits set by the law and the prophetic books to show Israel how both departure from covenant loyalty and reduction of the law to a minimalistic standard attract divine judgement.

<sup>9</sup> See Galatians 5:13-15 and Paul’s treatment of issues over which Christians differ in Romans 14, where he calls them to limit their own freedom willingly for the sake of others and to do everything to honour God and avoid harming a brother.

<sup>10</sup> I am not alone in claiming that Christian ethics integrates the concerns of the three schools of ethics. For other proposals along these lines see: John M. Frame, John M. (2008) *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship Volume 3, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 33ff; David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus on Contemporary Context*, second edn., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 80; David W. Jones. *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, B&H Studies in Christian Ethics, (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 20ff.; C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 1:3; John 15; Galatians 5:22-23

likened to the water that flows through the tree. The Spirit never works, however without the Word – gospel truth revealed in Scripture – and we need the Bible in every aspect of this ethical process.

The **soil** in which biblical ethics grows is the **character of God**. Biblical ethics rests in the person and nature of the God who created and is sovereign over the universe. Moral behaviour reflects the character of God. Our **priorities** should be the same as God's – as creatures in His image we are meant to represent Him to all creation, living in loving relationship with God and our fellow human beings. If we could always know what it means to love God and others and always acted in keeping with that knowledge, we would be sinless. In reality, however, sin has clouded our understanding and judgement. We can read Scripture and understand what God is like, but if we are to become like God, we need the Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Christ, from glory to glory.<sup>12</sup> We must put off the sinful nature and put on Christ. It is love that binds all other Christian virtues together in perfect unity.<sup>13</sup> At this level, Christian ethics are **virtue ethics**. Our aim is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ – to have God's law written on our hearts, as the new covenant promises,<sup>14</sup> so we act in a way that reflects God's likeness and embodies love. We need the **Scriptures** to reveal God's character to us **and the Spirit** to transform us. **Good actions are godly** – consistent with God's character and motivated by love for God first and then for others.

From the root of God's character grows the **shoots** of a life dedicated to God's will. As the shoot grows, it needs the support and guidance of God's **commands**, which provide **principles** by which we must live, keeping us on the right track in our understanding of what love for God and others entails. Until Christ returns in glory, when we shall be transformed to be perfectly like Him,<sup>15</sup> we are still prone to deception, to selfish desires and to sin. We need greater clarity from God as to how we ought to live. For this reason, God gave His Law to Israel and the commands of Christ and the apostles to us. Growing from the roots of virtues that reflect God's character, then, Christian ethics has a **deontological** dimension in God's will for His people revealed in Scripture. We need the **Scriptures** to know God's law **and the Spirit** to motivate us to want to obey it. **Good actions are obedient** – in line with God's revealed will as outlined in the New Testament (we can also learn from the Old Testament Law but must consider how Christ's coming changes our relationship to it).

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 3:14

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 8:10

<sup>15</sup> 1 John 3:2

From the shoots grow the **fruits** of obedient living in the everyday decisions we must make in given situations. The issues at stake here are our **conduct** and the **power** by which we can live faithfully for God. The consistent scriptural emphasis on our part within a larger community of God's people means that we must consider the consequences not only for ourselves but for others. Wisdom is known by the fact that it leads to maximal blessing for others and glory for God. Thus, Christian ethics builds on **virtue** and **duty** a final **consequentialist** dimension. We are not, however, abandoned to our own reason in deciding what to do or not to do. We need the **Scriptures** to show us examples of others who have been foolish or wise in similar situations and the **Spirit** to guide our steps in each choice to follow His will rather than our desires (Galatians 5:16-25). **Good actions are wise** – in step with the Spirit, in each specific situation seeking to bless others and bring glory to God.

In summary, then, good actions are godly (reflecting the character of Christ and motivated by love for God and others), obedient (fulfilling the commands of God in Scripture) and wise (aware of their consequences and acting always to maximise the glory of God and the good of others). Good fruit grows from good shoots that emerge from good roots. This image helps us to understand not only what is good, but also how we can do what is good. It also reminds us that we need the Word and the Spirit to be righteous. It also provides a simple scheme for ethical decision making. When faced with a decision, I can ask three questions: what is my motivation and how does it reflect Christ-likeness?; what is biblically permissible for me to do or say?; and what maximises God's glory and the good of others? All three must be correct for my action to be moral. Or, put in terms of our image of the tree: which courses of action are rooted in God's character?; which options are consistent with the commands of God that shape righteousness in the shoots of my life?; and which option within these would produce most fruit for God? These three aspects are all important and interdependent. We cannot claim to act in relationship to God, or led by the Spirit, if we are disobedient to Scripture or the consequences of our actions, although not prohibited in Scripture, are destructive. Nor can we claim to be faithful to Scripture if we have a dry obedience that does not flow from and enhance to joyful relationship with God and seek always to do the good we can do as well as avoid wrongdoing. And we cannot claim to be wise and fruitful if we are not people who fear and love God and whose lives are shaped by and obedient to the commands of God in the Bible.

### *Ethics, Gospel and Mission*

Returning to the concern with which this article began, the image of the fruit tree can help us avoid two dangers related to the mission of making the gospel known to others. The first danger is that we become moralisers who think that the faith

is all about ethics. Non-Christian religions may be primarily about ethical guidance for moral living, but the heart of Christianity is not ethics but the message of redemption from sin.<sup>16</sup> We are not called to be preachers of morality, but of Christ crucified for our salvation. In our mission to the world, we must not be known as people who primarily pronounce judgement in wrongdoing, but who point to the supreme right-doer, the Lord Jesus Christ, who became the right-maker through His death and resurrection. This message must, of course, be supported by our reputation as doers of good.<sup>17</sup> This is more important than ever in a postmodern age when there is such sensitivity to hypocrisy and claims to truth are heard as oppressive claims to power.

At the same time, however, we must avoid the second danger, which is to stop speaking about morality. Ethics is not separate from, or an add-on to, the gospel. Rather, ethics reveals what sin is and what faithful living for God looks like. There is no gospel without both of these dimensions and we must not proclaim a message that does not expose sin and call people to righteousness. To be biblical, gospel people (evangelical), we must recognise that the ethic of godliness is not separate from the gospel, but its fruit. I suggest that this means we must be very careful not to dismiss the implications of the gospel spelt out in the New Testament epistles as merely ‘cultural’ or ‘situational’ unless the divinely-inspired author makes it clear that is what they are. The gospel creates its own ethic and culture. This is, perhaps, the biggest temptation for the Church in our moment – not so much that we will start behaving as if sin doesn’t matter, but that we will stop speaking as if it does. If we do, however, it will be only a matter of time before our actions follow our words.

In our mission, therefore, we must be clear in proclaiming biblical truth with grace. It will be vital that we are consistent in applying biblical ethics to all aspects of life so that we are not dismissed as inauthentic or inconsistent. For example, we must not major on biblical ethics of sexuality and gender without also seeking to be biblical in our economics and care for the environment. We must, however, accept that one of the major challenges with commanding the gospel through our good deeds in the current context is that we have a different vision of the good from the culture that surrounds us. Like the believers to whom Peter wrote his first epistle, we must maintain, “a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame”.<sup>18</sup> This ‘putting to shame’ is not, however, always in this age. The apostle

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<sup>16</sup> Claims that all religions are basically the same usually rest on the assumption that religion is all about ethics. Whilst there is a great deal of agreement between, for example, Christianity and Buddhism about what is moral, there is a vastly different understanding of how we become good or what to do when we fall short of the standard of good.

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew 5:13-16; Galatians 6:10; Titus 3:8.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Peter 3:16.

continues to say, “it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil”.<sup>19</sup> In a fallen and corrupt world – increasingly, as ethical values depart from a deontological base closer to biblical standards to moral relativism in personal choices with absolutist insistence on autonomy, tolerance and freedom, we will suffer for doing good as Scripture defines it and even for testifying to the fact that there is a standard of good (an ethical truth) that can be known and is binding for all.

This may sound like a negative assessment, but the eschatological perspective should give us confidence and hope. As people who live for God's final assessment, we are willing to suffer loss in this age. At the same time, we know that our distinctive ethic – our consistent good, that resonates with what is written in the hearts of sinful people, to which their conscience testifies, and that was embodied fully in the provocative person of Christ – will be used by God both in judgement and salvation. In the final analysis, God will vindicate His people and pronounce judgement on those who have reviled them. On that day, however, there will also be those who give glory to Him precisely because that saw our good deeds and heard our reason for the hope we have and came to know Christ as the cornerstone for life, faith and ethics.<sup>20</sup>

To people who do not know about Jesus or reject Him, Christian ethics may seem foreign and implausible (foolishness to those who are perishing). We cannot expect people to agree with our definitions of sin, or even with the concept of sin. As people accountable to God, we must not compromise on what Scripture teaches about the good but must think carefully about how we can do what is good with a clear conscience before God. This may lead us to be misunderstood. Non-believers may be, “surprised when [we] do not join them in the same flood of debauchery”, and they may well, “malign us”, but we know, “they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead”.<sup>21</sup> It is then that those who mistreat God's people will finally be put to shame, while those who have humbled themselves under God's mighty hand will be exalted (1 Peter 5:6). In the meantime, we trust that the gospel remains true and through the convicting work of the Spirit of God it will continue to transform lives in unexpected and miraculous ways.

#### *CONCLUSION: KNOWING, CHOOSING AND DOING THE GOOD*

Our calling as believers in Christ is to know, choose and do the good in every situation. I have argued that good deeds, biblically understood, are godly, obedient and wise. An action is not truly good unless the motivation, means and

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Peter 3:17

<sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 2:1-12; 3:15

<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 4:4-5

ends are good. We cannot defend harmful actions simply because our motive was good, any more than we can claim an action is obedient to God because we judge its consequences to be good despite the fact that it transgresses a biblical command. These are not distinct principles – any action that is wise must also be obedient and any action that is obedient will, by definition, be godly.

In closing, I hope it has been clear in this discussion that morality for the Christian is never a matter of aiming for the minimum that is permissible without breaking God's law, but of striving towards maximum love for God and others, full Christlikeness and the joyous surrender of our rights for the sake of others. God wants us to mature so that we can discern what is good. He is preparing us for an eternity serving Him and the decisions we make now are all part of that process of growth. These three principles can act as tests to help us assess our behaviour and reach decisions about how we should act. We must make it our aim to have healthy ethical roots, shoots and fruits.

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# **The God of Qohelet: Positive Divine Attributes for an Age of Technology**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The book Ecclesiastes has been regarded as one of the most profound pieces of “wisdom” literature in the ancient Orient. It rivals in depth and the courage to challenge the institutional status quo with the literature from Mesopotamia and Egypt. It has puzzled readers in the last three millennia with its unparalleled courage to ask uncomfortable questions about faith, gods and humanity. Ironically, many of the questions that Ecclesiastes asked have found reverberations in the hearts of post-modern men and women today. On the one hand, the author affirms his belief that one can discern the “hand of God” dispensing justice even in the most tragic of circumstances. On the other hand, Ecclesiastes confesses that, even though he applied his heart “to know wisdom and to know madness and folly,” in the end he perceived “that this also is but a striving after wind.” His conclusion? “Vanity of vanities: all is vanity!” Statements like these have compelled us to approach Ecclesiastes in order to find the equilibrium in his vision between “despair” and “hope.” To do so, we will select a number of divine attributes that offer clarity not only to the vision of God in Ecclesiastes, but also to the sensitive issues of the meaning of life, suffering, justice, death and eternity. In the course of our analysis we will examine the views of contemporary scholars who have written on this subject. We will show how Ecclesiastes’ vision takes into account human suffering and despair, without sacrificing the integrity of hope.

**KEY WORDS:** Ecclesiastes, death, creation, God, immortality.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Technological advances characterize our society more than anything else today. Specifically, the fields of artificial intelligence and nano-technology have been merging very optimistically to the point of raising possibilities that one would have found hard to believe a few decades ago. For example, even though many scientists doubt that scientists will be able to repair and enhance the DNA in order to prevent the body from aging, more and more voices are taking this possibility very seriously. It looks like the quest for immortality has not changed

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from the Epic of Gilgamesh until today.<sup>2</sup> And technology keeps this quest alive even if the majority of its proponents suspect that they will most likely not among the beneficiaries. As Yuval Harari puts it, “it is not easy to live knowing that you are going to die, but it is even harder to believe in immortality and be proven wrong.”

When it comes to the question of the existence of God, however, the technological age offers too little for anyone to be optimistic. In fact, most of AI visionaries do not share the fundamental Judeo-Christian vision on life. We could say that, in a sense, the religious outlook today may be as bleak as during the days in which Ecclesiastes was written. With its motto “Vanity of vanities: all is vanity!”, the book of Ecclesiastes fits rather well within the confines of the twenty first century. Perhaps that is why Duanne Garret calls it “the Bible’s resident alien.”<sup>3</sup> It is true that the book does not share the religious skepticism or the atheism of authors like Reese, Harari, Kurzweil and de Grey. Still, the questions that it raises made Ecclesiastes a voice that the technological age, with its emphasis on creating artificial consciousness, cannot afford to ignore.

There is a certain nuance of mystery, one that evades the Western preference for systematization, in the way Qohelet unveils his portrait of God.<sup>4</sup> But Qohelet has many things to say about God; some of which echo the ancient affirmations which Israel’s scriptures made about Him, like justice, mercy, holiness, and the like, and others that do not. The question we want to ask, however, is if one may include “mystery” into Qohelet’s vision of God, and then, along with the other attributes of God which the author lists throughout his book, to draw a portrait that will make better sense to the reader. We are aware that there is an inherent risk of *artificiality* that comes with selecting only those passages which describe God.<sup>5</sup> However, since the author always reasoned about God in relation to other

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<sup>2</sup> Thus Byron Reese, *The Fourth Age: Smart Robots, Conscious Computers, and the Future of Humanity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 306-309, and Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017. Kindle Books), 23-26, citing gerontologist Aubrey de Grey and Ray Kurzweil, two of the leading exponents of the view that within the next hundred years it is likely that science will triumph over death.

<sup>3</sup> D. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1993), 254.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Murphy sees the concept “work of God” as Qohelet’s way of preserving a certain mystery about God, never really giving the reader the satisfaction of having understood the ways of God in the world. Hence, “he repeatedly and explicitly describes the work of God as unknowable.” “The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qohelet the Sage,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbraus, 1990), 269.

<sup>5</sup> One way in which this can be done would be to analyze each verse which deals with our subject according to the book’s verse order. A better approach, we think, is to group the “God” references according to related topics, i.e., verses which deal with God’s moral attributes, and so forth (the topical approach). This would represent a departure from the original outline of the book, but at

themes, we will consider them both as immediate contexts for the references to God and as components of the author's world-view, out of which we hope we will present a correct picture of some of the most important attributes of the God of Qohelet.

## THE PHENOMENON OF VANITY

The book of Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most puzzling piece of literature in the entire Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> As we will argue later, if one does not grasp the unique literary and rhetorical structure of the book, he or she will fail to understand and to accept the unitary vision of the book. Its author is a master of controversy, and that only because he employed controversy is a literary device.<sup>7</sup> He will declare defeat on the answer to the question of where will the human spirit go after death, only to assert later that the spirit will ascend to God, who created it?

Regarding the theological vision of the author, even though he does not doubt that God exists, he wonders at times whether He is good, all-knowing, or all-powerful. The reason why the author raises questions like these is that life seems often times quite meaningless. Before exploring the content attributes in the book of Ecclesiastes, one needs to ask what did the author of Ecclesiastes mean by "vanity"? The word 'בָּהֵן' (vanity) occurs 38 times in this book alone, and Ecclesiastes "makes the most individual use of" it.<sup>8</sup> Citing C.C. Forman, Garrett considers the possibility that "the frequent refrain that all is 'meaningless' may

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least it has the advance of coherence and order, which is essential when trying to isolate a given theme of the book.

<sup>6</sup> It is not our purpose here to explore the history of scholarship on the issue of date and the authorship of Ecclesiastes. The history of scholarship is rich in diversity on this issue. On this topic one may want to consult C-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 36-47, and T. Longmann III, "Ecclesiastes 3: History of Interpretation," *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, T. Longmann, P. Enns, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 140-49. For the present, we will assume with Garrett that "the nature of the text can coexist with the idea of Solomonic authorship" and that "as we read the book, we are more and more absorbed in the words not of 'King Solomon,' but of 'Solomon-become-the-Teacher.'" Thus *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 264.

<sup>7</sup> Note Salyer, G.D., *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (London: A&C Black, 2001), especially "The Epistemological Spiral: the Ironic Use of Public and Private Knowledge in the Narrative Presentation of Qohelet," 167-238, and Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279, for the fact that "one of the features that makes the structure of Ecclesiastes so difficult to discern is its nonlinear arrangement," which is less like a chronological development and more "a set of circles that return to the same point," that is, the pattern of a "spiral."

<sup>8</sup> Thus K. Seybold, "hebel," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:313-20.

be a play on the name of Abel, the murdered son of Adam.”<sup>9</sup> Specifically, the interjection “Vanity!” (hevel) would have evoked the brutal death of Abel (hevel) as “result of sin.”<sup>10</sup> Even though semantically הַבְּהֵל ranges from the literal sense of “breath, whiff, puff, steam” to the notion of “deep emptiness”, “absurd,” and the prepositional phrase “in vain,” in Ecclesiastes it usually describes the feeling of “futility” and “worthlessness.”<sup>11</sup> This experience has both an emotional and an intellectual dimension. Emotionally, it echoes the feeling of frustration conveyed at the very beginning of the book by the interjection lament: “Vanity!” (Eccl 1:2).<sup>12</sup> The intellectual aspect is evidenced by the idea that “under the sun,” that is, as far as the human mind can comprehend reality, some things remain [incomprehensible, unintelligible].”<sup>13</sup>

As a religious book, one would expect Ecclesiastes to focus mainly on the question of the existence and providence of God. As a sapiential work, however, the book also deals with the sensitive issues of the futility of pleasure, even intellectual pleasures, the meaning of work and of material accomplishment, and the danger inherent in human relations. And yes, Ecclesiastes accepts the raw challenges of undeserved and unpunished suffering, and the agony over the question of life after death. The manner in which he appears to appease this feeling of agony is to insist upon the only reality that one can be sure of: the nature of God.

## POSITIVE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES IN ECCLESIASTES

According to Thomas Oden, “attributes of God are qualities that belong to God’s essential nature and that are found wherever God becomes self-revealed.”<sup>14</sup> Although *Ecclesiastes* bears the stamp of Wisdom Literature, at no point did the

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<sup>9</sup> Thus C.C. Forman, “Kohleleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JJS* 5 (1960): 256-63, op. cit. in Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 279.

<sup>10</sup> Both words have the same vowels and consonants, and the accent falls on the same vowel: הַבְּהֵל. Thus L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, BibleWorks module).

<sup>11</sup> Thus C-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47, and D.J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 281; J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology. Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 590-91; P. Enns, “Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, 121-32;

<sup>12</sup> Note, however, the view of T. Longmann III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 61, that the translation “vanity” may be problematic due to the fact that today it is “primarily used in reference to self-pride.” Longman opts for “meaninglessness” instead of “vanity.” See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47, for the sense of “anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory.”

<sup>13</sup> Seybold, “hebel,” 3:318.

<sup>14</sup> *The Living God* (New York: Harper, 1992), 35.

author think of God as the God of the philosophers.<sup>15</sup> It is true that Qohelet reflected on philosophical themes like the meaning of life, happiness, work, pleasure, and justice, but he arranged them in a form which escapes precise definition, in part because the Qohelet employs a poetical style as well.<sup>16</sup> So, is it appropriate even to bring up the idea of divine attributes? We believe that it is. In the first place, Qohelet uses the word *Elohim* some forty times in twelve chapters.<sup>17</sup> And secondly, many of these occurrences involve some forms of divine activity, like creation, or exercising providence and dispensing justice, which entail the existence of attributes i.e., wisdom, power, being just, and the like. It may not be fully consistent with Semitic thought to portray God in Platonic or Aristotelian categories, but it would be equally unwarranted to exclude the possibility of distinguishing among the activities of God (as described in Ecclesiastes), and arranging them in a framework that will allow one to understand better Qohelet's religion.

### 1. *Eternity*

Two of the problems that consumed most of Qohelet's attention were the sense of meaninglessness and injustice. For example, he expressed the attitude of "meaninglessness" whenever he observed that human beings will never attain lasting fulfillment and happiness, no matter how hard they work, or how wise or rich they have become (chapter 2). His disillusionment appears to be so deep that everything that is done under the sun is "vanity and a striving after wind" (Eccles 1:2, 14; 2:17).

Now, injustice is an interpersonal and societal problem. It may or may not give birth to ultimate questions such as the existence of God and life after death. The feeling of meaninglessness, however, forces one to wonder whether life as he or she experiences it is all there is. And contrary to what many scholars claimed, the book Ecclesiastes took a more positive view on the issue of life after death and eternity.

