

# **Semănătorul (The Sower)**

## **The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research**

**Volume 1, Number 2.**

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel  
University of Oradea and International Contributors,  
March 2021.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

© 2021 Dr. Hamilton Moore et al

Faithbuilders Publishing  
12 Dukes Court, Bognor Road,  
Chichester,  
PO19 8FX  
[www.faithbuilderspublishing.com](http://www.faithbuilderspublishing.com)

ISSN: 2515-3218

ISBN: 978-1-913181-75-8

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this journal is available from the British Library

The views contained herein are not necessarily the views of the publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV) adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.

בבִּהְיוֹב, לַבִּהְיוֹב, הַסְנוּרָהוֹב [Hebrew]; ΒΩΓΡΚΛ, ΒΩΓΡΚΝ, and ΒΩΓΡΚΙ [Greek] PostScript® Type 1 and TrueType fonts Copyright ©1994-2015 Bible Works, LLC. All rights reserved. These Biblical Greek and Hebrew fonts are used with permission and are from BibleWorks ([www.bibleworks.com](http://www.bibleworks.com)).

Cover Design by Esther Kotecha, EKDesign  
Layout by Faithbuilders Publishing  
Printed in the United Kingdom

## **Editorial Board**

### **Editors:**

Dr. Hamilton Moore (QUB, Belfast);

Dr. Ilie Soritau; Dr. Adrian Giorgiov;

Dr. Dinu Moga and Dr. Corin Mihăilă (Emanuel University, Oradea).

### **Editorial Advisor**

Drd. Eunicia Ile (Emanuel Publishing House, Oradea)

## **Editorial Board Contact Details**

Universitatea Emanuel din Oradea

Str. Nufărului nr. 87  
410597 Oradea, ROMÂNIA

Tel./Fax: +40 259.426.692  
Email: [contact@emanuel.ro](mailto:contact@emanuel.ro)

Facultatea de Teologie

Mariana Popovici Secretară

Email: [teologie@emanuel.ro](mailto:teologie@emanuel.ro)  
Tel.: +40 359.405.602

Dr. Hamilton Moore (Editor)

Semănătorul (The Sower) the Emanuel Journal of Ministry  
and Biblical Research Universitatea Emanuel din Oradea  
Str. Nufărului nr. 87  
410597 Oradea, ROMÂNIA

Email [dr.hamilton.moore@gmail.com](mailto:dr.hamilton.moore@gmail.com)

Tel.: +40 781 259 1743

This present publication comprises the second part of Volume 1 of Semănătorul (The Sower): The Emanuel Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research. The pandemic in Romania, with all the disruption caused, has meant that there has been a delay in publishing these articles. The Journal incorporates submissions by the Faculty of Theology of Emanuel University, Oradea, plus contributions from International scholars. They are not only published here but have been shared on line with Faculty members and are available on the Emanuel website.

The publication of the Journal has been made possible through the commitment of members of the Emanuel Faculty, the collaboration with Emanuel University Press, the Emanuel “Ethics and Society” Research Centre, and the contribution of distinguished colleagues from the Irish Baptist College, UK and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

The journal includes a range of articles on various aspects broadly related to challenges in communicating Christian truth in a modern culture. It presents papers which address important biblical issues and practical pastoral themes.

Editor,  
Dr. Hamilton Moore

## CONTENTS

<b>“Does God Ever Feel Sorry?” Understanding Verbs of Divine Emotion in the Pentateuch and the Targumic Versions of Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan.</b>	
Aurelian Botica.....	6
<b>John 2:13-22. Jesus’ Public Revelation of Himself in the Temple.</b>	
Hamilton Moore.....	27
<b>The Concept of Rest in Hebrews 4: eschatological and soteriological aspects.</b>	
Ovidiu Hanc.....	42
<b>Was Amos among the prophets? Amos 7:14: A prophet in spite of himself.</b>	
Corin Mihăilă.....	53
<b>“Man of Sorrows”: A Christian Reading of Isaiah’s Servant Songs.</b>	
S. D. Ellison.....	83
<b>The Wise Women in the Books of Samuel: a critical and theological analysis of 1 Samuel 25 and 2 Samuel 14.</b>	
István Borzási.....	97
<b>“Live Coals Separated, Soon Die”: The Early Baptist Vision of the Church and Associations.</b>	
Michael A.G. Haykin.....	116
<b>Apprenticed to Christ: Reshaping Disciple-Making around Christ’s Commission.</b>	
Paul Coulter.....	125

## “Does God Ever Feel Sorry?”

### Understanding Verbs of Divine Emotion in the Pentateuch and the Targumic Versions of Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan.

Aurelian Botica<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

In the present study we will direct our attention to the particular instances in which God appears as the subject of the verb נחם in the Pentateuch, where the context describes the reaction of “regretting” or “repenting” over a previous decision. In addition, in order to find out whether the Aramaic translators were consistent when trying to avoid anthropomorphisms, we will look at several of the occurrences of the verb in situations where it appears with a human, not a divine subject. This comparative approach will allow us to locate the different dimensions of the semantic field in which a given verb functions. Hopefully the wider the picture of this field, the better the chances are that we will understand the motivations and beliefs that informed the particular choices the translators made.

KEY WORDS: Targums, Anthropomorphism, God, Repentance, Old Testament

#### INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will focus on Aramaic translations of the Hebrew verb of emotion נחם (“to repent”, “regret”), as it appears in Genesis 6:6-7 and Exodus 32:12, 14, and in the Targums of Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan. Although the subject of anthropomorphisms has been amply treated by Targumic scholars, there are virtually no works that deal with the translation of verbs such as these in the Targums. Traditionally they have been labelled *antropophatic*, not *anthropomorphic*, but they fall under the same category as do expressions that attribute human organs (hands, nose, ears, etc.) or actions to God. In the Hebrew literature of the Old Testament there are a number of verbs of emotions that appear to have raised theological problems for some of the Aramaic translators. In addition to נחם (“to repent”, “regret”), one could mention שנא (“to hate, also with the noun form שְׂנֵאָה, “hate”), אנה (“be angry”), אהב (“love”, also

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Dan Aurelian Botica, Conferențiar universitar Emanuel, Theology, Limba ebraică, Judaism si Elenism Rabinic. dabotica@gmail.com

with noun form, אָהַבָּ “love”).<sup>2</sup> Each one of these verbs deserves a study on its own, especially as some of them have a high number of occurrences in the Old Testament.

## SURVEY OF SCHOLARLY RESEARCH

One must realize that the problem of anthropomorphisms that modern scholars inherited from antiquity is as alive today as it was when the first Aramaic translators of the Old Testament encountered expressions like “the feet of God” or “God repented.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, some scholars argued that the phenomenon of anthropomorphism may have been present in the worldview of the biblical writers themselves.<sup>4</sup> Others noted that the sensitivity in translating certain words or expressions did not affect the Old Testament “until the time of the LXX translation, in which pains are sometimes taken to avoid any anthropomorphic

---

<sup>2</sup> By focusing only on verbs, we do not mean to suggest that Old Testament anthropomorphic language is limited only to verbs of human emotions applied to God. Typically, when scholars have approached the subject of anthropomorphism, they have taken into account both inward (emotions) and outward (organs) entities. Thus W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1967), 21, with reference to Zechariah 14:4 (the “feet” of God) and Daniel 7:9 (the description of the “Ancient of days”); W. Klein, et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 308, for the usage of anthropomorphisms in poetry.

<sup>3</sup> According to A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God. Essays in Anthropomorphism* (London: Oxford, 1937), 29ff., “neither the Tannaim, nor the Amoraim...were unanimous in their views and teachings about the problems of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism.” Marmorstein describes the two main schools of translation as the *literalist* and the *allegorical*. The chief representative of the first school was Rabbi Aqiba, “who preferred the literal exposition, even where anthropomorphic difficulties predominate.” The representative of the allegorical school, Rabbi Ishmael, considered that Torah spoke in the language of human beings, and so, influenced perhaps by the thought of Philo of Alexandria, he adopted the allegorical approach. R. Ishmael considered it a lack of piety to attribute human characteristics to God. Note, however, the more cautious approach of G.F. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1960), 420, who showed that it is “an egregious error to think that the Targums attempt to dispose of all the anthropomorphisms in the Scripture.” For the approach to anthropomorphism in early and medieval Rabbinic thought see also L. Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2000), 21ff.; E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 38, 44, 152-53;

<sup>4</sup> Thus A. De Pury, “Yahwist (“J”) Source,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1013, who shows that in order to support their view in favor of the Documentary Hypothesis, some scholars linked the presence of anthropomorphism with the Yahwist (J) source. Accordingly, the Yahwist source consists of the work of 10th century biblical authors who revised and/or added certain portions of the sacred text of the Old Testament. As we will show, the argument simply fails when one takes into account the presence of anthropomorphisms in passages that the same scholars would attribute to the Deuteronomist source (e.g., Deut 1:27; 9:28; 12:31).

implication (e.g. Exod 24:10).”<sup>5</sup> This, of course, raises the important question of dating and the historical and geographical contexts in which the Greek and the Aramaic translations took place.<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, the debate in recent times appears to have focused more on the theories of Aramaic translations of the Old Testament, and in particular on the Pentateuch.<sup>7</sup> With Marmorstein and Klein we may argue that there have risen three main approaches that dominated this debate: the *Allegorist*, the *Moderate*, and the *Literalist*. According to the Allegorist school, the Targumic translators intentionally eliminated or toned down all anthropomorphic expressions.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this approach were varied, ranging from theological concerns to issues of literary aesthetics and/or simple clarification of a difficult style.<sup>9</sup>

The Moderate approach may be divided in three subsequent theories. The *topical* system combines the allegorical and the literalist approaches, depending on the

---

<sup>5</sup> Thus G.W. Bromiley, “Anthropomorphism,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:137. First of all, Bromiley’s example does not concern us in particular, for the simple reason that the LXX translation does not seem to vary too much from the MT in the passages that we selected for our analysis. Second, the example cited by Bromiley concerns an anthropomorphism applied to human beings, not to God. The MT reads: וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“And they saw the God of Israel”), while the LXX has καὶ εἶδον τὸν τόπον οὗ εἰστήκει ἐκεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ (“And they saw the place where the God of Israel stood.”). It is the “seeing” of the elders, not of God, that the LXX appears to reformulate here.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have dated the Targums anywhere from the 2nd century B.C. to the 3rd-6th century A.D. In this sense, see S. Kaufman, “Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and Their Use in the Study of First-Century Texts,” in *The Aramaic Bible. Targums in Their Historical Context*, D.R.G. Beattie, M. McNamara eds., JSOTSup. 166 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 118-41, esp. 122., and B. L. Visotzky, “Text, Translation, Targum,” in *Fathers of the World*, WUNT 80 (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995), 21. A. Shinan, “Targum,” *The Cambridge History of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, J.R. Baskin ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 586-88, shows that in the 7th century new languages such as Arabic and later Yiddish “displaced the Aramaic Targumim.”

<sup>7</sup> Thus M. Klein, “The Translation of Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim,” *Congress Volume - Vienna 1980* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), and his survey of the Medieval and Modern debates regarding the problem of anthropomorphism. For theories of translation in the formation of Targumim see also M. McNamara, “Some Targum Themes,” *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, D.A. Carson et al (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 308ff.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the three-fold division and the titles adopted in our summary are based on our own reading of Klein’s analysis. For the proponents of this view see Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), 37; Y. Komlosh, *The Bible in Light of the Aramaic Translations* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 103; B. Grossfield, “Bible: Translations, Aramaic (Targumim),” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), and M. McNamara, “Targums,” *The Interpreters’ Dictionary of the Bible. Supplement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), 860.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis* (Bates City, MO: Michael Glazier, 1988), 12-14.

terms to be translated and the subjects to which these terms are attributed.<sup>10</sup> The *evolutionary* system holds that the anthropomorphic terms underwent a historical process of development, one that intensified during the final stages of translation/redaction.<sup>11</sup> The *thematic* system focuses on the consistency and theological significance of the usage of the word *memra* (“word” or “manifestation”) in the contexts of the themes of creation, revelation and salvation.<sup>12</sup> All three systems allow for the employment of both the *allegorical* and the *literal* schools of translation.

Underlined mainly by Klein, the Literalist approach assumes that anthropomorphisms did not appear to be an issue for the Aramaic translators. There is a wealth of examples where anthropomorphic terms were intensified (rather than toned down), as well as instances where identical words were used both with respect to God and to human beings, for reasons other than theological. Klein allows for certain anthropomorphic tendencies in the Targumim, but explains them as late, pious attempts to remove literal translations of anthropomorphisms. The secondary origin of these changes is evident especially in places where the Aramaic syntax is awkward or where scribal errors occurred. The scribes thus “introduced only minimal changes, often at the expense of grammar and syntax,” and these “do not belong to the original strand of the texts.”<sup>13</sup>

For the most part, the scholarship that we have reviewed so far has dealt little or not at all with the possibility that the Targumic authors may have been influenced by Greek thought in their view of God and the impossibility of him showing regret. In Greek thought, for a being such as God to undergo “changes”, “modifications” or “processes” would subvert the logic and hence the reality of the perfection of being. Aristotle, and classic Attic thought, may have also come under the influence of Pythagorean philosophy with its view of *πάθος* both as a good “emotion” and a “defect.” In its early stages *πάθος* derived from the term *πᾶσχω* – “that which happens” – and it came to be applied incidents, or events

---

<sup>10</sup> Thus S. Maybau, *Die Anthropomorphien und Anthropopathien bei Onkelos und die spatern Targumim* (Breslau, 1870).

<sup>11</sup> See M. Gingsburger, *Die Anthropomorphismen in den Thargumim* (Braunschweig, 1891).

<sup>12</sup> D. Munoz, *Dios-Palabra: Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco* (Granada: Institution San Jeronimo, 1974); *La Gloria de la Shekina en los Targumim del Pentateuco* (Madrid: Consenjo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Klein, “Translation of Anthropomorphisms,” 177.

that that took a unfortunate turn.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the word appeared as early as Homer under the form πένθος, with the sense of “sorrow.”<sup>15</sup>

Given the history of the concept, then, Aristotle’s notion of θεὸς ἀπαθής (God impassable) would make perfect sense. And so would his reticence in ascribing any emotions to God.<sup>16</sup> For Aristotle, God is “a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things.” Therefore, he is “impassive and unalterable.”<sup>17</sup> For some the Aristotelian god is more like an “It” that “does not know anything outside of itself” and hence cannot be the object of human worship.<sup>18</sup> This leads us to conclude that, if there ever was any shared background between Greek and Aramaic thinkers, it made little or no direct impact on the worldview of Targumic translators. We know that Hellenistic philosophy had a minimal degree of influence over Palestinian Rabbinic Judaism. The apparent lack of consideration on the part of Palestinian scholars for the writings of Philo of Alexandria, for example, remains a relevant case. But even if contact between the two was minimal, it still remains important to ask why Greek thought shared with Rabbinic Judaism a similar reticence in ascribing human emotions to God.

Overall, we may conclude by observing that, in spite of Klein's weighty contribution to the debate, the views of the *allegorist* and *moderate* approaches appear to command more acceptance in contemporary scholarly circles.<sup>19</sup> What one must understand, however, is the fact that for most Jews who understood

---

<sup>14</sup> Thus H.G. Liddell and H.S. Scott, πένθος, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> W. Michaelis, πένθος, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Friedrich ed., translated by G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:926-39. Note the Aristotelian association of πα,ροϋ with evpiquimi,a, ovrg,h,, and fo,boj, among other vices.

<sup>16</sup> Thus J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991), 267-71, who points out the Aristotelian concept of θεὸς ἀπαθής (God impassable). For Aristotle, “as actus purus and pure causality, nothing can happen to God for him to suffer.” And as “the perfect being, he is without emotions.” F. Copleston Jr., *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1:317, also noted that for Aristotle “(a) God could not return our love, and (b) we could not in any case be said to love God.”

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W.D. Ross (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>), XII:7.

<sup>18</sup> A. Diogenes, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 129.

<sup>19</sup> This view, summarized by Paul Flesher, “Anthropomorphism,” *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical World*, 2 volumes, J. Neusner ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1996), explains that “the Targums have a strong tendency to alter...anthropomorphisms.” He views the *memra* and *shekinah* of the Lord as attributes, rather than nominal substitutes for God (which would be Klein's position). Thus “instead of God creating, for example, God's *memra* creates. At other times the action is not performed by God but in front in God, or is rendered in the passive voice.”

little or no Hebrew a “targum like Neofiti would have been their Bible.”<sup>20</sup> This notion helps us put into a proper perspective the importance of targumic studies and the hermeneutics of translation/interpretation. Were the Jewish readers as sensitive over the literalness of their translation as are scholars of the same texts today? To what extent did factors like *society* and *culture*, *historical* events and *geographical* location influenced the hermeneutics of the translators? Do certain Targumic traditions fall into clear patterns of hermeneutics that differ from others? Do they exhibit sufficient variations as to defy a comfortable and predictable scholarly classification?

Although our study focuses on a very specific theme, it is hoped that at the end we will have had a better understanding of the methodological approaches that characterized the work of Targumic translators. We will now turn our attention to several of the texts from the Pentateuch where God is described as sharing the human reactions of “feeling sorry” and “changing his mind.”

#### VERBS OF “REPENTANCE” OR “FEELING SORRY”<sup>21</sup>

The verb that describes the act of “feeling sorry” is נחם. It occurs 108 times in the Bible and it has “two broad semantic domains.”<sup>22</sup> The first has the sense of “comforting”, “strengthening”, “ameliorating someone’s pain,” or “feeling sympathy” for someone. Under this form, which is the more frequent of the two, the verb usually appears in the Piel family, especially with the sense of “comforting.”

In the second sense, נחם connotes the idea of “regret, feeling sorry, repenting,” or “changing one’s mind.” The biblical authors used this form of the verb with

---

<sup>20</sup> Thus P.V.M. Fleisher, “Targums as Scripture,” *Targum and Scripture: Studies in Aramaic Translations and Interpretation in Memory of Ernest G. Clark*, P.V.M. Fleisher ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 71. Yet see P.S. Alexander, “The Rabbinic Lists of Forbidden Targumim,” *JJS* 27 (1976):177-99, for the contention that certain portions of the Targums were prohibited from being read in the synagogue. This shows that, at least in some circles, people shared a more skeptical attitude toward the notion of the Targums as Scripture. Alexander, “Targum,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:330, argues that the Targum was a pre-rabbinic institution “which the Rabbis attempted to rabbinize and to control,” even though “official uniformity was never achieved.”

<sup>21</sup> For the English translations we have relied on the ESV Bible Translation. Whenever we departed from the ESV translation, we indicated it by placing the words so translated in *italics*.

<sup>22</sup> Thus H. Simian-Yofre, נחם, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 9:340-55. The verb occurs some nine times in this form: One would notice that in Numbers 23:19 and Psalm 110:4, even though the verb appears with God as subject, it conveys precisely the opposite idea of God not feeling regret, as human beings would usually do: “God is not man..., that he should repent” (אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּתְנַחֵם).  
 אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּתְנַחֵם).

both human beings and God as a subject.<sup>23</sup> When the verb occurs with God as subject, it usually takes the Niphal form and it describes the notion of God himself “feeling regret” over a certain event or act that he had previously planned otherwise.<sup>24</sup> The verb occurs several times in the Pentateuch with the sense of God “being sorry” or “repenting” (Genesis 6:6, 6:7; Exod 32:12, 14).<sup>25</sup> This second aspect, evidently, created some sort of dissonance for many expositors and, here, for Targumic translators, as they may have thought it improper to convey literally the notion of divine repentance.<sup>26</sup> In order to understand better the extent of this phenomenon, we will list the main passages where the נחם verb appears in the Hebrew text, along with the translations of the targums Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan.

### 1. Genesis 6:6-7

6 וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים: (Gen 6:6-7)  
 7 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲמַחֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בְּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי נַחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתִם:

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD *regretted* that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

<sup>7</sup> So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I *regret* that I have made them.”

<sup>23</sup> Thus L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, נחם, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, Bible Works module). D.K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 672.

<sup>24</sup> Notice, however, Judges 2:18, where the same Niphal form of נחם is rendered as “For the Lord was moved to pity” (כִּי־יִנְחַם יְהוָה) because of the suffering of Israel at the hands of her enemies. Evidently the author draws a line distinction here between “regretting” and “feeling pity”.

<sup>25</sup> The verb appears in other books with the same sense as well. Thus 1Samuel 15:10-11: “[the Lord said] I feel sorry (נַחַמְתִּי) that I made Saul king” (cf. 15:35), 2Samuel 24:16 and Jonah 3:10: “the Lord felt sorry (וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה) over that evil” (cf. 1Chronicles 21:15), Jeremiah 18:10: “I will change my mind (וַיִּנְחַמְתִּי) over the good that I had said I would do” (cf. 26:3, 19), Ezekiel 24:14 and Zechariah 8:14: “I will not feel sorry” (וְלֹא אֲנַחֵם), Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9, 4:2: “Who knows if [the Lord] will not turn and feel sorry” (אֵי שָׂוִיב וַיִּנְחַם), Amos 7:3, 6: “The Lord repented (נַחַם יְהוָה) over this thing: It shall not happen.”

<sup>26</sup> Thus K.A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 341ff. Both Matthews and G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 144-45, show that the biblical authors were more interested to convey the anguish of God, not to deal with aspects of philosophical determinism and theological systematization.

Gen 6:6 (T. Onk.) ותב יי במימריה ארי עבד ית אנשא בארעא:  
(6:7) ארי תבית במימרי ארי עבדתינון:

And the Lord *regretted* in his memra that he made man on earth, (6)...

for I *regret* in my memra that I made them” (7)

Gen 6:6 (T. Ps Jon) ותב יי במימריה ארום עבד ית אינשא בארעא  
ואידיין עליהון במימריה  
(6:7) ארום תבית במימרי ארום עבדתינון:

And the Lord *regretted* in his memra that he had made man on the earth(6)  
and he debated about them in his memra...

“for I *regret* in my memra that I made them” (7)

Gen 6:6 (T. Neofiti) והוות תהו מן־קדם יי ארום ברא ית בר־נשא בארעא ואתפיס עם לבה  
(6:7) ארום הוה תהו קדמי ארום בראת יתהון

And *it was regret* from before the Lord that he had created the son of man on the  
earth and he was reconciled with his heart (6)...

“for there *was regret* before me that I created them” (7)

2. Exodus 32:12, 14

12 שוב מחרון אפך והנחם על־הרעה לעמך:  
14 וינחם יהוה על־הרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו

12 Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your  
people.

14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on  
his people.

Ex 32:12 (T. Neofiti) חזור כען מן תקף רוגוך תהו <sup>1</sup> קדמך <sup>2</sup> ותנחם על בישתא די אמרת  
<sup>1</sup> למייתי <sup>2</sup> למייתי <sup>2</sup> יתה על עמך:  
14 <sup>7</sup> והוות תוהו קד יי על בישתא די אמר למייתיה על עמא:

12 Turn now from the anger of your wrath before you and relent of this evil that  
you have said you will bring upon your people.

14 And there was penitence before the Lord for the evil which He said to bring upon the people

14 והוה תהו מן-קדם יי על בישתא דחשיב למעבר לעמיה:  
Ex 32:12 (T. Ps. Jon.) טוב מתקוף רוגזך ויהוי תוהו קדמך על בישתא דמלילתא למעבר לעמך:

12 Turn from your strong anger, and let there be relenting before you over the evil that you have threatened to do to your people.

14 And there was relenting before the Lord over the evil which He had thought to do to His people.

14 ותב יי מן בשתא<sup>1</sup> דמליל<sup>2</sup> דחשיב למעבר לעמיה:  
Ex 32:12 (T. Onk.) טוב מתקוף רוגזך<sup>1</sup> ואחייב מן בשתא<sup>1</sup> דמלילתא למעבר לעמך:

12 Turn from the strength of your anger, and revert from the evil which you have threatened to do to your people.

14 And the Lord did turn from the evil which He had threatened to do to the people.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE TERMS *MEMRA* AND THE PREPOSITION *QDM*

Before dealing with the texts themselves, it is important to define two of the terms that appear in almost all of the Targumic translations of the texts from Genesis, but not in the Hebrew text: the word *memra* or *memra* (מימרא, מימרא) and the prepositional phrase “before/from before” (מקדם/קדם). They are crucial for understanding the mindset of the Aramaic translators.

##### *The Word Memra*

The word is of Aramaic origins and it probably derives from the form מִמְרָא. In its literal sense it means “word” or “speech.”<sup>27</sup> As we will show later, the translators often used it to connote God’s presence or power, or as a linguistic mediatory term substituting for the “word” of God. Now, the Targumic authors employed *memra* not only in relation to actions that God performs, but also to

---

<sup>27</sup> The *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 2019. Bible Works 10 Module). See also M. Jastrow, מִימְרָא, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996), 775; Michael Sokoloff, מִימְרָא, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 670

describe the response of human beings to God. For example they believed in the Memra (Exod 14:31), they were murmuring against it (Exod 16:8) or they were supposed diligently to accept the *memra*.

Scholars have noted several possibilities concerning the function of *memra* in the Targums. The word appears some 28 times in Targum Onkelos on Exodus, for example, out of which 23 times it relates directly to an action that otherwise God would have done.<sup>28</sup> As such, Sabourin shows that earlier scholars believed that *memra* was seen as a “divine hypostasis” which allowed the Jews to satisfy “he ever intensifying demand for a transcendent, purely spiritual interpretation of God. Such were figures like the Spirit, the Wisdom, the Shekinah, and the Word (*memra*) of God.”<sup>29</sup> Koehler too understood the translators to have used *memra* as the “manifestation of the divine power, or as God's messenger in place of God Himself, where the predicate is not in conformity with the dignity or the spirituality of the Deity.”<sup>30</sup> One would note that at times the *memra* “wipes out the worship of Baal-peor” (T. Neofiti, T. Ps-Jon. to Deut 4:3) and it may conclude a covenant and enjoin the people (T. Neofiti to Deut 4:23).<sup>31</sup> Along similar lines, a number of scholars have explored the concept of *memra* in relation to the notion of “intermediaries,” the most common of which would be the symbol of Christ in the Old Testament. This remains a viable dimension to be explored in the larger context of “*memra*” studies, but it falls outside the given purpose and limits of this paper.<sup>32</sup>

Scholars like D. L. Munoz and L. Sabourin dismiss the idea of *memra* as divine hypostasis, and in turn view it as a “Jewish attempt to express God’s creative

---

<sup>28</sup> Paul Bohannon, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: an English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1990), 27-28.

<sup>29</sup> L. Sabourin, “The Memra of God in the Targums,” 79, in the *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 6 (1976):79-85. Here Sabourin quotes W. Bousset, as the representative of the German Protestant school. See *Kyrios Christos* (E.T., New York, 1970), 288. See also the references to Munoz in the introduction.

<sup>30</sup> K. Koehler, “Memra,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Jewish Encyclopedia.com, the complete 1906 full text).

<sup>31</sup> Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 40, and also Jastrow, *בימור*, 75, for the notion of the hypostized “word” that the Targums use “to obviate anthropomorphism.”

<sup>32</sup> For a starting point see M. McNamara, “Logos of the Fourth Gospel and Memra of the Palestinian Targums,” *The Expository Times* 79.4 (1968): 115-117, for a plausible degree of indirect synagogal reading of the Targums on Johannine literature (Gospel of John 1:1). Likewise, D. Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94.03 (2001): 243-84; M.S. Wrobel, “The Gospel According to St. John in the Light of the Targum of Neofiti to the Book of Genesis,” *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 9 (2016), 4:115-130, H.A. Joseph, *Finding Christ in the Old Testament Through the Aramaic Memra, Shekinah, and Yeqara of the Targums*, SBTS Dissertation (<https://oatd.org/oatd/record?Record=handle/10392/4948>).

and redemptive activity in an appropriate way.”<sup>33</sup> By using this word, the translators removed “the anthropomorphical representation by saying that God acts and communicates through his *memra*.” As such we may encounter here a divine attribute, not a divine being per se, used here in a thoroughly monotheistic context which precludes any divine autonomy.

G.F. Moore understood *memra* not necessarily as a substitute for God, but as “command”, “will”, “teaching”, “inspiration”, “power”, “protection.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, he argued that the word may have functioned mainly as a “buffer-word,” used in places where “the literal interpretation seemed to bring God into too close contact with his creatures.”<sup>35</sup> Seen in this way, the *memra* is “purely a phenomenon of translation, not a figment of speculation.”<sup>36</sup>

A slightly different interpretation is offered by Robert Hayward. He, for example, reaches the conclusion that “originally a term bearing a particular and distinctive theology of the Divine Name and Presence, it was used sparingly in carefully chosen contexts.” But “at some point in the tradition the content of *Memra* was lost: how or why we do not clearly know.” Hayward believes that, if *memra* was originally used only with a few distinct verbs, later its use spread to “verbs of speaking, and thence *Memra* may be subject of virtually any verb, becoming a mere periphrasis or substitute for the Tetragram.”<sup>37</sup> As with other authors, Michael Kline concurs with Moore that the word *memra* is not a divine hypostasis, but a nominal substitute in place of God’s name or pronoun.<sup>38</sup> It is not clear whether Klein shares Hayward’s theory that *memra* may have been initially employed only with select verbs, but he agrees with Hayward that the use of *memra* “appears arbitrary and unmotivated by theological considerations.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps we may never fully understand the worldview of the Aramaic translators with respect to *memra* and the possibility that God allowed mediators like that to work on his behalf. It still is plausible to say that the concept may have been used at times euphemistically in order to mediate the personal manifestation of God in unusual or sensitive situations.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Sabourin, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Moore, “Intermediaries in Jewish Theology,” *HTR* 15 (1922): 41-61.

<sup>35</sup> *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge, 1927), 1:419. Moore adds that various other devices are employed to the same intent, such as the substitution of a passive voice for the active and the “frequent introduction of *קדם* and *מקדם*.”

<sup>36</sup> *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 1:491.

<sup>37</sup> R. Hayward, “The *Memra* of YHWH,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974), 412-18.

<sup>38</sup> Klein, “Anthropomorphisms”, 172.

<sup>39</sup> Klein, “Anthropomorphisms”, 175, quoting Hayward’s article, pg. 413-14.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis*. The Aramaic Bible, vol. 6. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 19.

*The Preposition “before/from before” (מקדם/קדם).*

One of the elements that, along with *memra*, seems to create a temporary buffer between God certain sensitive situations is the prepositional phrase “from before” (מן־קדם). For example, instead of saying “God regretted,” the Aramaic translators would render the Hebrew as “and there was regret from before the Lord.”

Klein shows that in its basic form the preposition קדם is used 196 in the Targum Onkelos with reference to God. In his view, the Aramaic translators employed קדם “out of deference to high office or nobility, and not related to the nature of the Deity.” As such, it is “used as an expression of respect.” Klein argues that this linguistic phenomenon occurs as the “natural result of the idiomatic variance between biblical Hebrew and Targumic Aramaic,” or “simply, as the translation of a biblical phrase that was understood figuratively.”<sup>41</sup>

A slightly different argument was made by Klein in “The Preposition קר (‘Before’): A Pseudo-Anti-Anthropomorphism in the Targums.” In his view, different scholars “assumed that these translational adjustments were a result of the refinement of Israel’s concept of the Deity.”<sup>42</sup> The adjustments Klein refers to were meant “for the avoidance of Biblical anthropomorphisms, or for the obviation of direct relationship between man and God” (this echoes Moore’s “buffer-word” theory). Klein disagrees with this interpretation and, after a brief analysis of several sensitive verses, he concludes that the translators employed the preposition קדם or the prepositional phrase מקדם not only with reference to God, but also before verbs with human subjects. The use of the preposition “before” is a substitution for *the nota accusativi*, or for other more direct prepositions, and is “common in both the divine and the human contexts.” As in the case with the word *memra*, Klein denies the use of קדם/קר as a means of avoiding or circumvoluting anthropomorphisms.<sup>43</sup> True, it may function “as an expression of deference to a respectable person or institution,” but all such usages “apply equally in reference to man or God.”

---

<sup>41</sup> Klein, “The Preposition *qdm* (Before): A Pseudo-Antianthropomorphism in the Targums,” *JTS* (1979): 502-507.

<sup>42</sup> Klein, *Anthropomorphism in the Targum* (Jerusalem: Makor Publishing, 1982), xxiii.

<sup>43</sup> Klein, *Anthropomorphism in the Targum*, xxvi.

*Analysis of Genesis 6:6-7*

MT	Gen 6:6 6:7	וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה כִּי נִחַמְתִּי
ONK	6:6 6:7	וְתָב יְיָ בְּמִימְרֵיהּ אֲרִי תְבִית בְּמִימְרֵי
NEO	6:6 6:7	והוות תהו מן־קדם יי ארום הוה
PS JON	6:6 6:7	ותב יי במימריה ארום תבית במימרי

It is our view that, if we read closely the translations of Genesis 6, we can say that the Targums are intentionally consistent in using the *memra* or other forms of mitigating the verbs of repentance with God as a subject. This being said, the question still remains if in Genesis 6:6 and 6:7 the Targumic translators employed *memra* as a normal Aramaic literal device or as a means to possibly as a means to protect God from the charge of excessive human emotionalism.

The truth is that God is portrayed in Genesis as a hesitant Creator, whose creation has departed from his will to the point that it *grieves* him to his heart. The two verbal constructions used to express God’s feelings are וַיִּנָּחֵם and וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לִבּוֹ. As we already stated, the first form occurs in the Niphal and it has the sense of “feeling regret” or even that of “repenting.” In the Pentateuch it is the only verbal form used whenever God changes his mind with respect to a prior action or decision in relation to his people. In this case, one might say that “Yahweh’s *nhm* is an act of identification with human frailty.”<sup>44</sup> The expression וַיִּתְעַצֵּב is usually translated as “it grieved him” or “he worried [in his heart].”<sup>45</sup> Although

<sup>44</sup> H. Simian-Yofre, נחם, *TDOT*, 9:343.

<sup>45</sup> Thus L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, עִצַּב, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, Bible Works module); C. Meyers, עִצַּב, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G.J. Botterweck ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 11:278-80, for the sense of “mental distress... grounded in the acts of others,” and G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 144-145, for עִצַּב as “expressing the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish.”

this verb falls outside the topic of our study, it nevertheless adds a helpful dimension to the concept of divine emotions. In this case, out of the three versions only Pseudo-Jonathan feels obligated somehow to amend the MT to “he debated about them in his memra” (ואיריין עליהון במימריה).

In Genesis 7:6-7, to translate the Niphal form וַיִּנָּחֵם, the Neofiti employs the form הוּוּ of the verb “to be” followed by the noun “regret” (תהו) and the prepositional phrase “before the Lord”: והוּוּ תהו מן־קדם יי (“and there was regret before the Lord”).<sup>46</sup> As opposed to Neofiti, Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan use the verb תוב (“to turn back” or “regret”) with the prepositional phrase במימריה (“in his memra”): ותב יי במימריה: “and the Lord turned [regretted] [repented] in his memra.”<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to observe that in one form or another the verb נחם is found in other passages from all three Targums: Neofiti, Pseudo-Jonathan, and Onkelos. Likewise, the word appears in the larger body of Targumic and later Syriac literature, where it conveys the sense of “comforting” someone, an equivalent to the Piel of the MT.<sup>48</sup> What is rather interesting is that the term does not occur with the sense of “feeling sorry” [in oneself] or “regretting,” which we have already documented in the Hebrew text. This semantic particularity may be responsible for Targums choosing alternative modes to render the Niphal form of the Hebrew text. As a preliminary conclusion, we may say that in employing the concept of *memra* and choosing certain linguistic alternatives to a literal translation, the authors created an image of God that seems a bit different from the picture of Genesis 6:6-7.

*Exodus 32:12, 14*

MT	Ex 32:12  14	שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפָּי וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה  וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה עַל־הָרָעָה
----	--------------------	---

<sup>46</sup> M. Jastrow, תהי, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1649, for the verb תהי as “be astonished”, “pause” and “regret, repent.” Similarly, S. Kaufmann, wht, *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Note the equivalent קדמי תהו היה for the Hebrew נחמתי in verse 7: “there was regret before me.”

<sup>47</sup> Jastrow, תוב, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, for תוב as “to go back”, “return” and thus “to regret” something. Similarly, Kaufmann, תוב, *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Note the equivalent במימרי תבית for the Hebrew נחמתי of verse 7: “I regret in my memra.”

<sup>48</sup> Kaufmann, נחם, *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 2019); Jastrow, נחם, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 895; L. Costaz, *nhm, Syriac-English Dictionary* (Beiruth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1997), 291.

ONK	12	חוב מתקוף ואתיב מן בשתא
	14	ותב יוי מן בשתא
NEO	12	חזור כען מן תקף ויהוי תהו קדמן ותנחם על בישתא
	14	והוות תוהו קד ייי
PS JON	12	חוב מתקוף ויהוי תוהו קדמן
	14	והוה תהו מן-קדם ייי

When we come to the passage in Exodus 32:12, we observe both similarities with, and differences from, the way the Aramaic translators operated in Genesis 6. Speaking of similarities, Targum Onkelos maintains the same preference for the verb חב, as an option for both Hebrew imperatives שׁוּב (“turn” or “change”) and הִנָּחֵם (“relent yourself”). Neither *memra* nor any intervening prepositional phrase are being used by Onkelos. The Aramaic translators do not seem to be bothered by the image of God changing his mind with respect to the punishment of his people.

Regarding Pseudo-Jonathan, if in Genesis 6:6-7 the translators chose the verb חוב both times to render the Niphal form וַיִּנָּחֵם, in Exodus 32:12 they use it only once out of three verbs of human emotions. And that is a direct, word-for-word equivalence: the Aramaic חוב for the Hebrew imperative שׁוּב. But this was to be expected. Where the translators differ from their Genesis 6 choice is in the way they translated the well-known וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה. As we indicated already, instead of using the formula וְחָב יי במימריה (“and the Lord regretted in his *memra*”), they opted for the larger and more indirect phrase: וְהוּוּת תְּהוּ מִן-קִדְמָא (“and there was regret before the Lord”). Evidently, we will never know whether the same hand or a different hand was responsible for this change. But the fact still remains that translation of Exodus 32 reflects a slightly different approach from that of Genesis 6, even though the picture of God is somewhat identical.

Neofiti, on the other hand, remains consistent with the terminology that it employed when in Genesis 6. The Aramaic translator did not opt for the verb חוב in Genesis 6 and is not opting for חוב here either, in spite of the fact that it had the verb at his disposal; חוב appears at least 16 times throughout Neofiti to the Pentateuch. First, for the Hebrew imperative שׁוּב Neofiti uses חזור (“turn back”),

in the formula חזור כען מן תקף רונך (“turn back now from the might of your wrath”). In spite of the longer wording, the emphasis in Aramaic is just as strong as in Hebrew. Second, for the Hebrew imperative number two, וְהִנַּחֲתָם (“relent yourself”), Neofiti appeals again to terminology that it already used in Genesis 6: ויהיו תהו קדמך (“let there be regret before you”). This phrasing is more complex than in Hebrew and the preposition קדם also seems to put a bit of a distance between God and the emotions of regret that the Hebrew text implies. Finally, for the Hebrew וַיִּנַּחֲתָם Neofiti uses for the first time in our passages the direct equivalent נָחַם.<sup>49</sup> Neither Onkelos, nor Pseudo-Jonathan employed this verb in passages that describe divine “sorrow” or “regretting,” even though all three of the Targums had at their disposal the verb.

Version	Genesis		Exodus	
MASORETIC	6:6	וַיִּנַּחֲתָם יְהוָה	32:12	שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפֶּיךָ וְהִנַּחֲתָם עַל־הָרָעָה
	6:7	כִּי נִחַמְתִּי	14	וַיִּנַּחֲתָם יְהוָה עַל־הָרָעָה
ONKELOS	6:6	וְתָב יוֹי בְּמִימְרֵיהָ	12	תּוֹב מִתְקוּף וְאַחִיב מִן בִּשְׂתָא
	6:7	אַרְי תְּבִית בְּמִימְרֵי	14	וְתָב יוֹי מִן בִּשְׂתָא
NEOFITI	6:6	והוות תהו מן-קדם ייי	12	חזור כען מן תקף ויהווי תהו קדמך ותנחם על בישתא
	6:7	ארום הוה	14	והוות תוהו קד ייי
PSEUDO JONATHAN	6:6	ותב ייי במימריה	12	תוב מתקוף ויהווי תוהו קדמך
	6:7	ארום תבית במימרי	14	והוה תהו מן-קדם ייי

It is also worth noting that in Exodus 14:5 and 13:17 these distinctions seem to disappear when the subject of “changing one’s mind” is a human being, not God.

<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that the Aramaic נָחַם appears 11 times in Neofiti to the Pentateuch, and yet the translators did not use it even once in Genesis 6:6-7, where the Hebrew direct equivalent נָחַם appears twice. At this point it is only a conjecture, but it is plausible that Neofiti to Genesis may have had a different translator than did Neofiti to Exodus.

In the second example, all three Targums change the meaning from “regret,” which was used by the MT both here in the previous passages (וַיִּנְחֵם), to “break one’s heart,” or “be afraid.” Since we do not know whether the Targums would have inserted the preposition “before” in this case as well, it is difficult to speculate whether the “divine” context would differ from the “human” with respect to the application of this verb. Finally, in Ex. 14:5 all versions use the Hebrew הִפַּךְ, with the sense of turning one’s heart from a previous decision. Here, then, the Targums agree literally with the MT.

## CONCLUSION

We have noted in our review of secondary literature that a significant number of scholars do not think that the *memra* in Genesis 6 and Exodus 32 functions as a substitute for God. Even though adding the *memra* renders the translation a little bit awkward, neither Onkelos nor Pseudo-Jonathan seem to alter intentionally the Hebrew image of God. Targum Neofiti, on the other hand, does not employ the word *memra* but introduces more often the preposition מִן־קִדְמוֹתָא. We believe that the use of מִן־קִדְמוֹתָא/קִדְמוֹתָא in these cases falls outside of the context of “deference” presented by Klein. Even though these expressions appear as if they were intended to protect God from the weakness of “regret,” in reality the translators may never have intended to do this in the first place. As Simian-Yofre argued, what we have in God is a “change in purpose incidental to the circumstances, not a modification of the circumstance.”<sup>50</sup>

As Michael Klein argued, the Targumic translators had to walk a “middle golden path” when choosing the best translation of the MT.<sup>51</sup> One would understand their predicament, given the ominous tone of the Talmudic saying that “He who translates a verse literally is a liar; but he who adds to it is a blasphemer” (b. *Kiddushim* 49a). What we find, instead, is that when it comes to the central question of the avoidance of anthropomorphisms, “the targumim are not consistent.”<sup>52</sup> Often times, texts that one would expect the authors to impose an anthropomorphism on were translated literally; and texts that would seem ordinary to a Jewish audience were not. It is plausible that overall there existed a hesitancy on the part of the translators that one did not find when the texts of

---

<sup>50</sup> Simian-Yofre, נגה, *TDOT*, 9:345. On a more theological note, D.K. Stuart, *Exodus*, 672, argues that “God never desired to destroy his people in the first place, so was willing to repent in response to Moses’ appeal.” As such, one need not reject “God’s flexibility and responsiveness as if he cannot change direction in accord with his own purposes.”

<sup>51</sup> Klein, “The Aramaic Targumim: Translation and Interpretation”, in *Michael Klein on the Targums: Collected Essays 1972-2002*, Avigdor Shinan et al (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 4.

<sup>52</sup> Avigdor Shinan et al, *Michael Klein on the Targums: Collected Essays 1972-2002*, xi ff.

Genesis 6 and Exodus 32 were first drafted. The lack of consistency in staying with a certain vision of translation makes this conclusion difficult to maintain.

The scholarly debate on the translation of anthropomorphisms by the Targum is as intensified today as it has ever been. On the one hand, Hayward believes that, since expressions like “memra,” or “[from] before the Lord,” occur in so many problematic passages and with so many different verbs, that it is impossible to know exactly how they were used in the early stages of the formation of the Targum. Klein too has shown that these concepts are used both in “human” and “divine” contexts, which makes almost impossible that the authors used them as buffer-words against strong anthropomorphisms. On the other hand, authors like Sperber and Sabourin, among many others, contend that the Targums used different ways to circumvent anthropomorphisms, or used the “memra” as an allusion to a divine hypostasis active in the world. The evidence presented here, I believe, illustrates this disagreement. We have seen examples where verbs like “to be angry” and “to regret,” while attributed to God, function so only indirectly, as if to create a functional distinction between the human and the divine experience of such emotions. In spite of this, the final meaning of the passage is unmistakably clear: the “regret” comes from God, and so does the “anger.” It is conceivable, then, that at the end this distinction may just reflect our failure to understand fully the mindset of the translators and the unique nature of the language. As Max Kadushin put it, “the Targum then is not consistent...The idea of God’s otherness is a very indefinite idea; it permits of exceptions and it ignores inconsistencies.”<sup>53</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, P.S. “The Rabbinic Lists of Forbidden Targumim,” *JJS* 27 (1976):177-99.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Targum,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 volumes, D.N. Freedman ed. New York: Doubleday, 1992, 6:320-31.

Bohannon, P. *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: an English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1990.

Boyarin, D. “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94.03 (2001): 243-84.

Diogenes, A. *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985.

Batnitzky, L. *Idolatry and Representation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2000.

Bromiley, G.W. “Anthropomorphism,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979, 1:136-139.

---

<sup>53</sup> *The Rabbinic Mind*, third edition (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1972), 330.

- Copleston, F. Jr., *A History of Philosophy*. New York: Doubleday, 1985.
- De Pury, A. "Yahwist ("J") Source," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, 6:1012-20.
- Eichrodt, W. *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1967.
- Flesher, Paul. "Anthropomorphism," *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical World*, 2 volumes, J. Neusner ed. New York: Macmillan, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Targums as Scripture," *Targum and Scripture: Studies in Aramaic Translations and Interpretation in Memory of Ernest G. Clark*, P.V.M. Flesher ed. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 61-78.
- Gingsburger, M. *Die Anthropomorphismen in den Thargumim*. Brunschweig, 1891.
- Grossfeld, B. "Bible: Translations, Aramaic (Targumim)," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. volume 1. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis*. Bates City, MO: Michael Glazier, 1988.
- Klein, M. "The Preposition *qdm* (Before): A Pseudo-Antianthropomorphism in the Targums," *JTS* (1979): 502-507.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Aramaic Targumim: Translation and Interpretation", *Michael Klein on the Targums: Collected Essays 1972-2002*, Avigdor Shinan et al. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Klein, W. et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004.
- Kaufman, S. "Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and Their Use in the Study of First-Century Texts," *The Aramaic Bible. Targums in Their Historical Context*, D.R.G. Beattie, M. McNamara eds., JSOTSup. 166. Sheffield: JSOT, 1994, 118-41.
- Komlosh, Y. *The Bible in Light of the Aramaic Translations*. Tel Aviv, (1973).
- Marmorstein, A. *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God. Essays in Anthropomorphism*. London: Oxford, 1937.
- Matthews, K.A. *Genesis 1-11:26*, NAC. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996.
- Maybau, S. *Die Anthropomorphien und Anthropopathien bei Onkelos und die spatern Targumim*. Breslau, 1870.
- McNamara, M. "Logos of the Fourth Gospel and Memra of the Palestinian Targums," *The Expository Times* 79.4 (1968): 115-117.
- Meyers, C. עֲצָב, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G.J. Botterweck ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001, 11:278-80.
- Michaelis, W. πάθος, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Friedrich ed., translated by G.W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967, 5:926-39.
- Moltmann, J. *The Crucified God*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Moore, G.F. "Intermediaries in Jewish Theology," *HTR* 15 (1922): 41-61.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Judaism*, 2 volumes. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1960/1997.

Munoz, D. *Dios-Palabra: Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco*. Granada: Institution San Jeronimo, 1974.

\_\_\_\_\_. *La Gloria de la Shekina en los Targumim del Pentateuco*. Madrid: Consenjo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas 1977.

McNamara, M. "Targums," *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*. Supplement. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Some Targum Themes," *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, D.A. Carson *et al.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.

Simian-Yofre, H. תַּרְגּוּמֵי, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978, 9:340-55.

Sperber, A. *The Bible in Aramaic*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973.

Shinan, A. "Targum," *The Cambridge History of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, J.R. Baskin ed. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 586-88.

Stuart, D.K. *Exodus*, NAC. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006.

Urbach, E. *The Sages*, translated by I. Abrahams, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Visotzky, B. L. "Text, Translation, Targum," *Fathers of the World*, WUNT 80. Tubingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995, 106-112.

Wenham, G.J. *Genesis 1-15*. WBC. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987.

Wrobel, M.S. "The Gospel According to St. John in the Light of the Targum of Neofiti to the Book of Genesis," *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 9 (2016), 4:115-130

## DICTIONARIES

*A Greek-English Lexicon*. Liddell, H.G., Scott, H.S. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

*A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*. Sokoloff, M. Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002.

*Syriac-English Dictionary* L. Costaz. Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1997.

*Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature*. Jastrow, M. New York: Judaica Press, 1996.

*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Koehler, L. Baumgartner, W. Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, (Bible Works module).

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W.D. Ross. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>.

Joseph, H.A. *Finding Christ in the Old Testament Through the Aramaic Memra, Shekinah, and Yeqara of the Targums*, SBTS Dissertation, (<https://oatd.org/oatd/record?record=handle/10392/4948>).

Kaufman, S. *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 019. Bible Works 10 Module.

Koehler, K. "Memra," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Jewish Encyclopedia.com, the complete 1906 full text).

# **John 2:13-22. Jesus' Public Revelation of Himself in the Temple.**

Hamilton Moore<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

John's account of the cleansing of the temple is significantly longer, more detailed, and more theological in nature than that recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. John was not just concerned about relating historical detail, but selected each event to emphasize the significance of the actions or statements of Jesus. This is also true of the cleansing of the temple in the theological truths it reveals about the person and work of Jesus. After a brief summary of what is considered to be the main purpose for the writing of the Gospel of John, the early setting of the event of cleansing is discussed. The significance of Jesus' public revelation of himself is highlighted. John is pointing to the fact that, as the place where men go in order to meet God, the temple has been supplanted and replaced by Jesus himself as the word become flesh (1:14) and by his one sacrifice "for all time" (Hebrews 10:12) in whose resurrected person people may now encounter God (cf. 1:18, 14:6).

**KEY WORDS:** Purpose of John's Gospel; temple; fulfillment; worship; death of Jesus.

## **INTRODUCTION**

How can we seek to determine the target audience or first readers of the Fourth Gospel? Again, what was its main purpose? The following facts will assist us.

The book often translates Aramaic words e.g. 1:38; 9:7 and emphasizes words like light, life, logos, truth, eternal life, rather than the kingdom of God which means that it is all meaningful to Greeks. We find a great interest in people outside Palestine, 7:35, 11:52, 12:20, while the Gospel does explain clearly some Jewish customs, 2:6; 4:9. As far as Jewish interests are concerned, a great deal is to be found in the book concerning the fulfillment of Scripture and on Jesus as the Messiah, 1:41,45; 3:14; 4:26; 5:39; v39; 7:41-42. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the fact that "the Jews" are opposed to Jesus. In fact, the reference to "the Jews" is to be found seventy times in John, compared to only five in Matthew, six in Mark, five in Luke. Therefore, John is an intensely Jewish book, since the only Gentile who speaks is Pilate. Note the challenge of 9:22, 12:42,

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Hamilton Moore, BD; MTh; PhD (QUB), is an Adjunct Professor in Emanuel University, Oradea. Email. dr.hamilton.moore@gmail.com

the possibility of being “put out of the synagogue” if one follows Christ and accepts that he is the promised Messiah.

D. A. Carson<sup>2</sup> revived the earlier theory that John was written to evangelize Jews and proselytes. Carson claims that the purpose clause of John 20:31 ought to be read “that you may believe that the Christ the Son of God is Jesus” i.e. it is a question of identity. The combination of biblical quotations and also allusions to the OT are clear evidence that it was written to a biblically-literate readership who had some competence in these matters i.e. Diaspora Jews and proselytes particularly. In addition, one should notice the emphasis on the individual coming to faith, responding properly to God’s self-disclosure in Jesus. Although, it is best to accept the proposal of some scholars, i.e. that John should not be limited narrowly to only one purpose.

Note that there are seven “I am” sayings and seven special “signs” in this Gospel. All are supportive of the point Carson has made. Here we have a biblically-literate readership.

7 sayings unique to John – the “I Am’s”:

- (a) The bread of life, 6:35
- (b) The light of the world, 8:12
- (c) The I Am, 8:58
- (d) The good shepherd, 10:11
- (e) The resurrection and the life, 11:25
- (f) The way, the truth the life, 14:6
- (g) The true vine, 15:1

Jesus throughout his ministry performed many signs, 20:30. But in John seven are especially recorded:

- (1) 2:1-11. Changing water into wine at Cana.
- (2) 4:46-54. Healing the royal official’s son at Cana.
- (3) 5:1-15 Curing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda.
- (4) 6:1-15. Multiplication of the loaves in Galilee.
- (5) 6:16-21. Walking upon the sea of Galilee.
- (6) 9:1-12. Healing the blind man in Jerusalem.
- (7) 11:1-44. Raising Lazarus from the dead.

---

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20v30-31 Reconsidered”, *JBL* 108,1987: 639-651.

But the cleansing of the temple also was a sign. John does mention other signs apart from the above. John 20:30–31, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” A sign is an event John records which reveals Jesus’ claims as the Divine Messiah and helped instil belief in his followers. In this passage Jesus does not perform a miracle as he did when he turned water into wine. These verses while they do not record a *miracle* that shows who Jesus is, highlight an *event* that makes an important revelation about the person of Jesus i.e. he himself is the fulfillment of the temple of God on earth. God was “tabernacling” (John 1:14) among them and he was the recipient of true worship. We should note that the destruction of the second temple must have exerted a universal impact on Jews in both Palestine and the Diaspora. Köstenberger<sup>3</sup> can affirm:

*The Fourth Gospel’s emphasis on Jesus as the fulfilment of the symbolism surrounding various Jewish festivals and institutions—including the temple—can very plausibly be read against the backdrop of the then-recent destruction of the second temple as one possible element occasioning its composition... John would have formulated his Christology at least in part in the context of the crisis of belief engendered by the destruction of the temple. The gospel could then be understood, at least in part, as an effort to respond to the religious vacuum which resulted from the temple’s destruction by pointing, not to a temporary, but a permanent solution: Jesus’ replacement of the temple in the religious experience of his people by himself.*

The destruction of the temple related to messianic expectations would have allowed John the opportunity to present first to Diaspora Jews and proselytes Jesus as the fulfilment of temple-related symbolisms and OT hopes which now were being realised in him. Therefore, while the removal of the temple is not explicitly mentioned in John’s gospel, Kerr<sup>4</sup> points out that John is a writer who regularly chooses not to refer directly to important events (such as Jesus’ baptism by John or the institution of the Lord’s supper) but opts instead for more indirect strategies of bringing out the theological significance of these incidents. He refers to the fact that the “nature of irony and double meaning is to make one’s points with subtlety, not baldly. John could very well be working with the unexpressed, but universally known, presupposition that the Temple had fallen,

---

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 26 (2005), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’ Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSS 220; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 24.

in the interests of shrewdly presenting Jesus as the new Temple complex of Judaism.” Again Köstenberger<sup>5</sup> can point out:

Specifically, it appears that the Fourth Evangelist sought to commend a permanent solution in this crisis of belief with which the Jews were faced, namely faith in Jesus the Messiah as the one who embodied the fulfilment of the underlying symbolism, not only of the temple, but of the entire Jewish festival calendar (not to speak of a variety of other typological substructures of OT theology such as the serpent in the wilderness or the manna). If so, John’s solution presents a viable alternative to the path chosen by mainstream Judaism (as represented by Pharisaism), namely, that of rabbinic Judaism centered on the Mishnah and the Talmuds.

Another scholar, J. A. Draper,<sup>6</sup> finds an explicit connection between the destruction of the temple and the message of the Fourth Gospel, suggesting that “John’s Gospel may be characterised as a fundamental response to the failed millenarian movement in 68-70 CE, which left the central symbol of the Jewish people and culture in ruins.... To most, the loss of the temple must have seemed to be a permanent loss of the presence of God with his people.” John’s message is that while “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known,” John 1:18. Again, in 4:21-24, Jesus announces, “The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father...the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” Draper<sup>7</sup> affirms that John’s purpose in highlighting this temple incident early in his Gospel, which we will discuss presently, “is an important clue to its central interest.” As Motyer<sup>8</sup> also maintains, “John would have been heard to address the situation faced after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, particularly in Judea where the loss of the Temple and its worship were felt most keenly.” John presented his Christology in part to affirm that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled various elements of OT expectation, including those which pointed to God coming to his people and dwelling with them in a more permanent way than had previously been the case. So, Köstenberger<sup>9</sup> asks us to trace the emerging Johannine motif of Jesus as “the fulfilment (and thus

---

<sup>5</sup> Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” 221.

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Draper, “Temple, Tabernacle and Mystical Experience in John,” *Neotestamentica* 31/2 (1997): 285. He actually understands this cleansing of the temple as “repositioned” at the beginning of the Gospel, rather than a first cleansing with the second to follow in the days leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion.

<sup>7</sup> Draper, “Temple, Tabernacle and Mystical Experience in John,” 263.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and ‘the Jews’* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” 228- 29.

replacement) of Jewish religious symbolism related both to religious institutions such as the tabernacle or the temple (1:14, 51; 2:14-22; 4:19-24)” and “to various religious festivals such as Tabernacles or Dedication (7:1-8:59; 10:22-39).” For him, this will include the recognition that we noted, the physical locations of worship are inadequate. Jesus now is the proper focus of worship (9:38; 20:28).

We should note that the prologue prepares the reader for John’s temple replacement theology by the reference to the Word being made flesh and “dwelling among us” (*skenoō*, 1:14), linking Jesus with God’s presence among his people in the tabernacle and later in the temple (Exodus 26-27; 1 Kings 6:13). Particularly important here is the link with the Word being made flesh and the notion of divine glory. Frequently in the OT the glory related to God’s self-manifestation in the tabernacle and Solomon’s temple. Now this divine glory, the Hebrew *shekinah*, previously limited to the Temple is visible in Jesus Christ because it is bound to the Logos become flesh. In addition, Judaism claimed Jerusalem and the Torah, were the focal points for the entire cosmos; John claims this for Jesus.

#### THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

John’s account of the cleansing of the temple follows as we noted the first recorded “sign,” the changing of water into wine in Cana of Galilee. John here recounts Jesus’ Passover<sup>10</sup> visit in Jerusalem, which is the actual beginning of his revelation of himself to widening circles. The cleansing is an affirmation of Jesus’ authority, of who he really is and an indicator of the crisis his mission presented to Judaism. John alone terms the feast “the Passover of the Jews” (2:13; cf. 6:4; 11:55), rather than simply “the Passover” or “the Lord’s Passover” (Exodus 12:11), thus distancing himself from the religious observances of Judaism, which Christians have claimed were fulfilled in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Dodd<sup>11</sup> sees this event is part of a block of material at the commencement of the “book of signs” (2:11; 20:30) which has a common theme of new and better beginnings in Christ (2:1-4:42), as later expounded by Paul (2 Corinthians 5:17).

John differs from the Synoptic Gospels in placing the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry instead of near the end (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-46). Scholars disagree over whether this is the first

---

<sup>10</sup> The Jewish Passover celebration commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, when the angel of judgment passed over every home where the first Passover was observed and the blood of the paschal lamb had been placed on the two door posts and the lintel, Ex. 12:12-13, 43-51.

<sup>11</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 289.

of two similar events in the ministry of Jesus, or whether the one cleansing was adjusted chronologically by either John or the synoptic writers. Many feel that John's theological emphasis caused him to place the event at the start; while others accept the Johannine dating, but believe that Mark included his account of the cleansing with his only one recorded visit of Jesus to Jerusalem. John places it during the first of three Passovers (2:13) within the limits of Jesus' ministry (cf. 6:4; 11:55). Carson<sup>12</sup> cautions: "all four Evangelists frequently arrange their material in topical rather than chronological order; one should not rush to harmonize by addition." However, while it is not possible to resolve the issue with certainty, we agree with Carson<sup>13</sup> that "the arguments for one (cleansing) are weak and subjective, while the natural reading of the text favours two." We would follow Tasker<sup>14</sup> when he maintains: "John is not correcting a supposed chronological blunder on the part of the earlier evangelists, nor deliberately altering their history in the interests of theological exposition, but...relating an additional 'cleansing' which the Synoptic writers had no occasion to relate."