Throughout the book Qohelet uses the expression "*under the sun*" as a means of delineating the stage – spatial and/or temporal – in which human life is played, especially the events that have to do with the living, not the dead.<sup>18</sup> But

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<sup>15</sup> A notable exception, among others, is Paul Tillich, who called Qohelet the "great existentialist of his period; *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE, : University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 168, noting that the spirit of the Preacher "fills our philosophy and our poetry."

<sup>16</sup> Thus Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279.

<sup>17</sup> Whether the omission of the Tetragrammaton is intentional or not in Ecclesiastes remains outside of the scope of our paper. The matter, nevertheless, remains worth exploring.

<sup>18</sup> The phrase appears some 29 times in Ecclesiastes alone. It may be rendered as "in our physical universe," or "the world as we know it." Note, however, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 113, who argues that, unlike the phrase "under the heavens" – which is a "spatial designation (referring to what

indirectly, this phrase creates the impression that God's world is different from our own. It is true that God appears to be intimately involved in human affairs in "the world as we know it" (he gives wisdom, happiness; he administers justice; he approves or disapproves certain things, etc.). But for Qohelet, God does not seem to be affected by the unfolding of historical events, even those that pervert the pristine order he intended in the first place (7:29). In other words, God transcends both the physical and the temporal limitations of life under the sun. Perhaps that is why Qohelet used only the name Elohim to speak about God, never "God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh."<sup>19</sup> We know that Ecclesiastes is a highly structured piece of literature, and that the author had a clear rhetorical purpose in choosing a term against another and affirming realities that seem to contradict each other. Even so, he does not picture Elohim as an indifferent deity. Thompson's idea that the joy that comes from God is like a "narcotic that numbs the recipient to the true nature of reality" does not do full justice to Qohelet's vision of God.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most direct reference to the transcendence of God against time, and implicitly the eternal dimension of humanity, is found in 3:11, "He has made everything beautiful in *its time*; also he has put *eternity* into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

The term "eternity" has troubled interpreters because of the different ways in which the word אָלֹם (*olam*) can be translated.<sup>21</sup> Generally, the debate is concerned with whether this word is used with a positive or a negative

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is happening in the world)" – the expression "under the sun" denotes a temporal reality which refers to "this world of light and life, as opposed to the world of darkness in the netherworld."

<sup>19</sup> Thus Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 35, stating that Qohelet's use of the name Elohim "leaves the reader with a sense of distance between God and Qohelet," while Yahweh "would invoke warm, covenantal feelings and memories." Likewise Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 56, argues that "this deity does not relate personally with anyone..., God does not enter into a covenant with anyone." Seow does allow for the possibility of an intentional theological device here. In his view, "Qohelet appears to be so intent on avoiding any reference to divine immanence that he does not risk even the language of divine omnipresence."

<sup>20</sup> God gives wisdom to the one who pleases him (3:26), He gives people wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, as well as joy in their heart (5:19-20), God created humans as upright (7:29), He will do good to those who fear Him (8:12). In Eichrodt's words, the Preacher knows that "joy can be praised as the first the Creator's gifts." In *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, translated by J.A. Baker (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1967), 494.

<sup>21</sup> Note, אָלֹם, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, for the sense of "long time" or "duration," "eternity," but also "future time" or "times to come." The word also refers to immemorial ages or "prehistoric times" (Isaiah 51:9). It applies to God in the formula "everlasting God." The LXX translates ~l'[o with aivw,n, usually in stereotypical way with the sense of "eternity," or in the formula "for ever" (eivj to.n aivw/na cro,non), in *The Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauspie eds. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003. BibleWorks module),

connotation. In Barton's view *olam* should be rendered as "ignorance" (with a segolate noun vocalization) a thought similar to Genesis 3:22, or the *Story of Adapa*, where the gods were concerned that humans may become their equal.<sup>22</sup> Gordis reviews the noun's meaning in several contexts, and concludes that the idea of "the world," found also post-biblical Hebrew, fits best with Qohelet's overall purpose.<sup>23</sup> Murphy and Seow adopt a more positive interpretation, seeing אָלֶמֶן as "duration" (Murphy) or, as Qohelet used it in other instances (3:14; 1:4, '0; 2:16; 9:6; 12:5) simply "eternity" (Seow).<sup>24</sup> According to Seow, human beings are caught up in a tension between the awareness of time and eternity, which underscores the theme of "ephemerality" so characteristic to Ecclesiastes. "God is responsible for giving both *time* [the first part of the verse: "everything beautiful in *its time*"] and *eternity*....Humanity knows of *eternity*, but can only cope with activities in their *time*" (italics mine).<sup>25</sup> If the author saw אָלֶמֶן as "eternity," then we have here an implicit allusion to God as eternal, or at least, as able to implant a sense of eternity in the human heart.

Viewing eternity as a human experience, scholars have debated whether Qohelet believed in human immortality or that he intended this passage as a reflection only on God's eternity.<sup>26</sup> Most list a number of passages that portray a rather pessimistic view of life after death.<sup>27</sup> Notice the following:

"For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has

<sup>22</sup> George Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 105. A similar interpretation is adopted by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 97, who considers other instances where "olam" can mean "something hidden," or "a dark counsel" (see Job 28:21, 42:3, and also Ugaritic and Phoenician inscriptions).

<sup>23</sup> Robert Gordis, *Kohelet. The Man and His World* (New York: Shocken, 1968), 231. Similarly, H.D. Preuss, "olam," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 330-345.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), 35. See also C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 163. For the sense of "long time," "prehistory" or even "future apocalyptic times" see "Olam," *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173, and Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 314, who shows that "under the sun, this sense of the eternal cannot be satisfied, because humans are unable to grasp the whole divine plan." Similarly, Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 299, for the "sense of alienation and bewilderment in time" that is stirred by eternity in our hearts. We feel, Garrett adds, that we are "grieved to be trapped in time."

<sup>26</sup> For a more recent statement on this issue see Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians*, 246, who argues that "the Israelites had no hope of heaven, and...had no fear of hell." In the case of Ecclesiastes, Walton argues for "only one possible destiny after death: Sheol, which was clearly not a place of reward, but neither was it a place of punishment (Eccles 6:6)."

<sup>27</sup> Note Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology. Israel's Faith*, 644, for the view that Qohelet found no evidence that human beings "would enjoy a positive afterlife."

no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” (3:19-21)

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10)

“So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity” (11:8)

Nevertheless, passages like 3:11, 12:5 and 12:7 show that the statements that Qohelet made about death and immortality have to be understood not only philosophically, but rhetorically as well.<sup>28</sup> One the one hand he wonders if the spirit (**רוּחַ**) of “man goes upward...” (3:21), while on the other he states that matter will return to earth, from which it came, and the spirit (**רוּחַ**) “shall return unto God who gave it” (12:7). If no hard, syllogistic affirmations were made about human immortality – not at least with the eschatological terminology of the New Testament – it was because, first, the role of Ecclesiastes was to question life with an intentional “under the sun” perspective.<sup>29</sup> One that stated the truth in the context crisis, “making us feel the emptiness of life and the attractiveness of a God-filled life that leads to contentment with one’s earthly lot.”<sup>30</sup> Second, Ecclesiastes belonged to a unique Wisdom genre that, like Job, did not revert to “a simplistic retributive theology” to unlock the difficult questions of life and death. And third, Qohelet did reveal his belief that human beings would experience life after death in a spiritual manner (notice 12:5, man is going to “his eternal home” – **כְּיֻחַ שָׁלֹךְ**).<sup>31</sup>

In closing, it is worth mentioning that in close connection with the attribute of eternity is that of “transcendence.” Thus Qohelet states in 5:2, do not “let your

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<sup>28</sup> Thus Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279: for the literary pattern of the “spiral.”

<sup>29</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 304, agrees with the conclusion that “Ecclesiastes asserts that humans are mortal,” a characteristic that they share with the animals. This is not, however, an assertion that “no form of afterlife whatsoever is possible for humans.” Ecclesiastes does not build an “either...or” argument, but a “both...and” one. “Because by nature we are dependent and contingent, our hope of eternal life must be founded in God and not ourselves (Eccl 12:7, 13-14).”

<sup>30</sup> L. Ryken, “Ecclesiastes,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, L. Ryken and T. Longmann eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 268-80, op. cit. in Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279.

<sup>31</sup> H.D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, translated by L.G. Perdue (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996), 133, for the idea, in spite of the fact that “the human person is on the way to his or her eternal home” (Eccl 12:5), life “is still worth living.” Preuss doubts, however, whether in the religious worldview of Qohelet there existed an “equalization or retribution in the future life.”

heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.” Evidently, the author was not concerned with the nature of God’s dwelling, but with the human attitude toward God, namely, with “caution, reverence, restraint, moderation, and sincerity.”<sup>32</sup> But implicitly, we are made aware of God “as Wholly Other, the transcendent One.” Here, the *transcendence* of God functions as a reminder of both who people are and how they should approach Him. R.B.Y. Scott believes the sage “is expressing his contempt for thoughtless participation in cultic worship.”<sup>33</sup> This “casual” attitude toward the deity was also criticized in the *Egyptian Instruction of Ani*, where one is urged not to be “free with him.” We conclude, however, that if Qohelet appears to view God as an overly transcendent deity, it is for a specific methodological reason. In the midst of everything transient, something or someone must remain unchanged. That is why we should never disregard the distance that separates humans from God, or view Him as a person who can be manipulated.<sup>34</sup> That Qohelet does not insist on divine immanence may be due simply to his specific theological agenda for this book, not to his general theological vision about God. It is the thought of God as *transcending the temporal element* that shapes the human response in a world that He created good, but which turned evil.<sup>35</sup>

## 2. Creation

In the view of Eichrodt, “there is no doubt that the Preacher has modelled his life on the creation story in Genesis.”<sup>36</sup> What Eichrodt alludes here to is Ecclesiastes 3:11. The Preacher (Qohelet) “knows that the Creator has made everything beautiful in its time, and has put eternity in Man’s heart, thus binding him inwardly to himself.” Even though the verb נָתַן has a wide range of applications and subjects (human beings included) in the mind of the original readers it has clear overtones from the act of creation recorded in Genesis. In fact, it is the most important and widely used word in the narrative of creation, where it appears some 18 times in the first three chapters of Genesis, describing the creation of both nature and human beings.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>33</sup> *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 227.

<sup>34</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Thus Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 285, who argues that, in spite of Qohelet’s insistence to view life “exclusively under the sun” and thus risk diminishing the role of God, he ends up “acknowledging him as the transcendent Creator and Sovereign who deserves the worship of all humans.”

<sup>36</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 494. Note, however, Longmann, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 119, for the argument that Qohelet could have used the “creation” verb bara, but instead used the “bland verb” asah due to his “lack of enthusiasm about God’s creation.”

<sup>37</sup> Thus H. Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 11:387-403.

Another important term is the word “beautiful” (**נָפֶה**, yapheh). For Eichrodt, it describes an act the mysterious order of which “sets everything in its right place,” which is why it is given here such an eloquent expression: “He has made everything beautiful in its time!” (3:11).<sup>38</sup> Evidently **נָפֶה** probably has more than aesthetic connotations here. Most commentators interpret it as “appropriate,” or “right,” or “proper.”<sup>39</sup> Although the word “everything” encompasses more than physical creation, the *creative* aspect of God’s activity is unmistakable. Interestingly, Murphy links **נָפֶה** with the word **טוֹב** from Genesis 1, used by the author to conclude every day from God’s creation (“and it was good”).<sup>40</sup>

A second passage alluding to this theme is 3:14, namely, “whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so in order that men should fear before him.” The concept of “adding and subtracting” was familiar to the author of Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 13:1, where Israel is called not to add or take away anything from God’s law. In Ecclesiastes 3:14, creation is linked with “fearing God” (which may be also implied in the Deuteronomistic passages). In other words, the work of God - whether physical or spiritual - will endure for ever, and this reality, if understood properly, can have a didactic purpose, i.e., lead people to fear God. Crenshaw asks, “Does Qohelet think of the deity as jealously guarding divine prerogatives (an idea that occurs in a few ancient text, Gen 3:22, 11:6)?” The idea that fear has negative connotations in this passage is also shared by Barton and Gordis, who detects here the primitive theme of “the jealousy of the gods.”<sup>41</sup> Along with Seow and Farmer, Fox thinks that “fear” is not imposed by God, but should be the appropriate response on our part once we acknowledge we are “dealing with a sovereign and inscrutable deity.” Farmer too believes that fear should be an appropriate response to the anxiety which results from “trying to guarantee that our actions will have permanent results.”<sup>42</sup> Regarding the idea of the “eternity” of creation, Qohelet does not imply “that everything God does is everlasting.”<sup>43</sup> Rather, the author thinks that the work of God, unrestricted by time and space, is different from the achievements of human beings, who toil “in this physical world.” In Seow’s own words, “their activities are only transient, whereas God’s are eternal.”

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<sup>38</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, 494.

<sup>39</sup> Thus Michael Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1989, 193, *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 299.

<sup>40</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> Gordis, *Kohelet*, 233.

<sup>42</sup> Kathleen Farmer, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes - Who Knows What is Good?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 161. See Michael Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 195.

<sup>43</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 174.

Finally, Qohelet views God as the *creator of the human soul*. The statement that the human spirit “returns to God, who gave it” (12:7) has given birth to a number of opposing interpretations. A number of authors believe that the idea of the soul returning to God falls short of the later Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul. Fox shows that an analysis of other verses dealing with the idea of human destiny will reveal that, for Qohelet, “the return of the life-spirit to God simply means death,” or extinction.<sup>44</sup> Others like Seow, Gordis, Murphy, and Crenshaw link this verse with 3:21, where the author speculates whether the human spirit ascends upward (apparently to God). For them it is not clear whether Qohelet believed life after death was possible in another form. What is evident is that the author believed that human life itself “is possible only because of the life-breath that God gives.”<sup>45</sup> As we have argued so far, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Qohelet did not take a materialistic view on the fate of the human soul. This verse is a clear indication that Qohelet saw God as the *creator* of all life. As the gift of God, the life-breath will return to him when one dies (Ps. 104 29-30; Job 34:14-15; Isa 42:5; Ez 37:5). As *creator*, God dispenses physical enjoyments and fame (2:24; 3:13; 5:19; 6:2; 9:7), wisdom (1:13; 2:26), and ultimately human life (5:18; 12:7).

In closing we could say that Qohelet’s vision was shaped both by the event of creation and by that of the fall.<sup>46</sup> We have already shown that the word **הַבָּל** can describe the experience of “vanity” and the proper name Abel (as both words have the same vowels and consonants, and the accent falls on the same vowel). We have also introduced the view of C.C. Forman, namely, that “the frequent refrain that all is ‘meaningless’ may be a play on the name of Abel, the murdered son of Adam.”<sup>47</sup> An interesting corollary to the concept of creation and the fall appears in Romans 8:20, where the apostle Paul talks about creation being “subjected” to “frustration” or “futility” (**הַנְּאֹתֶפֶת שְׁסִחֵךְ** הַתְּהִתְאַמֵּם) where ματαιότης is the LXX translation of the Hebrew **הַבָּל**.<sup>48</sup> The pessimism of Qohelet was shared by the Scripture as a whole: until things will get better, they are getting worse.

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<sup>44</sup> Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 308-309.

<sup>45</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 382.

<sup>46</sup> Notice especially the text of 7:29: “See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes,” an allusion to the Genesis account of the Fall.

<sup>47</sup> C.C. Forman, “Koheleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JJS* 5 (1960): 256-63, op. cit. in Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 279.

<sup>48</sup> “ματαιότης,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, F.W. Danker ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. BibleWorks module) and *The Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauppie eds. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003. BibleWorks module), which cites the occurrence of ματαιότης in Romans 8:20.

### 3. Justice

It is important to establish at the outset that approaching the phenomenon of “injustice” in a way that disturbs the sensibilities of the conservative reader is one of the hallmarks of Wisdom literature, especially in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.<sup>49</sup> Before analyzing *morality* and *justice* as *divine characteristics* in Ecclesiastes, it should be pointed out that Qohelet often mentions them apart from any connection with God. For example, in connection to God he says that “it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God” (8:13). But the same theme is contemplated apart from God, as in 7:15 - “there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing.” Each verse has different moral implications, depending on how one understands the character of God as viewed by Qohelet. The distinction is important, because in the first case God is involved - thus the idea of justice against the wicked - whereas in the second he is not; here, the wicked seem to have escaped justice. We do not mean to suggest that whenever God is mentioned justice and morality receive preferential treatment, and vice versa. A number of scholars have noticed the connections between the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, the two books that address the issue of injustice in the most critical manner.<sup>50</sup> But it is important to distinguish between Qohelet’s reflection on justice/injustice in general, on the one hand, and justice/injustice linked with God, on the other hand. It is possible that behind the assertion “who can make straight what God has made crooked” he may imply that things which are wrong could not be so unless God ordained them. However, in spite of the many enigmatic inquiries which he often leaves unanswered - as if they were just observations on life in general - Qohelet never questions the moral character of God. God is involved neither in the events described in 7:15, where Qohelet saw the wicked prospering, nor in those of 4:1, where the oppressed have no comforter and the oppressors have the power.

Now, given Qohelet’s belief that God controls the affairs of this world, and that no one can straighten what He made crooked (7:13), it is possible to speculate that God is at least indirectly responsible for unjust acts. But it is highly improbable that Qohelet was unable to follow the logic of his assertions. Like Qohelet, the Old Testament seems to hold God’s sovereignty and the presence of injustice in creative tension. Human freedom, though alluded to in 7:29 (where the man whom God made upright “sought out many devices”), is not given a great deal of attention here. This does not mean that Qohelet did not

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<sup>49</sup> Note C.J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 179-79

<sup>50</sup> Representative here is Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 56-57, who argues that, when thinking about social injustices Qohelet “shares the honest perspective of Job.”

believe in it. He tells us too little concerning freedom that we may form a reasonable opinion about his beliefs.

One will also notice that in 3:17 Qohelet describes God as a judge who has appointed “a time for every matter;” in this case, to “judge the righteous and the wicked.” Crenshaw considers Qohelet’s other statements about the lack of justice against the wicked, and concludes that “the affirmation of divine judgment appears contradictory. This verse, then, may be a later gloss.”<sup>51</sup> Scott believes Qohelet uses an orthodox interpretation of divine justice as a straw man, “only to discard it.”<sup>52</sup> Similar views are held by Barton (this verse is the work of a Chasid) and Gordis (verse is authentic, but is meant as a *satirical note*).<sup>53</sup> Seow and Murphy reject the “editorial” interpretation, and explain that Qohelet does not refer here to eschatological judgment. As in 3:11, Qohelet in fact claims that God has appointed a “proper” time for everything. The time-frame need not be definite; “the statement is merely an acknowledgment that whatever will be done is entirely in the hand of God.”<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, a number of authors have argued that verses like 11:9; 12:13; and 12:14 were glosses made later by an editor who sought to balance Qohelet’s views on divine justice. For instance, Seow acknowledges that 12:9-14 “is an appendix of some sort.”<sup>55</sup> He compares Qohelet’s earlier claims on divine justice and concludes that 11:19 and 12:14 are clearer explanations of how God will judge, whereas earlier he only admitted that God will simply judge (3:17). Seow also says that “it is the possibility of such a hermeneutical move that assured the acceptance of Ecclesiastes into the canon (see b. Sabb. 30b).”<sup>56</sup> However, unlike Barton, Crenshaw and Gordis, he believes that “the perspective in vv 13b-14 is not contradictory to the rest of the book.” Murphy too shows that, while various interpreters view 11:9 as a latter gloss (“but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment”), the “Israelite tradition of divine judgment is too strong for him [Qohelet] simply to negate it.”<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, we believe that the author of Ecclesiastes impressed upon his work a clear literary and theological structure. The charge of glosses and editorial tensions does not do justice to the literary/theological integrity of the work. The following verses reflect a consistent thematic integrity on the issue of human sin, injustice and divine retribution:

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<sup>51</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

<sup>52</sup> *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, 223.

<sup>53</sup> Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 108, and Gordis, *Qohelet: the Man and His World*, 235.

<sup>54</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>57</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, 117.

“For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind” (2:26)

“When you vow a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools” (5:4)

“Let not your mouth lead you into sin,...why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?” (5:6)

“See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (7:29)

“Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God” (8:12)

“...but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God” (8:13)

“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth...But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9)

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the duty of man” (12:13)

“For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:14)

It is so evident that idea of God judging the wicked does not contradict other assertions about injustice made by Qohelet. First of all, it agrees with the wider context of the Old Testament view to which Qohelet would often refer. Furthermore, there are several other instances where Qohelet's choice of words like sin, sinner, the man pleasing to God and the one fearing God indicate that the moral universe he believed in was not vastly different from the ancient Jewish faith.