Carson<sup>15</sup> rightly states that "it is hard to imagine two cleansings of the temple without some similarities. That both should occur near a Passover festival is not too surprising, since only at the high feasts would we be likely to find Jesus in Jerusalem." While both events are similar, they have noticeable differences. Morris<sup>16</sup> convincingly argues that "the Johannine narrative is firmly embedded in a great block of non-synoptic material" and that "the evil in question was one which was likely to recur after a check." The use of the severer phrase "den of robbers" in the Synoptics, (Matthew 21:13) rather than "house of merchandise", (John 2:16), may suggest greater displeasure at the second cleansing. John indicates that Jesus was in Galilee during the next Passover (6:4), allowing around two years between each cleansing. Jesus' initial cleansing, as an unknown Rabbi at the commencement of his ministry, would not have outraged the authorities as much as the latter, when he was a highly controversial figure; nor is it likely to have permanently ended the practice. As Jesus had attracted popular support (2:23) the authorities may have chosen to excuse his action as an over-zealous impulse, but a later repetition would have been treated as an act of defiance against the system.

---

<sup>12</sup> D.A Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, (Leicester, Inter-varsity Press, 1991), 177.

<sup>13</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 178.

<sup>14</sup> R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 61.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 177.

<sup>16</sup> L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 190.

## JESUS REVEALS HIMSELF

We remember from Acts 1-2 the scene at Pentecost, where so many people would throng Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. Passover-time would be similar. Great crowds would arrive in Jerusalem, not only from other parts of Israel, but from all over the world (Acts 2:5-12). Howard-Brook<sup>17</sup> estimates that the population of Jerusalem would swell from 50,000 to 180,000 at Passover. These Jews and proselytes would have to pay the half-shekel temple tax in the coinage of the temple, as the “foreign” currency with the image of the Emperor would be unacceptable and had to be exchanged for the proper coin. These worshippers also had to offer up their sacrifices, and for many of these travelers, the only solution was to buy a sacrificial animal there in Jerusalem. It is likely that Jesus would have come up annually with his parents to fulfill the requirement of the Law that every male Jew, from the age of twelve up, attend the Passover at Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16). To this Passover he came as the Messiah and God the Son or “the only God,” John 1:18. Regarding the cleansing, Milne<sup>18</sup> makes the point that it would have been appropriate for Jesus to herald the commencement and also close his ministry by such an action; initially by a Messianic demand for spiritual reformation, and in the shadow of his impending death to declare the bankruptcy of religious legalism.

The first temple, was built by Solomon (1 Kings 6-7), the second, by the Jews who returned from the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 6:15). This temple was the third temple, known as “Herod’s Temple.” He built it not so much to facilitate Israel’s worship, but as an attempt to reconcile the Jews to their Idumaeen king. Scholarly consensus holds that Herod commenced the third temple in 19 BC, and that, although the main structure was completed within ten years, work continued until 64 AD. The Jews’ comment that it had then taken forty-six years to build (2:20) implies a date of 27 AD, which would be around the start of Jesus’ ministry. Perhaps it did not have the glory of the first temple built by Solomon, but it must have exceeded the beauty and splendor of the second temple, (cf. Ezra 3:12; Mark 13:1).

## JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

In v.13-16 Jesus’ actions in the temple are recorded. We find one long and complex Greek sentence, (2:14-16), which underscores the intensity and urgency of his actions. The disciples only passively witness.

---

<sup>17</sup> W. Howard-Brook, *Becoming the Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (New York: Maryknoll, 1994), 83.

<sup>18</sup> B. Milne, *The Message of John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 68.

Only John mentions sheep and cattle and the detail of Jesus' whip. The sellers of oxen, sheep and doves were providing the animals necessary for temple sacrifice, and the moneychangers were providing a currency exchange for Jews arriving from different countries who needed to buy animals, or pay the temple tax in the approved denomination (i.e. the half-shekel, Exodus 30:13-16). Generally, scholars suggest that no coin bearing the effigy of the emperor could be offered to the temple for any purpose. But Morris<sup>19</sup> refers to Israel Abrahams who maintained that Tyrian coins bore similar markings and suggested that it was the exceptional quality of the Tyrian coins (exact weights and high silver content) that made them acceptable. According to Brown,<sup>20</sup> the high priest, Caiaphas, permitted his supporters<sup>21</sup> to move their trading stalls to the temple as a way of avenging himself against rivals in the Sanhedrin. This would mean that there was a large number of people offended by this commerce in the temple. Also, by the unnecessary crowding and stink in the temple precincts.

Was Jesus simply objecting here to them carrying on their business inside the outer courtyard of the temple (the court of the Gentiles)? He said to the dove-sellers, "take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade," (2:16, cf. Zechariah 14:21). The traders and money-changes had to work somewhere convenient, but that need not be within the temple precincts. The result was that the place of prayer for all nations (cf. Isaiah 56:7; Mark 11:17) was filled with the noise, filth and stench of a cattle market, and inquiring Gentiles seeking God found only commerce there. Kostenberger<sup>22</sup> explains that the Court of the Gentiles is the only access that Gentiles have to the temple, and these vendors render Gentile worship impossible by using their space for commercial purposes. However, the "den of robbers", recorded by the Synoptic writers (cf. Matthew 21:13 and Jeremiah 7:11), implies corrupt trading and exploitation.<sup>23</sup> Mark 11:16 also implies that Jesus objected to travelers or traders making the use of the temple as a shortcut.

Morris<sup>24</sup> notes that "it was not so much the physical force as the moral power he employed that emptied the courts." He stood alone in opposition and his righteous anger stirred the consciences of the merchants. In fulfillment of

---

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 170.

<sup>20</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 119.

<sup>21</sup> The Sadducees controlled the high priesthood and the temple mount.

<sup>22</sup> A. J. Köstenberger, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 106.

<sup>23</sup> We should not miss the parallel in Jesus' denunciation: the "house of my father" has become a "house of *emporium*," of trading (from which we get, through Latin, "emporium"). Activities which were supposed to serve the worship of God have now displaced it and the trading has taken centre stage.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 194.

prophecy (Malachi 3:1-4), his first official act was to purge his temple of the false system of worship within. Filled with zealous righteousness, Jesus made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables (2:15).

There is no record of him actually smiting the traders themselves (though it may be implied by the “all” of 2:15; cf. Synoptics, how he drove them out). The scourge of chords was more a symbol of authority than a weapon. Even though he drove out the sheep and cattle, and scattered the money by overturning the tables, he was not seeking to destroy property. He did not release the pigeons, either lest they escape, or because he was more lenient to those providing a service to poorer worshippers (cf. Leviticus 12:8; Luke 2:22-24). As Milne<sup>25</sup> notes “gentle Jesus meek and mild is nowhere more inaccurate and unhistorical than here.” But Jesus’ actions and his denunciation, would be intended to make a point and reveal who he was rather than actually purify the temple.<sup>26</sup>

#### THIS EVENT IS ABOUT FULFILLMENT

We should note that John’s Gospel seeks to show that Jesus came to fulfill the old system, not reform it. In v.17 John records “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

We are not told whether it was at this time or after the resurrection (cf. v22) that the disciples came to associate Jesus’ action with the above prophecy from Psalm 69:9. Carson<sup>27</sup> makes the point that “if his disciples remembered these words at the time, they probably focused on the zeal, not the manner of the consumption.” Psalm 69 is generally given a Messianic significance in the New Testament (cf. John 15:25, 19:28; Acts 1:20; Romans 11:9; 15:3). Jesus himself cited Psalm 69:4 in John 15:25 as his own experience, and uttered the words “I thirst” from the cross in fulfillment of 69:21. John’s quotation of Psalm 69:9 fixes the reader’s attention on Jesus, rather than the temple, and points to Jesus’ future sufferings rather than any focus upon his present location. The citation of this Psalm of lament is so significant as it prophetically articulates many of the things that Jesus felt during his trial and crucifixion – hated without a cause, enemies without number, betrayal by friends, mocked by passers-by—and yet trusting in

---

<sup>25</sup> Milne, *The Message of John*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> It is clear that the cleansing of the temple does not permanently remove the abuses. The conditions in the temple were the same at the time of the second cleansing (described in the Synoptic Gospels) as they were in the first cleansing (described here by John). It seems that after the Lord departed from Jerusalem all the temple traders began to operate again. There was no sense of guilt or repentance. The Lord’s purpose in this first cleansing is to “make a statement,” about himself, the temple, and the Jewish religious system.

<sup>27</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 180.

God for deliverance. Jesus' zeal for God and his house will indeed consume him in death on the cross in Jerusalem. The fact that it was Passover time with its association with the imagery of the sacrificed unblemished lamb and the blood of deliverance is also highly significant (John 1:29; 6:4; 19:14-16, 31-37).

The Greek verb here in 2:17 is in the future passive tense, rather than the past tense of Psalm 69:9, and implies that Jesus' zeal, evidenced in his cleansing of the temple, was associated with the necessity for him to die on the cross. His zeal for the birth of a people (3:1-10; 4:21-24) who could offer pure and acceptable worship required the necessity for his death. The Sadducees would later seek his death for what he did on that day at the temple mount. After the Sanhedrin had him arrested, Annas would question Jesus first before sending him to his son-in-law, the acting high priest, Caiaphas who would arrange for his execution by the Romans.

Jesus' action implied a special relationship with God, just as his use of "my Father's house", (cf. Luke 2:49) implied a unique sonship distinct from natural humanity. His actions here were not that of just a reforming prophet. The Messiah and Son of God has come to his temple, (Haggai 2:9; Malachi 3:1-4; John 20:30-31). The Jews ask for a sign of his authority in v18, (cf. also Mark 8:12; 1 Corinthians 1:22). They may have discerned a messianic claim (Malachi 3:1ff. mentioned above). They did not dispute the rightness of his action, but neither did they admit guilt. "What sign do *you* show us for doing these things?" The word "you" is emphatic in the Greek. Though asking the Lord for a sign they apparently mocked the suggestion that *he* (of all people) could do such a thing! They were more concerned with the issue of authority than purity of worship; yet the boldness of Jesus' action must have made them wary lest they had a divinely appointed prophet among them. Had they had any spiritual insight as well as their knowledge of the OT they would have realized that the cleansing was a sign in itself of the presence of God. Jesus is claiming to have the authority to correct the evils performed in the temple. He calls the temple "my Father's house," (v16). Sadly, no-one who actually witnessed this event fully grasped its meaning or significance.<sup>28</sup> The disciples will understand, but only after our Lord's death and resurrection, only after the coming of the Holy Spirit, (John 16:12-14). Note that Jesus not only came with God's authority, (as a prophet might do); he came as "the only God," 1:18. Morris'<sup>29</sup> comments about the Jews:

This expression ["the Jews"] is rare in the Synoptic Gospels. Each of them refers a few times to "the King of the Jews" and scarcely uses the term

---

<sup>28</sup> This is the first time that Jesus identifies God as his Father, but the Jews who question him in verse 18 do not challenge him about this.

<sup>29</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 130-131.

otherwise. But in John it is used some seventy times. Sometimes the Evangelist employs it in a neutral sense (e.g. 2:6, “the Jews’ manner of purifying”). He can even use it in a good sense (e.g. “salvation is from the Jews,” 4:22. But more often he uses it to denote the Jewish nation as hostile to Jesus. It does not necessarily denote the whole nation. In fact characteristically it means the Jews of Judea, especially those in and around Jerusalem.

We can say that in John’s Gospel this hostility to Jesus is recorded of the chief priests and Pharisees. They are depicted as our Lord’s bitterest opponents.

There is an allusion here to Zechariah 14:21. The passage from Zechariah was looking toward the Day of the Lord—a day when “every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD of hosts so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them, and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.” At that time, holiness will pervade all of life, so that the temple sacrifices (and the animal sellers and money changers) will no longer be necessary. It is Jesus, the messiah, by his coming death who brings that reality into being. He will offer “for all time” the one sacrifice to take away sin, Hebrews 10:12. But the Jewish leaders could not see this.

Jesus replied with a counter-challenge in the form of a riddle, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). They failed to understand, as their disbelieving response shows (2:20); they thought he was referring to the Jerusalem temple. Any suggestion that Jesus was primarily referring to the spiritual resurrection of religion, and the supplanting of the old faith by the new is at odds to John’s explanation in v21. A resurrected Messiah had been foreshadowed in the Jewish Scriptures (cf. Psalm 16:10; Hosea 6:2), but considering the location their response is understandable. The Jews constantly only saw the immediate literal application in Jesus’ remarks (cf. John 6:51-52). Morris<sup>30</sup> considers it ironic that “the Jews themselves were to be the means of bringing about the sign they asked the Christ to produce.” Should we note that the resurrection of Jesus is the eighth sign to which the other seven in the narrative of John’s Gospel point?

John interprets Jesus’ statement so that his readers realize the intended significance: “he spoke of the temple of his body”, (v21). Jesus could challenge the temple system because as John in his Gospel was affirming that he was now the primary embodiment of God’s presence on earth (1:14). Even his disciples did not fully appreciate the significance of his words until after his resurrection (v22), though Jesus had spoken plainly of it, (Matthew 17:22-23). They fully

---

<sup>30</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 199.

understood and believed after they saw it fulfilled. For John this remembrance was a result of Holy Spirit aided, post-resurrection reflection on the past (14:26). John refers in v22 to the revelation of the truth of “the Scripture” (cf. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31; or Isaiah 53:12) and Jesus’ “word,” in ways that gave both equal authority, creating Christological implications for the person of Jesus, cf. 12:16.

Jesus’ own death and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple were thus inevitably linked together, as indicated by the rending of the veil of the temple (cf. Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Jesus had come to die because the temple and its sacrifices were inadequate as a means of appeasing and approaching God. Here Jesus uses the Greek word *naos* which refers to the inner shrine of the temple, the dwelling place of deity; not *hieron* which, as used in 2:14-15, includes the temple precincts. Here was a pointer to his deity; an implication that God uniquely dwelled in him (cf. Colossians 2:9). Hence his implication of unity with the Father by his own part in the resurrection (2:19), and later of mutual indwelling (cf. 14:10-11). John ascribes the resurrection power to Jesus himself (cf. 10:17-18) while other New Testament writers speak of the Father raising the Son (Romans 4:24; 8:11; Acts 3:15; 4:10). What was destroyed was also going to be raised.

*This temple was to be a sacrifice to end all need for sacrifices. Jesus not only cleansed the temple; he later fulfilled it, rendering it obsolete. Later, in weeping over Jerusalem, he would declare “your house is left unto you desolate”, (Matthew 23:38). How much all this would mean to his first readers, Jews and proselytes of the Diaspora, who had seen the temple in Jerusalem destroyed. He was the living, fulfillment of the temple of God on earth, and the recipient of true worship. They had lost nothing.*

“DESTROY THIS TEMPLE...”

Although false witnesses misrepresented Jesus’ statement at his trial (Matthew 26:59-61), distorting his challenge into a threat (Mark 14:58; cf. Acts 6:14) with conflicting accounts (Mark 14:59) and taunting him while on the cross (Matthew 27:40; Mark 15:29), the true implication of his actual words here was evidently later understood by the Jewish leaders (Matthew 27:63). Morris<sup>31</sup> concedes that “it is not easy to understand” and that “it would readily be misunderstood and misremembered,” the persistent repetition of the charge shows that Jesus said something of this nature. Only John records the true saying in its original context, thus complementing the synoptic evidence. It was a challenge to the Jews to destroy him; he did not say he would destroy anything.

---

<sup>31</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 199.

This (2:19) is “the word” which the disciples remembered (2:22) and understood (2:19) after Jesus’ death, as evidenced by Peter’s application at Pentecost, (cf. Psalm 16:8-11 and Acts 2:24-28). As mentioned earlier, explanations of misunderstandings (especially by unbelievers) are common in John. His honest admission of earlier ignorance (2:22) supports the historical integrity of the book.

Morris<sup>32</sup> clarifies the issue by saying that “while the primary reference of the saying is surely to the resurrection of Jesus it would be quite in the Johannine manner to see a double meaning in the words. It may well be that they point us also to the ultimate abolition of the temple and of the temple sacrifices.” Milne<sup>33</sup> suggests that the statement has a parallel in “the sign of Jonah” of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 12:38-40 when predicting his destruction at the hands of the Jewish authorities and his glorious resurrection, as the sign that will authenticate his claims and this specific action. He was saying that the sign of his authority would be his death and resurrection.

Jesus looked beyond temple worship to after his death and resurrection when worship would be “in spirit and in truth” (4:21-24) and not be tied by geographical location. The Jerusalem temple would become spiritually redundant, and thus he predicted the end of the Jewish religious system. It had been a temporary token residence of the presence of God, one who was too great to be thus confined (Acts 7:48-50; 17:24). Jesus had come to create a more direct avenue whereby men could approach God in worship. This was to be by the offering of his own body as an atoning sacrifice, the Father's acceptance of which would be signaled by his resurrection on the third day. He therefore invited belief in him (20:30-31) and heartfelt worship (4:23-24) and denounced impure outward observance. By his cleansing of the temple Jesus manifested his truth, having previously manifested his glory and grace at Cana (cf. 1:14, 17; 2:11). Therefore, John is pointing to the fact that, as the place where men go in order to meet God, the temple has been supplanted and replaced by Jesus himself, in whose resurrected person people will now encounter God (cf. 1:18, 14:6).

## CONCLUSION

As with all John’s selections, the “cleansing of the temple” is highly significant as it proclaimed Jesus' Messiahship, his deity, his fulfillment of OT promises and hopes and his purifying saving mission. His statement foretold his death and resurrection as the ultimate sign of his authority and power. It was a symbolic gesture intended as an eschatological sign to those with spiritual insight. God

---

<sup>32</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 203.

<sup>33</sup> Milne, *The Message of John*, 69.

had become flesh and dwelled among them (1:14) as Christ, the anointed one, (1:41) through whom the Kingdom of God was to be realized. For John's readers the record helps make as dramatic an introduction to Jesus as the actual event did to the Jewish nation at the first Passover of his ministry. The shadow of his death, in Jerusalem, at the hands of his Jewish opponents, and what it accomplished, and signified, hangs over the Fourth Gospel from the beginning. Some have spoken of a more “realized” crucifixion, which goes with his “realized” eschatology. It can be accepted that both the death of Jesus and the eternal life that comes from it are realities from the very beginning of John’s narrative.

John’s gospel remains distinct from the Synoptics by the frequent use of dialogues for didactic purposes. Carson<sup>34</sup> explains that in each dialogue Jesus discloses himself as the fulfillment of OT promises and institutions. His readers should believe, John 19:30-31. As Köstenberger<sup>35</sup> observes:

The significance of this sign, which escaped both the Jews and the twelve at the time it took place, ought not to remain a mystery to the first readers of John’s gospel. Rather, they should be able to understand that the temple clearing was a messianic sign that pointed to the inner meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion and bodily resurrection and presented Jesus as both the fulfillment and the replacement of temple symbolism and the new and true center of worship for his new messianic community.

Jesus himself, in his own body, was a new “Temple,” who embodied in himself the meaning of the Temple and its significance. John calls upon his readers to realize that there was indeed life after the destruction of the temple and life apart from Jerusalem. The old order had given way to the new. As Walker<sup>36</sup> stresses, “From the moment Jesus first appeared in the city the role of Jerusalem and its Temple were destined to undergo a dramatic change. These entities would no longer be necessary for any sense of proximity to God...God was now found in Jesus, and Jesus through the Spirit.”

---

<sup>34</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 214.

<sup>35</sup> Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” 235.

<sup>36</sup> Peter W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 199-200.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barclay, W., *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1975.
- Barrett, C.K., *The Gospel according to John; An Introduction with Commentary and notes on the Greek Text*. London: SPCK, 1978.
- Beasley-Murray, G.R., Sec. ed. *John*, Nashville: Word Books, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.
- Brown, R.E., *The Gospel according to John; Introduction, Translation and Notes*, 2 vols. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966-71.
- Bultmann, R., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1971.
- Carson, D.A., *The Gospel According to John*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991.
- Culpepper, A., *The Gospel and Letters of John*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.
- Draper, J. A., "Temple, Tabernacle and Mystical Experience in John," *Neotestamentica* 31/2 (1997).
- Howard-Brook, W. *Becoming the Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship*. New York: Maryknoll, 1994.
- Kerr, Alan, R., *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John*, JSNTSS 220. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J., *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- "The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel," *Trinity Journal* 26 (2005) 205-242.
- Kruse C.C., *The Letters of John*. Leicester: Apollos, 2000.
- Keener, C. S., *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003.
- Milne, B., (1993), *The Message of John*. Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1993.
- Morris, L., *The Gospel according to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, Rev. Ed.
- Motyer, Stephen, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and "the Jews."* Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997.
- Schnackenburg, R., *The Gospel according to John*, 3 vols. London: Burns and Oates, 1968-82.
- Smalley, S. S., *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*. Guernsey: Paternoster Press Co. Ltd., 1978.
- Walker, Peter, W.L., *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

# The Concept of Rest in Hebrews 4: eschatological and soteriological aspects

Ovidiu Hanc<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In this article we will analyze the concept of rest as it appears in the Old and New Testaments. The understanding of the concept of rest in Hebrews 4 is based sine qua non on the Old Testament concept of rest. We will also look at how the concept is presented in the Gospels in relation to the person and work of Jesus and the theological nuances that are present in Hebrew 4.

KEY WORDS: rest, Sabbath, work, Christology, throne of grace.

## INTRODUCTION

Hebrews 4 represents the *locus classicus* of the concept of rest in the New Testament. The term κατάπαυσις (*katapausis*) appears eight times in the New Testament (once in Acts 7.49), out of which seven times are found in Hebrews (twice in chapter 3 in v.11, 18 and five times in chapter 4 in v.1, 3, 5, 10, 11). The verbal form καταπαύω (*katapauō*) appears four times in the New Testament (once in Acts 14.18) out of which three times are found in Hebrews 4 (v.4, 8, 10). Hofius noted that both noun and verb appear in the NT only once in Acts and in Heb 3:7–4:13 (the noun 8 times, the vb. 3 times), but except in Acts 14:18, where the verb has the meaning *dissuade* someone from something, the two words have a religious usage in all NT occurrences.<sup>2</sup>

The related word ἀνάπαυσις (*anapausis*) is found in the gospels (Matt. 11.29; 12.43; Lk. 11.24) and Revelation (4.8; 14.11) while the verbal form ἀναπαύω (*anapauō*) is found twelve times in various places without an extended use in a certain passage.<sup>3</sup> Another term related to the concept of rest is that of Sabbath. The main nuance of the term σάββατον (*sabbaton*) is that of cessation from labor, a special Jewish day of sacred rest and worship.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ovidiu Hanc, BA (Emanuel); MTh (QUB Belfast); PhD (QUB, Belfast) is lector universitar in Emanuel. ovidiu.hanc@emanuel.ro.

<sup>2</sup> O. Hofius, “Κατάπαυσις, Εως, ἦ,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 265.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 11.28; 26.45; Mk. 6.31; 14.41; Lk. 12.19; 1 Cor. 16.18; 2 Cor. 7.13; Phlm. 1.20; 1 Pet. 4.14; Rev. 6.11; 14.13.

## THE CONCEPT OF REST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The concept of rest  $\text{שָׁבַט}$  (*sha.vat*) means “to cease; to stop working; to rest” and appears for the first time at the end of the creation week (Genesis 2.1-3) as God rested from His act of creation.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish literature speaks clearly of a “day” of seven days that culminates with a day of rest.

The term  $\text{שַׁבָּת}$  (*shab.bat*) appears for the first time in Exodus 16.23-29 and then in Exodus 20.8-11 as part of the Decalogue. The Sabbath was set before the people of Israel as one of the most important parts of the law.<sup>5</sup> Dressler analyzed the origin of the etymology and the meaning of the word  $\text{שַׁבָּת}$  and concludes that lexicographers failed to produce conclusive evidence for an alternative origin of the Sabbath, and correctly suggested that the Sabbath originated with Israel and with the Sabbath came the seven-day week.<sup>6</sup>

Genesis presents the fact that God created the world in six days, and then He rested on the seventh day. God sanctified this day of rest. The essence of rest is not that of recovery from hard labor, but of contemplation and enjoyment of what was done. God did not rest because He was tired, but sanctified this day that becomes a necessary part in the mandate of work and rest. J. C. Laansma argued that “work is intrinsic to created human existence, reflecting the divine pattern of work and rest,”<sup>7</sup> while Kidner argued that the rest is an expression of achievement, not inactivity, for God nurtures what he creates. This symbolism is seen also in the fact that Jesus was ‘seated’ after his finished redemption (Heb. 8:1; 10:12), to dispense its benefits.<sup>8</sup>

In the pattern of creation, the day of rest marks an interruption of the pattern that is found on each day of creation. The lack of the expression “there was evening and there was morning” is not an omission of the author, but rather an eschatological indicator of a greater rest that is found in God.

Kidner emphasized correctly that the absence of the formula that rounded off each of the six days with the onset of evening and morning, imply the “infinite

---

<sup>4</sup>Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 697.

<sup>5</sup> Harold H. P. Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Dressler, 23.

<sup>7</sup> J. C. Laansma, “Rest,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, vol. 1, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 63.

perspective” of God’s sabbath.<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 4 indicates that God’s rest in Genesis not only foreshadows a sabbath rest, but an eschatological eternal rest that is available for the believer in Christ.

After the deliverance from Egypt, God established the Sabbath as a day sanctified for the Lord (Ex. 16.1-30) that was unknown to the people of Israel who were accustomed with the ten-day week. Dressler followed Parker and argued that the sojourn in Egypt had taught them regarding this ten-day ‘week’.<sup>10</sup> The Decalogue refers to the day of rest as a day that must be sanctified (Ex. 20.8-11). The fourth commandment is the most elaborate one and refers to God’s rest that becomes a norm for the newly formed covenantal people. This commandment is expanded even more in Deut. 5.12-15 with more details, where the rest has soteriological nuances (v.15). The rest on the seventh day symbolizes the salvation of the people from the bondage of Egypt. The Israelites should remember this day as they were slaves in Egypt but now they are delivered from this slavery/work by God’s mighty hand. As God’s rested from His work, He similarly delivered the people of Israel from their work/slavery and blessed them with opportunity to rest. Thus, the Sabbath is not only a paradigm of rest, but also of salvation. The sabbath becomes a sign of the eternal covenant with God (Ex. 31.12-17), while breaking the Sabbath was equivalent to a desecration of this sacred covenant and was punished by death.

The gift of rest” is an important OT theme for the people of God as they journey in the land of promise. This ‘resting place’ is in no way an image of blissful inactivity, rather one of unhampered constructive activity.<sup>11</sup> As the people entered the promised land, they become disobedient. Disobedience was reflected not only in immoral living, but also in ignorance toward the sabbath rest. The Babylon captivity is partially caused by the failing to keep the sabbath (2 Chron. 36.21). The generation in the wilderness did not enter God’s rest (Ps. 95.11), while later generations did not keep God’s rest (Jer. 17.21-27; Ez. 20.12-24; Amos 8.5).

The Sabbath is a practical reflection of the concept of holiness as an act of being set apart. On the Sabbath day, the people of Israel were called to set the day apart for God. As they departed from God, they disrespected the day of rest and considered it a burden.

---

<sup>9</sup> Kidner, 1:63.

<sup>10</sup> Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” 24; Richard Anthony Parker, “The Calendars and Chronology,” in *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed. Richard Anthony Parker, Gerald J. Toomer, and Erik Iversen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> J. C. Laansma, “New Dictionary of Biblical Theology.”

## THE CONCEPT OF REST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The concept of rest is interwoven with the Sabbath day, as the day of rest par excellence. The term שַׁבָּת (*shab.bat*) is transliterated into the Greek as σάββατον.<sup>12</sup> In the New Testament, the rest has Christological overtones (Matt. 11.28-30). Christ's promise of rest is an indicator of his divine nature since only God is the true source of rest (Ex. 33.14; Ps. 116.7; Jer. 6.16). Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12.8; Mk. 2.10; Lk. 6.5). Carson argued correctly that the Sabbath itself is associated with the theme of restoration and the messianic age and within such a framework the very concept begins to undergo transformation. "That Jesus Christ is Lord of the Sabbath is not only a messianic claim of grand proportions, but it raises the possibility of a future change or reinterpretation of the Sabbath, in precisely the same way that His professed superiority over the Temple raises certain possibilities about ritual law."<sup>13</sup>

All the Gospel passages that present the controversies over the Sabbath day reflect a high Christology. Jesus is presented as being equal to the Father, therefore He is Lord over the Sabbath. Jesus does the same works His Father performs (Jn. 5.17-18), an indicator of divine prerogatives. The many healings that Jesus has done on the Sabbath day (e.g. Mt. 12.10; Mc. 3.2; Lc. 6.7; 13.14; 14.3; Jn. 5.10) reflect a deeper meaning of the Sabbath. Schreiner noted that by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus indicated that the Sabbath must be interpreted eschatologically and Christologically as well, for it points to the final rest that the Lord will grant to his people.<sup>14</sup> The Gospels present the Sabbath disputes not from the legal framework, but from a Christological lens. This lens is determinant when it comes to a theological understanding of the concept of rest.

W. D. Davies argued for the notion of replacement in John's Gospels.<sup>15</sup> Jesus replaces the ancient Tabernacle, the Jewish holy space with its holy water, the vine, the feasts. Carson suggests that Jesus Himself replaces the Sabbath, a possible suggestion that might be linked with Hebrews 4.<sup>16</sup> Jesus becomes the rest of the believers.

---

<sup>12</sup> Burge, *Jesus and the Jewish Festivals*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> D. A. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 66.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 620.

<sup>15</sup> W. D. Davies, *Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 315, 335.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," 84.

The conflicts between Jesus and the Jews have as a starting point the relation to the Sabbath. This conflict is a fundamentally Christological issue. The Sabbath-day healings points to Jesus' work of salvation and deliverance. John shows that Jesus is equal to the Father, so he does the same things as the Father. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, so He has all the authority to rule over the Sabbath. Jesus' argument is that God, although He stopped all creative work on the seventh day, He does not stop His activity. It was recognized that God is continually active even on the Sabbath, supporting the whole world through His providence (Jn. 5.17-18). In a sense, God's rest is entirely an eschatological reality. Jesus is working even on a Sabbath day, as His Father does. Jesus intentionally causes a conflict with the rabbis over their legalistic way of keeping the Sabbath.<sup>17</sup> When religious leaders were confronted with a miracle performed on the Sabbath, they did not question the possibility of Jesus' power being of divine origin but focused entirely on the Sabbath violation.

Klink notes that in the pericope of the healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (Jn. 5), the focus is only indirectly on the Sabbath and its laws, for its direct focus is the God of the Sabbath. The main theme of what follows is not "the violation of the Sabbath" but the violation of the personal power of God.<sup>18</sup> The Sabbath, together with other Jewish feasts are pointers to Jesus.

In John 7, the Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. It is obvious that Jesus had not broken the Law, so He justifies His healing done on the Sabbath day, bringing up the discussion about the circumcision ceremony (vv. 22-24). Circumcision was to be performed on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17.10-14). The moment God gave the law on the Sabbath, the two laws would inevitably come into conflict. The resolution of this dilemma took place through a hierarchy of laws in which circumcision preceded the Law of Moses (see Mishnah *Shabbath* 18.3; 19.2-3; *Nedarim* 3.11).<sup>19</sup>

By this prioritization of the Laws, we deduce not only that Jesus is a good interpreter of the Mosaic law, but we also understand the authority He has in relation to the Sabbath. Just as circumcision was seen in the Old Testament as superior to the Sabbath law, now Jesus is superior to the Sabbath Law. This aspect of Jesus' sovereignty over Sabbath is described by the synoptic Gospels in Mt. 12.8; Mk. 2.28; and Lk. 6.5.

---

<sup>17</sup> Carson, *From Sabbath*, 80-81.

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Klink, *John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 273.

<sup>19</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 243.

In John 9, Jesus healed a man born blind on a Sabbath day. John's highlighting the timing on a Sabbath day reflects his high Christology. Keener argues that Jesus' claim to divine authority as God's *shaliach* to adapt Sabbath rules is the actual calendrical issue in chapter 5 and 9 (esp. 5.9 and 9.14).<sup>20</sup> John presents Jesus as the Son of God and thus standing above the Sabbath.

## THE CONCEPT OF REST IN HEBREWS: CITATIONS AND ALLUSIONS

Hebrews 3.11 is the first time when the author uses the concept of rest. The verse quotes Psalm 95.7-11 where God swore in His wrath that the Israelites that hardened their heart in rebellion in the wilderness will not enter His rest (c.f. Num. 14.28-35). This theme is still active through Christ, since the good news of entering God's rest that was heralded to them (εὐαγγελίζομαι *euangelizomai*) is available to us as well (v.2). The author expands this concept since in Hebrews 4.4 he cites from Genesis 2.2. Thus, the theme of rest is not only referring to the rest of the promised land but reflects a much bigger reality that was inaugurated at the end of creation.

Hebrews 4 combines two distinctive OT nuances that covers the fact that God rested at the end of creation week (v.4) and the final entering into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua (v.8). Bauernfeind argued that comprehensive reflection on these two facts leads to the conclusion that the OT points beyond itself, and that the rest is still in the sphere of promise. "A true fulfilment of the task of Joshua, as Ps. 95:7 ff. also demonstrates, v. 7, will take a different form from the historical."<sup>21</sup> The concept of rest is used as a warning toward perseverance into God's eternal rest. The text has a soteriological and an eschatological dimension in the reference to God's eternal rest.

The concept of rest has a soteriological dimension. In v.2 the rest is defined in relation to the good news that came to us just as to them (καὶ γὰρ ἔσμεν εὐηγγελισμένοι ...). The way someone enters in God's rest is through the message of the Gospel, a reflection of the good news that was given to the people of Israel. The use of the present tense in v. 3 (εἰσερχόμεθα) and the aorist in v.10 (εἰσελθὼν) as a reference to entering God's rest is an indicator of this salvation as a present reality. O'Brien strongly argues that the Sabbath rest is only a future reality.<sup>22</sup> Although his case is very well argued, the consummation of a reality

---

<sup>20</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 635.

<sup>21</sup> Otto Bauernfeind, "Καταπαύω, Κατάπασις," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 627.

<sup>22</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 165–66.

in the future, does not nullify an inauguration of this reality in the present. An attempt to dissociate the future from the present reality solves a tension that needs to be present in the text.

However, the concept of rest has an eschatological dimension as well. In v.10 the author described the act of entering God's rest using an aorist as an action that was already fulfilled, while in v.11 the exhortation to strive to enter that rest is seen as a reality in the future that is to be consummated. The rest from the works is an allusion to the new soteriological dimension in which salvation is not through the fulfilment of the requirements of the Law.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the rest is synonym to salvation through faith.

For the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, obedience and faith are two complementary concepts. In verse 3 the author notes that the Israelites did not enter in God's rest because they did not have faith, and later in verse 6 they did not enter because they did not listen.

Bauernfeind correctly noted that as the promise of Scripture undoubtedly points beyond the servant Moses to the Son (3:1–6), so the rest mentioned on creation (Gen. 2:2) points beyond Joshua (4:8) and David (4:7) to the last things.<sup>24</sup> The eschatological dimension of rest is seen in the tension of already but not yet. The believer entered God's rest, but simultaneously waits for the coming rest. Commenting on the healing of the blind man, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, Carson argues that in the Hebrews' passage the "sabbath-rest" is part of a pattern of "rests" in the Old Testament: the seventh day, the rest of entering into the Promised Land, the promise of rest in the Psalms. Carson correctly noted that the conclusion is drawn that there is still a rest for the people of God, a rest that can be entered and enjoyed by faith in Christ.<sup>25</sup> This rest represents a deliverance from dead works and a partaking in the salvation brought by Christ.

The warning regarding the necessity of perseverance is an indicator the rest is in one sense not yet inaugurated. This perseverance implies a perseverance in grace as opposed to the works of the Law. There is a necessary rest from the works of the Law, but also a necessary perseverance and approach to the throne of grace. Just as disobedience and disbelief had consequences for those who came out of Egypt, so it will have consequences for those who reject the good news of Christ's rest and return to Jewish law.

---

<sup>23</sup> Donald Alfred Hagner, *Hebrews* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 72.

<sup>24</sup> Bauernfeind, "Καταπαύω, Κατάπαυσις," 627.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 248.

Marshall noted that the act of entering God's rest combine elements of the present and the future.<sup>26</sup> The concept of rest contains the implied contrast between Joshua (the Greek word for Joshua is *Iēsous*) who did not give rest and the new Joshua who can do so.<sup>27</sup> Joshua is an archetype of Jesus Christ. Just as Joshua brought the people of God to Canaan, so Jesus Christ brings the people of faith to His Kingdom.

The book of Hebrews is indeed a book of contrasts. From the beginning we can find many explicit, but also implicit comparisons between angels, Moses, Joshua, Levitical priesthood, old covenant, tabernacle, sacrifices, high priest, prophets, and the superiority of Christ.

The author uses positive comparisons rather than negative contrast. This gives a high value to the description of the superiority of Christ. He is not contrasted with negative realities but compared with the most valued aspects of Jewish faith. Christ is not contrasted with a decadent person, but with the serving angels, faithful Moses and so on.

When it comes to the rest as the ultimate symbol of redemption from the bondage of Egypt by entering in the promised Land, the rest that Jesus offers is much better than what they received through Joshua.

#### THRONE OF GRACE: RULE AND REST

The throne of grace that is mentioned in v.16 is a symbol of dominion. However, it is vital not to dissociate the theme of a throne from the main theme of the passage, the theme of rest. The mention of the throne portends the nuance of *rule* but also of *rest*.

The main theme of rest is followed by the exhortation to strive to enter God's rest avoiding disobedience of the word of God. The tension between resting and striving is noteworthy. The element that motivates both the call to rest and the challenge to strive to enter the rest is Jesus as the great High Priest.

The conjunctive particle οὖν (*oun*) of verse 14 indicates that the mention of the work of the great high priest is to be connected to what was said before. What is striking in relation to a high priest and the concept of rest is the fact that the high priest did not have a chance to rest. The sacrifices were offered continually (διηλεκής *diēnekēs*) (Heb. 10.1). The one element that the Tabernacle is lacking

---

<sup>26</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 618.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall, 623.

is that of a chair – an element of rest. The tabernacle had the Table for the Presence (Ex. 25.23-30), but not a chair that the priests could use for resting. The author of Hebrews notes that the offerings were brought daily (Heb. 10.11), and only Jesus as a great high priest offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins and sat down at the right hand of God (Heb. 10.12).

Jesus is the only high priest that is presented as sitting after offering a sacrifice. The act of sitting down is twofold in this context. First, there is the element of a finished work and secondly there is the element of divine reign. This element of Jesus as a high priest that sits on the throne is presented in Hebrews 4 with the same double nuance of *rest* and *rule*.

The tabernacle has an element that refers to the act of sitting related to the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat (כַּפֹּרֶת, *kap.po.ret*) was the gold lid that covered the Ark of the Covenant that had an artwork of two cherubim with their wings overshadowing the mercy seat (Ex. 25.17-21; 26.34; 37.6-9; Lev. 16.13-15).<sup>28</sup> The mercy seat rested on the ark and signified God's throne (1 Sam. 4.4; 2 Sam. 6.2; 2 Kg. 19.15; 1 Chron. 13.6). There is a thematic equivalent between the mercy seat and the throne of grace where mercy can be received (Heb. 4.16). In the Old Testament, the mercy seat was the meeting place between God and His people (Ex. 25.22), while now, through Jesus, people can access the throne of grace.

Thus, the concept of rest in Hebrews 4 has not only an eschatological dimension, but also a soteriological one. Christ is the only high priest that rests on a seat, and the seat is a throne. This is an allusion to the mercy seat that was on the ark of the covenant – the symbol of God's presence. The fact that Jesus, the Son of God sits, signifies his dominion and his salvation that was possible only through the mercy of God.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of rest in Hebrews 4 is complex and it is linked to three Old Testament realities. The first mention of rest in Heb. 3.11; 4.3, 5 reverberates with Ps. 95.7-11. The second citation of Heb. 4.4 reverberates with the creation

---

<sup>28</sup> The term for the mercy seat that is used in the Septuagint is that of propitiation: ἱλαστήριος (*hilastērios*). The reason that lies behind this translation is the fact that the Hebrews term for mercy seat (כַּפֹּרֶת *kap.po.ret*) has the root verb to cover (כָּפַר, *ka.phar*). Hence the LXX translators used the word propitiation to emphasize the concept of covering sins. This term appears in the New Testament in Rom. 3.25 and Heb. 9.5, while the cognate word ἱλασμός (*hilasmos*) appears in 1 Jn. 2.2 and 4.10.

account of Gen. 2.2, while the third allusion of Heb. 4.8 reverberates with Joshua 1.13, 15.

These citations and allusions make us understand that the concept of rest is much broader than the mere physical reality. The rest that is presented in Heb. 4 has an explicit eschatological connotation in which the tension already (4.10) but not yet (4.11) is found. The rest is a future reality, but at the same time a present one. The eschatological nuance of rest should not be dissociated from its soteriological overtone. In Hebrews 3-4 the concept of rest has several biblical roots in the rest of Genesis 2, in the rest in the promised land, and in the eschatological rest promised in the book of Psalms. At the same time, the concept of rest must be understood in the light of Jesus, as High Priest – the only priest described as sitting. The fact that this chair is a throne, is a twofold reflection of a Divine King and unique High Priest. Thus, the aspect of rest should not be dissociated from that of reign. Jesus Christ is greater than Moses and Joshua in the fact that He is the only one that offered a real rest. Moses failed to offer a rest, while the one offered by Joshua was unsatisfactory. Jesus not only offers a rest (both present and future), but He is the only High Priest that is resting. His rest is not only a reflection of fulfilment but also of reign in both eschatological and soteriological aspects.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bauernfeind, Otto. “Καταπαύω, Κατάπαυσις.” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Carson, D. A. “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels.” In *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, edited by D. A. Carson. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999.
- . *The Gospel According to John*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Davies, W. D. *Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.
- Dressler, Harold H. P. “The Sabbath in the Old Testament.” In *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, edited by D. A. Carson. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999.
- Hagner, Donald Alfred. *Hebrews*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990.
- J. C. Laansma. “Rest.” In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity Diversity of Scripture*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000.

- Keener, Craig S. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Kidner, Derek. *Genesis*. Vol. 1. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008.
- Klink, Edward W. *John*. Edited by Clinton E. Arnold. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004.
- O. Hofius. “Κατάπαυσις, Ἔως, ἦ.” In *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- O’Brien, Peter T. *The Letter to the Hebrews*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Parker, Richard Anthony. “The Calendars and Chronology.” In *The Legacy of Egypt*, edited by Richard Anthony Parker, Gerald J. Toomer, and Erik Iversen. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Schreiner, Thomas. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

# Was Amos among the prophets? Amos 7:14: A prophet in spite of himself<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Corin Mihăilă<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long debated whether the prophets considered themselves as such or were so designated by later generations. Amos is among the literary and oral prophets of the Old Testament who seems to even reject and deny such designation in Amos 7:10-17 although he admits to prophesying. A close look at Amos 3:1-8 in conjunction with 7:10-17 will show that Amos was indeed a prophet, though a prophet in spite of himself. What he rejects is not his authority as a prophet, but his initiative in becoming a prophet as well as any connection with a prophetic guild. As such, Amos is numbered among many of the men called by God who have reluctantly accepted the call.

**KEYWORDS:** Amos, prophet (נָבִיא), seer (חֹזֶה), son of a prophet (בֶּן־נָבִיא), Amos 3:1-8, Amos 7:10-17.

## INTRODUCTION

A large part of the Old Testament is taken up by what the Hebrew canon terms as the נְבִיאִים or “The Prophets.” There is little disagreement over the fact that these literary creations contain oracles against foreign nations and against Israel (including Judah), which were uttered by men “as they were led by God.” At least that is what these men claimed for their words. Thus, what they were doing is commonly characterized as “prophesying.” What is, however, not so quickly admitted is that these men should be called נְבִיאִים, “prophets,” or that they should be perceived as fulfilling the role of a prophet. In this sense, a great distinction is drawn between the verb “to prophecy” and the noun “prophet.”

Such a distinction has recently led A. Graeme Auld and R. Carroll, among others, to argue that, although these men can rightly be said to have “prophesized,” they were perceived as “prophets” only by later generations such as the editors and redactors of their speeches who gathered and catalogued them under the broad

---

<sup>1</sup> The second part of the title is taken from Hans Walter Wolff characterization of Amos in “The Irresistible Word (Amos),” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 6.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Corin Mihăilă, is lecturer in New Testament at Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania. He resides in Braşov, Romania, working also as a pastor at First Baptist Church, Braşov. Email: corin.mihaila@emanuel.ro.

category of “Prophets.” However, according to these scholars, these men never identified themselves with the נְבִיאִים, in fact at times they overtly rejected such a designation. Thus, a more accurate description of these men is “Poets.”<sup>3</sup>

The *locus classicus* of the arguments for this position is Amos 7:10-17. More specifically, the advocates of this view claim that Amos clearly denies for himself the office of נְבִיא in 7:14. By use of a Hebrew nominal clause כִּן־נְבִיאָא Amos seems to distance himself from the term “prophet,” though he admits in 7:15 that what he is doing is called “prophesying.”

This paper, then, will seek to answer the challenging question, “Was Amos among the prophets?” In the process of answering, we will pay close attention to Amos’ self-perception in relation to the term נְבִיאָא. Crucial to this task is the analysis of two passages in Amos that deal with the legitimizing of the prophet’s call: Amos 3:1-8 and 7:10-17. We have chosen to focus on these two passages because they are the only ones in the whole book that use the singular or plural form of the noun נְבִיאָא with reference to Amos, though we will also make mention of 2:11-12, the only other passage in the book using the noun, but apparently unrelated to Amos’ identity.

The importance of Amos’ self-perception for the understanding of Israelite prophecy has long been recognized.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the words of Amos (particularly in 7:14) are not easy to translate, much less to grasp their meaning. Amos 7:14, for instance, is generally recognized as the *crux interpretum* of the book. But if we are to understand something about the identity of these men in relation to the role of a “prophet,” we must struggle to understand the meaning of Amos’ words. This is all the more important as we realize that Amos is the earliest of the literary “prophets,” on whose footsteps follow the other eighth and seventh century prophets. So Amos, in a way, sets the tone of how the “prophets” perceived themselves. An understanding of Amos’ self-perception in relation to

---

<sup>3</sup> A. Graeme Auld, “Prophets Through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 3-23; R. Carroll, “Poets not Prophets: A Response to ‘Prophets Through the Looking Glass,’” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 25-31; H. G. M. Williamson, “A Response to A.G. Auld,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 33-39; See also the rejoinder by Auld in “Prophets Through the Looking Glass: A Response to Robert Carroll and Hugh Williamson,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 41-44. See also S. A. Geller, “Were the Prophets Poets?” *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 211-21.

<sup>4</sup> *Contra* Matitiah Tsevat, “Amos 7:14—Present or Preterit,” in *The Tablet & the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, eds. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell & David B. Weisberg (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 256-58. He states: “The answer does not imply a view of the essence of prophecy or the status of prophets it provides no basis for criticism of the history of these passages.” (258).

the נְבִיאִים is therefore crucial not only for the immediate understanding of his words but also for the general theme of Israelite prophecy.

## AMOS 3:1-8: AN *APOLOGIA* OF AMOS' PROPHETIC AUTHORITY IN PROCLAIMING DIVINE JUDGMENT

Amos 3:1-8 begins the second division of the book.<sup>5</sup> Verses 1 and 8 form an *inclusion*—"Yahweh has spoken"—which shows not only that these verses are a unit but also that with verse 8 a certain initial resolution has been reached.<sup>6</sup> There are primarily two themes that hold this passage together: (1) "evil" (i.e., catastrophe/disaster) in a city shows God's judgment and (2) prophecy is God's warning to people.<sup>7</sup> J. Jeremias rightly sees 3:1 as announcing Amos' divine discourse, 3:2 as naming it (i.e., judgment), and 3:3-8 as legitimizing it.<sup>8</sup> As such, this unit is intended to legitimize Amos' prophetic commission and pronouncement. Seeing this passage as an *apologia* of his authority as a prophet of God is important as a starting point in elucidating Amos' self-perception in relation to the role of a prophet.

### *Setting the Text in Context*

In order to see where Amos and his role as God's "prophet" come into focus in this message, we need to notice the logical development of this unit and the relationship of these two major themes. In this sense, Andersen and Freedman are right to see verses 1 and 2 as a "pivotal expression or bridge" between chapters 1-2 and chapters 3-4.<sup>9</sup> While chapter 2 in particular announces God's

---

<sup>5</sup> *Contra* Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 378, who see chapter 1-4 as the first major unit of the book. In this respect, they take 2:9-3:8 as a unit. Most commentators however see a clear break at 2:16. For a thorough presentation of different views on the structure of Amos, see Stephen J. Bramer, "Analysis of the Structure of Amos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 160-74. How one understands the structure of Amos has little influence on the exegesis of this paper. The smaller segment, i.e., 3:1-8, however, must be seen as a unit within the larger context. See Yehoshua Gitay, "A Study of Amos's Art of Speech: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amos 3:1-15," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 293- 309, for arguments in favor of viewing this passage as a unit. Also Karl Moller, following D. A. Dorsey, suggests that Amos 3:1-15 is a rhetorical unit consisting of a seven-part chiasm. See his *A Prophet in Debate: The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Book of Amos*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement, Series 372 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 217- 50.

<sup>6</sup> Cf., Jorg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (translated by Douglas W. Stott; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., Jan de Waard and William A. Smalley, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos* (United Bible Societies, 1979), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremias, *Amos*, 48. Also Moller, *A Prophet in Debate*, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 32. Shalom M. Paul also sees these verses as a "sort of mini recapitulation of some of the main motifs and expressions of the first two chapters..." *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 100-01.

judgment of Israel, it is only beginning with chapter 3 that the specifics of this judgment are presented. Amos 3:1-8, then, is a transitional pericope and is written to have a powerful rhetorical effect on the audience, namely, to convince Israel of the validity of the divine pronouncement of judgment.<sup>10</sup>

Verse 1 draws the attention of the audience to the divine speech: “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken.” The expressions used both in verses 1 and 2 echo the language of the covenant made at Sinai.<sup>11</sup> There, God spoke to Israel and the result was fear. Here God speaks again, but, as Amos will later suggest, the result is not fear; rather Israel ignores the warning and suppresses it (3:8). The covenant language is particularly evident in 3:1b where Amos reiterates the Exodus motif from 2:10, and in 3:2a where Amos reminds his audience of the special relationship that Israel has with Yahweh.<sup>12</sup>

It is this very covenant language that Amos employs for rhetorical impact. Upon hearing the covenantal language, Israel would have immediately assumed that Amos will proclaim a message of comfort and peace. Thus, when Amos proclaims in 3:2b that God will punish Israel for the very reason of their special status, the audience must have been shocked and alarmed. For them, the past covenant implied present and future protection and salvation (cf. 5:14, 18; 9:10). But they forgot that God was not only the guarantor of salvation but also a righteous God who will punish Israel for her transgressions (e.g., Josh. 24:19-20). In this sense, Amos 3:2b is programmatic for chapters 3 and 4, serving as their hermeneutical key.<sup>13</sup>

In these opening verses of chapter 3, then, an unexpected reversal takes place: From the *special status* of Israel, as God’s covenant people, Amos draws out

---

<sup>10</sup> Moller, *A Prophet in Debate*, 224.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., Jeffrey Niehaus, *Amos*, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical & Expository Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992; 3rd ed. 2000), 322, where he rightly states that, “The phraseology of the prophecy of Amos illustrates the covenant background against which it was written.” Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 382, argue that, “Without the covenant background and the stipulations and sanctions imposed at Sinai the prophet’s argument would be meaningless.”

<sup>12</sup> Paul notices the technical legal meaning of the verb “to know” in 3:2a. He states: “What is actually implied here [by the use of this word] is that the Lord has made a covenant with the people of Israel, who alone are recognized as his sole legitimate covenant partners...Their distinction and dignity stem...from the permanent covenant relationship that permanently binds them to their God,” *Amos*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., Jeremias, *Amos*, 48. Henry McKeating, *The Books of Amos, Hosea and Micah*, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 26, sees verse 2 as being “virtually a summary of Amos’ entire message.” James Luther Mays considers the appeal to the covenant as “furnishing a theological framework within which other announcements of coming judgment can be understood,” *Amos: A Commentary*, *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 55.

their *special responsibilities* before God and therefore the divine right to punish.<sup>14</sup> Instead of their election functioning as the foundation for God's care and protection, Amos uses it here as a basis for punishment.<sup>15</sup> The reversal, then, is both shocking and at the same time justified. Robert Martin-Achard and S. Paul Re'emi capture well the rhetorical impact of this reversal:

... from [the election] he draws a conclusion diametrically opposed to that of his partners in dialogue. The latter take it for granted that their election protects them from the divine wrath and shelters them from the menace of destruction. As for the prophet it is precisely because the Israelites are the object of God's choice that he will require them to give an explanation of their iniquities. Just being the people of God offers no absolute guarantee, rather it confers a special responsibility. We are to note the astonishing reversal accomplished by Amos: election takes the place here of the bill of indictment. We can conceive just how scandalized his hearers must have been by his proposition: the prophet had turned the history of salvation into a history of judgment.<sup>16</sup>

By drawing unexpected conclusions concerning the covenant's implications, Amos' legitimacy and authority in passing judgment must have been questioned by the audience. We could almost hear the hostile response and the protest of the audience, to Amos' proclamation: "Who does he think he is to make such a pronouncement [3:2b]?"<sup>17</sup> Two objections in particular must have been raised in the minds of the people after hearing the first two verses of chapter 3:

---

<sup>14</sup> "Therefore" in 3:2b points to the unexpected, opposite, interpretation of the covenant's implications.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Harry Mowvley, *The Books of Amos & Hosea*, Epworth Commentaries (London: Epworth, 1991), 37. Most commentators notice this shocking reversal that takes place and the interconnection between privilege and punishment. See, e.g., Paul, *Amos*, 102, where he states that, "The imminent judgment is predicated upon their very election." Andersen and Freedman have caught well the use of the covenant language to justify divine judgment, when they suggest the following meaning: "Yahweh has done these things for you in the past, and Yahweh will do this thing to you in the future. You did not deserve the first, but he did them for you anyway; you certainly deserve the second, and in spite of every effort on his part, he finally cannot and will not avert it," *Amos*, 32-3. Richard S. Cripps suggests the following reading of verse 2: "You are indeed the people of my special care, but that fact does not imply that I shall treat you more leniently than I do other nations who transgress my moral laws. The greater your privileges so much the more your responsibility. Or in New Testament language 'Unto whom much is given from him much shall be required,'" *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* (London: SPCK, 1929; 2nd ed. 1955), 152. Mays states: "The historical credo has been drawn into the accusation against the nation," *Amos*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Martin-Achard and S. P. Re'emi, *God's People in Crisis: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handset, 1969), 28.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., Mowvley, *Amos*, 38.

(1) It makes no sense for God to punish his covenantal people and (2) Amos has no authority and is not competent to prophecy judgment. These two objections are answered by Amos in 3:3-8. Thus, Amos' primary concern in these verses is not to reveal their sins nor to describe the punishment, which he will do later, but to convince and persuade them by appealing to their mind and reason of the validity of his pronouncement in 3:2b.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, this unit has an apologetic tone: Amos seeks to defend his right to bring a message of divine judgment.

### *The Prophet's Legitimization as the Rhetorical Climax of 3:3-8*

Commentators agree on several aspects of Amos 3:3-8. Although, Stuart, for instance, calls this unit a "disputation in which Amos' or any prophet's necessity to prophesy about disaster Yahweh has cause is defended,"<sup>19</sup> and Niehaus takes this passage as a "covenant-lawsuit address,"<sup>20</sup> all see it as a defense of some sort. As such, Amos seeks to secure the assent of the audience to what he has to say by means of a series of rhetorical questions. He uses this device "in order to draw the unexpected audience logically and skillfully into the flow of a persuasive and penetrating presentation of the inextricable relationship of all events and happenings."<sup>21</sup>

Also, commentators generally agree that Amos' method of persuasion based on a series of rhetorical questions resembles the wisdom, didactic literature (e.g., Job 8:11ff; 38).<sup>22</sup> Samuel Terrien has convincingly argued for the presence of wisdom motifs in Amos. He states concerning this passage that, "The fact that the prophet expects to stimulate audience approval in a matter of logical thinking involving assent to the principle of empirically observed causation is strongly reminiscent of the teaching method of the wise."<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf., Gary V. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 31 (Waco: Word, 1987), 324.

<sup>20</sup> Niehaus, *Amos*, 318. He follows Herbert B. Huffmon, "Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959): 285 in structuring 3:1-8 in the form of such an address: Introduction of plaintiff and judge 3.1a; Introduction of defendant 3.1b; Indictment 3.2; Confirmation of covenant-lawsuit messenger 3.3-8; Summons to witnesses 3.9a; Judgment 3.9b-10; Judgment 3.11-15.

<sup>21</sup> Paul, *Amos*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Wolff, *Amos the Prophet: The Man and His Background* (translated by Foster R. McCurley; ed. by John Reumann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 10, where he states: "This form has instructional functions in the didactic style of wisdom discourse since it simultaneously provokes insight into and concurrence with the knowledge which is perceived by the series of observations."

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Terrien, "Amos and Wisdom," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 112.

The rhetorical questions share at least three features in common.<sup>24</sup> First, they are all derived from common knowledge and experience (particularly that of a shepherd as Amos was) and therefore no special training in wisdom was necessary to answer these questions. The answers were self-evident because the analogies were trivial. Secondly, they all illustrate the principle of cause-and-effect (with the exception of 3:6 where it seems to be reversed) in the animal, human, and divine realms. According to the generally accepted principle, every event has its cause.

Amos' argumentation is thus fundamentally logical in nature utilizing the principle of analogy. Thirdly, all rhetorical questions expect "No" as an answer. They press the audience into agreeing with Amos, and thus it is easy to hear the audience whispering in agreement: "It is true; this thing would not happen were it not preceded by the other."

Commentators, however, are divided over what is being defended in 3:3-8. The majority agree that in these verses Amos offers an *apologia* of his prophetic commissioning. J. L. Mays argues that this unit is a "defense of the messenger's work; the prophet speaks to justify his commission."<sup>25</sup> Andersen and Freedman agree: "The main objective is a defense of the prophet in his role as messenger of Yahweh." Later they contend: "Amos 3:3-8, with its theme of prophecy is an *apologia* for the compulsive behavior of prophets in the light of the treatment received in 2:12."<sup>26</sup> Shalom Paul also states that, "Amos is hereby presenting an *apologia* for his calling. He justifies and legitimizes his prophetic commission."<sup>27</sup>

Smith on the other hand, argues that the structure of the unit emphasizes the following theme: "The cause of divine punishment versus the results of divine election." In other words, "The real issue of debate is: will God destroy Israel,

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf., John H. Hayes, *Amos. The Eighth Century Prophet: His Times & His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 124.

<sup>25</sup> Mays, *Amos*, 59. See also, Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, Henneneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 183, 187; Mowley, *Amos*, 38. Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (translated by John Sturdy; New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 56- 59.

<sup>26</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 33 and 378, respectively. Later they state: "It is tempting to see in this exposition a defense of the prophet' s right and obligation to speak the word of Yahweh when he hears it," 400.

<sup>27</sup> Paul, *Amos*, 104. See also Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, The New American Commentary, vol. 19b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 71 where they state: "Amos spoke here as the defender of his office as messenger as well as the messenger of his God."

his chosen people?”<sup>28</sup> In response to the previous view, he adds: “Amos is not defending himself... he is not attempting to vindicate his own authority.”<sup>29</sup>

Apparently, what distinguishes the two views is the object to be defended: messenger or message, respectively? This, in turn, depends on whether one takes verse 6b or verse 8b to be the climax of the rhetorical unit. According to the latter view, what is being defended in this passage is the message of doom and destruction. Smith rightly argues that 3:3-8 must be read in the context of 3:1-2, and as such it functions as an answer to the paradox of 3:1-2.<sup>30</sup> What the Israelites reject, according to Smith, is the message of judgment pronounced in 3:2b; it is this message that must be justified.

Besides the argument from structure, support for his view is brought by pointing to the goal of the rhetorical questions. In other words, while the first six rhetorical questions state something straightforward with which the audience would agree, the answer to the question raised in 3:6b (“Does a disaster overtake a city if the Lord does not do it?”) is not self-evident and therefore is considered the goal of the argument up to this point. By the use of the chain of rhetorical questions derived from nature and social relations, Amos seeks to prove that God is the cause of disaster - the implication of the covenant stated in 3:2b. Hayes explains: “Amos’ goal would appear to have been to get the audience to agree to the implication of the first six questions where the response was straightforward and commonsensical and then on the basis of such agreement to assent to the final proposition. Acceptance of this proposition would then support his main contention: the present trouble being undergone by Israel, its oppression by neighboring states was the work of Yahweh...”<sup>31</sup>

The second position argues that the climax and ultimate purpose of Amos’ presentation is 3:8, namely, that he *must* prophecy since God has spoken.<sup>32</sup> In the words of Hans Walter Wolff, “Yahweh’s word came as *verbum irresistibile*.”<sup>33</sup> This view perceives as the setting of this unit a hostile encounter between the speaker and audience. The audience must have suspected that Amos proclaimed

---

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Amos*, 99 and 103, respectively. He follows William R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, vol. 23 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 64.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Amos*, 110.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Amos*, 106. See also McKeating who supports this interpretation on the basis that “it sees the images as filling out the meaning of verse 2 to which the passage is joined,” 27. However, McKeating, on the same page, rejects verse 7 as authentic, arguing that it is “a prose gloss or explanation introduced by a scribe who placed a different interpretation the passage regarding it as a justification of the prophet’s authority.”