On the other hand, one notices in Qohelet an attitude of pessimism and despair that set him apart from most of the traditional Jewish authors of the Old Testament (Job is a notable exception). It is possible that the author of the book may have suffered a spiritual crisis which affected his world-view, to the effect that his message became not the norm, but the exception in Wisdom Literature. But throughout the book one will find references such as these which recall traditional Old Testament beliefs, a fact which proves that in spite of his pessimism, Qohelet never fully abandoned the ideals of justice and righteousness. Whether it was the sinner or the oppressor, the attitude of a fool

or of a liar, Qohelet believed that there was an intrinsic moral reaction within God against perversions like these, and that God's final word will uphold justice, in his proper time.<sup>58</sup>

We have argued that Qohelet made certain affirmations concerning divine justice from the beginning of the book that confirm the views taken from 11:9 on. It is true that chapter 12 seems to conclude the book on a strong ethical note, one that is a bit unusual for the claims the author made earlier. And yet, it is still difficult to believe that the so called "editor" was so ignorant (or hurried) as not to realize that by piling up all these strong ethical claims at the end he will arouse the suspicion of later readers. As a scholar invested with the authority to edit religious works – if indeed the work was edited – he certainly knew how to insert ethical claims in the appropriate places, so that the overall structure of the book may appear coherent, and thus preclude any suspicions on the part of the readers.<sup>59</sup> As Estes argued:

If the author of the book employs the persona of Qohelet to examine a test case, in which he unsuccessfully seeks to find advantage under the sun in order to demonstrate that genuine advantage comes only through remembering God the Creator, then the epilogue can be construed as the conclusion to which the author has been leading the reader...By viewing the epilogue as the actual position of the author, the recurrent exhortations to accept life with all of its enigmas as a gift from God are pointers to the conclusions of the book, not orthodox interpolations into the purportedly subversive doctrine of Qohelet.<sup>60</sup>

The fact still remains that the theory of a final editor has not yet answered all the problems raised by ending of Ecclesiastes.

## CONCLUSION

The scope of this essay was to review the majority of the claims made by Qohelet on three attributes of God: *eternity/transcendence*, *creation* and *justice*. Although not all references to God fit the category of "attribute," those which did helped clarify certain forms in which God was intelligible to Qohelet. The

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<sup>58</sup> But see J. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: an Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1981), 128, for the view that "Qohelet could muster no confidence in God's disposition to reward virtue and punish vice." Crenshaw adopts a multiple-author view which includes at least Qoheleth and his "epilogist," or admirer. The essential Qoheleth, in Crenshaw's view, "lacked trust in either God, or knowledge."

<sup>59</sup> It is entirely possible that in some circles the book of Ecclesiastes was not received with sympathy, and so even the simple addition of a different ending - with the people's knowledge - would be seen as a necessary correction. In other words, the final addition need not have been made in secret.

<sup>60</sup> *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 378-79,

two attributes of *eternity/transcendence* and creation impress on the reader the acknowledgment that God is not bound either by time or space. As Walter Brueggemann sees it, in Ecclesiastes “God will outlast all creatureliness and will preserve all that is, was, and will be. God is the all-comprehensive and all-sufficient.”<sup>61</sup> God’s transcendence also hinders people from fully comprehending the logic of his actions and the area of *justice* as well. And this may have contributed to the pessimism of Qohelet; and implicitly to the widely critical readings of his book. Von Rad may not be wrong to call this a *new* and *alarming* thought in the Old Testament, although we disagree that this phenomenon was necessarily new.<sup>62</sup> While other teachers acknowledged the mystery that surrounded God, for the most part that thought did not disturb their faith.<sup>63</sup>

But Qohelet also viewed God in more positive and affirming ways, as the source of life, the dispenser of human pleasures, and the giver of wisdom; in other words, as *creator*. As Jacque Ellul observes, “in Qohelet God is above all the One who gives. For this reason we disagree with those who reduce the God of Qohelet to a vague or bland divinity.”<sup>64</sup> God not only creates, but he administers *justice* amidst his creation, even though at times He appears to be the source of **עַל** (evil) as well.<sup>65</sup> Here, however, and contrary to what many authors have argued for, Qohelet listed one very convincing explanation for the phenomenon of **עַל** and that of injustice: human rebellion and the fall: .<sup>66</sup> That is why Ecclesiastes is firm that “there is a reckoning and an accountability that cannot be escaped.”<sup>67</sup> There is no point in denying that Qohelet’s crisis of evil influenced his views of justice in the world. There is also no reason to doubt that in Qohelet, as in Job, intense questioning was in itself a literary and theological motif.<sup>68</sup> Employing the word **עַל** some eighteen times, often in direct relation to

<sup>61</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, “Ecclesiastes: The Far Edge of Negativity” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 394.

<sup>62</sup> The fact remains that the state of alarming negativity was not typical exclusively of Wisdom literature. Voices like those in the Psalms of the suffering, Jeremiah, and others, expressed their bewilderment at what they perceived to be that dimension of God which they had never experienced before.

<sup>63</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 234.

<sup>64</sup> Jacque Ellul, *Reason For Being - A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 250.

<sup>65</sup> Thus J. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 183, with reference to Ecclesiastes 7:14, “In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one, as well as the other...”

<sup>66</sup> Note also 8:12: “The sinner does evil a hundred times” (**מֵאָה עַשְׂרֶה רָעַבְתָּה**).

<sup>67</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 394.

<sup>68</sup> But see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 145, among others, who argues that Qohelet left the question of injustice suspended, offering no satisfactory answer. Fox asks “how can there be

הַכֹּל (vanity) attests to the tension that characterizes his work.<sup>69</sup> This tension was intentional, not born out of fatalism. In the end, as Brueggemann observes, Qohelet does not stand alone in raising up his lament and faith in God's justice at the same time. "Israel's way is to voice all of its enraged candor, but always to bear in mind the One who must be addressed, and then obeyed."<sup>70</sup>

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injustices (as there are) if God is just (as he is)?" In this end, "Qohelet sees no answer." Without even trying to resolve this tension, he only "teaches how to live with it."

<sup>69</sup> Thus the pair הַבָּל and עֲשֵׂה in the formula "vanity and an evil task is this" (וְאֵת הַבָּל וְעֲשֵׂה רַע הוּא) in 4:8.

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# Theology and Technology: Biblical and Practical Aspects

Ovidiu Hanc<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The article seeks to define technology showing that it can be a tool which can be of practical use for humanity or can be of spiritual help or hindrance to believers. Consideration is given to the use of technology in the OT and NT, including its wrongful use. Technology and ethics present opportunities to discuss its rightful or wrongful use as it provides an appropriate framework for sin i.e., the internet. The article also considers information technology and how it has advanced the gospel but also how the use of online facilities leaves believers open to the neglect of real relationships and fellowship. Technology brings unexpected benefits but also unimaginable pitfalls in the area of consumerism and materialism.

**KEY WORDS:** the definition of technology, internet, evangelism, consumerism, use for the glory of God.

## INTRODUCTION

Technology is the application of knowledge for practical ends. It is the science of processing various materials as aids for life, human activity, and social interaction. When we talk about technology, we refer to many aspects related to the mechanical, technical, electrical, electronic, etc. Technology is a tool for human existence, but it can also be used as a tool against humans. In recent time, the development of technology has experienced an exceptional growth.

From the beginning of the Bible we find the use of technology in various forms as an integral part of human activity. Technology is a physical reality, but it also has spiritual values due to the influence it has on man. We cannot think of the use of technology void of a spiritual reality. Arthur Hunt argued that technology is not neutral, but it has the potential to change our beliefs and behaviors as our print-oriented culture is shifting to an image-oriented one.<sup>2</sup>

Recent research on the influence of technology on human life focuses mainly on the influence it has on human thinking and activity. Technology cannot be separated from spiritual reality and the way in which it influences not only the

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 19.

human body or thought but also the soul. This study examines the biblical aspects of technology and its impact in a practical way in the life of faith today.

Paula McNutt in her interdisciplinary study on the impact of iron technology on the material and cultural life of ancient Israel noted that technology and technological innovations have long been recognized as major contributors to the development of social and cultural systems and have tended to be closely related to crucial turning points in human history.<sup>3</sup>

Although this research emphasizes some negative aspects of technology, it is important to note that much of the technological accomplishment is beneficial for humanity, but it also has a destructive spiritual potential. Separating technology from spiritual reality means ignoring the existence of a point of intersection between theology and technology.

### OLD TESTAMENT AND TECHNOLOGY: TOOL VS. TRAP

In the Bible we find from the very beginning the use of technology by people who have moved away from God (building cities Gen. 4.17; inventing musical instruments Gen. 4.21; metalworking Gen. 4.22; building a tower Gen 11) or by the people who sought to be in the will of God (building an ark Gen 6; building wells Gen 21.30-31, 26.15; building altars Gen. 12:7).

Although today we expect the technological process to finally offer extremely complex products, in ancient times the use of technology to produce simple but useful things meant a lot. One basic example of crafting something for daily use is the sandals. The use of sandals was extremely important in terms of the protection they offered. However, we find references to the use of sandals in both the Old and New Testaments not only in relation to physical activity but having a symbolic value. In the Pentateuch we find a reference to the taking off of sandals in the context of the theophany in Ex. 3 (see also Jos. 5:15), or having the sandals on in the context of deliverance from the bondage of Egypt (Ex. 12:11). Another reference is that God bears witness to how miraculously their garments and sandals were not worn out in the wilderness for forty years (Deut. 29.5). The book of Ruth mentions the use of taking off and offering sandals as a symbol of completing a transaction (Ruth 4.7).

In the New Testament we find references to sandals with reference to an act of spiritual significance. John the Baptist is not worthy to untie the Messiah's shoes (e.g. Matt. 3:11; Mk. 1:7; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:27). We also find the mention of sandals

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<sup>3</sup> Paula McNutt, *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism and Tradition in Ancient Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2009), 13.

with reference to the commission for the ministry (Lk. 10:1-16; Lk. 22:36), thus their usage is essential for fulfilling the responsibility of delivering the Gospel message.

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE TABERNACLE

Technology was used not only for creating simple object for daily use, but also for special elements related to worship. The construction of the Tabernacle required a special skill in processing materials of gold, silver, bronze, stones, and wood. God endowed Bezaleel and Oholiab in a special way for work that included sculpting and processing various materials (Ex. 31:2-11). The most valuable object was the Ark of the Covenant – a sacred object that symbolized God’s presence among His people and was used as a storehouse for the tablets of the law, Aaron’s staff, and the manna vessel (Heb. 9:4). Later, we find the use of technology in building the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6). Hiram is described as a skilled worker in bronze (1 Kings 7.13-14). Throughout the history of the people of Israel we find the use of technology in processing various materials.

## THE WRONG USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has often been used against God. The Tower of Babel is a symbol of the use of technology in a way God is not honored (Gen. 11: 3-9). Idolatry is another example of the use of technology for wrong worship. The defining element regarding idolatry is the production of a physical object in various forms and materials for worshiping a deity that the object represents.

If in Exodus 31 the craftsmen use their skills to worship God, one chapter later we find technology in the service of idolatrous worship as they fashioned the golden calf (Ex. 32:2-4). The crafting of idols occurs many times in the Bible not only among pagan people, but also in the people of God (*e.g.* the worship of the bronze serpent that Moses crafted in Numbers 21:9 as Nehushtan 2 Kgs. 18:4; the crafting and worshiping of a piece of wood Is. 44:10-20; etc.).

Another example of the misuse of technology in worship is the pride caused by great technological achievements (*e.g.* the pride of king Nebuchadnezzar for building great Babylon, Dan. 4:30) or confidence in technological achievements. Psalm 20:7 presents the tendency of man to trust military technological development as an asset in time of war. Wisdom literature reflects this reality in which some trust in chariots and horses. This reference does not imply that military technology has a negative connotation, but the fact that trust in technology has replaced trust in God.

King Uzziah ordered the construction of war machines placed on towers and in strategic corners serving as a defence against the Philistines in the event of a siege by throwing arrows and large stones (2 Chronicles 26:14-15). The spiritual fall of Uzziah comes at a time when he was strong from a military point of view and his accomplishments led him to pride (2 Chron. 26:16).

A similar example is found in 2 Chronicles 16:12 where Asa did not seek God during his illness but sought help from doctors. This passage is not a prohibition on appealing to doctors in case of illness, but an unwanted description of Asa's independence from God.

John Calvin argued that “the human heart is a perpetual idol factory.”<sup>4</sup> With the help of technology, this tendency toward idolatry becomes more practical since idols give a visible form to an invisible reality.

## NEW TESTAMENT AND TECHNOLOGY: BIBLICAL ASPECTS

In the New Testament we often find references to elements that require the use of technology. In his preaching, Jesus often illustrates spiritual truths of the Kingdom of Heaven using various tools or objects (cities Matt. 5:14; oil lamps Matt. 5:14-16; 25:1-13; gates Matt. 7:13-14; nets Matt. 13:47- 50; coins Lk. 15:8-10; tower Lk. 13:4; etc.). The Acts of the Apostles gives us examples of several technological elements (gate 3:2; dungeon 4:3, 5:23; builders 4:11; chariot 8:28; books 1:1, 19:19; ships 13:4, 13; basket 9:25; altars 17:23; tents 18:3; idols 19:24-25; whips 22:24; etc.).

Paul uses elements of spiritual armor to communicate truths about the spiritual battle in which the Christian is involved (cf. 6:11-17). In the book of Revelation, we find many elements that involve the use of technology from the candlesticks that represent the churches to the Holy City which is built of gold and jasper (Rev. 21:18).

The letters represent the element by which the New Testament has been preserved over time through writing, copying, and distribution. Technology is therefore used not only to explain and exemplify the message of Scripture, but also to preserve it.

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 108.

## INFRASTRUCTURE: “ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME”

Phillip Schaff mentions that all roads pointed towards the Imperial City, and started from its *Milliarium Aureum*,<sup>5</sup> the Golden Milestone that was considered to be the place from which all the distances were measured in the Roman Empire. Although the expression “mille viae ducunt homines per saecula Romam” (a thousand roads lead men forever to Rome) was penned in 1175 by Alain de Lille in one of his works, *Liber Parabolae*, the reality of a unique system of roads in the Roman Empire of the first century is undisputed.

One clear reference is the swift movement of two hundred soldiers with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to Caesarea at night to bring Paul to safety (Acts. 23:23-25). Road infrastructure was, among other things, one of the advantages for the spreading of the Gospel.

## NEW TESTAMENT TERMINOLOGY FOR TECHNOLOGY

Technology is a broad term. The etymology of the term *technology* indicates a construction of two terms τέχνη (*technē*) and λόγια. The term τέχνη (*technē*) means skill, art, craft, method, system, methodology while λόγια is a derivative of λόγος (*logos*) which means word, narration, explanation, constructed with the suffix -ία (-ia).

In the New Testament, the term τέχνη (*technē*) appears three times (Acts 17:29; 18:3 and Rev. 18:22), while the related term τεχνίτης (*technitēs*) appears four times (Acts 19:24, 38; Heb. 11:10 and Rev. 18:22). Thus, we have five chapters in the New Testament where we can find the terms τέχνη and τεχνίτης from where we can emphasize five important theological aspects.

First, in Acts 17:29 the apostle Paul speaks to the Athenian philosophers proclaiming that God is not a God created by man's craft and skill – the term used is τέχνη. The second passage is in Acts 18:3 where apostle Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth and because they had the same craft, they worked together to make tents – the term τέχνη appears. In the next chapter we find the term τεχνίτης twice in v.24 and 38 with reference to Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis gaining with his craftsmen from their occupation.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 Volume I - The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Reverend Alexander Roberts (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 1.

The fourth passage is Heb. 11:10 where the term τεχνίτης is used about God who is the designer and builder of the heavenly city. The last passage is Revelation 18:22 where we find both terms τέχνη and τεχνίτης. In this passage John presents the destruction of Babylon and the fact that there will no longer be heard in this city the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, and also a craftsman of any craft will be found in this city no more, neither the sound of the mill, because Babylon will be destroyed.

An analysis of these passages in which we find the terms denoting technology reflects the following fundamental principles. We first understand that God is not a created God, created through a technological process like the idols and representations found in Athens. God is the one who creates man and gives him the ability to use technology. Thus, technology is ultimately from God and for God.

In the second passage where we see the apostle Paul working technologically, we understand that technology can be used and must be used for God's work. In the next chapter, however, we understand that technology can be used to craft statuettes for idolatrous worship. Thus, technology is a tool that can be used both as a blessing and as a curse.

In the fourth passage we discover that God is described as a technical builder who builds the heavenly city on a solid foundation. This technical ability is a nuance of God's creative power.

In Revelation 18 we see that technology can be used in a negative way for Babylon. From a theological point of view, Babylon symbolizes the city that opposes God, but which will eventually be destroyed. From an eschatological point of view, any technological process in opposition to what God is will be destroyed.

Concluding all these aspects related to the way in which the New Testament presents the use of technology, we emphasize that technology has been used simultaneously for the advancement of the work of the Gospel and against it.

## TECHNOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: PRACTICAL ASPECTS

Studying the history of the Church and the way the technological development has impacted it, the examples are innumerable. When Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1436, no one anticipated the huge effect this invention would have on the Church starting with the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Later, as the Industrial Revolution took place starting with the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the transition

from an agrarian to industrial society was just the beginning of a much rapid technological development.

The Industrial Revolution significantly affected society and Church life, directly or indirectly. Today we are living in a time of digital revolution – the development of the media and the Internet. Today's society has shifted from Gutenberg era to Zuckerberg era.<sup>6</sup>

The generation before our own was the first generation of Christians who had to learn how to live and deal with a television in the house. This generation of Christians is the first generation who must learn how to live holy in a world of information technology. There are many studies performed today on the extent the modern technology, especially information technology, is affecting our life, health, behavior, brain, social life, etc. Inevitably all these aspects relate to our spiritual life in many ways.

### *Technology and Ethics*

Technology is not good or bad *per se*. The technology is neutral from a moral point of view. However, each technological element has a certain moral dimension. The fact that technology can be morally neutral does not mean that it is neutral in terms of destructive potential. A knife, although is a tool in the kitchen, can also be used in a dangerous way comparing to a stuffed animal toy.

Our life is marked by useful technological things; however, from a spiritual point of view technology becomes part of a spiritual reality depending upon how it is used.

Wrong use of technology provides an appropriate framework for sin. The internet is just an example in which ethics is relativized and sin is trivialized. Thus, the technological development has led to the potential growth of sin. The development of technology tends to make us less dependent on God. John Piper noted that one of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.<sup>7</sup> A wrong use of technology is that in which the life of faith becomes more superficial, and the resulting behavior is inclined to violence, immorality, rebellion, etc. Studying the epidemic of boredom in our culture, Richard Winter argued that technology

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<sup>6</sup> John Naughton, *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg: Disruptive Innovation in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Quercus, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> “John Piper on Twitter: ‘One of the Great Uses of Twitter and Facebook Will Be to Prove at the Last Day That Prayerlessness Was Not from Lack of Time.’ / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JohnPiper/status/5027319857>.

acts as a giant amplifier of both aspects of the world – all that is wonderful and good *and* all that is terrible and evil. He refers to Aldous Huxley’s vision of the future (*Brave New World*) in which the advancing of technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face, since people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.<sup>8</sup>

Tim Challies is correct in affirming that the long history of human innovation proves that every technology has inevitable consequences. Thus “when we create and develop new technologies, we must also understand that technology is like everything else in this sinful world: it is subject to the curse.”<sup>9</sup> The virtual world is simultaneously a spiritual world, a platform in which the Gospel is proclaimed but also where the power of darkness is advancing.

Nomophobia is another example of a type of fear of being without a mobile device. As any other addiction, nomophobia represents a modern form of idolatry in which technology is used for sinful purposes.

### *Technology and Epistemology*

Recent technology also provides an appropriate framework for relativism. The truth was always under siege. The Bible presents the absolute nature of God’s truth; however, beginning with the fall, God’s absolute truth was always questioned or attacked (e.g. Gen. 3:1; 1 Kings 22:22-23; Ps. 62:4; Is. 28:15; Jer. 9:3-5; Dan. 8:12; Rom. 1:25).

The world today is marked by information technology which has the potential of producing informational obesity, a state in which it becomes harder and harder to sift through the ocean of information to find true and relevant information.

The book of Daniel is an example of the limitation of technology and education. When it comes to spiritual reality, the only viable source of information is revelation. Daniel was able to explain the dream of the king only because of divine intervention (Dan. 2:19-28). When it comes to knowledge, science, education, and technology are helpful, but also limited.

Although we would expect technological development to produce unprecedented opportunities for knowledge, the reality of all research studies

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Winter, *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion Wonder* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2002), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 16.

reveals that the huge flow of information to which modern man is subjected leads to lack of concentration, lack of analytical thinking, superficiality in thinking, incapability of memorization, limitation of creativity, emotional instability, lack of peace of mind and other negative aspects.

Technology provides great tools for studying the Bible;<sup>10</sup> however, in the process of knowing God, technology can be an epistemological asset, but it cannot replace a personal knowledge, just as the simple information about a person does not produce a real relationship.

### *Technology and Ecclesiology*

The development of technology had inevitably impacted the Church. There are many positive aspects for the ministry and life of the Church today. The proclamation of the Gospel has a potential to reach across the globe much more widely and relationships can be developed much easier. With the help of technology, the Word is proclaimed in the countries that are closed to the Gospel message. One of the most effective methods of Evangelism today in the persecuted countries is through the use of technology.

However, technology has also unwanted side effects. The internet can easily become a replacement for fellowship. It is true that the Internet can replace the fellowship of those unable to come to fellowship, but live streaming cannot replace the true and deep fellowship of the saints.

Technology is essential for the development of human activities and relationships. But it can also be a trap as the believer's use of technology can be reversed so that they become subjugated by technology. Technology helps us communicate easily but it can also isolate us from one another as we are predisposed to focus on technology itself instead of relationships.

We are social beings, created to relate to each other since we are created by a Triune God. The relationships within the Godhead are a paradigm for our existence within community.

### *Technology and Eschatology*

One prophetic aspect that Isaiah emphasizes from the beginning of his book is that in the messianic age people will beat their swords into plowshares and their

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<sup>10</sup> Luis Vegas Montaner, Guadalupe Seijas De Los Rios-Zarzosa, and Del Barco Javier, eds., *Computer Assisted Research on the Bible in the 21st Century* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010).

spear into pruning hooks (Isa. 2:4). The messianic age will be one in which technology will no longer be used in a destructive way.

Another eschatological aspect is found in Daniel 12:4, where the prophetic message mentions that at the time of the end, many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase. Although the commentators do not agree on the meaning of this verse considering the prophetic message of the book,<sup>11</sup> the aspect of increasing knowledge is generally acknowledged by the scholars since those living in the end times will have far greater knowledge than those in the sixth century B.C.

In 1982, R. Buckminster Fuller a renowned inventor, architect, philosopher and mathematician published the book *Critical Path – A Study of Knowledge*. He analyzed the amount of knowledge gained over time and estimated that the speed at which information gets doubled is getting faster and faster. The latter is now between one and two years.<sup>12</sup>

The exponential development of technology comes with a legitimate question about the limits of technology. The development of technology seems to be focusing on helping and entertaining humanity; however at the eschatological level technology is only a tool within a meta-narrative of God's eternal purpose.

## CONCLUSION

In the Bible we do not find specific rules about how a Christian should use modern technology. But we do find the guiding principles needed to navigate an increasingly technological world. The fundamental biblical premises in relation to technology are the following: First, God is not the creation of technology, but technology is God's creation. God has created us in His image, so our ability to create technology is a God given gift that reflects His character. Second, man's fall into sin has inevitably affected our use of technology. Technology is a tool that was intended to be used for God, but it can be also a tool used by and for the Devil. Third, because of this, the use of technology has been and will be either a tool or an obstacle to the message of the Gospel. Fourth, from an eschatological point of view, every technology that is not used to glorify God will ultimately be destroyed (Rev. 18:22).

Today's technology can help or affect our spiritual development. Technology brings unexpected benefits but also unimaginable pitfalls. Consumerism,

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<sup>11</sup> John Walvoord, *Daniel*, ed. Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 210.

<sup>12</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller and Kiyoshi Kuromiya, *Critical Path*, 2nd edition (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Griffin, 1982).

materialism are just the few elements that come with the technological development of society. Technology must be used as a tool for spiritual life, not as a prison. The essential aspect in relation to technology is not the technology itself, but the dependence on technology.

In conclusion, the good fight of faith in the technological age is not against technology but against dependence of technology. A correct approach to technology from a biblical point of view implies neither demonizing nor idolizing it but using it for the glory of God.

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# Biblical - Pedagogical Foundations in the Training of the Church Musician for the Romanian Twenty-First Century Evangelical Church

Gary Methena<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the biblical-pedagogical foundations related to the training of church musicians to serve the Romanian Evangelical church. The examination will centre around three pillars of Christian higher education taken from three pivotal pedagogical passages from the teachings of Christ as He prepared His disciples to become the worship leaders in the early church: (1) the *process* of Christian higher education is delineated in the Great Commandment, (2) the *purpose* of Christian higher education is defined in the Great Commission, and (3) the *product* of higher education is described in the Sermon on the Mount. An examination of these three pillars of Christian higher education will reveal relevant principles that can be applied by Emanuel University in the training of its church musicians for effective ministry in the modern culture.

**KEY WORDS** worship leader, Emanuel University training, Great Commandment, Great Commission, the Sermon on the Mount.

There is a mindset in Evangelical culture today that worship is just another spoke on the wheel of the ecclesiastical machine along with evangelism, missions, preaching, teaching, music, education, and all the other ministries of the church. Warren Wiersbe<sup>2</sup> challenges that mind set when he writes, “Worship is at the center of everything the church believes, practices, and seeks to accomplish.” Worship is not just another spoke on the wheel, but the very hub from which everything the church is and does should emanate, and that includes the ministry of Christian education as well.

Christian education is the proper worship response to the revealed all-knowing, omniscient God. God is knowledge personified. There is nothing to be known that He does not already know altogether. Education begins and ends with Him, as illustrated in the following verses:

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<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Real Worship, it Will Transform Your Life*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 17.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Prov. 1:7 ESV)

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!” (Ps 111:10 ESV)

“And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’” (Job 28:28 ESV)

David Lyle Jeffrey<sup>3</sup> writes, “In Augustine’s view the incentive for so much learning is not then by any means mere mastery of knowledge for its own sake; such ambition ‘puffs up’ the mind and makes it an object of idolatrous worship. What prompts earnest and excellent scholarship in the Christian is the ‘fear of the Lord.’”

What is the biblical process of Christian higher education? What is its purpose? What is the product it hopes to produce? The answer to these questions can be found in the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and in the Sermon on the Mount.

## THE PROCESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the teachers of the law was standing by listening to Jesus debate the Sadducees. Impressed with Jesus’ knowledge of the Word, he decided to ask Him a question himself, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28) Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31)

Everything done in God’s kingdom emanates from one’s love of God and love for people. There is no greater commandment than this. That being the case, James Smith<sup>4</sup> affirms that education is not “first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love.” “God is Love,” (1 John 4:8 ESV), so it stands to reason, since man has been created in His image, his highest motivation for life and learning is love.

The psalmist, in talking about those who fashion with their own hands idols to

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<sup>3</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, quoted in David S. Dockery, *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society through Higher Education* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 1.

<sup>4</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 18.

worship—idols who cannot speak, see, hear, smell, handle, or walk—says that “those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Ps 115:8 ESV). Man becomes like what he worships. Man is not so much what he thinks as much as what he loves. Again, Smith<sup>5</sup> writes:

Many Christian schools, colleges, and universities—particularly in the Protestant tradition - have taken on board a picture of the human person that owes more to modernity and the Enlightenment than it does to the holistic, biblical vision of human persons. In particular, Christian education has absorbed a philosophical anthropology that sees human persons as primarily thinking things. The result has been an understanding of education largely in terms of *information*; more specifically, the end of Christian education has been seen to be the dissemination and communication of Christian ideas rather than the formation of a peculiar people. This can be seen most acutely, I think, in how visions of Christian education have been articulated in terms of “a Christian worldview.”

This understanding of education that Smith describes can be summarized in the philosophy of Plato and later Descartes, who says that man is primarily a thinker - “I think, therefore I am.” World-view teaching focuses on only one facet of our humanness - the mind. World-view teaching assumes that if we teach people to think like Christians, they will act like Christians.

Another alternative anthropological view of man seen in some educational philosophies is that man is not a thinking creature, but a believing one; man is essentially a “religious” being, for Smith,<sup>6</sup> “defined by a worldview that is pre-rational or supra-rational. What defines us is not what we think—not the set of ideas we assent to - but rather what we *believe*, the commitments and trusts that orient our being-in-the-world.” This approach says that man is primarily a believer - “I believe in order to understand.”

The problem with these two models is that they reduce man to just a cognitive creature, as if he is only a brain without a heart. Jesus taught that genuine worship must be a balance between spirit and truth. Truth (the mind) is critically important, but so is spirit (the heart). Man is not primarily a thinker, or a believer, but a lover - “I am what I love.” Smith<sup>7</sup> explains:

This Augustinian model of human persons resists the rationalism and quasi-rationalism of the earlier models by shifting the center of gravity of human identity, as it were, down from the heady regions of mind closer to the central regions of our bodies, in particular, our *kardia*—our gut or heart. The point is to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 47.

emphasize that the way we inhabit the world is not primarily as thinkers, or even believers, but as more affective, embodied creatures who make our way in the world more by feeling our way around it.

Romanian Evangelical educators need to look beyond an informational understanding of discipleship to a more worship-centric view - a view that illustrates how individuals' liturgies form them into the people of God. Learning in this context is worship, and because it is, it follows the revelation-response rhythm of worship. A biblical worshiper does not offer prayers or sing songs to invoke God's presence like the pagan worshipers on Mount Carmel tried to do by shouting, dancing, and abusing themselves to get their god to show up. Biblical worshipers do not invite God into their presence. He is *omnipresent*. He is already there. He is the One extending the invitation. God reveals Himself and man responds in worship, and it is through that response that man learns of God and becomes like Him. In like manner, and, paradoxically, learning does not start with the head; it starts with the heart.

Scripture tells us that "without faith it is impossible to please him" (Heb. 11:6 ESV). Romans 14:23 says, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" ESV. How then can a scholar please God in his scholarship? How can faith be expressed in pedagogy? Smith<sup>8</sup> describes the relationship between learning and faith when he writes, "My contention is that given the sorts of animals we are, we pray *before* we believe, we worship before we know—or rather, we worship *in order* to know." Learning is a heart/worship/faith response to a revealed omniscient God.

Man is not one-dimensional. He is not just a mind; he is heart, soul, and strength as well. This has tremendous ramifications to how an educator approaches training a church musician. Education, as a heart/worship/faith response to an omniscient God, is a pedagogy of participation, as John Witvliet<sup>9</sup> explains:

This practice-oriented pedagogy gives us a well-grounded model for pedagogy today at both colleges and seminaries. It is a picture of robust liturgical participation followed by rigorous theological reflection. It is a picture of profound theological depth, interdisciplinary rigor, and pastoral concern. It calls for leaving behind any vestige of Enlightenment-shaped theological pedagogy that is concerned merely with dispensing information so that we can pursue a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>9</sup> John D. Witvliet, "Teaching Worship as a Christian Practice: Musing on Practical Theology and Pedagogy in Seminaries and Church-related Colleges," *Perspectives* 21, no. 6 (June 1 2006): 17-23, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://perspectives.journal.org/blog/2006/06/01/teaching-worship-as-a-christian-practice-musing-on-practical-theology-and-pedagogy-in-seminaries-and-church-related-colleges/>.

vision of theological teaching, research, and learning as profoundly formative (indeed, how can theology be anything other than “practical”?)

Witvliet asks the question, “How would the teaching of Christian worship change if it were more firmly rooted in a theologically robust understanding of Christian practice?” A worship pedagogy for training Romanian church musicians oriented to worship practice will point out the explicit “connections between the mechanics of liturgy in any culture and the theological commitments they reflect and shape.”<sup>10</sup> The key word here is *connections*. The mechanics, style, form, and the meaning and purpose of worship cannot be taught in isolation of one another. Practice-orientated worship pedagogy will emphasize the connections between these elements and teach the student to “move easily and coherently among them.”<sup>11</sup>

What Witvliet calls “practice oriented pedagogy,” Smith calls liturgies. The pedagogical strategy for learning is through the liturgies of life. In this case, Smith<sup>12</sup> uses the word liturgy as a synonym for formative, embodied worship practices of all kinds.

Liturgies—whether “sacred” or “secular”—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*. They do this because we are the sorts of animals whose orientation to the world is shaped from the body up more than from the head down. Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies.

In other words, Smith is saying God designed man in such a way that he does not jump into learning head first, but heart first. “Liturgies aim our love.” What a person loves informs his practices and actions (his liturgies), which, in turn, form his character and personhood. “Every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain kind of person. Hence every liturgy is an education, and embedded in every liturgy is an implicit worldview or ‘understanding’ of the world.”<sup>13</sup>

How might this concept appear in a classroom training Romanian church musicians? “Practices are things people do,” Witvliet<sup>14</sup> writes:

Our study should not be limited merely to what people think about worship, how they think during worship, or whether or not they like what they are doing.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Witvliet.

A significant amount of energy should be reserved for encountering actual gestures, symbols, sermons, songs, images, and environments. Worship is a multi-sensory subject matter. This is why worship courses feature so many photographs, video-clips, and sound recordings of actual worship services. Worship faculty might require students to purchase a hymnal not only to analyze songs, but also to sing them. And students need to participate in worship, sometimes guided by the most savvy participant-observer methods our cultural anthropology colleagues can offer us, and sometime guided by their own intensive prior study of both the neighborhood and the liturgy of the congregation they visit.

The first and great commandment is for man to love God with everything he is: heart, soul, mind, and strength, and he does that all at the same time. Man is heart, soul, mind, and strength all in one person. He can't worship God with his heart and not his soul, or with his mind and not his strength. To do so would be schizophrenic. This is especially true as it applies to educating church musicians. The goal of Christian education for two millennia has been this integration of the whole person. David Dockery<sup>15</sup> ties all these thoughts together:

The starting point for this integration has rested not only on the foundation of the words of Jesus' Great Commandment but also on the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, which reminds us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding (Prov. 1:7; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). Thus the beginning point for thinking, learning, and teaching is our reference before God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

In a word, the process of Christian education is worship.

What about the second part of the Great Commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself? (Mark 12:31 ESV) One's vertical relationship with God is tied directly to His horizontal relationship with others and cannot be considered separately. That is why Jesus was so quick in his reply to the teacher of the law to emphasize this important connection. How does a church musician most effectively show his love for others in this context? And how is this love for others related to worship and to Christian higher education? The answers to these questions can be found in the Great Commission.

## THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

It is in the Great Commission, in conjunction with the Great Commandment, that Jesus shows us the purpose of Christian education.

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had

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<sup>15</sup> Dockery, 10-11.

directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:16-20 ESV)

It is understandable that a secular organization or institution of any kind would spend a great deal of time crafting a “mission statement.” A well-worded, thoughtful mission statement helps an organization clearly identify its purpose, guides its actions, spells out its overall goals, and provides a matrix and a guide for making decisions concerning the organization. It is less understandable (speaking hyperbolically) why an organization or institution that calls itself “Christian” would find it necessary to craft a mission statement that would improve on the one already given to them by Christ in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. That certainly includes a Christian institution of higher learning. Every kingdom individual and entity has the same mission statement: love God, love people, and make disciples.

Many Christian educational institutions are struggling with a crisis of identity because they don’t know what business they are in.<sup>16</sup> Many think, understandably so, that they are in the education business. They think their job is to instil information and improve skills so that students can get a great job, make a good living, live in nice homes, send their children to good schools, and have a great life—goals very similar to those of secular universities for their graduates. They think their job is making better and more successful lawyers, doctors, teachers, musicians, and even better theologians. What is the business of a Christian university?

According to Matthew 28:18-20, a Christian educational institution of higher learning is in the business of making disciples, and if it is not making disciples, then its claim of being a Christian university is highly suspect. The call of the Great Commission is a pedagogical call. Jesus calls every believer to be an educator, a “discipler,” teaching others what Jesus has taught him.

Matthew 28:17 tells us that this pedagogical call to “make disciples” is a call rooted in worship: “And when they saw him they worshiped him” [ESV]. Michael Spradlin<sup>17</sup> writes, “Since the call of discipleship is to live like the Lord

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<sup>16</sup> Dockery, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Spradlin, “Does Evangelism Play a Role in Biblical Worship?” *The Journal Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary* 3, (Spring 2016), accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.mabts.edu/sites/all/themes/midamerica/uploads/Spradlin-Evangelism-and-Biblical-Worship.pdf>.

Jesus, then evangelism must be a part of our everyday life. In one sense, our daily obedience shows our reverence for our God and is a part of our worship of Him.” Warren Wiersbe<sup>18</sup> writes:

Evangelism divorced from true worship can become merely a program tacked on to an already overloaded ecclesiastical machine, or, even worse, a struggle for statistics and “results.” Isaiah became an evangelist *after* attending a worship service in the temple and seeing God “high and lifted up” (Isaiah 6:1). Evangelism is an essential part of the church’s ministry, but it must be the result of worship, or it will not glorify God.

The Greek word translated “make disciples” in the Great Commission is the word *matheteō*. Spiros Zodhiates<sup>19</sup> comments on this word:

*Matheteuō* must be distinguished from the verb *matheō* (which is not found in the NT), which simply means to learn without any attachment to the teacher who teaches. *Matheteuō* means not only to learn but to become attached to one’s teacher and to become his follower in doctrine and conduct. It is really not sufficient to translate this verb “learn” but as “making a disciple.”

This is the ultimate demonstration of a biblical worshiper’s love for others that Jesus talks about in the Great Commandment. The biblical worshiper shows his love for others by giving them the gospel, making them disciples, baptizing them, and then teaching them what Christ has taught him.

The assignment of a Christian educator is to make disciples. What is the aim of this assignment? What is its learning outcome? If the assignment is to make disciples, and the definition of a disciple is one that attaches himself to the teacher and begins to do what he does, then the aim of discipleship is Christlikeness – “to become his follower in doctrine and conduct.” That is God’s ultimate goal for every church musician: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29 ESV). The assignment is to make disciples. The aim is to be like Christ. The approach is worship.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that the biblical means by which one is transformed into Christ’s likeness is worship: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” [NASB]. Warren Wiersbe<sup>20</sup> agrees:

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<sup>18</sup> Wiersbe, *Real Worship: It Will Transform Your Life*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> S. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, s.v. “matheteō,” 933.

<sup>20</sup> Wiersbe, *Real Worship*, 35.

As we worship Him and behold His glory, we are transformed by His Spirit to share in His own image and glory. Instead of hiding a fading glory [like Moses did], we reveal an increasing glory that causes others to see Christ and honor Him.

No one who has ever been in the presence of God ever walked away from that experience unchanged. Genuine worship is transforming. Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1 ESV). The Greek word translated “spiritual worship” is *latreia*, which comes from *latreūō*, meaning “to serve, in a religious sense to worship God... It refers particularly to the performance of the Levitical service”<sup>21</sup> – in other words, it is literally liturgy. It is in the daily liturgies of presenting one’s corporeal body as a living sacrifice in worship that one’s mind is transformed and renewed. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2 ESV). Worship begins in the heart of a man, and as he works that love for God out in his daily liturgies – his corporeal actions and practices of worship, his mind is renewed and he is transformed. A Christian education is a progressive pedagogy; first, there is love, then liturgy, then learning.

James Smith<sup>22</sup> argues that the goal of Christian education is more than just acquiring a Christian perspective or worldview:

The distorted understanding of worldview that dominates current models assumes a rationalist, intellectualist, cognitivist model of the human person; as a result, it fails to honor the fact that we are embodied, material, fundamentally *desiring* animals who are, whether we recognize it or not (and perhaps most when we don’t recognize it), every day being formed by the material liturgies of other pedagogies—at the mall, at the stadium, on television, and so forth. As such, Christian education becomes a missed opportunity because it fails to actually counter the cultural liturgies that are forming us every day. An important part of revisioning Christian education is to see it as a mode of counter-formation.

When asked, “What, then, is the goal of Christian education?” Smith<sup>23</sup> replies:

It’s goal, I’m suggesting, is the same as the goal of Christian worship: to form radical disciples of Jesus and citizens of the baptismal city who, communally, take up the creational task of being God’s image bearers, unfolding the cultural

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<sup>21</sup> Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study New Testament, s.v. “*latreia*,” “*latreūō*,” 931.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 220.

possibilities latent in creation – but doing so as empowered by the Spirit, following the example of Jesus’ cruciform cultural labor. If the goal of Christian worship and discipleship is the formation of a peculiar people, then the goal of Christian education should be the same. If something like Christian universities are to exist, they should be configured as extensions of the mission of the church – as chapels that extend and amplify what’s happening in the heart of the cathedral, at the altar of Christian worship.

If they are to be “extensions of the mission of the church,” in the making of “radical disciples,” then Christian educational institutions must be aggressive in staying accountable, connected, and responsive to the needs of the local churches they exist to serve. Albert Mohler<sup>24</sup> writes:

A theological seminary, if it is to remain faithful, must be directly accountable to its churches. Lacking this accountability, the institution will inevitably drift toward heterodox teachings. A robust confessionalism is necessary, but the constant oversight of churches is of equal importance.

This principle of local church accountability was demonstrated perfectly by the initiation of a case study survey of fifty-seven Romanian Baptist pastors by the EUO music department to ascertain their expectations of church musicians trained at Emanuel University.

The purpose of Christian higher education is to make disciples. In teaching church musicians and preparing them for ministry, Romanian Evangelical educators need to look beyond an informational understanding of teaching and discipleship centered in the inculcation of content, to a more formational understanding centered in worship that proceeds from a heart of love through the practice of transforming pedagogical liturgies resulting in an *anakainōsis*,<sup>25</sup> a renewed and renovated mind (Rom 12:1-2).

## THE PRODUCT OF CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The process of Christian higher education is worship. The purpose of Christian higher education is to make disciples. The product of Christian higher education is cultural transformation. The Sermon on the Mount could be considered the syllabus for a comprehensive course on lifestyle worship, which is just another way to express the concept of discipleship. If the purpose of Christian education is to make disciples, teaching them everything that Jesus taught, then the Sermon on the Mount would most certainly be one of the required texts.