<sup>31</sup> Hayes, *Amos*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Niehaus, 375.

<sup>33</sup> Wolff, “The Irresistible Word,” 5.

the message out of his own initiative and thus Amos seeks to prove that his proclamation is the result of an irresistible call of God, just as any other natural cause-and-effect events in the world. Andersen and Freedman explain:

The point made in this section is that the prophet is privy to the counsel of Yahweh and when a decision is reached Yahweh speaks; then the prophet has no choice but to bring that message to the attention of the people so that they will know about divine plans and decisions. The combination of Yahweh speaking and the prophet prophesying or reporting Yahweh's speech is as firm, certain and inevitable as a half-dozen other combinations in the world of nature and of humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Later they add: "The heart of the message has to do with the indissoluble link between the word of God and the mission of the prophet. The connection between the speaking of Yahweh and the prophesying of his servant is essential and fundamental—they are two parts or sides of the same reality."<sup>35</sup>

The rhetorical questions, then, serve as a "trap" for the audience who is unable to escape the snare of Amos' logic. Amos uses this device in order to bring them to acknowledgement of his prophetic authority. Shalom Paul explains:

He first attracts the attention of his listeners by deftly drawing them into his orbit of thinking by means of statements they can readily and favorably accept and then suddenly and dramatically he confronts his already captive audience with a totally unexpected and climactic finale. The phenomenon of prophecy is likewise a product of this same irresistible sequence of cause and effect. The first seven oracles as well as the seven rhetorical questions serve as an effective decoy for his ultimate trap; they are preclimactic. They are completely caught off guard when the prophet adds his eighth and final thrust.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to observe that in this view, the tendency is to take the rhetorical question in 3:6b as something that Amos' hearers already knew, namely that Yahweh was the cause of civil calamities. It was an appeal to what they took for granted.<sup>37</sup> The only thing left to prove was Amos' authority to prophesy.

While both of these views have their valid points of arguments, a more balanced view is possible, which takes into account both themes.<sup>38</sup> There is a close

---

<sup>34</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 371.

<sup>36</sup> Paul, *Amos*, 105. He is followed by Smith and Page, *Amos*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., James Ward, *Amos & Isaiah: Prophets of the Word of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 40.

<sup>38</sup> De Waard and Smalley allude to the importance of both themes but do not seek to show the coherence of the text, *Translator's Handbook*, 62.

connection between the two major themes of this unit—the evil is the direct act of God and Amos is the valid prophet to proclaim such a message. Stuart explains what the logic of the passage is as a whole: “Yahweh has caused this disaster, has revealed it to Amos, and Amos must proclaim it.”<sup>39</sup> Andersen and Freedman concur:

Not only is it true that evil befalls a city because Yahweh does it, he does not do it without telling a prophet. The links in the chain are firm. The lord makes a decision; he tells a prophet; the prophet announces it—he must; it comes to pass—it must. The only mission connection is that the people do not heed the warning.<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, verse 7 plays a crucial role in connecting the two themes and it is not superfluous as some commentators argue.<sup>41</sup> Once Amos has proven with the help of the first six rhetorical questions that disaster is caused by God, he then adds that God warns the people by means of prophets. Thus, both major themes are emphasized by the text, since both statements are not self-evident and need proof. They represent two peaks of the same mountain.

Nevertheless, the rhetorical unit seems to show a certain progression towards an ultimate climax found in 3:8. At least two arguments can be presented in support for this assessment. First, as far as the immediate context is concerned, the rhetorical question in 3:6b is preclimactic. Wolff rightly argues that, “A provisional conclusion can be said to have been reached at verse 6b, a conclusion which finds its precise clarification in v8: the disaster brought by Yahweh upon the city which strikes terror into the people is the message forced upon the prophet in an irresistible way.”<sup>42</sup> The seventh question found in 3:6b functions as the seventh oracle against the nations in chapters 1-2, namely as a “trap” that leads further to the unexpected conclusion concerning the validity and authority of Amos’ proclamation of divine judgment.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the emphasis in the immediate context falls on the validation of Amos’ authority as a prophet.

---

<sup>39</sup> Stuart, *Amos*, 326.

<sup>40</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 394.

<sup>41</sup> There have been some who have dismissed verse 7 as original arguing that it is a redaction gloss based on the observation that its prose interrupts the poetical genre of the surrounding verses, that it has very little to do with the preceding thought, and that the phrases used (e.g. “servants of Yahweh”) are characteristic of the later prophets. It is mostly the earlier commentators who see verse 7 as a later interpolation. See, e.g., Wolff, *Amos*, 181, “It can be asserted with considerable assurance that 3:7 is a later literary addition.” Also A. G. Auld, *Amos*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 31.

<sup>42</sup> Wolff, *Amos the Prophet*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. follows Robert Alter in observing that Amos uses a “rhetoric of entrapment” in his oracles against the nations by using the pattern  $x/x+1$ . See his “‘For Three Sins...Even for Four’: The Numerical Saying in Amos,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1990): 188. The

Second, the rhetorical question posed in verse 3—“Do two go together unless they have arranged to meet?”—can be regarded as the introduction of the theme of the series in 3:3-8. Andersen and Freedman rightly argue that, “Verses 4-7 validate the principle of association adumbrated in the introduction. In each case there are two things that naturally go together.”<sup>44</sup> Shalom Paul agrees: “The anonymity of ‘two walking together’ makes this theme an appropriate continuation of the cause-and-effect dual relationship just described between Israel and God in verses 1 and 2 on the one hand, and serves in addition as a convenient all-purpose introduction to the remaining six questions of ‘bilateral’ relations on the other.”<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the two walking together can be contextually identified with God and the prophet from 3:8. The emphasis of the whole pericope falls thus on the inescapability of God speaking and the prophet speaking (in this case Amos).

This evaluation of the unit cannot but lead to the conclusion that Amos’ ultimate purpose in the opening passage of chapter 3 is to justify his prophetic authority. The pronouncement of judgment in 3:2b produced shock, doubt, and indignation in the audience. Before he could proceed with the description of judgment, Amos had to make sure that his audience was convinced that his prophetic message is not his thoughts but is the result of the irresistible call of God. His argument, then, is logical and is as follows: just as each event in nature and in human relations has its cause, so every calamity has God as source; moreover, God warns the people of such calamity through a prophet. The implied conclusion of the unit for our purpose is thus this: Amos is a prophet of God who must announce civil disaster, because of God’s irresistible call.

Amos, therefore, clearly identifies himself with the נְבִיאִים in this passage. His apparent denial of being נְבִיא in 7:14 must therefore be interpreted in light of his association with the נְבִיאִים in 3:7. The hermeneutical rule that supports this position is that the meaning of the harder text (i.e., 7:14) must be interpreted in light of the easier text (i.e., 3:7-8). In other words, whatever the meaning of Amos 7: 14 is, it cannot contradict the meaning of 3:7-8 where Amos is clearly numbered among the נְבִיאִים.

---

same can be said of the 7/7+1 in 3:3- 8. While the Israelites may be persuaded to believe that disaster comes from God as the seventh question, and believe that this was the ultimate point of Amos’ argumentation, they would not have expected the eighth question in 3:8, especially after the chain of questions is interrupted by the prose of 3 :7. See also J. Limburg, “Sevenfold Structures in the Book of Amos,” *Journal for Biblical Literature* 106 ( 1987): 220, who points out that here we have another 7+1 series (i.e., seven rhetorical questions followed by the passage’s focal point).

<sup>44</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 387.

<sup>45</sup> Paul, *Amos*, 109.

## AMOS 7:10-17: A DEFENSE OF AMOS' RIGHT TO PROPHECY IN ISRAEL

Amos 7:10-17 is the best-known and at the same time most controversial text in the book of Amos not only for its known translational crux of the nominal clause in 7:14, but also for the meaning of the term נְבִיא and the relation of Amos to the נְבִיאִים. Gene Tucker is right to state that the text “provides direct insight into how the prophets were perceived by their followers and their opponents and indirect insight into how the prophets perceived themselves.”<sup>46</sup>

### *The Immediate Context*

Its placement in the present context (between the third and fourth visions) has a specific purpose despite its apparent misfit, namely it has a theological rather than historical or chronological purpose.<sup>47</sup> Its function is not only to show the historical setting of the prophetic judgment against Amaziah—the debate between the priest Amaziah and the prophet Amos. As Harry Mowvely correctly argued, “It has been included as a contribution to a discussion about the authority of different groups of people: prophet, priest and king and above all the authority of Yahweh.”<sup>48</sup>

In this sense, the main emphasis of the dispute between the priest and the seer is on the “authority in whose name and commission they are acting in the first place. The priest of the royal sanctuary in Bethel is presented to the reader first in his official function; as is his duty, he sends a message to his state superior the king before turning to Amos. Analogously, Amos is presented first in relation to his superior God before he turns with his divine oracle to Amaziah.”<sup>49</sup> The conflict is thus not so much between the priest and the prophet, but between human leaders and the inescapable word of God. Ake Viberg rightly states that, “The issue at stake was nothing less than the value and authority of Yahweh’s prophetic message at Bethel.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Gene M. Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity: A Form-Critical Study of Amos 7: 10- 17,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 424.

<sup>47</sup> Cf., Hayes, *Amos*, 231.

<sup>48</sup> Mowvely, *Amos*, 79.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremias, *Amos*, 137. The conflict between divine and human authorities is characteristic, not an isolated phenomenon. See, e.g., the conflict between Jeremiah and Pashur in Jer. 20:1; Jer. 26, 28; or the conflict between Jesus and the priests and scribes when they ask him: “By what authority are you doing these things?” Mk. 11:29; or the conflict between Peter, John and the religious authorities in Acts 3:18 who order them to speak no more.

<sup>50</sup> Ake Viberg, “Amos 7:14: A Case of Subtle Irony,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 113. See also Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity,” who persuasively argues for the authority of Amos’ message as the central theme of the unit. Among his arguments, two are most telling. First, if the text is analyzed as narrative with a plot (exposition, conflict, crisis, and solution), the center of the story and its key are found in verse 15 where Amos defends his commission. Second, “In terms of

Just like in 3:1-8, so in this passage there is a challenge to Amos' authority to prophesy in Israel. The central theme of the passage, then, is an *apologia* of Amos concerning his prophetic commission to Israel. According to Andersen and Freedman, "The main point, almost the only point is that he is under inescapable obligation to deliver the prophetic word to Israel."<sup>51</sup> Smith agrees when he states that, "[The unit's] purpose is to explain the basis for the authoritative message that Yahweh commanded Amos to deliver to 'my people Israel.'"<sup>52</sup>

Seeing the emphasis of the text on prophetic authenticity, Amaziah's opposition to Amos is due not so much to a denial of Amos' legitimacy and authority as a prophet, but to a denial of the place of his prophetic authority (i.e., Bethel).<sup>53</sup> Several details of the text confirm this interpretation. First, Amaziah considers Amos a "seer" and there is no reason to take this characterization as derogatory. Some have sought to support the understanding of נָבִי in a depreciatory sense, meaning that Amos rejects being identified with false prophets who prophesy for gain.<sup>54</sup> Such an interpretation is tempting since Amaziah commands Amos to return to Judah and there "to earn his living." It also appears to make sense in

---

tone and content, the narrative is partisan and apologetic." Amos seeks to defend and justify his right to prophesy in the face of Amaziah's challenge and opposition.

<sup>51</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 775.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Amos*, 239. Smith and Page concur: "The issue in the narrative of the encounter between Amos and Amaziah was one of authority. Who was in charge of the people called Israel? Was it Jeroboam the king, or Amaziah the priest at Bethel, or Amos the prophet of God, or God himself?" *Amos*, 135. See also Ward, *Amos & Isaiah*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Cf., Paul, *Amos*, 242.

<sup>54</sup> *Contra* TEV "I am not the kind of prophet who prophesies for pay." So also Simon Cohen, "Amos Was a Navi," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 177; J. L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 124 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 67. Wolff, *Amos*, 312-13; Hayes, *Amos*, 236; Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 785; Hammershaimb, for instance, states that, "Amaziah treats Amos as one of the professional fortune-tellers who sold their knowledge for money and told people what they wanted to hear," as in Mic. 3:5, 11. See his *Amos*, 116. See also Ziony Zevit who takes the נָבִי here to designate seers attached to the court, the so-called "court-prophets," who depended upon royal patronage, "A Misunderstanding at Bethel," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1974): 786-87; Cripps, *Amos*, 232, paraphrases Amos' statement as "No prophet (such as you have in mind) am I; certainly not one of the roving bands of prophets (So prophet, in a better sense, certainly I am)." Thus, what Cripps is arguing is that Amos "is only dissociating himself from the less spiritual and the less worthy prophets of the past and perhaps especially of his own day." For arguments in reading ἡζ<βχο (and therefore aybiān) in a positive light see the next page of this paper. That a prophet may prophesy for gain is attested on several occasions: 1 Sam. 9:8; 1 Kg. 14:3; 2 Kg. 4:42, 8:9. However, Paul rightly argues that, "Although the charge is not unprecedented, the payment of a fee for an oracle is not to be found among the classical prophets. Only false prophets still accept perquisites for their oracles," *Amos*, 242.

light of Amos' response that he is a shepherd and a farmer, as if to say that his means of earning money is not by being a prophet.<sup>55</sup>

But, as we have already seen, the purpose of the inclusion of this text between visions 3 and 4 is theological: to authenticate the authority of Amos to prophesy in Israel. As such, the emphasis is on the place of the utterance of the divine oracles, Amaziah is seeking to convince Amos to prophesy elsewhere, without denying his authenticity as a prophet. The mention of his vocation as a shepherd and farmer is brought into the discussion for the sole purpose of serving as a contrast to what he is now without choice—a prophet. In other words, his choice is that of being a shepherd and a farmer, but the irresistible call of God is that of being a prophet. His denial of being a prophet would thus be not a denial of prophesying for gain, but a denial of being a prophet by choice.<sup>56</sup> This reading is supported by the obvious contrast between the twice repeated emphatic *I* in 7:14 and the twice repeated *Yahweh* in 7:15.

A positive understanding of נְבִיאָה seems to be supported from the broader context. In 1:2 the verb חָזָה is used in a positive way and though a different yet synonymous word is used in describing the visions of Amos (i.e., רָאָה), there is no reason to deny the fact that Amaziah considered Amos an authentic visionary based on the visions Amos had.<sup>57</sup> Shalom Paul rightly argues, then, in comparing Amos with Balaam that, “Their legitimacy is not questioned; they are simply *persona non grata*.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Tsewat, “Amos 7:14,” 257. He paraphrases Amos' response thus: “You are relating my appearance at your temple to material interest which I supposedly have. But you are wrong! I am not a נְבִיאָה. To be sure, there are men, sometimes called נְבִיאִים who prophesy for economic gain, and this is even more true of those called בְּנֵי-נְבִיאִים, but I am not one of them. Perhaps some are forced by circumstances to do so, but I am not. I make my living as a cattleman and a gardener.”

<sup>56</sup> J. D. W. Watts gives a similar interpretation to Amos' denial by suggesting the following translation: “No prophet did *I* choose to be! (I did not choose or seek the status of נְבִיאָה). Nor did I seek to become one of the prophetic guilds. For *I* (had chosen to be) a herdsman and a tender of sycamores, when *Yahweh* took me from following the flock (the place of my choice) ...” *Vision and Prophecy in Amos* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 12. His emphasis is thus on the mood instead of on the tense; he describes the mood as “a kind of subjunctive of volition.” Though Peter R. Ackroyd gives a different interpretation of the nominal clause, he rightly notices that “By that very emphasis on origin, and by implication on the lack of qualification for office, the motif underlines the divine prerogative, just as this is done in other call material by stunning unwillingness (so Moses, Jeremiah) or unfitness (so Isaiah, Ezekiel).” See his “Judgment Narrative between Kings and Chronicles: An Approach to Amos 7:9-17.” In *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (edited by George W. Coats and Burke O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 87.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 771.

<sup>58</sup> Paul, *Amos*, 242.

Secondly, as a result, Amaziah shows a certain degree of respect to Amos and therefore he is careful as to how he deals with him. Andersen and Freedman explain: “Amaziah’s advice [to leave Bethel] could express a compromise, a caution and uncertainty in his own mind. He hesitates to take more drastic measures because for all he knows Amos might be a real prophet and therefore sacrosanct.”<sup>59</sup>

Thirdly, Amaziah seems to be perfectly happy for Amos to continue his role as a seer as long as he does it elsewhere. Amaziah’s concern is thus more with political stability than with the divine word, and that without actually denying Amos the status of a prophet. Jorg Jeremias is thus right to argue that, “Neither Amos’ profession nor his legitimate professional income is to be jeopardized,”<sup>60</sup> if Amos left Bethel, as far as Amaziah is concerned. James Ward however notices the divergent views on the role of a prophet between Amaziah and Amos: “Amaziah’s command did not entail a minor change in Amos’ plans or a mere restriction of the sphere of his operations. It constituted a denial of Amos’ basic commission as a prophet.”<sup>61</sup> For Amaziah the issue is one of *place* of prophetic utterance while for Amos it is an issue of prophetic *authority*. Gene Tucker explains: “When he addresses Amos he speaks in terms of jurisdiction: ‘You are not allowed to speak here.’ In his response it is clear Amos takes the issue to be one of authority. In the face of questions of legality and jurisdiction he asserts that Yahweh himself sent him.”<sup>62</sup>

Thus, what we may understand from all these details in the text is that Amaziah considered Amos a legitimate seer; what he failed to see was that included in the prophetic commission was also the place of prophetic utterance. In turn, Amos understands his prophetic authority as entailing prophesying *where* God irresistibly sent him. As such, what Amaziah considered being a minor change of plans and place, for Amos it meant rejection and opposition to God’s call, and therefore it deserved judgment.

Such an understanding of the main issues at work in the dispute between Amaziah and Amos may help us to see more clearly what is happening in 7:14 where Amos apparently denies the role of a נְבִיאַיָּהּ

*The Syntactical Force of the Particle לֹא and the Semantic Value of נְבִיאַיָּהּ, and נְבִיאַיָּהּ*

---

<sup>59</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 771.

<sup>60</sup> Jeremias, *Amos*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> Ward, *Amos & Isaiah*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity,” 428.

Much ink has been spilled over verse 14 of chapter 7 and many are the solutions offered for the interpretation of the nominal clauses. Space does not allow us to discuss all in detail, though we will seek to mention the major ones and then present the two most important ones.<sup>63</sup> We will start with the least advocated views, yet possible readings. These views all have in common the fact that they start from the presupposition that Amos cannot be denying the role of a *true* prophet. Therefore, he must be denying either being a false prophet or a court prophet. The arguments then focus on the semantics of *חֹזֶה*, *נְבִיא*, and *נְבִיאִים*, and on the syntactical force of the particle *לֹא*.

Some take the particle not as a negative particle but actually representing an emphatic negative marker, thus changing the Masoretic punctuation.<sup>64</sup> As such, the nominal clauses should be translated: “No! I am indeed a prophet, but I am not a son of a prophet (professional prophet)!” According to the advocates of this view, this reading is “so natural and logical, and consistent with the thought of the prophet that the only objection that can be raised against it is that it changes the traditional and accepted Masoretic punctuation,” an objection that has no real force since the traditional punctuation did not arise until centuries after Amos.<sup>65</sup>

This high regard of their own view, however, is too reductionistic. This is particularly seen in the paraphrase that Zevit suggests: “No! I am not a prophet enjoying royal patronage (i.e., a *חֹזֶה*); I am an independent prophet-my own man; nor am I a disciple of any prophet, working under his aegis and doing his bidding.”<sup>66</sup> In their desire to set Amos foursquare within the ancient movement of Israelite *נְבִיאִים*, they deny that *חֹזֶה* and *נְבִיא* synonymous, suggesting that they belong to two different semantic domains, while also suggesting that *חֹזֶה* and *נְבִיא* are to be seen in parallel.<sup>67</sup> More specifically, *חֹזֶה* is seen to refer to a “royal prophet” who is under the patronage of the king and *בֶּן־נְבִיא* is seen to refer to a “cultic prophet” who is subordinate to the priest. Such prophets would always deliver good news to please their patron, whether king or priest. These false prophets (“seers”) are attested in the Old Testament in places such as Jer. 23: 9-

---

<sup>63</sup> For a more comprehensive evaluation of the history of interpretation of this verse, see Viberg’s article, “Amos 7:14,” especially pp. 99- 107, to whom we are indebted for the material contained in this section of the paper. Our presentation will not include all the views he mentions, so we wholeheartedly recommend his article, though we do not agree with his final conclusions.

<sup>64</sup> Cf., Zevit, “A Misunderstanding at Bethel,” 783-90; Cohen, “Amos *Was* a Navi,” 175-78; Zevit, “Expressing Denial in Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew and in Amos,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 505- 09; Stuart, *Amos*, 376.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, “Amos *Was* a Navi,” 176-77.

<sup>66</sup> Zevit, “A Misunderstanding at Bethel,” 790.

<sup>67</sup> *Contra* most commentators who agree that the nouns “seer” and “prophet” are roughly synonymous. See, e.g., Mays, *Amos*, 136; Paul, *Amos*, 240; Smith and Page, *Amos*, 137.

40, Ez. 13:19, Mic. 3:5-7 and 1 Kg. 22. Amos, then, would only refuse to be identified with the false prophets, but accepting for himself the title of a true נְבִיא<sup>68</sup>

This argument, however, does not stand in light of both contextual and linguistic data. From a contextual point of view, if there was no synonymy between חֹזֶה and נְבִיא, why would Amos use נְבִיא when Amaziah referred to him as a חֹזֶה? What would be the sense of Amos' response in light of Amaziah's statement? Clearly Amos, by using the term נְבִיא, responds to Amaziah's use of the term חֹזֶה and his command to prophesy somewhere else, seeing the two terms as synonymous. From a linguistic point of view, the two nouns are sometimes used interchangeably referring to the same person, or in parallel lines making them synonymous (2 Sam. 24:11; 2 Kg. 17:13; Is. 29:10).<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, as Y. Hoffmann rightly notices, Zech. 13:5 understands Amos' response as a double denial.<sup>70</sup> And last, but not least, the following two affirmative statements identifying Amos' secular profession in 7:15 are obviously presented as a contrast to his double denial.<sup>71</sup> Thus, it is more consistent with the syntax of the text and the semantic values of חֹזֶה and נְבִיא, to understand Amos either refusing both or accepting both titles.

Another view is to interpret the first particle לֹא not as a negative but as an assertative "surely." The sense of the verse would then be: "I am surely נְבִיא, but not a member of the prophetic guild."<sup>72</sup> The major weakness of this view, as with the previous one, is that it takes the particles לֹא in very similar adjacent and parallel clauses as different (v.14 and v.16).<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries vol.25; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), seems to agree that Amos rejects the idea of belonging to "the cult prophets and the bands of their disciples," when he states that "Amos seems to renounce any concern for prophetic office, and more particularly for any possible income from such office..."

<sup>69</sup> For details see, Alfred Jepsen "chazah," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 4 (edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Frey; translated by David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 280- 90, where he rightly regards hzh as "a technical term for aybiPn"'s revelation. Ackroyd takes Is. 29:10 as a gloss in order to avoid synonymy; "Judgment Narrative between Kings and Chronicles," 75.

<sup>70</sup> Yair Hoffmann, "Did Amos Regard Himself as a NABI?" *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977): 210.

<sup>71</sup> Cf., Paul, *Amos*, 245.

<sup>72</sup> H. Neil Richardson, "A Critical Note on Amos 7:14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 89.

<sup>73</sup> Viberg, "Amos 7:14," 104.

A similar interpretation is that which takes the particle לֹא to have an interrogative force, which can be interpreted as assertative.<sup>74</sup> As such, the reading of the verse would be something like: “Am I not a prophet? Am I not the son of a prophet?” One problem with such a view, however, is that this translation “makes Amos the son of a prophet, which is what he most certainly is not.”<sup>75</sup> Such a criticism of course is valid only on the assumption that בֶּן־נְבִיא, refers to a prophetic family or guild. But, according to Peter Ackroyd, the phrase in question means “quality which belongs to a prophet” and therefore synonymous with “prophet.”<sup>76</sup> This meaning however is questionable in light of the use of the phrase בֶּן־נְבִיא in the Old Testament. Outside of Amos 7:14, the phrase is confined to a period of about 120 years during Elijah’s and Elisha’s ministries and was referring to the prophetic guild.<sup>77</sup> Thus, a more reasonable reading of the phrase would be “disciple of a prophet” or “under the authority of a leader prophet,” “one who has undergone training as a prophet.” Such an understanding is in line with the biblical evidence that at times describes the prophet in leadership as “father” (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:12 “But who is their [the prophets’] father?”—Samuel).<sup>78</sup>

In addition to that, while it is true that the two colons of 7:14 are parallel and therefore roughly synonymous, we are not dealing here with a “simple parallelism”; there is still some semantic distinction between נְבִיא and בֶּן־נְבִיא. According to Robert Alter for instance, one feature of Hebrew poetry (like we have in our text) is what he calls “dynamics of repetition” in which parallel phrases develop, rather than repeat an idea introduced in the first phrase.<sup>79</sup> Alter rightly emphasizes the subtle shifts in meaning that the parallelisms bring to bear upon the initial colon or phrase. Having said this, however, it doesn’t mean that

---

<sup>74</sup> Cf. G. R. Driver, “Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 67 (1955-56): 91- 92; Peter R. Ackroyd, “Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 68 (1956-57): 94.

<sup>75</sup> MacConnack, “Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 67 (1955- 56): 318.

<sup>76</sup> Ackroyd, “Amos 7:14,” 94. For such a sense he points to Neh. 3:8. But for the meaning of בֶּן־נְבִיא, it is not sufficient to look at בֶּן; the combination of בֶּן and נְבִיא is an idiomatic construction that cannot get its meaning from the sense of the individual parts. For a similar meaning see Hayes, *Amos*, 236, where he states that, “‘Son of a prophet,’ is simply a way of saying ‘one who belongs to the class of the prophet,’ that is a prophet.” Also Ward, *Amos*, 34; Cripps, *Amos*, 233, rightly see in the phrase a Hebrew idiom such as “sons of Belial” meaning “worthless men,” or “sons of the bride chamber” with the sense of “guests at a wedding,” or as in Ez. 2:42 “the children of the porters” meaning “door-keepers.”

<sup>77</sup> See, James G. Williams, “The Prophetic ‘Father’: A Brief Explanation of the Term ‘Sons of the Prophets’,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 345. He gives the following biblical references: 1 Kg. 20:35; 2 Kg. 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1. See also Niehaus, *Amos*, 462; Jeremias, *Amos*, 140.

<sup>78</sup> Cf., Williams, “The Prophetic ‘Father,’” 344-48. For other biblical references to prophets in leadership as “fathers” see, e.g., 2 Kg. 2:12; 6:12. See also Andersen and Freedman who agree with this meaning of the “son of a prophet,” in *Amos*, 778.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 11.

the second colon brings completely new information, unrelated to that found in the first colon. Rather, it means that the second colon builds on the meaning of the first colon. It is therefore justified to see *בְּיָדֵי נְבִיא* not so much as a different category from *נְבִיא* but as a “more precise delineation of the extremely comprehensive *נְבִיא*”<sup>80</sup> As such, those who take the *waw* of the second colon as expegetical or explicative may be closer to the meaning of Amos’ use of the nominal clauses.<sup>81</sup> Thus, Amos seems to be saying: “I [am/was] not a *נְבִיא*, namely I [am/was] not a *בְּיָדֵי נְבִיא*.” By this, Amos seems to be saying that he is under the authority of no human spiritual leader.

In light of the evaluation of the previous views, it is more consistent with syntax and semantics to take Amos’ statements in 7:14 as a negation of the title *נְבִיא*. Before we proceed with the meaning of Amos’ words, there remains one thing to be clarified: the temporal aspect of the nominal clauses (either past or as present tense).

#### *The Temporal Aspect of the Nominal Clauses in 7:14*

One should know that a nominal clause can presuppose either the present or the past tense; both tenses are equally possible.<sup>82</sup> However, what ultimately determines the tense of the nominal clause is the context. Gesenius states: “To what period of time the statement applies must be inferred from the context.”<sup>83</sup>

There are some who interpret the nominal clauses of 7:14 as preterit: “I was not a prophet, and I was not the son of a prophet.”<sup>84</sup> There are several strengths of this view. First, it is based on a natural and contextual reading of the nouns *נְבִיא* and *בְּיָדֵי נְבִיא* as advocated above (being synonymous).

<sup>80</sup> Jeremias, *Amos*, 139.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Ernest Vogt, “*Waw* Explicative in Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 68 (1956-57): 301-02; Jeremias, *Amos*, 135 n. 2 where he explains that “The second sentence offers a partial statement of the more comprehensive first one, the connective *we* is to be understood explicatively.” For *waw* as explicative, see Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* (edited by E. Kautzsch, translated and revised by A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 154 n. lb. Tsevat, “Amos 7:14,” 254, takes the *waw* not as restricting but broadening *aybiḥn*: “Not a *aybiḥn*”, and much less a *בְּיָדֵי נְבִיא*.”

<sup>82</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Amos. A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 222. He states that “Amos is deliberately exploiting the temporal ambiguity of the verbless clauses.”

<sup>83</sup> *GKC*, 141: 3f; see also B. K. Waltke and M. O’ Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §4.5c.

<sup>84</sup> H. H. Rowley, “Was Amos a *נְבִיא*?”, in *Festschrift Otto Eissfeldt zum 60. Geburtstag* (edited by J. Fuck; Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1947): 191-98; Mays, *Amos*, 138-39; Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity,” 432; Paul, *Amos*, 247; Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 778; Jeremias, *Amos*, 139; Ward, *Amos*, 33.