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<sup>24</sup> Albert R. Mohler, “Training Pastors in Church,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, February 1, 2008, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/training-pastors-church/>.

<sup>25</sup> Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, s.v. “*anakaínōsis*,” 886.

With all that is going on in our world today, it would be very easy to become despondent and retreat in despair, thinking that society has become too secular, too vulgar, too pagan, too hopeless to save. Bill O'Reilly's book *Killing Jesus*,<sup>26</sup> while focusing on the humanity of Christ and downplaying His divinity, does a very good job of describing historically the Roman culture in which Jesus was born and lived. To say that it was incredibly perverse and wicked beyond imagination would be an understatement. The reader is impressed that it was in this spiritual and cultural darkness, full of unfathomable violence and depravity, that God's love burst through the blackness in radiant light in the form of a little baby boy. The apostle John writes of Him, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5 ESV). No matter how black the darkness, light always prevails. It is getting very dark in the world, but as Adrian Rogers<sup>27</sup> preached, it is getting "gloriously dark, for it's after the darkest hour of night that the morning star appears."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that worship is not only transformational for the individual as he presents his body a living sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1-2), but, through that transformed individual, God can in turn transform a culture. Jesus said:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt 5:13-16 ESV)

In these two metaphors Jesus draws a sharp distinction between Christian and non-Christian culture, between secular and sacred, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. Jesus, in no uncertain terms, is saying that culture can be transformed, and these young worship-leaders-in-training will be the salt and light that will bring about that transformation. The same could be said concerning the young worship-leaders-in-training at Emanuel University of Oradea.

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<sup>26</sup> Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Jesus* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Adrian Rogers, "The Issues We Must Face, Part 1," *Love Worth Finding*, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/love-worth-finding/read/articles/the-issues-we-must-face-part-1-13513.html>.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with this introduction by Matthew: “Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them” (Matt 5:1-2 ESV). Jesus, the Master Teacher, and his pupils, the disciples, are engaged in a pedagogical enterprise. Jesus is teaching a worship studies intensive to the future worship leaders of the church. This is higher Christian education at its finest. It is through this educational experience that Jesus is teaching these future worship leaders how they will need to live, if they are going to be the salt and light that transforms culture.

Salt would have been a powerful metaphor for Jesus to use with these men. Salt was a valuable commodity in Bible lands. Salt was a critical component of sacrificial worship. Leviticus 2:13 tells us that God instructed that all the offerings presented to Him must contain salt. But most likely, when Jesus started talking about salt with these fishermen, they understood the metaphor precisely. There was no such thing as refrigeration available to keep foods fresh, so if the fish they caught were not heavily salted, they would quickly spoil and become rancid. The most valuable quality of salt in the ancient world was its value as a preservative. Salt was also valued for its healing properties.<sup>28</sup> Jesus was telling these young worship leaders that if they would commit themselves to live spiritually mature, godly lives (Matt 5:48) built upon these teachings of Christ (Matt 7:24-27), they would become a preserving and healing agent in their culture. Their holy presence would inhibit the corruption and decay of sin in people’s lives and be a sanctifying force in society.

When a Christian institution like Emanuel University sends its young musicians out into the world, it is sprinkling sacred salt on a decaying culture, preserving it, curing it, redeeming it. A candle under a bushel basket is of no value. Its efficacy is only realized when it touches the darkness, illuminating the dark corners of society, forcing the evil to scurry away from its pure and radiant brilliance. Darkness cannot overcome light (John 1:5).

Romanian society needs godly church musicians who live out the Sermon on the Mount in their churches and communities. Romanian society needs to be salted with godly church musicians who know what it means to be poor in spirit, who know how to mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and willing to suffer persecution for the advancement of the kingdom of God (Matt 5:1-12).

Romanian society needs the seasoning of godly church musicians who value

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<sup>28</sup> J. H. Bratt, “Salt,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975-1976), 5:220.

reconciliation over rage and purity over pleasure (vss. 21-30); who suffer slights and refuse revenge (vss. 38-42); who love their enemies by blessing those who curse them, doing good to those who hate them, and praying for those who persecute them (vss. 44-48).

Romanian society needs to be radiated with the healing light of godly church musicians who are men and women of prayer, who hallow God's name, who desire God's kingdom and His will above all else, who trust Him for daily provision, who forgive as quickly as they have been forgiven, and who are empowered to be victorious in the face of temptation (Matt 6:5-15).

Romanian society needs to be illuminated by the holy lives of godly church musicians who have more treasure in heaven than on earth, who trade worry for waiting on God, who do not judge hypocritically, and who know how to persistently ask, seek, and knock for the needs of those in their church and community (Matt 6:19-7:12).

The history of Emanuel University from its very beginning gives testimony to the powerful influence it has had on Romanian culture. Cheri Pierson,<sup>29</sup> in her case study of Emanuel University, then Emanuel Bible Institute, lists many specific examples of how the university has been salt and light in the surrounding Oradea community and in Romanian culture at large.

Pierson<sup>30</sup> observes that Emanuel University "contributes a positive moral influence through its general emphasis on the development of moral character in the students and through the students' participation in teaching religion and ethics in the public school system." Several people interviewed by Pierson for her study noted the university's profound spiritual influence in local Romanian churches through the spiritual training of church leaders, its emphasis on non-exclusivity, its music department, its social assistance ministries, and its emphasis on encouraging the students in their personal walk with God through Bible study, prayer, and spiritual mentoring.<sup>31</sup>

Emanuel University has the reputation of caring for and ministering to those in society who have been marginalized by most. Prisoners, Gypsies, Turks, street children, and the terminally ill, just to name a few, have all been helped through

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<sup>29</sup> Cheri Pierson, "Contributions of Adult Christian and English-Language Education to a Society in the Process of Transformation: A Case Study of the Emanuel Bible Institute, Oradea, Romania" (Ed.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL, 1999), accessed February 23, 2017, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/304513875/8606D282D78F4F27PQ/9?accountid=12085>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 133.

Emanuel's social aid programs.<sup>32</sup>

Currently, Emanuel University has nine different ministries that directly impact Romanian culture and society:<sup>33</sup>

1. The Foundation Casa (providing assistance to single mothers, poor families, and families in crisis),
2. The Bethesda Medical Center and Pharmacy (providing medical care for the needy),
3. Logos School of Music (providing music lessons to regional children),
4. The Emanuel University Publishing House (translating and distributing Christian literature),
5. Child Life Ministries (ministering to sick children in hospitals),
6. Music Therapy (using music to minister to kindergarten children and children in hospice),
7. English Summer School (teaching English through Bible stories and songs),
8. Business Days (national business conference), and
9. Transparency International (promoting and encouraging ethical business practices in the workplace).

As a result of the university's commitment to spiritual integrity and academic excellence, it has gained considerable influence and respect in the academy throughout Romania, Europe, and the world. Emanuel University is deeply loved and respected by the city of Oradea and its leadership, who consider it one of its crown jewels. The university exerts a positive influence in the community through the employment of local citizens, the contributions of many foreign guests, the highly esteemed business and economic school, the teaching of English as an international language to community residents, and the extensive EUO library.<sup>34</sup>

Nowhere is the sociological impact of the university on the community more evident than in its music pedagogy program. The Emanuel University music department, and especially its award-winning choir, has had considerable

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

<sup>33</sup> Lois Verduva, e-mail message to author on April 18, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 139-142.

positive influence in the community through recordings and live concerts on campus and in churches and civic halls throughout Eastern Europe, many of them broadcasted by radio. The music department's seasonal productions are very popular and are always standing room only events.

The beloved clergyman, the late Dr. John Stott,<sup>35</sup> rector for many years at All Souls Church in London and visiting professor at Emanuel University in its early days, submits this challenge:

Do you want to see your national life made more pleasing to God? Do you have a vision of a new godliness, a new justice, a new freedom, a new righteousness, a new compassion? Do you wish to repent of sub-Christian pessimism [that says Christians can have no influence in society]? Will you reaffirm your confidence in the power of God, in the power of prayer, of truth, of example, of group commitment—and of the gospel? Let's offer ourselves to God, as instruments in his hands—as salt and light in the community. The church could have an enormous influence for good, in every nation on earth, if it would commit itself totally to Christ. Let's give ourselves to him, who gave himself for us.

Emanuel University and its students have made a tremendous sociological impact on their culture, being the salt and light Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount. The development of a comprehensive Church Music/Worship Studies program built around the principles of process, purpose, and product found respectively in the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and the Sermon on the Mount, can only further enhance and expand the university's historic contribution to the cultural transformation of Romania and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>35</sup> John Stott, “John Stott: Four Ways Christians Can Influence the World,” *Christianity Today*, October 2011, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/saltlight.html>.

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# **Missional Witness in Modern Society: Principles from the Epistle to Titus 2:1-15.**

Hamilton Moore<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

God does everything in his time. Both comings of Christ have not only been Divinely Planned but Divinely Timed. In Titus 2 Paul, in writing to his younger missionary colleague regarding both comings, outlines how the Christians in the young churches of Crete were to live between the times. In this article we will look for some statements which we can take as reflecting the cultural and social life of the people of Crete and note Paul's teaching given to Titus as to how he ought to direct the Christians as to their mission lifestyle on the island. Finally, we can consider what we can learn from the situation then and note principles which would be helpful for our own responsibilities in missional witness in the twenty-first century.

**KEY WORDS:** mission, lifestyle, zeal for good works, the appearances of Christ, sound doctrine.

Crete lies south of the Aegean Sea in the Mediterranean at a strategic navigational point for sailing (Acts 27:7). The importance for trade meant that it would be influenced by many different groups and religious teachers from all around the Mediterranean world, including Jews and Jewish Christians (Acts 2:11). Mounce<sup>2</sup> points out that there are indications from outside sources that there were large numbers of Jews in Crete. It was also reputed early to have many cities.<sup>3</sup> It appears that Paul and Titus must have had a fruitful ministry in mission evangelism in some of the cities on the island, but as yet had not been able to consolidate the work or appoint elders (see Paul's former strategy in Acts 14:21-23). Therefore, Paul left Titus facing two immediate needs in the Christian community. To strengthen what remained unfinished i.e., to consolidate the life of the church and appoint gifted pastoral oversight. In 1:6-16 Paul set out in stark contrast the true elders he called on Titus to appoint (note the ἐγώ *ego* the 'I' of apostolic authority and the 'I commanded you', v5), with the false teachers whom the new elders were to silence. It appears that we are dealing with a young church receiving elders for the very first time. Note that there is no direction here

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<sup>2</sup> W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, Bruce M Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glen W. Barker, (eds.), Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000, 396.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (eds) I. H. Marshall and W. Gasque, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 287.

as in 1 Tim. 3:6 - avoiding the appointment of the younger. In the Epistle Paul sets out how the young church should engage in mission witness on the Island of Crete.

## THE CULTURE OF CRETE

In the Epistle Paul has given us glimpses of the Island's national or social characteristics in the first century at the time of the ministry of Titus. In 1:12 Epimenides, who was "a prophet of their own" is quoted by Paul. He is mentioned by Clement of Alexandria and Jerome. In 600 BCE he described the inhabitants of the island as "liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." Things have not changed over the centuries and Paul found that these particular traits were deeply embedded in their culture. Interestingly, Paul writes to Titus about a God "who never lies." Other indicators of the culture can be found in different verses of the Epistle; the Cretans were not only liars, but greedy and sensual, gluttons (1:12); self-indulgent (1:8, 2:2, 5, 6); drunkards (1:7, 2:3); insubordinate (2:5, 2:9). See also 3:1, where Paul urges Titus to remind the believers "to be submissive to rulers and authorities." He knows the turbulent character of the Cretans. Crete had been subjugated by Rome in 67 BCE and since then was continually restless.

Also in ch. 3 there is a further list of sins which are found in Cretan society. "We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient." The adverb *tote* means "formally, at one time." "Foolish" or *ἀνοητοι* *anoētoi* means ignorant of God, without spiritual understanding, with the adjective "disobedient" some suggest forming a contrast to the obedience asked of the Christian community. But here their disobedience must be seen as towards God, Tit. 1:16 – a rejection of God's authority over them. They were also "deceived," astray in their thinking and convictions, the sense this participle carries elsewhere in the Letters to Timothy and Titus, i.e., 2 Tim. 3:13. The account of their former life continues with their enslavement to "all kinds of," (Gk. ποικίλος *poikilos*), passions, a word which can have a neutral sense but normally is used of evil desires, (see 2:12; 1 Tim. 6:9; 2 Tim. 3:6) and "pleasures," *ἡδοναις* *hēdonais*, which should also be taken with a negative meaning here.

The vice list ends with four forms of wickedness that sum up their attitude and relationship with others. The first two are inner attitudes, feelings of malice, wishing people harm, and envy, the mental inner seething of dissatisfaction because of those who have what they desire. These attitudes were expressed outwardly in being hateful, in the sense of being detestable<sup>4</sup>, and also hostile in one's relationships with others. Such was Cretan culture.

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<sup>4</sup> The word στυγητοί *stugētoi* is found only here in the NT. Mounce suggests that here the passive sense is being used i.e., detestable, loathsome, rather than the active sense of hating

Sadly, society is not much different from this in the twenty-first century. This is why Paul was calling for a godly mission lifestyle to mark the local believers. He sets it out mainly in 2:1-10, older men; older women; younger women; younger men and slaves in the household. Three times in these verses Paul has stressed his concern for the need of a mission witness to the godless Cretan society, (vv5, 8,10).

## THE CHRISTIANS ON CRETE

Paul informs Titus what he is to teach the believers. He is to stress how they were to live between the times. Their lives were to be attractive. This is what will impact lives in this postmodern age. What people *see* is what will matter.

Paul first focuses upon the responsibilities of Titus as a true teacher. In v1 he stresses, “but as for you,” - words which occur five times in the Pastoral Epistles, - a paraenetic device exhorting Titus to take a different course from that of the false teachers, who were to be replaced. Paul expresses here the familiar call in the Pastoral Epistles for the people of God to be different, 1 Tim. 6v11; 2 Tim. 3v10, 14, 4v5; Titus 3:14. Paul’s focus is now on the Christian household, which would be wider than the modern family, taking in the whole retinue of slaves who would be involved in many activities for their master. So here we are to learn not only how we ought to behave as Christians but also later in the chapter why we must be characterised by such a true godly mission lifestyle - the motivation. Some will see vv11-15 as disconnected from what is before. But v11 begins with *γὰρ gar* “for” and really gives the theological reasons or basis for the directions given in vv1-10. The teaching must be seen as a whole. There is even a concluding summary that serves almost as a bridge from the theological motivation to the next section of paraenesis (v15).

Titus must teach “sound doctrine” which will bring God’s people (1v3) spiritual blessing. He must also teach the things which are “in accord” with it i.e., the practical duties which arise from it. Here Paul outlines some detailed ethical instructions that Titus is to pass on. These are in contrast with the way society was, a Christian lifestyle that would stand out as a witness. There are five different groups: older men (v2); older women (v3); younger women (v4-5); young men (v6), (Titus is included as an example for them, vv7-8) and slaves (vv9-10).

### *The Older Men*

In the NT πρεσβύτης *presbutēs* always refers to “older men” rather than church “elders.” Paul highlights four qualities to be found in such men. They need first

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God or people, because of the presence also of the next description, “hating one another,” *Pastoral Epistles*, 446.

to be “sober” or if it has here its metaphorical use “clear-minded.” The literal sense of sobriety should not be overlooked in the light of v3, the drunkenness and gluttony (1:12) which were common in the society. The older men were to have no part in it.

They must be marked by σεμνός *semnos*, which means to be dignified, serious, qualities which result in respect from other people. They were also to be self-controlled, which is a key quality here as it is also mentioned when it comes to older women (v4), younger women (v5), younger men (v7) and even the elders of 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8. It was so important to live self-controlled lives, in contrast to the culture around, Tit. 1:12 and especially in the light of what Christ has done for us, Tit. 2:12. They also are to be sound or spiritually healthy in the three cardinal Christian virtues of “faith” (the emphasis here is not faith in the creedal sense but similar to the others mentioned and the use in similar lists of virtues (1Tim. 4:12; 6:11; 2Tim. 2:22; 3v10) meaning i.e., personal trust in God, “love,” selfless service of others and “endurance,” constancy and perseverance in the path of God’s calling and will in the face of opposition, trying circumstances and discouragement. Particularly, older men are to display a living dynamic faith!

### *The Older Women*

The second group Paul writes of are the older women, and the word πρεσβύτις *presbutis* is found only here in the NT. The instructions (v3) continue in almost a parallel way (Paul uses the transitional term “likewise” or “similarly”) to that of the older men and finally, through a purpose statement (v4) the younger women are to be indirectly instructed by the older ladies. The qualities for both groups respectively are very similar to 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:14.

Four areas are singled out for them. First, they are to be reverent in the way they live, as befitting a holy person, carrying this demeanour into daily life. Here we have an inner condition or character that cannot be hidden but will necessarily manifest itself outwardly.<sup>5</sup>

Two moral failures are to be avoided, if one is to achieve the desired goal i.e., they cannot become backbiters or scandalmongers and be snared by wine. In the Cretan way of life these sins were known to be prevalent among older women – drunkenness and slanderers of others. As far as slander is concerned, the word is διάβολος *diabolos*, which elsewhere in these Letters can be used for the devil (1 Tim. 3:6, 7; 2 Tim. 2:26), since it is the activity for which he is known, but

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<sup>5</sup> I. H. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC, (eds.) A Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999, 244, P. H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006, 722.

obviously here inspires in others. The sin of slander is mentioned elsewhere in 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:13.

The language of enslavement – using the perfect passive participle – “addicted to much wine” warns of the dangers which existed in the society at the time. When it comes to every list concerning the appointment of church leaders the danger is highlighted, (1 Tim.3:3,8; Tit.1:7; see also 1Tim. 5:23).

Instead of using their tongues for slander, they are to use them to teach what is good. The emphasis is not that the women were “good teachers” but on the content of what they teach.<sup>6</sup> Mounce<sup>7</sup> makes the point that context shows that this refers not to an official teaching position in the church (1 Tim.2:11-12) but rather to informal one-to-one encouragement. The older women, experienced in life, marriage and rearing children, are encouraged to take the younger women under their care and assist them as they face new situations and responsibilities. This is a ministry the men cannot do.

Titus was to teach the older men and women and later the younger men. But the older women were to have a vital role sharing their wisdom and experience with those who were younger.

### *The Younger Women*

Seven qualities are expected of the younger women, closing with a motivating reason to so live. They are to be encouraged to love their husbands and love their children. Towner<sup>8</sup> discusses the use of σωφρονίζωσιν *sōphronidzōsin* and suggests that the young women were being influenced by the ideals and morality (or lack of it) of the new Roman woman, which was effecting the Cretan culture. Embracing the “values” of the “new woman” would have led to a rejection of traditional commitment to the household and endorsed a new sexual freedom rather than sexual fidelity to one’s husband. The verb in this context has to carry the meaning of a figurative slap in the face i.e., to call someone back to their senses!

The substance of this “wake up call” includes all seven qualities in the present verses. First, the two qualities of loving one’s husband, which was regarded as evidence of a good wife in both Hellenistic and Jewish cultures, and loving one’s children which was also highly valued (1 Tim. 5:10); both sum up basic domestic responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Paul urges further that the younger women are to be “self-controlled, pure” and “keepers at home.” The first two qualities carry the clear message of the expectation of sexual fidelity. What of the expectation that they

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 246.

<sup>7</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 410.

<sup>8</sup> Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 725.

<sup>9</sup> Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 726.

will be “working at home,” οἰκουργός *oikourgos*? Here we have a rare word which does not mean that women are being told to “stay at home” and are therefore prohibited from being “professional women.” Rather, that she must realise that if she accepts the vocation of marriage she has duties at home. J.B. Philips translates “home-lovers.” Women are also to be “kind,” perhaps in the context meaning “hospitable.”

Can these six qualities be grouped in three pairs? First, loving husbands and loving children which were already joined together in literature at that time and concern relationships in the home. The second pair would involve personal piety, self-controlled and pure and the third would focus upon actions with regard to those who are around her.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, she is to accept the leadership of her husband – a constant theme in Paul (1 Tim. 2:11; Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21-23). The present middle participle here means “continually submitting oneself” which means voluntary submission. Note the use of ἴδιοις *idiois* “one’s own” to make the point that Paul is focussing upon husbands here. So υποτάσσω *huptassō* refers to being under authority to men in a church situation (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11) and to their husbands. Mounce<sup>11</sup> makes an insightful point, “In both the husband/wife and master/slave relationship, Paul does not allow the former to demand submission but instructs the latter to give it.”

The concluding words, ‘that God’s word may not be dishonoured’ reminds us of Isa. 52:5. Paul makes clear on three occasions here his concern for the mission of the church – the impact that the life of the individual believer can have on non-Christian society (v5, 8, 10).

### *The Younger Men*

Just as for the other groups “likewise” there is to be an appeal to the young men (v6). They are to be urged - a strong appeal - to develop one quality - self-mastery – the key term of the section, which really can be understood in a comprehensive sense taking in the others that have been stated – Paul writes of “all things” περὶ πάντα *peri panta*. If we take the “all things” to refer to the preceding appeal then that allows σεαυτὸν *seauton* “yourself” to be emphatic, which is appropriate here.

Just as the older women were examples for the younger so Titus was to be to the young men. They are to be encouraged by a consistent example in Titus, to whom Paul now speaks directly. We are imitative by nature and need models to give us direction, challenge and inspiration. Titus should influence them by first showing “an example of good works.” This emphasis on being a model or

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<sup>10</sup> Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 412.

example is found often in Paul (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Thess. 1:7; 2 Thess. 3:9; Phil. 3:17). Titus was to be a τύπος *tupos*, a mould into which others can be impressed<sup>12</sup>, not as the false teachers who were unfit examples (Tit. 1:16). The theme of “good works” is important throughout the Letters to Timothy and Titus, especially in Titus (Tit. 2:14; 3:1, 8, 14; 2 Tim. 2:21; see also 3:17), although it is made clear that such works do not save (Tit. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:12-17; 2 Tim. 1:9).

But not only is he to be an example in his service but in his teaching which ought to have three qualities, to be marked by “purity” or “integrity,” taken as a reference to Titus’s character, the pure motives he must have. Also “seriousness” is a clear indication of the manner of teaching. We must be serious in preaching for the eternal welfare of our listeners is at stake. Lastly there is a focus upon the content of his teaching – it has to be in soundness of speech that cannot be condemned. Titus is to preach the truth, the apostolic doctrine, with clear motives and in seriousness and the outsiders will have nothing of substance to say against his preaching. It is of course clear that the apostolic doctrine will be condemned by some. The idea here is that no charges can justifiably be brought against the preaching of the word. Towner suggests that the letter gives evidence of the fact that the Jewish-Christian teachers were a dominant threat to the Pauline mission and here the singular “one who opposes” is most likely a reference to them or to a ringleader among them.<sup>13</sup> Paul’s aim is that “shame” will fall upon these men since Titus’s integrity will mean that they will be discredited. Nothing bad can be said about “us” – note Paul uses the plural and thus includes himself, possibly all who preach.

Two things are noteworthy. Once again, the need for such transparency and faithfulness that the mission of God in Crete will not be hindered, but advanced. In our own culture we have to share Titus’s manner of teaching.

### *Slaves*

In vv9-10 Paul now focuses upon a sixth and final group in the church communities and in the family households in Crete i.e. slaves. They are often addressed in Paul’s letters (Eph. 6:5ff; Col. 3:22ff; 1 Tim. 6:1ff; 1 Cor. 7:21ff). Unlike the other groups there is no age distinctions here. That masters are not mentioned likely means that Paul is focussing upon how Christian slaves are to live serving unbelieving masters (note that the term δεσπότης *despotēs* here is suggested to refer better to non-Christian masters,<sup>14</sup> but what of 1 Tim. 6:2 where the term is used of those who have faith?). However, one can acknowledge that

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<sup>12</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 413.

<sup>13</sup> Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 733-34.

<sup>14</sup> Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 314.

there were probably in this first-century situation more unbelieving masters than those who had turned to Christ (1 Cor.1:26-29).

Here we have first a basic command followed by four others which set out the details in contrasting pairs and a final purpose clause. Slaves are exhorted to subject themselves to their own masters. As for their work, they must try to please their masters by conscientious service and to be polite and respectful. They are to be honest and not to pilfer from them (*νοσφίζω nosphizō* means generally petty larcenies, pilfering, but can describe more serious theft, Acts 5:2-3). The positive contrast (*ἀλλὰ Alla*, a strong adversative) is for them to be dependable and to demonstrate that they can be trusted in every way. The verb *ἐνδείκνυμι endeiknumi* means not just to prove but to demonstrate powerfully and show visibly. “Good” fidelity will mean perfect or whole-hearted fidelity.

There is a purpose in all of this – note the *ἵνα hina* purpose clause. So they can make the gospel attractive. As was noted, three times in these verses Paul has stressed his concern for our witness in the mission of God to the non-Christian world, (v5, 8, 10). The word “adorn” the doctrine is *κοσμέω kosmeō* meaning to put in order, or make beautiful either physically or spiritually (Matt. 12:44; 23:29 25:7; Lk. 21:5; Rev. 21:19; 1 Tim. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:5). Therefore, the testimony of the Christian slaves would commend the gospel or make it credible. The doctrine is the teaching about God the saviour and their lives would demonstrate how God saves people and transforms them! These slaves would be so different from the normal picture of slaves, obstinate, dishonest, lazy. A life lived in very ordinary circumstances – as many of our lives are – can still make such a powerful impact for God!

But why are the believers in Crete – old men and women, the young and Christian slaves to so live as Paul urges here? Because of:

#### THE CHRIST AND CRETE

Paul writes of Christ’s first coming and of his second coming. Paul emphasises here that Christ came not to save us from hell but from sin! For the sake of the mission of God and because of all the he has done for us in Christ, we are to live between the times, in holiness, “zealous of good works” expecting his second coming to review our commitment to him...To repeat, the reasons for such Christian service or the doctrinal foundations are the two comings or two appearances of Christ, “the grace of God... appeared” (v11), “the glorious appearing” (v13) – the manifestations of grace and glory.

Verses 11-15 are purposefully linked with what Paul has just taught from v1-10 – see the connecting *γάρ gar* “for” and v15, the closing link back to v1. They emphasise in one long sentence two motivations for the lifestyle he has encouraged the different groups of Christians referred to in the first part of the

chapter to adopt. The grace of God appeared to redeem or deliver us from sin; we ought also to live in holiness because of the hope/certainty of the glory of God which is yet to appear.

Regarding the word “to appear” ἐπιφαίνεω *epiphaineō*, Luke has the only use of this word apart from when it is used of Jesus Christ’s appearances. The ship carrying Paul ran into a terrible gale and drifted helplessly in the sea. The sky was so overcast by day and by night that for many days the sun nor the stars “made no epiphany,” (Acts 27:20). The stars were still there but they did not appear. Apart from this occasion the word is used 4 times of Christ’s first coming (Lk. 1:79-79; 2 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 2:11, 3:4) and 6 times of his second coming (Acts 2:20; 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Tit. 2:11, 3:4). Paul is making the point that the two comings of Christ should have a powerful impact upon us as far as lifestyle is concerned. Commentators have noted in 1 Tim. 6:14 the claim in the “good news” proclaimed concerning the results of the “appearing” of Augustus that his victories were said to have made a real impact for good in the Imperial Provinces. Paul here is asking what impact upon the believers have the appearances of our Great God and Saviour had?

Note v11 “The grace...” It is not that the grace of God came into existence when Christ came - God has always been gracious - but grace appeared visibly in Jesus Christ. It is seen in his birth, his life, but above all in his atoning death. It “appeared to all men” in the sense that what his death achieved is offered to all men, “all groups of people,”<sup>15</sup> even slaves.

Paul personifies this grace. Grace the saviour became also grace the teacher. Grace finds her “teaching power” from the first great revelation of herself. We cannot separate out theology or our theoretical affirmations from practice.

Grace exhorts us to (negatively) renounce our old life, “ungodliness and worldly passions,” and live (positively) a new one in self-control, fair dealing and in touch with God. We should live as Paul has outlined in the earlier verses, because Christ came to deliver us from the things of the old life. This was the purpose of his coming! So, we cannot continue to live like this but must adopt the new lifestyle Paul has outlined. Witherington reminds us that “renounce” here is an aorist participle which reflects a “decisive turning point in the work of grace in an individual’s life.”<sup>16</sup>

Paul also reminds Titus that the one who appeared in grace will reappear in glory. It is not the appearance of two persons, “the great God and our saviour” but the

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<sup>15</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 422.

<sup>16</sup> B. Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol.1: *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John*, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, and Nottingham: Apollos, 2006, 143.

appearance of one who is both! There is only one definite article which covers both nouns.<sup>17</sup> Christ will come to perfect our salvation. Of course, one should remember that he is also coming as judge (2 Tim. 4:1). We cannot continue with the sinful habits of the old life and so must turn from them now in the present. Paul then naturally returns to the first coming, using negative and positive aspects concerning salvation; “he gave himself for us,” not just to secure our forgiveness but “to redeem us from (negatively) all iniquity and purify (positively) for himself a people who are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Paul uses here OT language of the exodus and Israel’s redemption from Egypt to be God’s people. See in the LXX Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ezek. 37:23 – where the Deuteronomy texts reflect the same concern for holiness as here.<sup>18</sup> Again, the phrase “zealot of good works” may allude to the reference in Deut. 26:18 “a peculiar people...to keep his commands.” – or reflect the redemption from lawlessness that Christ’s death achieves for us here. What his first coming was to achieve, his second will test or review.

Our redemption is from sin to live as Paul has presented earlier in the chapter. Older men are to be dignified and mature, older women reverent and teachers of the young, younger women are to be good wives and mothers and the young men, self-controlled; Titus must be a good model and slaves conscientious and honest. We renounce sinful ways and actions because Christ came to deliver us from all of that and to purify us to be his people and we must live also in the light of the appearing of Christ who is coming to review our commitment to holiness. Until then they must devote themselves to good works – an emphasis throughout Titus, (2:7,14; 3:1, 8 – also elsewhere in Paul, 1 Cor. 3:13-14; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:17); but it is also made clear that salvation is by God’s mercy, through Christ’s death for us and “not by works of righteousness which we have done,” 3:5.

## CONCLUSION

How are we to live between the times? Our lives should be attractive. As we stated at the beginning, in this postmodern age it will be what people see that will matter. We ought to live between the times, in holiness, “zealous of good works” expecting his second coming to review our commitment to him.

In v15 Paul emphasises to Titus that the lifestyle set out in vv1-10 and the motivation in what God and Christ have done for us, are to be stressed. The

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<sup>17</sup> Witherington reminds us also that in pagan inscriptions the phrase “God and Saviour” is generally used to designate the one person, the emperor or king, whether Ptolemy 11 or Julius Caesar. Again, he points out that nowhere in the NT do we read of the *epiphaneia* of God the Father. Witherington 111, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol.1: *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John*, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 328.

imperative present is used three times and Titus is exhorted to “keep on speaking” these things, to continue to encourage the believers to respond to the challenge of what has been done for them and not to fail to rebuke them if they are careless and neglectful “with all authority” – not just because he is Paul’s delegate, but because he is calling for a response to what God has done. No-one was to disregard or resist this teaching – and as we noted, the opening verses of ch.3 imply that the Cretans were marked with a restlessness particularly to Roman authority. So, they above all must be obedient to God. The closing verses of the Epistle to Titus sum up the way the Christian community are called of God to seek to impact the society around them. Paul appeals to Titus in 3:14, “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.”

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# Inerrancy and Love: a Theological Exercise of Interpreting the Resistance of the Bible to Interpretation in Modern Thinking.

Călin-Ioan Taloș<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Recent research on Biblical criticism, highlighting certain controversial parts in the Bible, reveal that there is a wide range of conflicting interpretations with regard to Holy Scripture. As a consequence of these, the notion of inerrancy has been revisited, the Scriptures' supernatural character has been examined and their degree of reliability has been re-evaluated. In what follows, I will analyse a series of theological views which are more or less close to the twenty-five inerrantist theses formulated at Chicago in 1978, with the purpose that, in the end, based on the Biblical concept of divine love, I will propose a succinct interpretation affirming the divinity and humanity of Scripture.

**KEY WORDS:** Biblical Criticism, interpretation, inerrancy, canon, authority of Scripture.

In 1978, 26-28 October, near Chicago, there was a meeting of over 200 American theologians organised by *International Council on Biblical Inerrancy* with the purpose of expressing their support regarding the inerrancy of the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> The concept of Biblical inerrancy was expounded and explained in the following four treatments, as Norman L. Geisler points out: "(1) The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (by the ICBI drafting committee, 1978); (2) The Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, by Dr. Sproul; (3) The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (by the ICBI drafting committee, 1982); (4) The Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, by Dr. Geisler."<sup>3</sup> According to The Chicago Statement and, subsequent to the ensuing commentaries, the Bible, namely the 66 canonical books, is "in its entirety inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit."<sup>4</sup>

Geisler, one of the active participants in the Chicago Statement, repeatedly emphasized that there is a historical consent among the prominent theologians belonging to various Christian traditions with respect to the infallible nature of

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<sup>2</sup> Norman L. Geisler, Christopher T. Haun, eds. *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy, Official Commentary on the ICBI Statements, Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy by Dr. R. C. Sproul (1980), Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics by Dr. Norman L. Geisler (1983)* (Matthews, N. C: Bastion Books, 2013), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Article XII apud. Geisler and Haun, eds., *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Article XII apud. Geisler and Haun, eds., *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy*, 10.

the Biblical content. According to a selection of texts made by Geisler, Clement of Rome reckons the Scripture is the true expression of the Holy Spirit; subsequently, there is nothing counterfeit in it.<sup>5</sup> For Justin Martyr, the Scripture has its origin in the Divine Word.<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus believes that the Scriptures are perfect, and their human authors “are above all falsehood.”<sup>7</sup> Tertullian points out the harmony of the Biblical books, considering the Gospels which, although they are four, are one.<sup>8</sup> The Bible is not a human composition, for Origen, but divine, being inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> All good things are caused by God, the Scripture is caused primarily, Clement of Alexandria considers, whereas philosophy is caused consequently.<sup>10</sup>

Interested in the way the revelation occurred, Augustine states that God “commanded the disciples, His hands, to write.”<sup>11</sup> The Eastern theologian endorsed the authoritative, divine nature, the historical contents, the infallibility and inerrancy of the Scripture: “I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.”<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, engaged on the project of not leaving any biblical notion deprived of intelligibility and meaning, affirms that the canonical Bible has God as author, and that the former is utterly flawless.<sup>13</sup> Even Martin Luther, the originator of the reformation, confirms at once the divine nature of the canonical writings, the fact that the Scripture is authoritative, infallible and inerrant, that it reveals Christ and is self-consistent.<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, is among those who affirm the divine origin of the Bible, the authoritative nature and the inerrant content of the original manuscripts,<sup>15</sup> and certain MSS issues, like the one in Matthew 27:9, are most probably assigned to scribes.<sup>16</sup>

Geisler includes in this list the representatives of the school in Princeton, Archibald Alexander Hodge and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield. They both claim that taking into account its origin, the Bible is God’s infallible Word, self-consistent, valid from the historical and scientific points of view, which is not,

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<sup>5</sup> Norman Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy, The Historical Evidence* (Matthews: Bastion Books, 2013) electronic edition, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.5.1. apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospel*, 1.35.54. apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Letters*, 82.1.3. apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.1., 1.1.10, 1.6.1., Job 13. Lect. 1., apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 67-68.

<sup>14</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 71-81.

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 83-87.

<sup>16</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 87.

however, automatically dictated, but verbally inspired and, consequently, inerrant and reliable.<sup>17</sup>

Geisler identifies those he called “modern liberal theologians,” represented by Harold Dewolf and Harry Emerson Fosdick, who adopted the anti-supernaturalist hermeneutical horizon of Benedict Spinoza, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger.<sup>18</sup> These theologians deny the divine origin of the Bible, highlighting both the fallible nature of its human authors, but also, mostly its errant character. Dewolf emphasizes, therefore, that “[t]o the intelligent student who is more concerned with seeking out and declaring the truth than with maintaining a dogma it must be apparent that the Bible is by no means infallible.”<sup>19</sup> He also refers to the differences between Exodus 37:1-9 and Deuteronomy 10:1-5, 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1, evoking at the same time a certain internal inconsistency between the books mentioned and the necessity of admitting what are considered by some as scientific errors.<sup>20</sup> Fosdick contributes to the same perspective pointing out that the Bible is fallible and errant<sup>21</sup>, written and rewritten through subsequent contributions, as it results, for example, from Exodus 6:2-3,<sup>22</sup> which he perceives as characterized by an insurmountable inconsistency,<sup>23</sup> and a lack of love.<sup>24</sup> As regards the concept of process theology, Geisler makes clear the implications engendered by this theology: the Bible is not God’s Word, it does not constitute a functional authority, the revelation is not supernatural, and the prophecy is not predictive. By contrast to this liberal approach, the fundamental theology, is represented by John R. Rice who, Geisler explains, affirms that God revealed the Scripture word by word, sketching out in a providential way both the vocabulary and the style that were going to be used in writing by its human authors.<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth’s and Emil Brunner’s thinking, both being exponents of neo-orthodoxy, “may be understood as a reaction against liberalism, but also as a refusal to return to an orthodox view of the Bible.”<sup>26</sup> Barth considers that the Bible *contains* God’s Word, which entails, though, contradictions, cultural accommodation, scientific errors. The authors of its construction are “sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written

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<sup>17</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 91-102.

<sup>18</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 104.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Dewolf, “A Theology of the Living Church,” 68, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> Harold Dewolf, “Living Church,” 69, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 108-109.

<sup>21</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 116.

<sup>24</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 143.

word.”<sup>27</sup> Brunner draws attention to the danger of considering that the Bible is God’s word.<sup>28</sup> He maintains that the Bible appears as a human writing the same way as God – descended in history – appears to us as a man.<sup>29</sup> The thousands of contradictions highlighted by literary criticism, Brunner affirms, which are prevalent both in the Old and New Testament, create the feeling that the Bible is “completely overthrown.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Geisler concludes:

Neo-orthodoxy rejects the orthodox view of an infallible and inerrant Bible. The Bible is not a propositional revelation. Instead, the Bible witnesses to and records God’s revelation in the person of Christ. The Bible is not the Word of God but “becomes the Word of God to us when we meet Christ through it. Barth admits the possibility of errors in Scripture; Brunner acknowledges thousands of them.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a liberal – evangelical perspective which comprises both liberal and evangelical viewpoints, pointed out by the author of the compilation.<sup>32</sup> A representative of the liberal – evangelical approach is C. S. Lewis. According to the latter, the human intermediaries of the revelation distort, in fact, sometimes rudely, its content.<sup>33</sup> The same way as God did not transform Himself into a man, but He assumed a human body, likewise, God’s revelation, Lewis suggests, did not transform into literature, but took on a literature in order to communicate the divine word.<sup>34</sup> Both the revelation and canonization of the sacred writings, their drafting and editing, sometimes with certain changes, are all together, Lewis proposes, providentially organized by God.<sup>35</sup> The nature of the Bible, Lewis considers, quoting St. Jerome and Calvin, is partly authoritative and objectively fallible<sup>36</sup>, containing “historical limitations”, “errors and

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics*, 1:2.529 apud Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 150.

<sup>28</sup> Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), 118.

Apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Word of God and Modern Man*, trans. D. Cairns (Richmond: John Knox, 1964), 32.

Apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Emil Brunner, *God and Man*, 36, Apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 165.

<sup>32</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 114, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 168.

<sup>34</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 116, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 169.

<sup>35</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 111, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in M. J. Christensen, C. S. Lewis on Scripture (Waco: Word, 1979), 98-99, and C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 109, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 172-173.

contradictions”, and “antireligious portions”.<sup>37</sup> Again, the authorship of the Psalms is often uncertain, as is the historical nature of the description of the creation. In spite of these things, “God must have done what is best, this is best, therefore God has done this. For we are mortals and do not know what is best for us, and it is dangerous to prescribe what God must have done—especially when we cannot for the life of us, see that He has after all done it.”<sup>38</sup>

The last perspective pointed out by Geisler is that of neo – evangelicalism which implies that “the Bible is not infallible divine words but only reliable human words.”<sup>39</sup> And this is due to the fact that “[t]he Bible is a human witness to divine revelation.”<sup>40</sup> In conclusion, Geisler considers that there is a historical unity concerning the acknowledgement of the inerrancy of the Scripture, which has been preserved for nineteen centuries, and which underwent changes only in the eighteenth century, with the adoption of the anti-supernaturalist philosophical horizon.<sup>41</sup>

### *Scriptures as human creation*

Certain critical perspectives of the Biblical content were initially anchored in Baruch Spinoza’s writings, a Sephardic Jew, a student of Bacon, Hobbes and Giordano Bruno, educated both in the study of the canonical Hebrew writings, and in metaphysical works and Cartesian scientific development.<sup>42</sup> The way the prophets received the divine revelation was through the vivid power of their imperfect imagination, according to their particular temperament and opinions,<sup>43</sup> and is distinct from concrete revelation by means of the mediated reception of the words, as was the unique case with Moses, who talked to God “face to face”.<sup>44</sup> Also, the Spirit that enlivened them was, in fact, the skill of their human mind, and the prophetic content is not based on definite truth, but more on manifest signs.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the epistles of the NT apostles, in Spinoza’s opinion, scrupulously quoting from the sacred writings, “were not written by revelation and Divine command, but merely by the natural powers and judgment of the

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<sup>37</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 176-179.

<sup>38</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 111, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 112, apud. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 111, apud. Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 171.

<sup>39</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 208.

<sup>40</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 209.

<sup>41</sup> Geisler, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 211, 212.