Second, this view rightly takes into consideration the immediate context in which both Amaziah and Amos describe what Amos was doing as *הִנְבֵּא* (“prophesying”), which etymologically must mean something like “act the part of a *נְבִיא*” In this sense, the act of prophesying is always connected to the person of a prophet.<sup>85</sup> The context does not seem to make a distinction in meaning between the *נְבִיא* in 7:14 and *הִנְבֵּא* in verses 13 and 15. The distinction is usually drawn only by those who see an irreducible contradiction and a lack of coherence between Amos admitting being called to engage in the act which defines a prophet-prophesying, on the one hand, and refusing the very title which is given to the one engaged in prophesying- prophet, on the other hand. Bruce Vawter, for instance, argues that: “I would suggest that the verb went its own semantic way independently of the noun, and probably much earlier.”<sup>86</sup> The reason these charismatic men of the eighth century used the verb to describe their activity, but did not use the noun to define their identity was because there was no other verb to use for what they were claiming to do. As a result, Vawter argues, “In Hebrew, one could prophesy, *הִנְבֵּא* without being a *נְבִיא*, in the original sense of the word, simply because “prophesy” had become something other than the narrow matter of its etymology.”<sup>87</sup>

Thomas Overholt, however, is more realistic and closer to the tenet of the whole book of Amos in recognizing that “prophets were performing a recognizable social role.” This means that though “It is not clear why the noun should be unacceptable while the verb acceptable... the use of the verb implies some observable behavior. It follows that the prophetic role is being performed and recognized. This presupposes that both the performers and the audience had a view of what was transpiring.”<sup>88</sup> If that is the case, Overholt asks, “What sense does it make to say audiences recognized that people were prophesying but did not understand them to be prophets?”<sup>89</sup> G. R. Driver raises the same question: “Why should he say that he was not a prophet when he was seen and known by everyone to be one?”<sup>90</sup> Keeping in mind that Amos was performing God’s irresistible call to prophecy in a social context in which an audience knew who

---

<sup>85</sup> This is also the case of Saul in 1 Sam. 10:10--11; He is also characterized as a “prophet” engaged in the act of “prophesying,” though we see him as only a temporary (“short-term”) prophet and not vocational. Amos is similar to Saul in the fact that both had no choice concerning prophesying; they both responded to an irresistible work of God.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Bruce Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” *Biblica* 66 (1985): 217.

<sup>87</sup> Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” 218. On p. 217 he states: “the *נְבִיא* association could have carried over to denominate those who continued to use the *Gathing*, even though they were not *nebi'im* in the first sense of the word.”

<sup>88</sup> Thomas W. Overholt, “Prophecy in History: The Social Reality of intermediation,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 10. See also, Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” 216.

<sup>89</sup> Overholt, “Prophecy in History,” 11.

<sup>90</sup> Driver, “Amos 7:14,” 91.

a prophet was and what he was like, Overhold rightly argues that “Even if it could be established that Amos and the others did not claim to be prophets we would not be entitled to conclude that no one understood them to be performing the role of prophets.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, there is no question that Amos functioned as a prophet and was a prophet, as the past tense rendering asserts.

Thirdly, the preterit rendering of the nominal clauses seems to fit naturally before verse 15, the total meaning being: “I used to be a shepherd and a farmer until God called me to prophecy; only then did I become a prophet, so now I am a prophet.” This reading is also supported by the LXX and Peshitta.

Fourthly, the past tense reading of the nominal clauses also is in agreement with the broader context of the book.<sup>92</sup> We have sought to prove in the first section of this article, that Amos made a strong point in being understood as a prophet in 3:3-8. In both passages, the aim of Amos is to defend his authority to prophesy and his legitimacy as a prophet sent by God.

Thus, it is impossible to see Amos arguing on the one hand that he is a prophet of God, and on the other hand arguing that he is not a prophet. This apparent contradiction is solved by reading the past tense into the nominal clauses.<sup>93</sup>

In spite of making sense of the flow of Amos’ argument, the past tense lacks, however, support from the literary context. Though it may be argued that verse 15 is in the past tense, that cannot be said of verse 13, to which Amos responds. Also, if we are to read verse 14 in the past, it would make no sense as a response to Amaziah. Why would Amos tell Amaziah biographical information when Amaziah is talking about the present? It would interrupt the flow of the argument.<sup>94</sup> The purpose of the passage, after all, as argued before, is not biographical or historical, but theological.

Secondly, if the first nominal clause is taken in the past, then the second one, which is parallel to the first colon, should also be taken in the past. Thus, Amos would be saying: “I used not to be a son of a prophet, but now I am.” Such a

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>92</sup> Cf., Niehaus, *Amos*, 462.

<sup>93</sup> See Daniel Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005 who also suggests a possible past tense, suggesting that Amos “was not a prophet until God called him directly for the task at hand...he did not go to prophet school, take seminars on how to be a prophet, or join the guild of practicing prophets.”

<sup>94</sup> Viberg, “Amos 7:14,” 103. Also A. G. Auld, *Amos*, 26, states: “‘Not a prophet’ demonstrates that Amos is bent on *contradicting* Amaziah’s assumption that he is a professional prophet, not somehow *reinforcing* it.”

statement, however, is obviously meaningless especially that Amos emphasizes being commissioned directly by God to prophecy, and does not prophecy by human authority, by implication.<sup>95</sup>

Thirdly, the form *lo' hayiti* with a predicate noun would have been available to Amos had he wanted to make a statement in the past tense. In other words, Amos could have said that he had not always been a prophet in a clearer and less ambiguous way, had he intended to do it.<sup>96</sup>

In light of these problems of the preterit rendering of the nominal clauses, the only viable option is to read them in the present tense: "I am not a prophet, and I am not a son of a prophet I am a shepherd and a farmer." This is the most natural understanding of the nominal clauses and it is the present tense that is usually presupposed in a nominal clause, which is why no verbal form is needed on the surface level of the text.<sup>97</sup>

Secondly, the present tense is supported by the Vulgate and, more importantly, Zech. 13:5 uses Amos 7:14 with a present tense meaning. In other words, later biblical revelation understood the nominal clauses in Amos 7:14 as being present.

But while there are literary and contextual arguments in favor of the present tense, the question still remains: Is Amos not contradicting himself when he states that he is not a prophet, on the one hand, but that he is prophesying as a result of the irresistible call of God? Is there no contradiction between defending his authority as a prophet in 3:3-8 and his denial of being a prophet in 7:14?

Ake Viberg has sought to solve this paradox by interpreting Amos' denial as an example of irony.<sup>98</sup> Quintilian defined irony as that figure of speech or trope "in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood (*contrarium ei quod dicitur inte/legendum est* )."<sup>99</sup> Since a text does not contain the paralinguistic aspects (i.e., tonal inflexion, facial expressions and body language) in order to

---

<sup>95</sup> Similar critique was seen for the view that takes the particle **לֹא** as interrogative.

<sup>96</sup> Viberg, "Amos7:14," 103; H. -P. Millier "**נָבִיא**" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 9 (edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; translated by David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 138.

<sup>97</sup> See Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §4.5c. The nominal clause is similar to the well-known nominal clauses "Me Tarzan, you Jane."

<sup>98</sup> Viberg, "Amos 7:14," 107.

<sup>99</sup> As quoted by William H. U. Anderson in "Ironic Correlations and Skepticism in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 12 (2000): 68. Webster's definition is very similar: "Irony is the use of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of [their] literal meaning."

determine irony, since these belong to the stage, the only hermeneutical key which helps in determining irony is the context. The most important element of irony is that irony, according to William Anderson, “is a criticism which points out some *incongruity* by using the opposite of what is meant to demonstrate what should be (though what should be may be elusive or unattainable).”<sup>100</sup> With such an understanding of irony and how to detect it in written material, Viberg claims that, “What we have in Amos 7:14 is a case of understating, in which Amos claims to be less than he actually is in order to reveal the arrogance of the object of his irony, i.e., Amaziah.”<sup>101</sup> He further states:

Through his irony Amos makes himself into someone quite insignificant, in order to highlight Yahweh’s role in directing him away from tending to livestock to carrying out the word of one of his prophets... Making use of the contrast created by the irony in v. 14, he emphasizes that his status as a prophet owes nothing to man, and therefore he is not subject to any form of institution such as the cult at Bethel, only to the command of Yahweh. Amos is indeed a prophet, אֱנִיָּא, but that is not the issue; the important question is who has made him a prophet, who has commissioned him and who legitimates his message.<sup>102</sup>

This ironic interpretation of the nominal clause אֱנִיָּא לֹא has several strengths to command it as the most possible reading of Amos 7:14, of all the readings surveyed so far. First, it takes at face value the present tense of the nominal clause. It also interprets correctly the nouns הָזֶה and אֱנִיָּא as synonyms and positive in meaning. Moreover, it makes very good sense of the broader context and of the apparent incongruity between Amos claiming to be a prophet (3:1-8) and at the same time denying it (7:14).

However, seeing irony in the Amos’ denial of being אֱנִיָּא does not explain the parallel nominal clause אֱנִיָּא בֶן־אֱנִיָּא. As argued above, the two clauses are parallel and should be interpreted similarly. If that is the case, then one should see irony also in the second nominal clause. Amos, thus, would be saying that he is not a son of a prophet when in fact he would mean the opposite: *incongruity* by using the opposite of what is meant to demonstrate what should be (though what should be may “I am the son of a prophet.” But, as argued earlier, such a statement is absurd in light of the fact that Amos was a shepherd and a farmer by vocation. As a result, though irony may be a better solution than those

---

<sup>100</sup> Anderson in “Ironic Correlations and Skepticism in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?” 82 (emphasis by the author). Thus, he defines irony as “that *Gathering* which uses the literary device of stating the opposite of what is meant in order to have the literary *effect* of criticizing the incongruity between the two: irony can only be determined by the context in which it is given.”

<sup>101</sup> Viberg, 111.

<sup>102</sup> Viberg, 112.

presented above, it still falls short of offering an adequate explanation of the parallel nominal clauses.

Such being the case, there is need of another explanation with the following caveat offered by J. L. Mays: “If objective indications in the text itself could settle the matter, the question would have had a convincing answer long ago. One can speak then only in terms of probabilities which are indicated by overall considerations and what makes plausible sense in the context.”<sup>103</sup> With this humility in mind we can start by pointing to the following conclusions that we have reached so far during the process of evaluating different interpretations of Amos 7:14.

First, לֹא should be understood as a negative particle modifying the implied verb, rather than standing on its own as an independent clause. Second, the nominal clauses are most naturally read in the present tense, particularly given the quotation by Zach. 13:5. Third, חֹזֶה and נְבִיא are roughly synonymous and are referring to a *true* prophet. Fourth, נְבִיאִים is a more precise delineation of נְבִיא, meaning one belonging to a prophetic guild or, by implication, one whose prophetic authority is legitimized by a prophet-leader. Fifth, the *waw* in the second colon is to be taken more as a *waw* explicative, meaning “namely.” Sixth, there is no semantic distinction between the verb הִנְבֵּא and the noun נְבִיא; they characterize the activity and the title of one and the same person (in this case Amos). Seventh, in light of Amos’ *apologia* of his authority as a prophet in 3:3-8, Amos cannot be denying the fact that he is a prophet of God in 7:14. Eighth, in light of the immediate context, Amos is denying being a prophet by choice. Ninth, by implication, Amos is emphasizing Yahweh as the source of his authority to prophesy, which supersedes any human authority (even his own). Tenth, Amos using irony in his denial of being a נְבִיא is very unlikely, given the fact that he would have to admit that he was also a בֶּן־נְבִיאִים.

Based on these observations, we are forced to say that the most plausible explanation of what is happening in this text is that there is a sense in which he is claiming to be a prophet (as in 3:3-8) and there is a sense in which he is not a prophet (as in 7:14).<sup>104</sup> Such an explanation may seem simplistic, but it takes into consideration all the factors surrounding Amos’ self-perception in both 3:3-8 and 7:10-17. In what sense, then, is he a prophet and in what sense is he not a prophet? The only answer that the text allows us to give is that he was a prophet because he was called by God to prophecy and to warn the people of the imminent evil that was to befall Israel. At the same time, he was not a prophet

---

<sup>103</sup> Mays, *Amos*, 137. The same caution is signaled by, e.g., Paul, *Amos*, 247; Ward, *The Prophets*, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Cf., Vogt, “*Waw* Explicative in Amos 7:14,” 301.

in the sense that he did not choose to be a prophet and that he became a prophet as a result of the irresistible call of God. In this sense, Wolff may be right to describe Amos as “a prophet in spite of himself.”<sup>105</sup>

This conclusion is further corroborated by the observation that the tenor of the whole book of Amos is that Amos functioned as a prophet.<sup>106</sup> J. L. Mays states:

What is known of Amos from the undoubtedly authentic material in the book adds up to a total picture which is connected with other men who were called נְבִיאִים Amos received visions and reported these experiences in terms and patterns typical of other prophets. His intercessions have characteristically prophetic function. He was called and sent by Yahweh of Israel. In his mission he used predominantly the formulae and forms of the messenger and the judgment word which represent the basic style of earlier prophets. Amaziah took him for a ‘seer’ an alternate name for נְבִיאִים The verb to prophesy was used by Amaziah and by Amos to designate his speaking. What is such a man to be called? If he were not a prophet, he was functioning as a prophet.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, even though Amos appears to be denying being a prophet right there and then, that he functioned as a prophet, and therefore was a prophet, is supported by the details of his ministry, from his commissioning and his opposition to the call, to his prophesying and his confrontation with the royal and religious authorities.

Maybe Amos should be seen as a type of John the Baptist. When the delegates of priests and Levites sent by the Jews from Jerusalem to ask him whether he was Elijah, his answer was straightforward: “No!” (Jn. 1:20). Yet, when Jesus was asked about Elijah in Matt. 17:10-13, he made it clear that Elijah had already come and the disciples “knew that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.” The only way to account for this incongruity is to see in John a genuine and humble desire to point people away from himself and his importance in the salvation history to Jesus. He thus identifies himself as a “transitional figure.” That is the reason he preferred defining himself in the words of Isaiah, rather

---

<sup>105</sup> Wolff, “The Irresistible Word,” 6. See also James Luther Mays, *Amos, A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 137-9.

<sup>106</sup> Cf., Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 777.

<sup>107</sup> Mays, *Amos*, 138. See also, Hayes, *Amos*, 236; Cohen, “Amos Was a Navi,” 175; Tucker adds to these the fact that, “By employing here (7:15) the traditional language of a commissioning report, our text places Amos in a traditional Israelite role”; see “Prophetic Authenticity,” 432; Also Wolff, “The Irresistible Word,” 9 who reminds us of other prophets who were witnesses to “an irresistible Word,” such as Jer. 20:7; Acts 4:20 and 1 Cor. 9:16ff. To these one may add the similarity between Amos’ call and Moses and David’s calls from “behind the flock,” in Ex. 3:1 and 2 Sam. 7:8 (and Ps. 78:70), respectively. One should keep in mind that Moses actually was called a prophet (cf. Deut. 18:15).

than Malachi, as “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord.”<sup>108</sup>

In like manner, Amos wanted to take the people’s eyes away from him and the authority associated with the title “prophet” and to point to the irresistible and inescapable authority that is associated with the one who gives the call to prophesy, namely Yahweh. Thus, Amos is denying only self-importance and personal initiative and choice in prophesying; his desire was to make Yahweh the center of attention. In this sense, Amos was a prophet, but a prophet in spite of himself.

## CONCLUSION

The book of Amos is an important book for the understanding of Israelite prophesy, since it is the earliest of the literary prophets. In this sense, Amos’ self-perception answers the question of whether Amos thought of himself as a prophet or not. Our investigation of the problem has led us to an exegesis of Amos 3:1-8 and 7:10-14, two passages that deal, seemingly in a contradictory way, with how Amos saw himself in relation to the נְבִיאִים. The most plausible conclusion we have reached is that Amos was among the prophets, and that he was a prophet in spite of himself, as in fact most of the prophets and men of God were and are. He was a prophet, though not by his own choice, not from a tradition or school of prophets, and definitely not from among the court prophets.

Amos’ comments about his calling as a prophet is instructional for any person called into the ministry. There are those who go to seminary, who come from a family tradition of ministers, or who become ministers as a result of sitting under a teacher as a disciple. But there are also, few as they may be, who fulfil the function of a preacher without any of this background to provide them with authorization. They may fulfill such a calling temporarily or for a specific task, but they nevertheless may have God’s calling upon them. In the end, all ministers, regardless of their ministerial background or lack thereof, should be faithful to God’s calling, should fulfill their calling without regard for economic or social benefits, and should reluctantly claim any credit for such calling. Rather, they should have the attitude Paul had regarding his calling: “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor.9:16)

---

<sup>108</sup> See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 61, who states that, “The Baptist denied being ‘Elijah’ to counter the expectation that the same Elijah who escaped death in a fiery chariot would return in like spectacular manner.” In the Old Testament we see the same reluctance to identify as a prophet in Moses and Jeremiah, among others.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackroyd, Peter R. "Amos 7:14." *Expository Times* 68 (1956): 94.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Judgment Narrative between Kings and Chronicles: An Approach to Amos 7:9-17." In *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, edited by George W. Coats and Burke O. Long, 71-87. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.
- Andersen, Francis I. and David Noel Freedman. *Amos: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- Anderson, William H. U. "Ironic Correlations and Skepticism in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 12 (2000): 67-100.
- Auld, A. Graeme. "Prophets Through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 3-23.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Prophets Through the Looking Glass: A response to Robert Carroll and Hugh Williamson." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 41-4.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Amos*, Old Testament Guides. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986.
- Boyle, Marjorie O'Rourke. "The Covenant Lawsuit of the Prophet Amos 3:1-4:13." *Vestus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 338-62.
- Bramer, Stephen J. "Analysis of the Structure of Amos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 160-74.
- Bulkeley, Tim. "Cohesion, Rhetorical Purpose and the Poetics of Coherence in Amos 3." *Australian Biblical Review* 47 (1999): 16-28.
- Carroll, Robert. "Poets not Prophets: A Response to 'Prophets Through the Looking-Glass'." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 25-31.
- Chisholm, Robert B., Jr. "'For Three Sins...Even for Four': The Numerical Saying in Amos." *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1990): 188-97.
- Cohen, Simon. "Amos Was a Navi," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 175-78.
- Crenshaw, J. L. *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 124. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971.
- Cripps, Richard S. *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos*. London: SPCK., 1929; 2nd ed. 1955.
- de Waard, Jan and William A. Smalley. *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos*. United Bible Societies, 1979.
- Driver, G. R. "Amos 7:14." *Expository Times* 67 (1955): 91-92.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Waw Explicative in Amos 7:14." *Expository Times* 68 (1957): 302.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Affirmation by Exclamatory Negation." *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973): 107-14.

- Dempster, Stephen G. "Amos 3: Apologia of a Prophet." *The Baptist Review of Theology* 5 (1995): 35-51.
- Dijkstra, M. "I am neither a prophet nor a prophet's pupil': Amos 7:9-17 as the Presentation of a Prophet like Moses." In *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as a Historical Person, Literary Character and Anonymous Artist*, Oudtestamentische Studien 45. Edited by Johannes C. de Moor, 105-28. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
- Garrett, Duane A. *Amos. A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008.
- Geller, S. A. "Were the Prophets Poets?" *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 211-21.
- Gitay, Yehoshua. "A Study of Amos's Art of Speech: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amos 3: 1-15." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 293-309.
- Hammershaimb, Erling. *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*. Translated by John Sturdy. New York: Schocken Books, 1970.
- Harper, William R. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, vol. 23. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936.
- Hayes, John H. *Amos. The Eighth Century Prophet: His Times & His Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1988.
- Hoffmann, Yair. "Did Amos Regard Himself as a NABI'." *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977): 209-12.
- Hubbard, David Allan, *Joel and Amos*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries vol.25; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009.
- Huffmon, Herbert B. "Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959): 285-95.
- Jepsen, Alfred, "חזק.chazak" In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 4. eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green, 280-90. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Jeremias, Jorg. *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*. The Old Testament Library. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.
- Limburg, J. "Sevenfold Structures in the Book of Amos," *Journal for Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 217-22.
- MacCormack, J. "Amos 7:14." *Expository Times* 67 (1956): 318.
- Martin-Achard, R. and S. P. Re'emi. *God's People in Crisis: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, International Theological Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handsel, 1984.
- Mays, James Luther. *Amos: A Commentary*. The Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969.
- McKeating, Henry. *The Books of Amos, Hosea and Micah*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Moller, Karl. "'Hear This Word Against You': A Fresh Look at the Arrangement and the Rhetorical Strategy of the Book of Amos." *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 499-518.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Prophet in Debate: The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Book of Amos*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 372. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.
- Mowvley, Harry. *The Books of Amos & Hosea*, Epworth Commentaries. London: Epworth, 1991.
- Muller, H.-P. “נָבִיא *nabi*’.” In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 9. eds. G. Johannes Botteiwcek, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green, 129-50. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Niehaus, Jeffrey. *Amos, The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical & Expository Commentary* vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992; 3rd ed. 2000.
- Overholt, Thomas W. “Commanding the Prophets: Amos and the Problem of Prophetic Authority.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 517-32.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Prophecy in History: The Social Reality of Intermediation.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48 (1990): 3-29.
- Paul, Shalom M. *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.
- Richardson, H. Neil. “A Critical Note on Amos 7:14.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 89.
- Rowley, H. H. “Was Amos a נָבִיא?” In *Festschrift Otto Eissfeldt zum 60. Geburtstag*. Edited by J. Fuck, 209-12. Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1947.
- Schmidt, Daniel. “Critical Note: Another Word-Play in Amos?” *Grace Theological Journal* 8 (1987): 141-42.
- Smith, Billy K. and Frank S. Page. *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, The New American Commentary, vol. 19b. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995.
- Smith, Gary V. *Amos: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989.
- Simundson, Daniel J. *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- Stuart, Douglas. *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 31. Waco: Word, 1987.
- Terrien, Samuel. “Amos and Wisdom.” In *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson, 108-15. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962.
- Tsevat, Matitiah. “Amos 7:14--Present or Preterit.” In *The Tablet & the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W Hallo*, eds. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell & David B. Weisberg, 256-58. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993.
- Tucker, Gene M. “Prophetic Authenticity: A Form-Critical Study of Amos 7: 10-17.” *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 423-34.
- Vawter, Bruce. “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” *Biblica* 66 (1985): 206-19.
- Viberg, Ake. “Amos 7:14: A Case of Subtle Irony.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 91- 114.
- Vogt, Ernest. “Waw Explicative in Amos 7:14.” *Expository Times* 68 (1957): 301-02.

- Zevit, Ziony. "A Misunderstanding at Bethel: Amos 7: 12-17." *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1974): 783-90.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Expressing Denial in Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew, and in Amos." *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 505- 09.
- Waltke, B. K. and M. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
- Ward, James M. *Amos & Isaiah: Prophets of the Word of God*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Amos, Hosea*. Atlanta: Knox, 1982.
- Watts, John D. W. *Vision and Prophecy in Amos*. Leiden: Brill, 1958.
- Williams, James G. "The Prophetic 'Father': A Brief Explanation of the Term 'Sons of the Prophets'." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 344-48.
- Williamson, H. G. M. "A Response to A. G. Auld." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 33-39.
- Wolff, Hans Walter. *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Amos the Prophet: The Man and His Background*. Translated by Foster R. McCurley; edited by John Reumann. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Irresistible Word (Amos)." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 4-13.

# “Man of Sorrows”: A Christian Reading of Isaiah’s Servant Songs

S. D. Ellison<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The quest to identify Isaiah’s servant as presented in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ has long plagued students of Isaiah. By outlining the prevailing interpretations and noting the use of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in the NT the present article offers a possible resolution to the quest. A Christian canonical reading of Isaiah’s ‘Servant Songs’ provides a compelling case for identifying Isaiah’s servant as Jesus Christ.

**KEYWORDS:** Isaiah; Servant Songs; Messiah; New Testament use of the Old Testament

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic it has become customary to wear a face-covering in public spaces. As a result, it is now more difficult to identify people. Unable to see the entire face, it is hard to be certain about an individual’s identity. Something similar occurs in the book of Isaiah. In the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ Isaiah’s reader glimpses something of an intriguing figure but certainly not the whole. They are thus left to discern the servant’s identity.

At four particular junctures in the text of Isaiah there is an undeniable change in atmosphere as Isaiah introduces YHWH’s servant (42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). These four sections, first identified by Duhm in his 1892 commentary, have come to be known as the ‘Servant Songs’.<sup>2</sup> Oswalt is accurate in concluding: ‘However one may evaluate Duhm’s conclusions, one cannot fault his observations: there is an atmospheric change at these four places in the text’.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore necessary to address this atmospheric change and seek to identify the servant.

---

<sup>1</sup> S. D. Ellison (BSc, BD, MTh, PhD). Director of Training and lecturer in Biblical Studies at the Irish Baptist College, Partner College of the University of Chester, completing doctoral studies on the shape of the Psalter. davy.ellison@thebaptistcentre.org.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that ‘song’ is not a technical designation of the literary genre. Rather, its usage in this article is due to its traditional usage. Cf. F. Duane Lindsey, ‘Isaiah’s Songs of the Servant’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 553 (1982): 27 n.1.

<sup>3</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 107.

In this article, while appreciating the complexities involved in identifying Isaiah's servant, it will be argued that a canonical approach to the so-called 'Servant Songs' yields a convincing resolution to this 'unceasing subject of discussion in research.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, this article will identify the five most prominent interpretations of the so-called 'Servant Songs', highlighting the more significant issues involved in holding to these interpretations and argue that a Christian canonical reading of these portions of Isaiah offers a convincing resolution to the discussion.

## PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Before exploring the most prominent interpretations of the so-called 'Servant Songs', it is necessary to highlight a number of preliminary issues regarding interpretation. First, there is some debate concerning the actual demarcation of the songs. Ward notes:

Not only is the identity of the servant debated, but so is the scope of the servant songs. Some scholars regard Duhm's demarcation of the songs as arbitrary and extend the literary units to include additional verses.... Indeed, some students of the problem deny that any clear separation exists between the alleged songs and their contexts.<sup>5</sup> Ward's observation is justified. The context in which each so-called 'Servant Song' is located is undoubtedly important, however the distinctiveness of each passage from its context must not be eroded.<sup>6</sup>

The second, but related, preliminary issue is that of literary criticism, specifically the claim that the distinctive nature of the so-called 'Servant Songs' supports the assertion that they were added at a later date. Such a claim is highlighted by Williamson,<sup>7</sup> who proceeds to state that 'a number of voices have been raised urging that they [the so-called "Servant Songs"] must be regarded as integral, and indeed indispensable, parts of their present literary contexts.'<sup>8</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams assert the same:

---

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, trans. Margaret Kohl, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>5</sup> James M Ward, 'The Servant Songs in Isaiah', *Review & Expositor* 65, no. 4 (1968): 434–35.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 6, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 735, appears to flirt with this danger when writing of Isaiah 42:1–25: 'In this part of the book it is not easy to distinguish separate oracles.... Certainly the whole of the present chapter exhibits in the servant theme a point of unity.'

<sup>7</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, 21.

Although no single identification of the servant figure seems to hold good for all four Servant Songs when the songs are considered apart from their context, a consistent sequence to the songs—and to the identification of the servant figure within them—does emerge when the songs are related closely to their context; indeed the sequence in the Servant Songs follows the sequence of the chapters as a whole.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore imperative that while the distinctiveness of each so-called ‘Servant Song’ is maintained that they are not extracted from their immediate contexts.

The third preliminary issue that requires comment concerns textual problems. Writing of Isaiah 52:13–53:12,<sup>10</sup> North contends that ‘No passage in the OT, certainly none of comparable importance, presents more problems than this.... a glance at the number of marginal renderings indicates the difficulties in which the translators found themselves.’<sup>11</sup> It is of course possible that the prophet purposefully employed cryptic and veiled language.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the student of Isaiah seeking to discern the identity of the servant must wrestle with these textual issues.

The outlining of the above preliminary issues simply reinforces the difficulty inherent in the task of identifying the servant in Isaiah’s so-called ‘Servant Songs’. It is all-the-more significant that a Christian canonical reading of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ provides the possibility of a convincing resolution to the search for the servant’s identity. Before such a suggestion can be presented the prevailing interpretations of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ must first be detailed.

---

<sup>9</sup> Peter Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13, no. 42 (1988): 80.

<sup>10</sup> English versification will be employed throughout this article and the ESV is used unless otherwise stated.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL–LV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, trans. David M. G. Stalker, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1969), 93, writes: ‘The cryptic, veiled language used is deliberate.’

## PREVAILING INTERPRETATIONS<sup>13</sup>

The following material will review several of the interpretations on the issue. It is important to list them, as scholars differ widely on the integrity of the book.

### *The Collective Interpretation*

The first prevailing interpretation to be detailed may be termed the *Collective Interpretation*. In close proximity to the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ the nation of Israel is designated ‘my servant’ (Isa. 41:8–9; 44:21; 45:4; 48:20). It has therefore been argued that the servant in these passages is a collective—the nation of Israel.<sup>14</sup> Such a position possesses a strong Jewish heritage yet it is not without its Christian advocates, especially after the advent of the critical era in OT biblical studies. Rowley notes that ‘there came a growing tendency on the part of Christian scholars to accept the common Jewish view that the Suffering Servant was none other than the Israelite nation.’<sup>15</sup> The argument is further strengthened by YHWH’s declaration in the third so-called ‘Servant Song’: ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified’ (Isa. 49:3).

In light of the references to Israel as YHWH’s servant in the surrounding context and the third so-called ‘Servant Song’ it is argued that ‘There can be little question that Isaiah’s servant is at least to be identified as Israel’.<sup>16</sup> Noting that there are some difficulties with this view, Longman and Dillard also assert that the key to unlocking this dilemma is the remnant motif.<sup>17</sup> Focussing on the remnant theme has often been viewed as a credible manner of presenting a legitimate version of the collective interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> It should be acknowledged that the five following interpretations are not the only ones proffered within the academy. The most intriguing include: Leland E. Wilshire, ‘Servant-City: A New Interpretation of the Servant of the Lord in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, no. 3 (1975): 356–67 who suggests that the city of Zion should be understood as the servant. Alternatively, Ward, ‘The Servant Songs in Isaiah’, encourages understanding the servant as an office as opposed to any individual or collective. Christopher R. Seitz, “‘You Are My Servant, You Are the Israel in Whom I Will Be Glorified’: The Servant Songs and the Effect of Literary Context in Isaiah’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (2004): 117–34, likewise attempts to transcend the necessity to choose one particular option by adopting a fluid interpretation in which the servant must be understood as either an individual or a group at different junctures throughout the so-called ‘Servant Songs’.

<sup>14</sup> See the excellent survey of proponents of this position in H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament*, Second, Revised (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 35–44.

<sup>15</sup> Rowley, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Second Edition (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 314.

<sup>17</sup> Longman III and Dillard, 314.

<sup>18</sup> R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 72, observes: ‘The difficulties attending the simple identification of the Servant in the Songs with

Notwithstanding the above points, significant issues persist against accepting the *Collective Interpretation*, particularly with Isaiah 49:3 in view. At the grammatical level it is not immediately apparent that the servant should be equated with Israel in 49:3 since there is an *athnach* marker implying a pause or break in the sentence.<sup>19</sup> Within the immediate context of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ textual details make a collective interpretation problematic. Addressing Isaiah 49:3 specifically, Wilcox and Paton-Williams assert that ‘all the obstacles to identifying the servant consistently with Israel occur at or after Isa. 49.4.’<sup>20</sup> In particular it should be noted that the servant is to achieve Israel’s redemption. Israel attempting to redeem herself strikes one as contradictory.<sup>21</sup> Goldingay offers an apt summary: ‘the role attributed to the servant in xlii 1–4 is one which Israel herself is in no position to fulfil. The servant is to establish *mišpāt*; but Israel has *mišpāt* problems of her own (xl 27).’<sup>22</sup> Even the righteous remnant version of the *Collective Interpretation* fails to remedy these issues given that the remnant itself failed to attain the lofty goal of purity and obedience set forth by Isaiah.<sup>23</sup> Undeniably Israel has the title ‘Servant’ applied to her on several occasions throughout Isaiah. However, it is apparent that there are significant issues with consistently identifying Israel as the one referred to in Isaiah’s so-called ‘Servant Songs’.

---

Israel led some scholars (e.g. S.R. Driver, Skinner, Blank) to suggest that he stands for *a section of the nation*: a righteous remnant, “Ideal Israel,” or something similar. Such a righteous group would have been specially chosen by Yahweh as his agent in the redemption of the great mass of sinful Israel.’

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the discussion in Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, The New American Commentary 15b (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 345–46.

<sup>20</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Grogan, *Isaiah*, 6:777, explains: ‘Although a collective interpretation of this passage is not impossible and is naturally suggested by a consideration of v.3, a straightforward application to Israel is ruled out by vv.5–7.’

<sup>22</sup> John Goldingay, ‘The Arrangement of Isaiah 41–45’, *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 3 (1979): 292. Cf. John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2014), 65, who, when referring to the first so-called ‘Servant Song’, observed: ‘This declaration must make readers uneasy, because the description of the servant’s role doesn’t look like one that Israel can fulfill.... a deaf and blind servant is itself in need of a servant’s ministry.’

<sup>23</sup> Longman III and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 315. Cf. J. Alec Motyer, ‘“Stricken for the Transgression of My People”: The Atoning Work of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant’, in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 249, who writes: ‘42:18–25 quickly disabuses us of any thought that, nationally considered, Israel, as Isaiah knew it, is either fit or able for the task. This line of thought continues until it climaxes in the almost strident condemnations of 48:1–22.’

### *The Unnamed Individual Interpretation*

The second prevailing interpretation could be labelled the *Unnamed Individual Interpretation*. If the servant cannot be identified as a collective, perhaps he can be identified as an unnamed individual. A number of features appear to support such a claim. First, while the designation of servant is applied to the collective Israel beyond the demarcation of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’, within the four songs it is unquestionably an individual being referred to.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, if the prophet Isaiah is the speaker, and thus possibly the subject, in these songs then it is undeniable that the servant is an individual.<sup>25</sup> As much is implied by the use of the first person singular.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the concept of being called from the womb (Isa. 49:1) is reminiscent of prophetic calls of individuals (cf. Jer. 1:5) and thus militates strongly against a collective interpretation.<sup>27</sup> The *Unnamed Individual* interpretation is attractive.

A single, yet significant, point prevents the current author from embracing the *Unnamed Individual* interpretation. Motyer states it most effectively:

To speak of the Servant as a prophetic, covenant figure, however, needs qualification.... the Servant claims to be ‘Israel’ (3) and to be in his own person the Lord’s covenant (8) and salvation (6) – not to be the preacher or even the effectuator of these things, but to be them in himself.... Certainly the Servant is a prophetic, covenant figure, but he is also much, much more than any prophet ever was or claimed to be.<sup>28</sup>

As highlighted above, the role of the servant, as stipulated in the second song, is to redeem Israel (Isa. 49:5). However, YHWH is not satisfied with Israel alone—the servant will also redeem the Gentiles (49:6). Subsequently, Motyer asserts, ‘However such a vocation is to be fulfilled, it runs beyond that of a (mere) prophet – indeed it runs beyond that of a mere human.’<sup>29</sup> Both the vocation and its scope render the *Unnamed Individual* interpretation ultimately unsatisfactory. The role the servant fulfils in accomplishing YHWH’s salvation is too significant for him to remain an unidentified prophetic figure.

---

<sup>24</sup> Seitz, “‘You Are My Servant, You Are the Israel in Whom I Will Be Glorified’”, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 89, 94.

<sup>26</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1975), 135, notes that ‘in the prophetic books generally the subject of speeches in the first person singular, when it is not Yahweh and not otherwise indicated, is normally the prophet himself.’ Cf. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*, 7–8; Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Motyer, ‘Stricken for the Transgression of My People’, 249, in advocating an individual interpretation, argues that ‘The testimony of the third Servant Song is decisive (49:1–50:11).’ Cf. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 289.

<sup>28</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 1993), 384. The verse references are to Isaiah 49.

<sup>29</sup> Motyer, 389. He also warns: ‘But Isaiah will tell his story in his own time.’

### *The Named Individual Interpretation*

In an attempt to overcome the problem of anonymity with the servant, a third prevailing interpretation could be categorised as the *Named Individual Interpretation*. While there are numerous individuals that could be discussed,<sup>30</sup> and space prohibits a discussion of all the options, perhaps the most convincing is Moses. Baltzer proposes that the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ function as a memorial of Moses.<sup>31</sup> He claims that on the basis that ‘Jewish tradition was familiar with the identification of the Servant of God with Moses’<sup>32</sup> Isaiah’s songs reflect on four different instances in Moses’s life. By way of example Baltzer suggests that the charge ‘bring out’ repeated three times in Exodus (3:10, 11, 12) is present in a thrice-varied form in the first song (Isa. 42:1, 3, 7).<sup>33</sup> After the ‘bringing out’ Moses delivered the Decalogue (Exod. 20), and in the second song’s prophetic emphasis the reader finds ‘a reminder of the proclamation of the Decalogue on Sinai through Moses.’<sup>34</sup> The third song then transitions to the experience of Moses as reflected in Deuteronomy. Baltzer understands Moses being described as both teacher and student (cf. Deut. 1:5; 4:1, 5, 14; 5:31; 6:1) and suggests such is reflected in Isaiah 50:4.<sup>35</sup> The final song, Baltzer argues, is an interpretation of Deuteronomy 34.<sup>36</sup>

Baltzer’s presentation of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ as a memorial to Moses is ingenious, but ultimately the links are tenuous at best. Such is conceded by one proponent of the view in writing: ‘there has been a tendency among certain influential scholars to recognise only sporadic Mosaic allusions among the servant songs’.<sup>37</sup> These unnamed influential scholars would appear to be correct in their judgement. The primary issue against the *Named Individual* interpretation is the same that was proffered for the *Unnamed Individual* interpretation: namely, the Servant’s vocation runs not only beyond that of a

---

<sup>30</sup> For an introduction to some of the options see Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 73–74. It is also worthwhile consulting the argument that the individual is the prophet Isaiah. Initially, see Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 68–70.

<sup>31</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 20–21. Also see, Gordon P. Hugenberger, ‘The Servant of the Lord in the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure’, in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press/Baker, 1995), 105–40.

<sup>32</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Baltzer, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Baltzer, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Baltzer, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Baltzer, 20. Also see his exegesis of the passage, pp. 392–429.

<sup>37</sup> Hugenberger, ‘The Servant of the Lord in the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure’, 120.

prophet, but also of Moses or any other historical figure.<sup>38</sup> Whybray offers an apt conclusion:

[S]uch figures from the past could clearly not have occupied a central place in Deutero-Isaiah's message to his contemporaries. The phrases in question can only have been intended to contribute to the picture of the Servant by seeing him as a 'new Moses,' a 'new Jeremiah,' or the like.<sup>39</sup>

It is therefore justified to conclude that the *Named Individual* interpretation rightly recognises the intentional similarities between the servant and particular individuals who loom large in Israel's history. However, it does not adequately account for the scope of the role attributed to the servant in the so-called 'Servant Songs'.

### *The Messianic Interpretation*

In light of the above critiques it follows that the servant may be a hoped-for figure: a messiah. Hence, the fourth prevailing interpretation is somewhat logically the *Messianic Interpretation*. The so-called 'Servant Songs' do constitute a 'collection of futuristically oriented songs'<sup>40</sup> and in so doing could rightly be understood as pointing to a future figure of salvation. Indeed, 'The view that the Songs are predictions of a figure who has not yet appeared has very ancient roots in the history of both Jewish and Christian interpretation.'<sup>41</sup> At least three arguments can be offered in defence of such an interpretation. First, the beginning of the first so-called 'Servant Song' employs the language of presentation (cf. Isa. 42:1). Oswalt observes:

The first four verses present the Servant to the hearers and readers.... the language here is that of presentation,... It is particularly common with reference to the kings.... When these understandings are coupled with the similarities of this passage to 11:1–9, which describes the Messiah, it seems likely that the Servant here is a messianic figure (cf. 16:5).<sup>42</sup>

In a similar fashion to the presentation of particularly pivotal figures in YHWH's redemption of his people, such as Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Moses (Exod. 14:31) and David (2 Sam. 3:18), so too the servant is presented as a pivotal figure in the redemption YHWH provides for his people—and yet in a greater way.

---

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 389. One can only surmise that Motyer is one of the influential scholars to whom Hugenberger refers.

<sup>39</sup> Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Wilshire, 'Servant-City', 357.

<sup>41</sup> Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 109–10.

Second, all four so-called ‘Servant Songs’ possess a distinctly royal emphasis. In the first song the servant is anointed with the Spirit in order to bring justice (42:1, 3–4) which communicate both a royal empowering (1 Sam. 16:13) and duty (cf. Ps. 72:1–2; 101). The second song may allude to the adoption of Israel’s kings as sons (49:5; cf. Ps. 2:7) but also gives the servant a kingly hue by noting other kings and princes prostrating themselves in his presence (49:7). Royal emphases are not immediately apparent in the third song, and yet it is possible to read the YHWH/Israelite king vice-regency relationship in 50:7–9. The fourth song again envisages kings respecting the servant (52:15). Distinctly royal elements are discernible in each so-called ‘Servant Song’.

Third, not only does the opening of the first so-called ‘Servant Song’ employ language of presentation when introducing a royal figure, it also describes a designation. Westermann explains: ‘The first words plainly describe a designation. This means that someone with the right to so do designates or appoints someone else to perform a task or to hold an office.’<sup>43</sup> He proceeds to clarify that ‘all that can be said about 42.1–4 is that the echo of the royal designation, as well as the proclamation of justice and the sparing of those already under sentence of death, point in the direction of a mediator who discharges his office by way of action’.<sup>44</sup> Together these three aspects of the servant’s description reveal an individual of royal character who has been chosen by YHWH, and such language is commonly attached to messianic thinking in the OT.

Although compelling, the *Messianic* interpretation faces at least two issues that prevent its wide-scale acceptance. First, the language of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’, especially the first one, is not dissimilar to the description of Cyrus in Isaiah 45:1–7. He does not operate in a strictly messianic sense. It is not therefore immediately apparent that the servant should be equated with a messianic figure. Furthermore, Hugenberger argues that the presence of royal and Davidic terminology in Isaiah 40–66 has been largely overplayed.<sup>45</sup> Without a strong royal emphasis in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ the *Messianic* interpretation is weakened somewhat. There is a pervasively prophetic emphasis in the songs (Isa. 42:4; 49:2; 50:4). However, to claim that ‘there is no obvious suggestion of royalty in the servant’s multiple calling’<sup>46</sup> is an overstatement of the case. While these two issues offer some resistance to accepting the *Messianic* interpretation,

---

<sup>43</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Westermann, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Hugenberger, ‘The Servant of the Lord in the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure’, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Hugenberger, 117.

it does appear to be more coherent than the first three prevailing interpretations identified above.

### *The Christological Interpretation*

The final prevailing interpretation to be identified in this article marks the juncture at which Christian and Jewish interpretations diverge: the *Christological Interpretation*. Astute readers will have noticed that the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ has received minimal attention thus far.<sup>47</sup> As its testimony is added to the above considerations of the first three so-called ‘Servant Songs’ it emerges that the *Christological* interpretation is perhaps more convincing than is sometimes admitted in OT scholarship.

The attributing of three adjectives (high, lifted up and exalted) to the servant in Isaiah 52:13 is significant given that elsewhere in Isaiah these are repeatedly applied almost exclusively to YHWH.<sup>48</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams write: ‘The implication is not necessarily that the servant is Yahweh, or even divine; but there *is* an implication here that the servant's work is Yahweh's work, and the language used to make the point is daring, to say the least.’<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the substitutionary aspect of the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ must not be overlooked. The servant’s sufferings are undertaken in the place of another: ‘The servant suffers not just innocently, but *for* someone else’s iniquity.’<sup>50</sup> Contrary to Wilcox and Paton-Williams’s suggestion, this development is not wholly new (cf. 49:7; 50:5–6), but it is significant. Commenting on Isaiah 50:6, Smart states, ‘the impression is conveyed strongly that there is some one man who actually felt the blows.’<sup>51</sup> Such is equally true for the servant in the fourth song. However, it is clear in the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ that the blows are delivered on account of another’s sin (cf. 53:5–6, 8–9, 11–12). Therefore, the servant cannot be the prophet himself, as suggested by Smart.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Motyer argues that four essentials for a perfect substitute are present in the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’: identification with the guilty party, free of the guilt of the guilty party,<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ poses many exegetical problems which cannot be examined in any great depth here. See, Grogan, *Isaiah*, 6:796: ‘The text of this great passage presents a good many difficulties.’

<sup>48</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, 95. Emphasis original.

<sup>50</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, 96.

<sup>51</sup> James D. Smart, *History and Theology in Second Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 35, 40–66* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 165.

<sup>52</sup> Smart, 165.

<sup>53</sup> Also note the servant’s claim to obedience/innocence in 50:5–6. See, John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 402; Christopher R. Seitz, ‘The Book of Isaiah 40–66’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 440.

perfectly acceptable to the offended party and voluntarily accepting the role of substitute.<sup>54</sup> Within the Christian canon only one individual matches this description: Jesus Christ. Hence, the warrant behind the *Christological* interpretation.

Such an approach is not, of course, without its difficulties. Foremost among them is the issue of obscurity, perhaps even intentional obscurity and possible corruption of the text.<sup>55</sup> The wisdom of placing so much emphasis on the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ in defence of the *Christological* interpretation may justly be questioned. Furthermore, there are significant, although not unassailable, questions regarding this interpretation’s relevance to the original hearers/readers of Isaiah’s prophecy.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, a consideration of the use of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in the rest of the Christian canon alleviates these difficulties.

#### THE SO-CALLED ‘SERVANT SONGS’ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In order to discern the identity of the servant in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ one must consider their earliest interpretation, namely the NT. Allusion to and direct quotation of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in the NT documents is plethora (Matt. 8:17; 12:18–21; Mark 1:11; 10:45; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; 19:30;<sup>57</sup> Acts 8:32–33; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22–25). The striking feature of these quotations and allusions is that they all read Isaiah’s so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in a Christological manner. Of particular interest is the reference in Acts 8, for there the Ethiopian asks the very same question this article is attempting to answer: “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (v. 34). As Marshall records: ‘For Philip, the answer is simply Jesus. This implies that even at this early date the recognition that the job description of Isa. 53 fit Jesus, and only Jesus, was current among Christians.’<sup>58</sup> It is evident that Christians in the NT era, and thus the NT authors, followed Jesus’s example of reading the OT Christologically (cf. Luke 24:44–49). It is hardly surprising that the link was made between the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ and Jesus given that just ‘as deliverance from physical bondage demanded the servant Cyrus, so deliverance from spiritual bondage calls for the Servant,

---

<sup>54</sup> Motyer, ‘Stricken for the Transgression of My People’, 253–56.

<sup>55</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 74, draws attention to such difficulties.

<sup>57</sup> On the linking of the servant succeeding (52:13) and Jesus’s cry of ‘It is finished!’ see, Motyer, ‘Stricken for the Transgression of My People’, 251.

<sup>58</sup> I. Howard Marshall, ‘Acts’, in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 574.

One who will be what Israel is not, so that she may have the possibility of becoming what she is to be.’<sup>59</sup>

Considering the testimony of the NT more broadly, the case could be made that the Christological interpretation exemplified in the NT actually incorporates elements of all five prevailing interpretations. Hence, the collective interpretation finds fulfilment in the individual named Jesus. With Isaiah 42 in view, Patston explains that ‘the Gospel writers wanted to present Jesus as the true expression of what the nation of Israel really was and should have been. As Jesus takes up the role of Israel, he necessarily takes up the role of servant.’<sup>60</sup> Indeed, persisting in this line of thought it is possible to see Jesus of Nazareth as ultimately a remnant of one.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the individual interpretations also find fulfilment in Jesus. Above Baltzer’s suggestion that the servant was Moses was highlighted, but as noted the task the servant was to fulfil extended far beyond what Moses could conceivably achieve. It would take one who was greater than Moses (Heb. 3:1–6). Arguably all of the prevailing interpretations can be satisfactorily incorporated in to the Christological reading.

A brief survey of the NT’s testimony concerning the individual alluded to in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ does not answer every question. Nevertheless, its testimony is clear: the servant is unmistakably identified as Jesus Christ. Abernethy asserts: ‘It turns out that Jesus, fully divine and fully Davidic, takes on the mission of the servant.’<sup>62</sup> Moreover, this is a mission that stretches across the Christian canon. Despite misidentifying the servant as Israel, Seitz helpfully observes: ‘The promise embedded in God’s word to Abraham and embodied in Isaiah’s servant Israel is here [Mark 1:11–14] manifested in the man Jesus.’<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Wilcox and Paton-Williams conclude: ‘No single answer to these questions may be said to command a consensus.’<sup>64</sup> Indeed, ‘The book of Isaiah does not resolve who exactly would fulfil the role of God’s suffering servant.’<sup>65</sup> In attempting to reconcile these realities with the obvious significance of the servant I find it

---

<sup>59</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 59.

<sup>60</sup> Kirk Patston, *Isaiah: Surprising Salvation*, Reading the Bible Today (Sydney: Aquila Press, 2010), 221.

<sup>61</sup> Longman III and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 315.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 40 (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2016), 159.

<sup>63</sup> Seitz, ‘Isaiah 40–66’, 366.

<sup>64</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 79.

<sup>65</sup> Abernethy, *Book of Isaiah*, 158.

compelling to consider Isaiah's veiled presentation of the servant as a fulfilment of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6 to keep the people hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving (vv. 9–10). Perhaps Motyer reveals a similar line of thought by arguing that Isaiah 53:1 'teaches that the Servant can be recognized only as a result of divine revelation. The "Arm of Yahweh" has to be revealed, else he will continue to be seen in merely human terms.'<sup>66</sup> It takes the eyes of faith.

The argument set forth in this article is not that the eyes of faith are the necessary mystical insight for identifying the servant. Rather, the eyes of faith read any section of Scripture with the rest of Scripture in mind.<sup>67</sup> The confusion and debate concerning the servant in Isaiah reveals a reticence to accept the canonical presentation of the servant in Isaiah's so-called 'Servant Songs'. By surveying the prevailing interpretations in light of the details present in the Isaiah texts and permitting the testimony of the NT to carry canonical weight, one can no longer ignore the Christological interpretation as Christian eisegesis.<sup>68</sup> Such a claim does not offer 'demonstrable solutions for all of the problems'<sup>69</sup> but it does present a convincing resolution. If the NT authors identified Isaiah's servant as Jesus Christ it would be dangerous for any allegedly Christian reading of the so-called 'Servant Songs' to ignore that testimony.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abernethy, Andrew T. *The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach*. *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 40. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2016.
- Baltzer, Klaus. *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, trans. Margaret Kohl, Hermeneia. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Duane, Lindsey F. 'Isaiah's Songs of the Servant', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 553 (1982).
- Goldingay, John. 'The Arrangement of Isaiah 41–45', *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 3 (1979).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2014.

---

<sup>66</sup> Motyer, 'Stricken for the Transgression of My People', 263 n.28.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Seitz, 'Isaiah 40–66', 469: 'We can see into the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, as did those first witnesses, because God has provided a testimony ahead of time, which will be used to interpret and illuminate and, indeed, guarantee the exaltation of God's servant.'

<sup>68</sup> Abernethy, *Book of Isaiah*, 160, thus concludes: 'though the book of Isaiah does not present the Davidic ruler and the servant as identical figures, we find an unexpected and glorious merging of two unique offices and purposes in one person, Jesus Christ.'

<sup>69</sup> Ward, 'The Servant Songs in Isaiah', 433.

- Grogan, Geoffrey W. *Isaiah*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 6, *The Expositor's Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.
- Hugenberger, Gordon P. 'The Servant of the Lord in the "Servant Songs" of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure', in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham. Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press/Baker, 1995, 105–40.
- Longman III, Tremper and Raymond B. Dillard. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Second Edition, Nottingham: Apollos, 2008.
- Marshall, I. Howard. 'Acts', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson eds. Nottingham: Apollos, 2007.
- Motyer, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'Stricken for the Transgression of My People": The Atoning Work of Isaiah's Suffering Servant', in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013.
- North, Christopher R. *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL–LV*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.
- Oswalt, John N. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.
- Patston, Kirk. *Isaiah: Surprising Salvation. Reading the Bible Today*, Sydney: Aquila Press, 2010.
- Rowley, H.H., *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament*. Second, Revised, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965.
- Smart, James D. *History and Theology in Second Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 35, 40–66*. London: Epworth Press, 1965.
- Smith, Gary V. *Isaiah 40–66*. The New American Commentary 15b, Nashville, TN: B&H, 2009.
- Ward, James M. 'The Servant Songs in Isaiah', *Review & Expositor* 65, no. 4 (1968).
- Westermann, Claus. *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, trans. David M. G. Stalker, Old Testament Library, London: SCM Press, 1969.
- Whybray, R.N. *The Second Isaiah*. Old Testament Guides Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Isaiah 40–66*. New Century Bible London: Oliphants, 1975.
- Wilcox Peter and David Paton-Williams. 'The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13, no. 42 (1988).
- Williamson, H.G.M. *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Wilshire, Leland E. 'Servant-City: A New Interpretation of the Servant of the Lord in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, no. 3 (1975).

# **The Wise Women in the Books of Samuel**

## **– a critical and theological analysis of 1Sam 25 and 2Sam 14 –**

István Borzási<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The intention of this work is to investigate the role of two women characters in the Books of Samuel, called wise women, to see how they influenced the life of Israel and its king. Understanding their life and character will contribute to the interpretation of the Books of Samuel: we will find out how these women affected the course of the history of Israel, the political acceptance of David as king, and the morality of the time.

KEY WORDS Kingship, parable, providence, women, covenant.

### INTRODUCTION

From a biblical theological point of view the key aspect of the books of Samuel is how the earlier promises given to the patriarchs and to Israel are partially fulfilled in the reign of David. The reign of David is a turning point in the outworking of God's purposes of salvation. The narratives about David and about the major women characters in the Books of Samuel show that if the promise has a future, it is more a matter of God's grace than of human faithfulness. In the outworking of this grace and fulfilment of the promises, women characters in the Books of Samuel have a major contribution. The women characters in the Books of Samuel shaped the whole history of Israel in that time, influencing familial, social and political affairs, changing and determining the course of events. They deserve a higher consideration and a deeper appreciation.

Biblical narratives generally are products of their time, and by nature are historiography, or at least semi-historical writings, of theological, ethical, social and national character, (giving to their writings a literary and aesthetic shaping, and using rhetorical devices). Abigail (1Sam 25:24-31) and the Tekoite woman (2Sam 14:4-17) make use of lengthy speeches, which should be studied in their literary, persuasive, ethical, judicial and political aspects. They both make a confession of guilt; and both intercede for a guilty party (Nabal and the fratricide son), trying to get mercy from David. Their speeches are very persuasive, and at the end these women are able to convince David to do what they want. We are

---

<sup>1</sup> István Borzási BD; MTh; MA; PhD. Professor in OT in Emanuel University. [iborzasi@gmail.com](mailto:iborzasi@gmail.com).

going to examine these two women characters and their convincing speeches. They both relate to David as to the Anointed of the Lord, and they mention the Lord's name several times in their speeches.

## ABIGAIL

The story of Abigail (1Sam 25) is placed after David had been anointed as king by Samuel (1Sam 16:1-3), so from the narrator's point of view he is already a "king-in-waiting."<sup>2</sup> This is important, because it influences the understanding of Nabal's and Abigail's treatment of David: they are dealing with the anointed of the Lord.

Abigail reminds David of God's promises, and her speech based on the general promises of the Lord becomes equivalent with a prophesy. She considers the meeting with David the providence of God, and urges him respectfully, to not take vengeance upon his foolish enemy, Nabal, but let God do this work, because it belongs to Him.

### *Abigail and Nabal*

Abigail's characterization is presented in contrast with her husband, Nabal, who is presented as worthy of his name<sup>3</sup>, a vicious, materialistic, egocentric, "worthless fellow" (1Sam 25:25). Because of this deliberate, overt characterization of the narrator, we know from the start, who Nabal is: a Calebite, a dog-like man,<sup>4</sup> הָאִישׁ קָשָׁה "a harsh man" and רַע מַעֲלָלִים "evil in his doings" (1Sam 25:3), הַבְּלִיעֵל "a good for nothing" "a man of Belial" (1Sam 25:25), who is indulging himself in lavish banquet in which he becomes so drunk that he is unapproachable till the next morning (1Sam 25:36-37). He is introduced in terms of his possessions<sup>5</sup> and his autocratic arrogance over his servants. The sharp contrasts between Nabal and Abigail are open hints, that they

---

<sup>2</sup> George G. Nicol, "David, Abigail and Bathsheba, Nabal and Uriah: Transformations within a Triangle," *Scandinavian Journal for the Old Testament*, no. 12/1 (1998): 131.

<sup>3</sup> Levenson considers that his real name was changed for purposes of characterization. See: Levenson, Jon D. *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly no. 40 (1978): 14.

<sup>4</sup> The word *kālibbî* in the *qērê* appears to mean either "Calebite" or "dog-like" (cf. LXX, anthropos kunikos).

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann observes that „The way of introducing Nabal is precisely on target, because Nabal's possessions precede his own person. His life is determined by his property. Nabal lives to defend his property, and he dies in an orgy, enjoying his property. Only after being told of his riches are we told his name (v. 3a)” Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press 1990), 175.

“are irremediably mismatched.”<sup>6</sup> Abigail is טובת־שִׂכּוּל “of good understanding” and ויִפְתַּח תֵּאָר “beautiful in appearance.” Her “good understanding” is evidenced by her activity in the narrative and highlights her function as a wisdom figure. Her wisdom is revealed especially in her skillful use of words in her pathetic and convincing speech to David.

Abigail’s actions are sharply contrasted with Nabal’s actions. While Nabal’s non-diplomatic reply to David was an insult, Abigail’s speech is a remedy of the abuse. Nabal is a fool – churlish, surly and mean – who provoked David’s anger, but Abigail uses her wisdom and rhetoric, and softens David’s heart. Nabal is a “spiritual, moral and social disaster.”<sup>7</sup> We do not need to consider this an exaggeration: Nabal’s servants (1Sam 25:17), his enemy (v. 21), and his wife (v. 25) all agree in this matter; and Nabal’s own words (vv. 10-11) vindicate the writer’s assessment. The contrast is greater when his wife is described in the same breath as having טובת־שִׂכּוּל ויִפְתַּח תֵּאָר “good sense and beautiful appearance” (v. 3b).

Before examining Abigail’s speech, we need to focus upon Nabal’s insult. It has three parts: 1) a double rhetorical question which derides David by suggesting that he is rootless and his family is unknown (1Sam 25:10a); 2) a declarative statement which regards David as a rebel, a run-away slave (1Sam 25:10b); 3) a further rhetorical question which suggests the foolishness of giving provisions intended for Nabal’s servants to persons from places unknown (1Sam 25:11b). All these questions touched David’s pride and excited his anger. He was ready to go to take vengeance upon Nabal, by showing him, who he really is. David’s wrath was not right before God, because it was a sudden burst of a sinful passion, and not becoming to a servant of God.

The remedy for this insult is Abigail’s argument, which is a rhetorical masterpiece. Generally, in her speech Abigail “moves from vengeance to promise, from Nabal (v. 25) to David’s secure house (v. 28), from the momentary to the eternal.”<sup>8</sup> She disarms David by taking full blame for Nabal’s irresponsibility, interceding in behalf of her husband. She assures David that the vengeance of the Lord will visit Nabal if David will restrain himself from usurping the divine prerogative. She offers the goods she brought as a token of her confidence in the rightness of David’s cause. In her wisdom Abigail does three things: 1). as mediator between David and her husband, she takes upon herself Nabal’s guilt (1Sam 25:24); 2). she makes excuses for her husband’s bad

---

<sup>6</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Dale Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the heart*, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 20.

behaviour (1Sam 25:25); 3). she responds to David's challenge by preparing (v. 18) and by presenting (1Sam 15:27) gifts to him, acting on behalf of Nabal (but of course without his permission), doing what Nabal refused to do.

### *The prophetic element in Abigail's speech*

In her prophetic speech (1Sam 25:26-31), Abigail makes frequent references to the Lord. She mentions the Lord's name in the introductory oath formula, *יְיָ-יְהוָה* "as the Lord lives" (1Sam 25:26). The Lord is the one who restrained David from his evil purpose and vengeance (v. 26) and the one who will make a lasting house for David (v. 28), because he is fighting the Lord's battles (v. 29). David is going to be preserved from his enemies because of the Lord his God (v. 29), and the Lord will bring his promises into fulfilment concerning David (v. 29-30). These references to the Lord not only sharpens the contrast with her husband's godlessness, but gives a prophetic reference to what is going to happen with David: this is an anticipation of what God is going to promise David in His covenant (2Sam 7).