<sup>42</sup> R. H. M. Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. I., Introduction, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, Tractatus Politicus, Revised Edition (London: George Bell and Sons, York Street, Covent Garden), 1891, xxii.

<sup>43</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 27, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 18-19, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 20 and 24.

authors.”<sup>46</sup> The latter wrote, he says, “in light of natural reason.”<sup>47</sup> The fundamental issue which underlies Spinoza’s “Tractatus Theologico – Politicus” is: “Scripture should be made sub-servient to reason, or reason to Scripture ....”<sup>48</sup> Spinoza chooses to side with reason, though, because theology promotes submission without understanding, and reason promotes truth and wisdom, thus, the conclusion of the philosopher is that “the Bible must not be accommodated to reason, nor reason to the Bible.”<sup>49</sup> If, however, the Bible were submitted to the scrutiny of reason, a fact which is eventually undesirable, as reason is interested in revealing truth, then contradictions and inconsistencies would come out of it.

The concept of reason and Scripture as parallel objectives<sup>50</sup> places the philosopher in opposition to Jehuda Alpakhar and led him to present a series of controversial Biblical references, such as 1 Samuel 15:29 and Jeremiah 18:8-10, which concern the issue of God changing his mind.<sup>51</sup> The biblical data which narrate Moses’s death, could not have been edited exactly by him. Then the reference to Moses using the third person,<sup>52</sup> the sentence “and the Canaanite was then in the land”<sup>53</sup> and the phrase “the Mountain of the Lord” in Genesis 22:14 related to mount Moriah,<sup>54</sup> made Spinoza affirm that these texts were written only after the construction of the Temple. Also, the fact that the land of Bashan that belonged to giants was associated with the land of Judah, of which Moses would not have been aware, as the partition of the conquered territory took place subsequent to his death, made Spinoza consider that the text was edited after the death of Moses. The reference from Genesis 14:14 regarding Abraham’s pursuit of the defeated enemies to Dan, seems to need an expaination, since the settlement of Dan was named by Dan’s sons during the Judges’ time, as it is mentioned in Judges 18:29.

Taking into account that in the canonical Pentateuch there is reference to “God’s lawbook” (Deut. 1:5, 29:14, 31:9, Joshua 24:25-26), Spinoza proposes that this writing was irrecuperably lost, or its whole content was considerably altered.<sup>55</sup> He states, “We may therefore conclude that the book of the law of God which

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<sup>46</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 190.

<sup>49</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 195.

<sup>50</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 198. According to Spinoza, reason deals with truth, and Scriptures with submission in love. Given the fact that man needs both truth and love, both reason and Scriptures must be found within fundamental human interests.

<sup>51</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 194.

<sup>52</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 121.

<sup>53</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 122.

<sup>55</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 125.

Moses wrote was not the Pentateuch, but something quite different, which the author of the Pentateuch duly inserted into his book.”<sup>56</sup> Spinoza also claims that, for similar reasons, the book of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings underwent certain amendments along with editing.<sup>57</sup>

Spinoza expresses his point of view regarding the Scripture saying that even if its content “may be supposed to have been altered many times”<sup>58</sup>, the former is nevertheless God’s word, being neither mendacious, nor imperfect, nor corrupt.”<sup>59</sup> For the Jewish philosopher, a work is mendacious, flawed or corrupt only when the text is deprived of any intelligible message or meaning. However, Spinoza asserts, “from Scripture we learn, without any kind of difficulty or ambiguity, that its sum is this, — to love God above all, and our neighbour as ourselves.”<sup>60</sup>

### *Total Inerrancy*

The topic of inerrancy is very important for evangelicals since, as Albert Mohler maintains, “[w]ithout inerrancy, the evangelical movement will inevitably become dissolute and indistinct in its faith and doctrines and increasingly confused about the very nature and authority of its message.”<sup>61</sup> The very survival of evangelicals, Mohler continues, depends on the total acknowledgement of Scripture’s inerrancy: “I will make my position plain. I do not believe that evangelicalism can survive without the explicit and complete assertion of biblical inerrancy.”<sup>62</sup>

Mohler believes that the argument for Biblical inerrancy engages “three major sources – the Bible itself, the tradition of the church, and the function of the Bible within the church.”<sup>63</sup> According to 2 Peter 1:21, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1

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<sup>56</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 126.

<sup>57</sup> Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 127.

<sup>58</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, A Critical Inquiry Into the History, Purpose and Authenticity of the Hebrew Scripture; With the Right to Free Thought and Free Discussion Asserted, and Shown to be Not Only Consistent but Necessarily Bound Up With True Piety and Good Government [...] From the Latin. With the Introduction and Notes By the Editor* (London: Trubner and CO., Paternoster Row, John Childs and Sons, Printers, 1862), 236.

<sup>59</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 236.

<sup>60</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 237.

<sup>61</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, R. Albert Mohler Jr., Peter Enns, Michael F. Bird, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, John R. Franke (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), 42.

<sup>62</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 53.

Thessalonians 2:13, the doctrine of inerrancy is established on “the fact that God determined the very words of the Bible in the original text.”<sup>64</sup> God is perfect and flawless, therefore, “If the Scriptures are the very breath of God, their perfect inspiration implies and requires that they are without error.”<sup>65</sup> Historically, the doctrine of inerrancy, the Baptist theologian affirms, has been unanimously endorsed by theologians throughout the centuries,<sup>66</sup> its denial gaining a foothold merely in the twentieth century. Analysing Warfield, Mohler backs up his position, pointing out the fact that the doctrine of inerrancy, as any other doctrine, raises “certain intellectual difficulties”<sup>67</sup>; however, it is doubtful that its rejection makes the problem more simple. Along with M. Boice, Mohler stresses the essential role that the Bible plays in the life of the church, saying that “faithful preaching depends on the truthfulness and trustworthiness of every word of the Bible.”<sup>68</sup> Concerning the interpretation of the Biblical texts, including the controversial ones, Mohler affirms that the Bible is inerrant, consequently, it is not the Biblical text that is likely to have intrinsic problems, but the act of interpretation. He answers to the objection that the inerrancy-based hermeneutics is *a priori* by showcasing that the secularist phenomenology also engages a hermeneutic that has a number of assumptions.<sup>69</sup> Referring to the difference between Acts 9:7 and 22:9, Mohler argues that they are perfectly complementary: “In Acts 9:7, Paul’s associates are said to hear the voice but to see no one. In Acts 22:9, they see the light but do not understand the voice [...] Paul’s associates heard the voice without understanding and saw the light without seeing the appearance of Christ.”<sup>70</sup> With respect to the difference between the divine mandate to exterminate in Deuteronomy 20 and the mandate to love in Matthew 5:43-48, Mohler concludes “the divine ordering of death for the Canaanites is a stark reminder of the divine verdict of death upon all humanity, apart from Christ.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 54.

<sup>65</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 58.

<sup>66</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 60.

<sup>67</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 61.

<sup>68</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 79.

<sup>70</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 81-82.

<sup>71</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 88.

### *The Scripture's incarnation*

Peter Enns holds that the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy cannot facilitate a rigorous account of the compositional manner of the Scripture as a work of literature created in ancient cultural space.<sup>72</sup> He suggests that the attempt to reconcile, for instance, the order to exterminate the Canaanites in the Old Testament with the command to love overabundantly in the New Testament is difficult, not to say impossible, should we take into account the principle of inerrancy.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, inerrancy “is an a priori and prescriptive doctrine.”<sup>74</sup> Therefore, “inerrancy regularly functions to short-circuit rather than spark our knowledge of the Bible.”<sup>75</sup> More precisely, “inerrancy prematurely shuts down rigorous inquiry into what the Bible’s ‘truthfulness’ means, and so interrupts rather than fosters careful reading of Scripture.”<sup>76</sup>

Enns states that the doctrine of the Biblical inerrancy, due to the precisionist emphasis placed mainly on the perfect nature of the Bible, obscures the possibility of noticing “the more interesting, spiritually edifying, and lovely topic of what kind of a God we have, one who is willing to speak within the limitations of his audience.”<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, “[i]nerrancy also prevents us from coming to terms with ourselves”<sup>78</sup>, in the sense that by refusing to accept the finitude of the Biblical text, the former overlooks the limited cultural context of the modern reader, making the application of the Biblical message in the latter’s daily life impossible. Finally, Enns promotes a reidentification of the approach to the Bible’s text, starting from the “incarnational metaphor” according to which, the Bible is “a variety of writings that necessarily and unashamedly reflects the worlds in which those writings were produced.”<sup>79</sup> Although, as he states elsewhere, the belief “that the Bible is ultimately from God and that it is God’s gift to the church”<sup>80</sup> is correct. One can deduce that

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<sup>72</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 150.

<sup>73</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 186.

<sup>74</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 187.

<sup>75</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 151.

<sup>76</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 151.

<sup>78</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 151.

<sup>79</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 190.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation, Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), E-book Edition created 2011, 13.

“*inerrancy* has run its course and that evangelicals need to adopt other language with which to talk about the Bible.”<sup>81</sup> The language that Enns proposes is that of the Incarnational Analogy, according to which, the Scripture is human and divine, the same way as Jesus Christ is human and divine at the same time.<sup>82</sup> The signs of the Scripture’s humanity are the common language through which it expresses, the ancient culture that it imitates, the prophetic practice common to the ancient Mesopotamian world, the mimetic governing of Israel and the legal system based on legal codes, such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi.<sup>83</sup> The human aspects of the Scripture, in Enns’s words, “lack integrity.”<sup>84</sup>

### *Inerrancy of the Cross*

Kevin J. Vanhoozer insists on relating constantly to the articles in the Chicago Statement, employing instruments of critical analysis towards the former, and also highlighting the theological value and real role that they have in the Americophile evangelical space. Nevertheless, after he makes sure that he reveals the fact that the Scripture holds “its own standards of truth, figures of speech, and literary forms,”<sup>85</sup> he expresses his adherence, this time without any reserve, to an article of CSBI, which, he thinks, corresponds to the “*inerrancy of the cross*”<sup>86</sup>, namely, that the “Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.”<sup>87</sup>

### *An irreconcilable literature*

Unlike Vanhoozer, Michael F. Bird fits the doctrine of inerrancy only in American theological space. Therefore, Bird considers, inerrancy “should not be a universally prescriptive article of faith for the global evangelical church.”<sup>88</sup> The objection that one can raise is that not only American Christians and their theologians are interested in decoding the difficult passages in the Bible, but Christians in other parts of the world are as well. There is the social-cultural and

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<sup>81</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 190.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation, Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, 21.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Enns, *inspiration and Incarnation*, 25.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Enns, *inspiration and Incarnation*, 288.

<sup>85</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 365.

<sup>86</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 365.

<sup>87</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 365.

<sup>88</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 248.

technological phenomenon of globalization where socialization networks. Internet and YouTube facilitate theological information and doctrinal debate that include aspects which deal with the issue of Biblical inerrancy. People from all parts of the world participate, in one way or another, to this debate. This means that non-American Christians are not outside of it.

Bird claims that there are texts such as Matt. 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43 which are irreconcilable. One may, however, take into consideration, on the one hand, that the event narrated by Luke, Jesus's entrance into Jericho, could be on a different date than the event related by Matthew and Mark. On the other hand, Matthew may depict the same event as Mark, when Jesus left Jericho, but there is no necessity to say that he “conjures up” the existence of two blind men who get to be healed, whereas Mark restrains the focal point of his story, emphasizing the fact that a blind man, one of the two, very likely, benefits from his faith in the Messiah, the Son of David, by experiencing salvation as well, which is why the Evangelist feels compelled to point him out, disclosing his name, i.e., Bartimaeus, to his readers. Therefore, it is desirable that, before jumping out of the ship as soon as somebody yells that it is sinking, we check if things are indeed such. In other words, we will not accept the notion of falsehood while there are other possible explanations. The same principle should be applied in the case of the difference between Acts 9:7 and 22:9, without jumping to the conclusion that “[t]he details seem a bit hazy as to what Paul's companions did or did not see, probably because the details were hazy in Paul's own mind.”<sup>89</sup>

### *Incomprehensibility of the Scriptures*

John R. Franke promotes the pluralism of theological knowledge: “The plurality and flexibility of particular vocabularies provide a pointed reminder of the perspectival nature of language itself.”<sup>90</sup> The epistemology on which his postfundamentalist,<sup>91</sup> pluralist viewpoint is based is that of the incomprehensibility of the truth: “As finite creatures, we are not able to grasp the truth as God, who is truth, knows that truth to be.”<sup>92</sup> The questions raised are for example: If we insist that we cannot know the truth, then we cannot be sure of the truth that we care about, even if it is called postfundamentalist, and, if however there are clues that something is true and acknowledged as such, then we cannot claim that we are not able to grasp the truth. On the other hand, how

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<sup>89</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 286.

<sup>90</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 472.

<sup>91</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 464.

<sup>92</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 471.

can we say that we know only fragments of truth if we do not have the unfragmented, entire picture of it? And how do we know that a certain fragment of truth is not, in fact, the whole truth? Franke provides answers to these questions saying that “by virtue of the grace of divine revelation, we are able to know something about reality even if we cannot know it exhaustively or perfectly.”<sup>93</sup>

How can we explain the fact that many Christians have the knowledge “by the virtue of grace” but there is less consensus among them about the Bible? Or, alternatively, since “truth is characterized by plurality”<sup>94</sup>, and not every interpretive expression is true, then how can we know what is true and false or untrue? Should there be a valid universal criterion, then postfundamentalism would not be true, and if there is no criterion, we are held captive by a mystical hermeneutic of the “anything goes” type.

However, Franke continues by revealing that the Scripture, as a whole, is a map which, without having the merit of being precise, leads us correctly in the right direction: “Scripture functions like a map that effectively guides our journey into the mission of God. It pragmatically points us in the right direction without the necessity of being photographically precise or drawn exactly to scale.”<sup>95</sup> For Franke, the human involvement is intrinsically fallible. Therefore, “inerrancy functions only within the limits of language alone.”<sup>96</sup> The divine and human contribution to the revelation remain distinct and unmistakable just in order to avoid the idolatrous action of worshipping the Scripture’s human aspect.

### *A World of Contradictions*

This analysis cannot overlook the secularist approach to the Bible advocated by Bart D. Ehrman. He argues in favour of the idea that the Bible is “A World of Contradictions.”<sup>97</sup> Ehrman underlines the fact that supplementing the “vertical” Bible reading with the “horizontal” one leads to emphasizing the differences between the reported narrations. He claims, “[r]eading the Gospels horizontally reveals all sorts of differences and discrepancies.”<sup>98</sup> For instance, Mark 14:12

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<sup>93</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 475.

<sup>94</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 486.

<sup>95</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 473.

<sup>96</sup> J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, general eds., Stanley N. Gundry, series ed., *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 476.

<sup>97</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted, Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible, and Why We Don’t know about them* (New York: Harper One, HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 19.

<sup>98</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 21.

and 15:25 tell us that Jesus was seized on the day of the Feast of Azymes, when they sacrificed the passover, or the “day before the Sabbath” (Mark 15:42), namely Friday, and He was crucified at “the third hour” (nine o’clock), whereas in John 19:14 we find out that Jesus was tried and crucified on the preparation of the Passover, the day when lambs were slain in the temple. So, Ehrman claims, one day before the Feast of Azymes, in fact on Thursday, the historian affirms, and Jesus was brought to be judged by Pilate at six o’clock (twelve o’clock).<sup>99</sup> Ehrman, even though he is aware of the explanation that John would have related the crucifixion to another Jewish calendar which celebrated the Passover differently from the official calendar, thinks that the difference between these two Gospels which relate the same event is irreconcilable.

Helen K. Bond makes reference to one of M. H. Shepherd’s proposals regarding the existence of two calendars, a priestly one, which was circulating in Judea, approved by John, and another one agreed by Mark due to reasons related to the church where he was ministering, found in the Roman cultural space.<sup>100</sup> It is possible that both, Mark and John, relate crucifixion to a day which is immediately succeeded by the Sabbath day (Mark 15:42 and John 19:31). Or, another hypothesis is the theory of two Sabbaths according to which Mark might have referred to a Sabbath as it is set out in Leviticus 6:29-31; 23:24-32, 39.

Ehrman brings up other texts that are also highly controversial, and eventually he underscores three conclusions regarding the nature of the differences between the Gospels: firstly, “they show that the view of the Bible as completely inerrant appears not to be true”<sup>101</sup>; secondly, no matter what the presupposed degree of contradiction between the Bible’s authors may be, it is “important to let each other author speak for himself and not pretend that he is saying the same thing as another.”<sup>102</sup> And thirdly, “[t]he discrepancies that involve historical narratives [...] make it difficult to establish what really happened ....”<sup>103</sup>

### *The Bible is true at a deeper level*

Unlike Ehrman, Peter J. Williams has an inerrant – heuristical approach to difficult texts: “But these formal contradictions do show that the author is more interested in encouraging people to read deeply than in satisfying those who want to find fault.”<sup>104</sup> Difficulty is meant to engage even more the reader’s curiosity

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<sup>99</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 23-27.

<sup>100</sup> Helen Bond, (2013). “Dating the Death of Jesus: Memory and the Religious Imagination.” *New Testament Studies*, 59(04), 461-475, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 59.

<sup>102</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 59-60.

<sup>103</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 60.

<sup>104</sup> Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 127.

for the very purpose of helping him to discover some novel and useful Biblical information. Particularly, Williams states that “[h]ere the author of John’s Gospel has recorded *contradictions at the superficial level of language* to encourage the audience to think more deeply.”<sup>105</sup> For Williams, the contradictions in the Bible are deliberate, a fact which makes both seemingly antagonistic positions of certain texts be “true in some way at a deeper level.”<sup>106</sup> Williams notices, in conclusion, the fact that the problematical texts in the Gospels have the potential to be solved: “For all the many contradictions that have been alleged in the Gospels, and for all the texts that remain puzzling, I do not know of any that cannot possibly be resolved.”<sup>107</sup>

### *Scriptures, a collection of books pertaining to their time*

Michael R. Licona does not share the same viewpoint. Examining Plutarch’s *Lives*, he reaches the conclusion that the ancient historian uses a series of stylistic-literary methods which form, what Licona calls “compositional devices.” These devices are the following: *transferral*, “when an author knowingly attributes words or deeds to a person that actually belonged to another person. ....”<sup>108</sup>; *displacement*, “an author knowingly uproots an event from its original context ....”<sup>109</sup>; *conflation*, “[w]hen an author combines elements from two or more events or people and narrates them as one ....”<sup>110</sup>; *compression*, “[w]hen an author knowingly portrays events over a shorter period of time than the actual time it took for those events to occur ....”<sup>111</sup>; *spotlighting*, “[w]hen an author focuses attention on a person [...] whereas mention of others who were likewise involved is neglected ....”<sup>112</sup>; *simplification*, “[w]hen an author adapts material by omitting or altering details ....”<sup>113</sup>; *expansion of narrative details*, “if minor details were unknown, they could be invented to improve the narrative ....”<sup>114</sup> and *paraphrasing*.

Licona insists on affirming that the Gospels in the New Testament “bear a strong affinity to Greco-Roman biography”<sup>115</sup>, this fact leading him to the thesis that “evangelists employ many of the same compositional devices that were taught

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<sup>105</sup> Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 127.

<sup>106</sup> Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 127.

<sup>107</sup> Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 127.

<sup>108</sup> Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What we Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

<sup>109</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 20.

<sup>110</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 20.

<sup>111</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 20.

<sup>112</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 20.

<sup>114</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 20.

<sup>115</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 5.

in the compositional textbooks and others that were employed by Plutarch ....”<sup>116</sup> Thus, Licona gets to say things which hardly converge with the doctrinal objectives and content of the Chicago Statement. Here is an example: “John may have altered the day and time of Jesus’s crucifixion ....”<sup>117</sup> “Either Luke displaces an event or Mark//Matthew alters details”<sup>118</sup>. “Mark alters a question to a command,”<sup>119</sup> and “Matthew or John relocated an appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene.”<sup>120</sup> Such chosen examples illustrate sufficiently Licona’s belief that the authors of the Gospels sometimes resort to stylistic devices, for obviously rhetorical reasons, such as *simplification*, the effect of which is to introduce the idea that the Biblical authors make up events that are not backed up by a given historical reality.

### *The High Reliability of the Scriptures*

Lydia McGrew objects to the literary device theory employed by Licona, drawing attention to the fact that, however, “an alteration of fact is fictionalization.”<sup>121</sup> By fictionalization, McGrew understands three things: 1. “The real facts have been altered”<sup>122</sup>; 2. “The alteration of fact was made by the author deliberately”<sup>123</sup>; 3. “The alteration of fact is invisible to the audience ....”<sup>124</sup> McGrew draws attention to the fact that, when we give place to the literary device theory, we agree that the authors of the Gospels assumed the liberty to “retouch” their stories “using fictionalizing literary devices.” But this means that historical writings lose their historicity, and the epistemical effect is “a serious one.”<sup>125</sup> In accepting “alterations suggested by the literary device theorists”<sup>126</sup>, McGrew considers, the biographies of the Gospels will not be a mirror which will show us the image “of the Master by the natural process of historical reporting”<sup>127</sup>, but, on the contrary, become in effect, a “mask upon the historical Jesus.”<sup>128</sup> Following William Paley’s apologetic methodology, according to which the authors of the New Testament were either deceivers, or deceived, or they tell the truth, McGrew aims to highlight the coincidences within the Gospels, and those between Acts and the Epistles, calling them “undesigned

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<sup>116</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 199.

<sup>117</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 167.

<sup>118</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 167.

<sup>119</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 134.

<sup>120</sup> Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 182.

<sup>121</sup> Lydia McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask, Liberating the Gospels From Literary Devices*, (Florida, Tampa: DeWard Publishing Company Ltd., 2019), Kindle Edition, 29.

<sup>122</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 29.

<sup>123</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 30.

<sup>124</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 30.

<sup>125</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 31.

<sup>126</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 36.

<sup>127</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 36.

<sup>128</sup> McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, 36.

coincidences”<sup>129</sup>, for the very reason of reaching the premise that the writings mentioned are characterized by “high reliability, the absence of any deliberate fictionalization, and close apostolic origin ....”<sup>130</sup> and, thus, to point out that the authors of the Gospels and Acts tell the truth.

### *The confluent divine-human revelation*

William Lane Craig, analysing the correspondence between Jean Le Clerc, a Dutch theologian, and Spinoza, adopts an approach to inspiration which “is understood in terms of direction, not dictation,”<sup>131</sup> and which implies the idea that “God has already accommodated Himself to speaking in the languages of Hebrew and Greek and has thus limited His expression to what the grammar and vocabulary of those languages permit.”<sup>132</sup> This approach supports the interpretation that “There is then one author of Scripture, God, and one stenographer, man, to whom God dictates Scripture in a vernacular that makes it indistinguishable from the writer’s own expression.”<sup>133</sup> If, nevertheless, the Scriptures were not the outcome of the divine-human confluence, then God would be the only author, and “inerrancy would be unproblematic”. Craig says:

1. *The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity.*
2. *Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.*
3. *God totally controlled what human authors did in fact write.*
4. *Therefore, the words of the Bible are God’s utterance.*
5. *Whatever God utters is errorless.*
6. *Therefore, the words of the Bible are errorless.*<sup>134</sup>

The most problematical premise is number 2, because it evokes the paradox that God controls man completely without violating, though, his human freedom. How is this possible? Well, Craig explains it by appealing to the doctrine of middle knowledge suggested by the Jesuit Spanish theologian, Luis Molina (1535-1600), who analyses the knowledge of God under the aspect of its three logical moments.

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<sup>129</sup> Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View, Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Ohio, Chillicothe: DeWard Publishing Company Ltd., 2017), 13.

<sup>130</sup> McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View*, 226.

<sup>131</sup> William Lane Craig, “‘Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God’ (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration,” Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig, Used by permission of Philosophia Christi NS 1 (1999): 45-82, accessed January, 22, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/divine-omni-science/men-moved-by-the-holy-spirit-spoke-from-god-2-peter-1.21-a-middle-knowledge/>.

<sup>132</sup> Craig, “‘Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God’ (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration”.

<sup>133</sup> Craig, “‘Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God’ (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration”.

<sup>134</sup> Craig, “‘Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God’ (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration”.

The “natural knowledge,” the knowing of God since eternity, comprises in its horizon all that is likely to happen, regarding both individual essences, and all possible worlds, more exactly, “by His natural knowledge God knew what any free creature *could* do in any set of circumstances.”<sup>135</sup> The second knowledge is that of the world and actual things. According to this knowledge, God knows all the actual things and all their causes minutely. However, God also owns a knowledge of what could happen under unimaginable circumstances: a “knowledge of all true counterfactual propositions, including counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. That is to say, He knows what contingent states of affairs would obtain if certain antecedent states of affairs were to obtain”.<sup>136</sup> This is the third type of knowledge, God’s middle knowledge. The latter represents the basis according to which God updates the world as He knows it from eternity, but God can create, for the benefit of the free human agents, the necessary background in which they can act in a certain direction, leaving them the freedom of choice. This freedom is guaranteed to them by the possibility of choice.

The objection that one can raise against this theory is that, since God, who is uncaused, but, still, the causer, knew beforehand – engaging an infallible knowledge, not a probable one – that agent *A*, who, if it were placed in circumstance *C*, would freely perform action *a*, then *A* is not free, just for the reason that the knowledge of God is infallible and comprehensive, and if *A* is free, then divine knowledge could not be infallible, but only probable, because it only creates counterfactual circumstances *C*. A detailed critical analysis of a similar objection belongs to Robert Merrihew Adams who values the theoretical difference between infallible and probable knowledge.<sup>137</sup>

On the other hand, one must emphasize that the theory of middle knowledge, as it is articulated by Craig and Alvin Plantinga, is established on the principle that God’s thinking is lineary or inferential, thus, conclusion *C* is extracted from *P1* (major premise) by means of *P2* (minor premise). More concretely, Craig reproduces Plantinga’s explanation claiming that “God is said to weakly actualize a state of affairs *S* if and only if He strongly actualizes a state of affairs *S\** that counterfactually implies *S* (that is, were *S\** to obtain, then *S* would

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<sup>135</sup> Craig, “Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God” (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration”.

<sup>136</sup> Craig, “Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God” (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration”.

<sup>137</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams. “Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1977): 109-17. Accessed January 24, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009657>.

obtain).<sup>138</sup> The emphasis that we would like to highlight as such is that, if God's "middle knowledge" anticipates that  $S$  follows (being counterfactually implied)  $S^*$ , in the sense that between  $S$  and  $S^*$  there is a continuity (understanding that between social – physical – chemical circumstances and human free will there is a deep continuity that God knows beforehand), then the succession of  $S$  related to  $S^*$  is necessary, subsequently, knowledge of God is necessary, so it complies with the laws of inferential, lineary logic. Therefore, even God's "weak actualisation"<sup>139</sup> entails an essential and known internal conditioning, it is still an actualisation. If there is no continuity between  $S$  and  $S^*$ , meaning that there are no intimate necessary causes which may somehow engender the actions of the free will, then we encounter two issues: 1. The human will acts at random and cannot fully explain its option. Consequently, it cannot be blamed or held responsible. 2, The actions of the free will, being mysteriously disconnected from the state of affairs  $S$ , do not possess a necessary relationship with them. Therefore, the knowledge of God is not a necessary knowledge, based on the lineary, inferential logic. God knowing, according to other logical bases, the succession of  $S$  related to  $S^*$ , which makes Craig's and Plantinga's analysis of God's middle knowledge lose its competence, as, on the basis of inferential logic, a non-inferential thinking is analysed.

Craig, though, is convinced that the middle-knowledge theory can be successfully applied to the doctrine of inerrancy saying that "God knew, for example, that were He to create the Apostle Paul in just the circumstances he was in around AD 55, he would freely write to the Corinthian church, saying just what he did in fact say. It needs to be emphasized that those circumstances included not only Paul's background, personality, environment, and so forth, but also any promptings or gifts of the Holy Spirit to which God knew Paul would freely respond."<sup>140</sup> Craig concludes, "By weakly actualizing the composition of the books of the Bible, God can bring it about that biblical inspiration is in the fullest sense confluent."<sup>141</sup> Consequently, the Scriptures are a series of confluent compositions, with an intentional and direct, divine and human participation.

Following the diverse viewpoints about the Sacred Scriptures, the inerrancy perspective of the Chicago Statement, the fallibilism of the Bible as human literature, Scripture's incarnation, the incomprehensibility of the Scriptures,

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<sup>138</sup> Craig, "Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God" (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration".

<sup>139</sup> Craig, "Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God" (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration".

<sup>140</sup> Craig, "Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God" (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration".

<sup>141</sup> Craig, "Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God" (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration".

Scripture as a World of Contradictions, Scriptures as pieces of literature pertaining to their worlds, total inerrancy, the inerrancy of the Cross, a highly credible literature, and a confluencing literature, we can easily ascertain that the Bible purely and simply resists interpretation to a certain degree. How could a postmodern man interpret such an opposition of the Bible to interpretation? Why did God not reveal the Scriptures in a clear, divine, unique and unparalleled way in order for us to believe? Why did God not nail down His revelation on some stone tablets as king Hammurabi did, in order to avoid the doubts regarding the original? Why did God not give us Scriptures deprived of the difficulty of interpretation in order to help us escape from the confusion of choice? These are only some of the questions that one could ask.

In conclusion, I will try to evoke a possible answer, drawn from the Biblical content itself, to the matter of the Bible's resistance to interpretation. First and foremost, I would like to point out that the American logician, Charles S. Peirce, considered that the removal of the vague or unclear nature of a physical or literary reality can be carried out naturally and initially by appealing to abductive reasoning, which brings to the foreground the most adequate conjecture for the explanation of a vagueness. Abductive reasoning is formulated by Peirce as follows:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;  
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,  
Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.<sup>142</sup>

Vagueness, the logician believes, is a sign which, in "leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination."<sup>143</sup> For instance, "This month," says the almanac-oracle, "a great event is to happen." "What event?" "Oh, we shall see. The almanac doesn't tell that."<sup>144</sup> And in order to make things even clearer, underlines that "The *vague* might be defined as that to which the principle of contradiction does not apply."<sup>145</sup> As a consequence, a text or a relation between texts, which is not the object of the principle of contradiction,

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<sup>142</sup> Deely, John, ed.: *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Electronic Edition, 1 June 1994, reproducing vols. I-VI, Hartshorne, Charles and Weiss, Paul eds.: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1931-1935. vols. VII-VIII, Burks, Arthur W. ed.: (same publisher). 1958. Editorial introduction to electronic edition, CP 5.189.

<sup>143</sup> Deely, John, ed.: *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Electronic Edition, 1 June 1994, reproducing vols. I-VI, Hartshorne, Charles and Weiss, Paul eds.: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1931-1935. vols. VII-VIII, Burks, Arthur W. ed.: (same publisher). 1958. Editorial introduction to electronic edition, CP 5.505.

<sup>144</sup> Idem.

<sup>145</sup> Idem.

means that the text or the relation between texts is not one which is characterized by contradiction, but by vagueness, whose lack of clarity can be accomplished through the contribution of data which, by their explanatory quality, may be proved as being the best option.

By adopting this principle, I will tackle the association of God's command concerning the judgment upon the nations in Numbers 25:17, 31:1-18 and Deuteronomy 20:10-20, with the golden rule mentioned by Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:44-48, namely, God's command "Harass the Midianites and strike them down, for they have harassed you ...."<sup>146</sup> and that of Jesus Christ "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..." <sup>147</sup>

Therefore, "the surprising fact" lies in the discrepancy between the command "kill them for they are your enemies" and the one that requires loving their very enemies. If God revealed the two texts, then how is it possible that He commanded the sentence of His judgement in a part of the sacred text, whereas in the second part of the same canon, He demanded love?

One of the hypotheses which may be advanced, and that we endorse here, is that God envisaged expressly the promotion and intact preservation of the trust in the only God, for the entire land of Canaan. It is good to know that for this objective there are, theoretically, not only internal causes of carrying it out, such as the appropriation of God's law as an ethical-cosmological paradigm (Jeremiah 31:33), but also external leverages, such as the removal of any external influential factors that are adverse, (see Shema Israel in Deuteronomy 6).

From the information that we have today, the people of Israel, to whom God addressed both of the commands, fought for survival in a time when alternative foreign practices were approached with disgust and hostility. Willie Thompson, reviewing the engaging of violence in coercive labour and slavery, wage contracts, economic and monetary activities, and up to popular protests and activities of institutionalised violence, since the palaeolithic and until modernity<sup>148</sup>, explains that "[p]rior to the emergence of centralised states, settled social life was ruled by custom, and violence was intrinsic to it. Customary rules prescribed severe penalties including mutilation and death for – even accidental – violation of social custom or taboo [...]. Violence was second nature to god-

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<sup>146</sup> ESV Text Edition® (2016), *Bible Hub*, The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®) copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

<sup>147</sup> ESV Text Edition® (2016).

<sup>148</sup> Willie Thompson, "Exploitation and Violence," In *Work, Sex and Power: The Forces That Shaped Our History*, 78-98. London: Pluto Press, 2015, Accessed January 29, 2021.

kings in their domestic society, and therefore to organise, expand and extend it beyond their territory must have come very naturally.”<sup>149</sup>

The Jews were the people of their time. Under this aspect, we may think about the hypothesis that God aimed, in fact, to judge and convert the violent and degraded life of the Canaanites. The Canaanites’ spiritual decay, by sinking deeper and deeper into polytheism, which is known to have adopted the most grotesque forms, from idol worship to child sacrifice, was dramatically toxic and contagious. The Jewish people were risking, by settling down in Canaan the loss of their religious identity and along with it the pure faith in the only true God. There was no sign of conversion on behalf of the Canaanite peoples to the universal faith in the only One God in the chronicles of the Old Testament. Nothing at that time could generate such a conversion, therefore, the only solution left was to warn and correct the ungodliness of the Canaanites was absolute judgment from God. In terms of the penalty that comes from God’s judgment, one might notice that it is not selective, namely it does not protect preferentially a people to the detriment of another. One knows that the failure of the people of Israel, when first attempting to conquer Ai, was the outcome of God’s intervention who had used the pagan people of this city to apply His Divine judgment upon Israel, due to their disobedience.

Therefore, in Numbers 25 and Deuteronomy 20, there is evoked the non-preferential judgment of God who employs, this time, the Jewish people in order to judge and convert, when the situation required it, the Canaanite peoples. One knows, both from the chronicles of the Old Testament – Joshua, 1, 2 Samuel, 1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles, and from the prophetic writings like Isaiah and Jeremiah or Joel and Amos, that the Jewish people were either the object of the divine judgment, or the means of applying God’s justice or His exceptional forgiveness. God’s use of the Jewish people to apply His justice upon the Jews by means of other peoples had, among others, the role to create in the collective mindset of Israel and in the mind of each and every individual, the habit of a moral discernment. This was going to be fulfilled and implemented in the New Testament, in Jesus Christ, as well as in the community of love, which is the church, since discernment implies the love of truth, and the love of the neighbour necessarily claims discerning carefully between what is good for them and what is evil. Certainly, the idealist expectations of the postmodern reader for such texts formulate the pretence of having seen God operate patiently and non-violently under these circumstances. These expectations do not remain unfulfilled, but as long as we let ourselves be informed by the literature of the New Testament, about the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who, being God incarnate, managed to convert man from maliciousness and cruelty to God, and the kindness which results from a personal and transforming relationship with

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<sup>149</sup> Thompson, “Exploitation and Violence,” 97.

God. Thus, what could not be carried out in the Old Testament through the Jews, concerning the Canaanites, was accomplished in the New Testament through Jesus, concerning the world.

As concerns the conversion through Jesus Christ, one knows from the books of the New Testament, for instance from Acts where Paul's presence and sermon in the Areopagus of Athens are narrated (Acts 17:15-34), that some people prefer to give up on the liberty of living indifferently in exchange for the happiness to live absorbing, by faith, God's love, manifested in Christ's sacrifice, whereas others prefer giving up on the happiness which arises from receiving God's love, in exchange for the freedom of living according to their will. The effect of this last option is the preservation of sin and evil actions. That is why there is no other solution, but, again, to apply God's judgment, about which Paul stated that it is already "set", and the judgment will be carried out through the same Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. He is ready to reveal and judge, accordingly, man's self-centred life who claims freedom in exchange for total dependence on God, although, man, is actually dependent on Him as the source of life.

The final judgment that Christ will accomplish, will accuse the very rejection of God's love by man, and will indicate the harmful consequences which issue implacably and irretrievably from the former's action. The texts in Numbers and Deuteronomy, thus, evoke, by and large, the seriousness of man's estrangement from God, whereas in the backstage of heaven there had already been prepared the divine plan of man's conversion, through love, by Christ.

There are a number of texts in the Bible of a similar complexity. However, why does God, whose character is perfect and infallible, acknowledge that His action in history and, especially, His action of revealing the truth about Himself, may adopt some imprecise phrases, specific to human languages, that are marked by vagueness and blur? Why was God's revelation through the Scriptures not made in a clearer way, without difficulties and retouches? Why does the Bible have an obvious resistance to interpretation? Why were we not given a Bible with an unbreached syntax, clad in a language lacking approximations, a content with an unequalled semantic, and sometimes enveloped in unpretentious stylistics?

To answer these questions, I would suggest an analogy (as a hypothesis) with the image of the Word's incarnation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, as a sign of divine love towards mankind.

John, the evangelist, has expressed the idea that the act of the incarnation of the Word is the outcome of God's love, in John 1:14, a verse which has a common context with the verse in 3:16. This body of Christ, though, needs water (John 4:7, 19:28), food (John 12:2). Consequently, it is a body subject to human needs and limitations.

On the other hand, Jesus's biographers do not talk about the features of His physical appearance, in the manner that others e.g., Joseph (Gen. 39:6), Saul (1 Samuel 9:2), David (1 Samuel 16:18) or Absalom (2 Samuel 14:25) are presented.

Nevertheless, God decided to reveal Himself through a finite body that lacked celestial qualities and angelic effects, just because He wanted to be like us, and to present Himself to us just as we present to each other, without any formal perfection or physical glow. Unlike, the doctrine of the Gnostics and Marcion, or the teaching of the Platonists, for whom the body is contemptible,<sup>150</sup> the Christology of John and Paul makes obvious the fact that through incarnation God became flesh, taking upon Himself a limited human body as ours.

Likewise, the morphology and syntax of the books in the New Testament are characterized, here and there, by irregularities or solecisms, as is the case of the book of Revelation. These, in spite of the fact that they can be explained to a great extent (the author's Semitical thinking, a Greek with strong Semitic accent or "idiolectical peculiarity"<sup>151</sup>), denote the finite side of the revelation.

God commanded that the Word's incarnation as well as Its revelation will put on the modest forms of expression, fully mirroring the limited and approximate human faculties of expression.

The divine word, consequently, does not perplex the reader through the elevation of a style or syntax and does not intend to dominate the reader through some ostentatious or impeccable, unprecedented and inimitable phrasing and rhetoric. The divine word speaks through human morphological and syntactical approximations so that man can access through it the meaning of Godly truth. God's descending in body is not only a topological, spatiotemporal accomplishment, but an ethical success of the Word; the latter descended up to the modest, but pragmatically sufficient expression of the approximate human language. In fact, even in the most abstract language, the mathematical one, we were not able, for instance, to perfectly include a square within a circle, and the numeric value of "pi" has never been completed, always being an approximation.<sup>152</sup> We were born in a world limited by approximations, we got used to parts of the whole, "we think in part" and we express partly. And if God had chosen to speak to us in the highest form of the highest language

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<sup>150</sup> Charles Lock, "Carnival and Incarnation: Bakhtin and Orthodox Theology," *Literature and Theology* 5, no. 1 (1991): 68-82, p. 71, accessed March 30, 2021.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23926648>.

<sup>151</sup> Allen Dwight Callahan "The Language of Apocalypse." *The Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 4 (1995): 453-70. Accessed February 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509837>.

<sup>152</sup> See, Alfred S. Posamentier & Ingmar Lehmann, *a Biography of the World's Most Mysterious Number* (New York, Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004).

characterized by accuracy and objectivity, not even the most endowed intelligent minds could have deciphered it, because, as Alfred S. Penrose specifies, there are things that we possess, and others which surpass even the language of the most precise measurements: "[m]athematics itself indeed seems to have a robustness that goes far beyond what any individual mathematician is capable of perceiving."<sup>153</sup> And if God decided not to talk to us by means of the precision of the most accurate heavenly language, it means that He did us the favour of having talked to us the way a parent talks to the child they love.

It seems that in the texts in Matthew 13:10-17, Mark 4:11-12, Luke 8:10 and John 12:37-40, Jesus of Nazareth was aiming to awaken the audience from the comfort of ignorance which causes sterile complacency, and to arouse the uneasiness of ignorance, a condition which, through the concern which assists it, will challenge the thirst of the hearer to seek and acquire the truth which vivifies and transforms.

Therefore, the resistance of the Scriptures to interpretation can be interpreted as a deliberate means of the divine author to arouse the discomfort of ignorance and to establish the habit of discovering the meaning. Revelation, as it is, limited both in form and expression, is not only the novel expression of divine-human confluence, but also the urge which engages human-divine receptivity in the interpretive act, when, through a hermeneutics of hope and love, the fallible man and Holy Spirit actively co-participate at unravelling the Scriptures.

The feature of this prolific hermeneutical co-participation is an expression of a deep mutual love, both divine and human, characteristic of the glorious moment of a wedding ceremony.

Finally, one can note what is written in Hebrews 4:15 of the human Jesus. The fact is that while fully human he was without sin. Although humanness, as we know it (since the fall), is inherently sinful, it does not follow that sin is intrinsic or essential to humanness. In using this analogy this article can maintain that as the fully human Jesus was without sin, so in the fulness of the Word's humanity in the original autographs it can also be without error, i.e., inerrant.

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<sup>153</sup> Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality, A Complete Guide To The Laws of The Universe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 13.

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