Abigail's speech is not only exposing her wisdom but also her prophetic insight. Abigail recognizes David's coming kingship, she says that David will be chosen "ruler over all Israel" (v. 30), and in speaking about building for him *בֵּית נֶאֱמָן* "a secure dynasty" (v. 28) by the Lord, anticipates the dynastic element of Nathan's prophecy in 2Sam 7:8. 16, where the same language is used. In this way, the idea of the eternal, hereditary dynasty appears first in the speech of Abigail. This language becomes "a typical phraseology in Israelite-Judean historiography."

David is assured by Abigail that he would indeed become king of Israel, but he has to come to the throne with a clear conscience: There is no need to take the vengeance into his own hands: God is going to do that, not David. The Lord is in control, and David is going to have a glorious future.

### *Abigail's moral superiority and marriage with David*

In a way David is also in contrast in the narrative: first, with himself. This is a different David than what we find in the previous episodes. In chapters 24 and 26, David considers it a sin to lift his hand against Saul and shed his blood; here only Abigail's rhetorical genius saves David from bloodying his hands. Levenson looks at David's activity with a cynical eye, in general saying that: 1). David's request of Nabal was nothing more than simple extortion; 2). the entire conflict with Nabal and subsequent marriage to Abigail were politically motivated; and 3). David's illegitimate response to Nabal revealed the evil nature

of his character.<sup>9</sup> Abigail is better than David. David is reacting differently than how we have perceived his character until now.<sup>10</sup>

Abigail and Nabal are also in sharp contrast with Bathsheba and Uriah. The story of Abigail precedes the story of David and Bathsheba chronologically, and Berlin considers “a mirror image” of it.<sup>11</sup> Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah was a good man, Nabal was a fool. Bathsheba could do nothing to save her husband, but Abigail does this, though Nabal did not deserve it. The relationship between Nabal and Abigail is one of disrespect, alienation and hostility, while David here appears to be respectful to social norms, open to reason, capable of self-restraint, and blameless.<sup>12</sup> It is just the opposite, what we find out about him in the story of Bathsheba and Uriah. In the story of Abigail David’s apparent reserve marks him out as a character that is altogether more noble than the David who takes Bathsheba and then kills her husband. In the story of Bathsheba David commits murder because of a woman, while here by a woman David is prevented committing murder. There David is stirred up by a woman; here David is stilled down also by a woman. Both women later become his wives. Miscall summarises this: “In both stories, David gains a wife, but the process by which he gets them could not differ more radically.”<sup>13</sup>

Levenson considers David’s marriage to Abigail as a pivotal move in his ascent to kingship at Hebron: “There is no (other) explanation of how a non-Calebite like David managed to assume kingship in the capital of the Calebite patrimony, Hebron.”<sup>14</sup> After the reference of David’s move to Hebron (2Sam 2:1-4a) the passage goes on without any break to note David’s wives, where Abigail is described as אִשְׁתֵּי נָבָל הַכַּרְמֶלִי “the wife of Nabal the Carmelite.” So, David is the successor to Nabal the Calebite and the husband of a prominent Calebite woman, who bears a son called Chileab, reflecting probably Abigail’s Calebite origins (2Sam 3:3). This may be true, since in the early history of Israel there are several

---

<sup>9</sup> Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> In the preceding and following chapter the narrator is at great pains to show that, despite the opportunities given, David did not take the law into his own hands. We may note also that David’s reaction to Nabal’s insult is the opposite of his reaction to Shimei’s even more direct insults (2Sam 16:5-14). The reason for this may be that in 1Sam 25 David needs to be helped by Abigail to learn that kingship is going to be secured for him by God, while in 2Sam 16 he already learned this lesson.

<sup>11</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 30.

<sup>12</sup> There is an impression that David and Abigail are strongly attracted to each other and yet “fully understand the propriety that demands that their attraction should not escalate into a fully consummated relationship,” George G. Nicol, *David, Abigail and Bathsheba, Nabal and Uriah: Transformations within a Triangle*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Miscall, “Literary Unity in Old Testament Narrative,” *Semeia* 15 (1979): 39.

<sup>14</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 25.

examples about political marriages, which could bestow legitimacy on an aspirant to the throne. Close examples for this are the narratives about Absalom, Adonijah and Abner.<sup>15</sup>

This could explain also why David married Michal, the daughter of Saul, and even Ahinoam, the wife of Saul. Ahinoam the Jezreelite is mentioned with Abigail in the account of David's procession into Hebron (2Sam 2:2). While we know Abigail's general background, we do not have a clear account about the past of Ahinoam. What we know is, that only one person bears her name: אַחִימָעֵץ בַּת שָׂאוּל אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲחִינוֹעַם "the name of Saul's wife, Ahinoam, the daughter of Ahimaaz" (1Sam 14:50). It may well be that when David came into Hebron, he had as wives on one side a wealthy Calebite, Abigail, and at the other side the former wife of Saul, Ahinoam. Even if we do not know the time when David married Saul's former wife, it most probably happened, because Nathan clearly points this out in his rebuke as a well-known thing. The text reads: אֲדֹנָיִךָ בְּחִיקָךְ וְאֶת־בֵּית אֲדֹנָיִךָ וְאֶת־נְשֵׁי אֲדֹנָיִךָ לְךָ אֶת־בֵּית אֲדֹנָיִךָ וְאֶת־נְשֵׁי אֲדֹנָיִךָ "I gave you the household of your lord and the wives of your lord in your bosom." (2Sam 12:8).

Ahinoam is always mentioned before Abigail (1Sam 27:3. 30:5. 2Sam 2:2. 1Sam 3:2. 1Chron 3:1) and bears David a son before Abigail does (2Sam 3:2. 1Chron 3:1). So, Ahinoam could marry David before the conflict with the house of Nabal started. If this is so, then David could have laid claim to Saul's throne even while Saul was still alive.<sup>16</sup> Abigail, together with Nabal, her husband must have been very powerful figures in the Calebite clan, being at the pinnacle of the social status, as shown by the description of his wealth: three thousand sheep and one thousand goats. This is why he was holding מִשְׁתֶּה כַּמֶּלֶךְ "a banquet like that of a king" (1Sam 25:36). Levenson considers that "David picked a quarrel with Nabal with precisely such a marriage in mind",<sup>17</sup> which is an exaggeration of the matter, because the reasons we find in text are different. What we know for sure, is that through this marriage he got by chance a very powerful status which could contribute to his kingship in Hebron.

---

<sup>15</sup> The first two examples are in David's family: Absalom on Ahitophel's advice has intercourse with David's concubines as part of his effort to capture the throne for himself (2Sam 16:20-23) and Adonijah asks for the hand of Abishag, David's last mistress (1Kings 2:13-25), to which Solomon replies, "You might as well ask for the kingdom!" The third example is in Saul's house: Abner's assumption of Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines makes Ishbaal suspect Abner's loyalty to the house of Saul (2Sam 3:6-10).

<sup>16</sup> As convincing evidence for all these Levenson considers the account of David's reign in Hebron: "The chronology of 2Sam 2:10-11 corroborates this nicely, since it attributes a reign of two years to Saul's son and successor Ishbaal and one of seven and one half to David at Hebron. This suggests that David may have been King of Judah for five and a half years while Saul ruled the rest of the tribes." Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 27.

## THE TEKOITE WOMAN

In the story of the Tekoite wise woman (2Sam 14:4-20) the אִשָּׁה הַתְּכוֹמָה was instructed by Joab to go to David as a woman who had been “mourning a long time for the dead.” Joab put “in her mouth” the words of a tale (2Sam 14:2-3), according to which she is presumably a mother with two sons, one of whom killed the other in anger on the field. Her family now demands in revenge the death of the murderer, but in reality they hope to eliminate the sole heir of the family. Hearing this, David promises to give orders concerning the widow. But the wise woman continues her speech, until she receives immunity from any persecution. Then, she goes on again, until David swears by the Lord, saying: “not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground” (2Sam 14:11). At this point the woman changes her tune, and accuses David of “planning against the people of God” (2Sam 14:13), then pleading for Absalom’s restoration. She quotes a proverb: “For we will surely die, and become like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again” (2Sam 14:14), then she applies the king’s decision to her own situation and convinces him. Absalom’s banishment is ended, but he could not see the king’s face; in other words, he remains in another exile, in Jerusalem.

The story told by the woman, as we will see, does not represent a real event. It was only a ruse used by Joab to manipulate David to permit the return of his murderer son from exile. But the story was presented plausibly enough for the king to believe. The listener or reader at the beginning cannot find any sign to cause him/her to suspect that the story is not a real one. Everything is so vital, so realistic! The story saturated with emotions and moves dramatically to its climax, reaching its goal. David realizes that Joab is behind this, that the most important question is not the situation of the woman’s son (that is only an introduction), but Absalom’s fratricide and his restoration.

### *Literary considerations*

The pattern of this episode (2Sam 14:1-22) may be presented like this:

Joab’s plan, vv. 1-3

Woman’s distress caused by her family, vv. 4-7

The king resolves the case, vv. 8-11

Israel’s distress caused by the king, vv. 12-14

The woman softens the accusation, vv. 15-17

Joab discovered, vv. 18-20

King’s decision, vv. 21-22<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> The pattern is partly borrowed from: Ralph Dale Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of every adversity*, Christian Focus Publications (Fearn: Geanies House, 1999), 145.

It is clear that the main part of the passage is made up of the woman's conversation with the king. Joab may be there, in the background; but this *'iššâ ḥākāmâ* had her own special ability in handling the words. She speaks the right words at the right time, redirecting the course of events. She summarized her distress caused by her family and mentions the fact that their passion for justice is only a cover for their greed: they want *לְאַתְחִילֵהוּ שָׂם בְּשִׁמְרָה* "to destroy the heir also" (2Sam 14:7). If the remaining son will be executed, not only will she remain without support, but also with no descendant and the property will become available to the extended family. In other words, she is saying that in the name of justice they plan injustice. Among the heavily stressed extenuating facts the worst thing which could happen is to remain without posterity, often mentioned in curses. Hoftijzer points out, that "the clan, who in this case asks for justice does not do so for justice's sake. They are greedy: their aim is the inheritance not justice (v. 7).<sup>19</sup>

David decides to protect the heir. Asking permission to continue, the woman turns this decision into an accusation that the king is being two-faced: he decided that the woman's banished son should be restored, but he does nothing to restore his own banished son.

With her parallel case she assumes that Absalom is the (next) heir to the throne and by depriving Israel of the heir, David acts "against the people of God" (2Sam 14:13). For a while she philosophises that mortality is unavoidable and God wants to preserve and restore life, but immediately after that she reverts again to her own situation (2Sam 14:15-17), explaining her reason for applying to the king.

Her long speech is puzzling: it seems useless to use so many words after reaching the main point. But there is no reason to consider her a highly talkative woman: an *'iššâ ḥākāmâ* knows how to present her case and how to act in a given situation. She does this with a very specific reason: to delude David that the main point is not her real main point! As Hertzberg rightly notes:

First, the woman means to give the impression that her own personal problem is the reason for her appearance, and the case of the exiled king's son is mentioned only incidentally, as a related instance. By the construction of her address she means to make what is, of course, her main concern, the case of Absalom, seem to be a subsidiary matter.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer, "David and the Tekoite Woman," *Vetus Testamentum* no. 20 (1970): 421-422.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1964), 332-333.

But David is also wise (2Sam 14:20), as the Tekoite woman has noticed. He will not confuse main points with sub-points, and so asks the woman if Joab's hand is not involved in all this. With another exposé using 43 words, the woman's answer is: Yes. Even so, David ends Absalom's banishment (2Sam 14:21).<sup>21</sup>

### *Textual considerations*

The expression in 2Sam 14:3, that Joab *וַיִּשֶׂם יוֹאָב אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיהָ* “put the words in her mouth” is found also in Exod 4:15, Num 22:38 and Ezra 8:17, and means always an instruction given by a superior to a subordinate, who has to carry out the received instructions. The question of David in 2Sam 14:19, *וַיֹּאֲב אֶתְךָ בְּכָל־זוֹאת הַדָּבָר*, refers exactly to this, i.e. if the woman acts completely on Joab's instructions. The woman's answer is affirmative. This means that Joab instructed her about the matter in general, but could not instruct her about all the details of the discussion. The telling of the story in a skillful way like this, is still the property of the *אִשָּׁה הַחֲכָמָה*, since Joab could not anticipate the king's possible reaction. Joab had the initiative in this endeavour, but the wise woman of Tekoa executed his commands, with her very special ability. Joab took the decision to intercede for Absalom, but the wise woman carried out his wish.

The meaning of the verb *kālāh* in *וַתִּכַּל הָרוּחַ הַמְּלֶכֶת* is stronger than ‘to long’ or ‘yearn’ or “desire”, as most of the English translations understands.<sup>22</sup> It is better to follow the Septuagint in this case: *καὶ ἐκόπασεν τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ ἐξελεθεῖν ὀπίσω Αβεσσαλωμ* “and the spirit of king David ceased to go out after Absalom”, or the Vulgate: “cessavitque David rex persecui Absalom”, “king David ceased to persecute Absalom.”<sup>23</sup> The translation of McCarter, or Keil and Delitzsch, who gave to this verb a hostile sense in 2Sam 13:39, is correct: “the king's enthusiasm for marching out against (Absalom) was spent”, or “and it (this) held king David back from going out to Absalom.”<sup>24</sup> In 2Sam 14:1 there is no verb ‘long/long for’, and the verse simply means, that Joab knew

---

<sup>21</sup> Bellefontaine believes, “there is no clear evidence that the paramount is legally bound in parallel cases by the verdict he pronounces in a previous case”. However, the general feeling after the Tekoite woman's rhetoric is that she convinced David. Through a normal understanding of the narrative the reader comes to believe that Absalom's return to Jerusalem was achieved by the wisdom of the Tekoite woman. See Elizabeth Bellefontaine, “Customary Law and Citizenship: Judicial Aspects of 2Samuel 14:4-21,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no. 38 (1987): 62.

<sup>22</sup> This is how the Geneva Bible 1599, the King James Version 1611/1769, the New King James Version 1982, the American Standard Version 1901, the Revised Standard Version 1952, the New American Standard Bible 1977, the New International Version 1984, the English Standard Version 2001, and The Webster Bible 1833 translates it.

<sup>23</sup> This is how The New Jerusalem Bible and New Living Translation translates it.

<sup>24</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *2 Samuel*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 344.

(perceived)<sup>25</sup> that the heart of the king was either ‘upon Absalom’ (i.e., he was thinking about him) or ‘against Absalom’ (he remained hostile to him)<sup>26</sup>. If David had been yearning for Absalom, the whole strategy of Joab would become unnecessary; but if he is ‘against’ Absalom then the manipulating manoeuvre is understandable. 2Sam 14:24 clearly shows that David was not to welcome Absalom back with open arms. His grief because of Amnon’s death gradually diminished in time, but this has as a result only that he did not punish Absalom for his wickedness. He remained content with keeping Absalom in banishment. This is why Joab made use of the Tekoite wise woman, סִבָּב אֶת־פְּנֵי הַדָּבָר, to try “to change the present situation” (2Sam 14:20).

The verb *ḥāšab* in 2Sam 14:13 means ‘to think, to reckon’,<sup>27</sup> but may have the meaning ‘to plan, to devise’, and in some cases it clearly bears a meaning close to ‘to realize, to do’. Thus the expression וְלָמָּה הִשְׁבַּחְתָּה כִּזְאֵת may be translated as “why have you (schemed and) done something like this”,<sup>28</sup> bearing the accusation that David devised and did evil against God’s people. The woman goes on and reproaches the king that he violates his own ruling by not letting Absalom return and that his people have to pay for it.

Hoftijzer suggests a free translation of the second half of v. 14: “Will not God dedicate Himself to seeing that a banished one does not remain exiled from Him (i.e. He most certainly will dedicate Himself) and will He not find ways to do so?”<sup>29</sup> He takes this sentence as a rhetorical question, and the negation as negating both verbal forms, which is a normal understanding of the sentence. The Tekoite woman with the expression וְחָשַׁב מִחֲשֻׁבוֹת לְבַלְתִּי יְהוָה מִמֶּנּוּ נִדְּחָה (“but He devises means, so that His banished ones are not expelled from Him”) suggests that David is not in harmony with God, because he keeps the banished one to remain an outcast.

### *Hermeneutical considerations*

The interpretation of the words of the woman is not always easy, we see this especially in v. 9: עָלַי אֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ הָעֹנֵן וְעַל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהַמֶּלֶךְ וְכִסְאוֹ נָקִי: “o my lord, the

<sup>25</sup> The interpretation of the verb *yd'* (*know*, with added idea of *perceive*, *be aware*, *taking note*) in 2Sam 14:1 is explained by Francis Brown, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, with the cooperation of S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson, 1979), 293.

<sup>26</sup> This later translation is more likely, in the light of Dan 11:28. See also: C. E. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Vol. III. *I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 405-406.

<sup>27</sup> Francis Brown, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 363.

<sup>28</sup> See: Jer 18:11, 26:3, Ezek 38:10, Ps 35:20, and especially Gen 50:20, where Joseph’s brothers devised and did evil against him, but God devised and did help him out of his difficulties.

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 437.

king, the iniquity is on me and my father's house, but the king and his throne are guiltless.” This means that the woman and her family will bear all the consequences and the royal house will not have to face them, if the king is going to make a decision deviating from the established norm. But it seems that these words are not related only with the question of the consequences, but were meant to induce David after he had made a vague decision, to make a more specific one, and had this result. The woman received the king’s decision strengthened by an oath.

The only partial parallel we have in the OT is in 1Sam 25:24, where Abigail says to David that בִּי־אֲנִי אֲדֹנָי הַטֶּוֹן “upon me, my lord, is the iniquity.” In this parallel case the usual interpretation has no meaning, that Abigail is ready to bear the consequences, if David will abandon the normal procedure. Even if she speaks about her sin, which must be forgiven (1Sam 25:28), on the other hand she incriminated Nabal and exculpates herself (1Sam 25:25-26). A solution is given by Gevarjahu quoted by Hoftijzer, that “the formula was a polite way of expressing that David and ‘his throne’ would be responsible, namely for the blood of the last son left to the widow, should be killed as retribution for his crime”<sup>30</sup>. This fits both 2Sam 14:9 and 1Sam 25:24, but if we look at the other cases<sup>31</sup> where people express their feelings of guilt, they are not at all a polite way of saying that the other party is free from guilt. Rather, they are a sincere confession of guilt and acceptance of the responsibility, and in many other cases is followed by a plea for not to be punished.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the confession of guilt may be viewed as part of a plea for forgiveness, where the forgiveness is the main aim. Hoftijzer correctly expresses this:

In both cases (i.e. 1Sam 25:24 and 2Sam 14:9), Abigail and the Tekoite woman make a confession of guilt. They both intercede for a guilty party (Nabal and the fratricide son) and try to get mercy. ... The confession in the first place is meant to support the plea. If this is so, the central point of these texts is not who takes (or has to take) the responsibility in the case under consideration. But uttering the formula in question both women throw themselves on the mercy of

---

<sup>30</sup> Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 425.

<sup>31</sup> Note the confession of guilt expressed by one person to another: by David to Nathan (2Sam 12:13), by Shimei to David (2Sam 19:21), by Hezekiah to the king of Assyria (2Kings 18:14), by Aron to Moses (Num 12:11); and the confession of guilt expressed by people to God: David’s confession after the census (2Sam 24:10), the people’s confession of their idolatry (Judg 10:10-15), the people’s another similar confession (Judg 12:10), and a similar one made by the exiles (1Kings 8:47, 2Chron 6:37). For more on this subject see: Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 425.

<sup>32</sup> See the long list of these cases in Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 426.

David: they hope by doing so to further the chance that their request will be granted.<sup>33</sup>

### *Judicial considerations*

The narrative about the Tekoite woman has a judicial character.<sup>34</sup> This woman told her story in such a way that David considering the circumstances could make an authoritative decision against the established norm of his time.

Gunn denies the legal nature of the story, arguing that “the legal element is merely an accident of these particular cases where the one to whom the parable is addressed happens to be a king with (implicit) judicial powers.”<sup>35</sup> However, we have to be aware of the fact that the judicial element may be there, even if by accident. The king before whom the pretended widow of Tekoa appears is functioning as the highest level of power, in social, political or even religious matters, “who has the authority to suspend the normal operation of deeply rooted customary law, and decide in favour of the petitioner.”<sup>36</sup> The woman confronts David with the fact that God as guarantor for the king’s ruling, because of the oath sworn by the king, will let whomsoever banished from Israel to return, i.e. also Absalom. If the king acts against his own ruling, “punishment will follow and still will be of no avail, God will give effect of his ruling.”<sup>37</sup>

More light is thrown on the whole passage if we consider the comparisons used in the narrative. Firstly, the case presented by the woman is comparable with Absalom’s situation. The woman had two sons (as David had Absalom and Amnon). One killed the other (as Absalom killed Amnon). That the surviving son’s security is in danger, if the king will not intervene (Absalom is in danger). He must be saved, because he is the only heir (Absalom is the heir). It seems – even if there are not enough details to determine with absolute certainty – that the woman’s sons’ fight was not so serious, because there was no intention to kill each other. But a blow proved to be fatal, and this mutual hostility had a very sad result: one of the brothers died. This situation falls under the category of manslaughter, which is regulated in Num 35:6-34, Deut 19:1-13 and Josh 20.

---

<sup>33</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 427. He also argues, that בִּי-אֲנִי אֲדָנָי (‘upon me, my Lord’) is a formula used in both 1Sam 25:24 and 2Sam 14:9 not as an expression of the willingness of the confessor to take the full consequences of the evil deeds but to throw herself at the mercy of the other party and so to avoid punishment.

<sup>34</sup> The story of the Tekoite woman has been called a “judicial parable”, or a “judgment-eliciting parable”. See the lengthy discussion about this in: Elizabeth Bellefontaine, *Customary law and citizenship: Judicial aspects of 2Samuel 14:4-21*, 47-72.

<sup>35</sup> David M. Gunn, *David and the gift of the kingdom*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 438.

<sup>37</sup> Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 438.

But Absalom's fratricide was a calculated, organised, well prepared act, as a result of a long lasting, carefully nurtured hatred: "Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar" (2Sam 13:22). The commandment to the servants to strike Amnon (2Sam 13:28) betrays his murderous intentions. This is crying for justice, not for mercy. There is not enough basis to say that "the decision of the king in a special juridical case was also binding for parallel cases",<sup>38</sup> because there is no parallelism between the pretended son of the Tekoite woman and Absalom. Absalom's situation is different from what the woman presents to the king, and deciding in favour of the woman's son is not a precedent for Absalom's case. Permitting Absalom to return has nothing to do with justice.

Secondly, David is compared with an angel of the Lord, because he has the wisdom of an angel (v. 20). In 1Sam 29:9 Achish says to David that he likes him as much as he does an angel of the Lord, and in 2Sam 19:28 Mephibosheth sees David as an angel of the Lord, who may do as he pleases. In all these cases the common feature is that these people want to flatter David for one reason or another. The saying of the woman of Tekoa in this understanding is meant to be only flattery. Against this view is the opinion of Mowinckel, who referring to this text says: "through his anointing and endowment with the divine spirit the king also receives superhuman wisdom... he discerns all things and accomplishes what he wills."<sup>39</sup> The total knowledge of David is expressed with putting two opposites together: "knowing good and evil." With this the woman tells David why she expected to have her request granted: it is because the king is so extremely wise and merciful.

Blaikie compares the woman's speech with the juridical parable of Nathan about David's sin (2Sam 12:1-4), and the juridical parable of an unknown prophet about the escape of Benhadad (1Kings 20:38-43).<sup>40</sup> Although both Nathan and the wise Tekoite woman tried to convince David with their juridical parables, there are significant differences, as Blaikie pointed out:

There was a world-wide difference between the purpose of the parable of Nathan and that of the wise woman of Tekoah. Nathan's parable was designed to rouse the king's conscience as against his feelings, the woman of Tekoah's, as prompted by Joab, to rouse his feelings against his conscience.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 421.

<sup>39</sup> S. Mowinckel, *He that Cometh*, Oxford, 1956, 66.

<sup>40</sup> W. G. Blaikie, *The Second Book of Samuel*, The Expositor's Bible (Cincinnati, OH: Jennings & Graham), 208.

<sup>41</sup> Blaikie, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 208.

The differences, compared with the Tekoite woman's parable and its presentation, are also remarkable. The woman of Tekoa prostrated herself before David, which neither of the prophets did. She asks permission to proceed. Neither of the prophets do this; but they confront the king without any introduction, presenting the consequences without any restraint. The woman speaks highly about David, but none of the prophets do so. The background of these is that "the prophet has a status that a normal person does not have and therefore he can permit himself to say things other people cannot."<sup>42</sup>

At first it seems that David is not able to distinguish between a true and fictitious story, but this is not so. The author is more concerned to show the wisdom of the Tekoite woman: her wisdom is so genuine and worthy of praise, that makes David compassionate of her presented situation.<sup>43</sup>

According to Simon, the ruling of David could not be considered a binding precedent for Absalom's case, because the case presented by the woman "contained numerous extenuating circumstances."<sup>44</sup> The question is, how we view these extenuating circumstances: do they change the basic character of the case, or are they only additions, which do not change anything? Hoftijzer's opinion is preferable here. He notes that "the two cases are considered to be parallels notwithstanding the extenuating circumstances."<sup>45</sup> He also explains, that for juridical cases being parallels, they only "needed to be so in the basic facts"<sup>46</sup>, making a difference between basic facts and circumstantial facts. It may be that Joab's intention was to bring a gradual change in David's attitude, as Simon believes,<sup>47</sup> but after the interview with the woman the change was an immediate one. This change seems to be a result of his previous decision in the fictitious case presented by the woman.

The Tekoite woman confronts David with the consequences of his decision. With this she reveals that the presented case is not a real one, but was a kind of

---

<sup>42</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 443.

<sup>43</sup> This is against the view of Whybray who considers this "a story of Joab's wisdom rather than that of the woman". See: R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative. A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2*, Studies in biblical Theology, Second Series 9 (London: 1968), 36ff. The narrator presents the woman as wise, not Joab. The woman of Tekoa was able to handle a very tricky case, a real test for her wisdom, even if she was instructed. Not the wisdom of the woman but the wisdom of Joab, who designed the whole strategy should be questioned, because it is a foolish thing to appeal to God's mercy (2Sam 14:14) in a case that requires his justice. He should have known that there should be no mercy if there is no penitence.

<sup>44</sup> Uriel Simon, *Poor man's ewe-lamb*, 224.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer. *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 423.

<sup>46</sup> Hoftijzer. *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 423.

<sup>47</sup> Uriel Simon, *Poor man's ewe-lamb*, 225.

legal trap. In other words, “she drops her mask.”<sup>48</sup> She confronts David with the fact that his decision in the case of her fratricide son is a binding precedent for the case of Absalom. She does this by saying that because of this decision David himself is now guilty: If he prolongs Absalom’s exile then he violates his decision, strengthened by an oath. More than that, she reproaches David that he “acts against the people of God”: By letting Absalom stay in exile the king takes from the people their presumptive heir and makes Israel like a widow when David dies. This may be an allusion to the woman’s situation, who is a widow having her son as the only heir. Human beings are mortal – says the woman – and if David waits too long to reconcile himself with the exiled son, it may be too late. In this way, David is acting against the people of God (2Sam 14:13). The wise Tekoite woman confronts David with the fact that his decision in the woman’s case makes him guilty, and now the people have to pay heavily for his guilt.

### *Social considerations*

The “customary law”, according to Bellefontaine<sup>49</sup> functioned at different levels of social segments, before the monarchy: at lower levels of households and clans, but not very often at the level of the tribe. After the establishment of a centralized political system, in the transition period of David’s time, moving from tribal to monarchical Israel, there was a continual need to consolidate the king’s office. The Tekoite wise woman obtained the decision for Absalom’s return in such a way that the king’s office as supreme judicial authority was strengthened. The former king, Saul, relied only on his military status and achievements, but David was operating as judge, who “administered judgment and justice to all his people” (2Sam 8:15). David is confronted with the request to suspend the normal operation of the law, and to interfere in local judicial activity, overturning a legitimately reached judgment of the clan. With this he risked to alienate a group which was part of his power base, and this deterred him from making a clear and forceful decision at first. He tried to dismiss the wise woman with a vague promise that he will issue some ‘orders’ (2Sam 14:8). But the Tekoite woman is not content until she receives the desired verdict. She presses on with her speech; and David decides that the son, who by normal law should die, shall live and that the kinsman who in spite of the king’s judgement would kill the son (in accord with the law) would die (2Sam 14:10-11).<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Jacob Hoftijzer. *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 429.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Bellefontaine, *Customary law and citizenship: Judicial aspects of 2Samuel 14:4-21, 47-72*.

<sup>50</sup> The woman tries to relieve David of any possible risks by taking on herself any consequences of the decision, because in addition to the political risk, David is aware that he also risks possible repercussions from God, by failing to avenge the dead brother’s blood.

### *Rhetorical considerations*

The woman's appeal with respect to Absalom's situation had two specific goals: first that the fratricide should go unpunished, and second that the offender be restored to his former status as son and heir. She got only half of her desire: David suspended the punishment for homicide, but Absalom was not fully restored because he couldn't see the king's face.

The wisdom in the woman's story is not only demonstrated in her ability to extort a decision from David, which could constitute a binding precedent for Absalom, but also because she presents sufficient reasons to convince David to make an exception to a previously pronounced legal decision without being perceived as a weak king, but as a wise king, who is in control. In her speech, the wise woman makes use of imagery, as Alfons Schulz notes:

The woman of Tekoa calls the apparently intended killing of her only son the quenching of the coal left to her (2Sam 14:7). She compares human death with the spilling of water (v. 14). Finally, she, like Achish, calls David an Angel of God (vv. 17-20).<sup>51</sup>

The woman concludes her speech with a blessing (v. 17). It is not easy to define. Compared with possible similar cases (1Chr 22:16, 2Chr 19:11, Gen 28:1, 47:10, 2Sam 19:40, 1Kigs 8:66) it seems that the blessing is used as a sign that the speaker preferred to use to end the conversation about a certain subject. This is supported by 2Sam 13:25, where Absalom presses the king to come to the feast, but the king refuses "and blesses him", thus stopping the conversation on the subject. By speaking the blessing, the woman tries to end a very difficult conversation. She is a very wise woman indeed, who is able to carry out a delicate task.<sup>52</sup> Notwithstanding her vulnerable position, an ordinary person and moreover a woman, she is able to succeed; and neither she nor Joab is punished and Absalom is allowed to return.

---

<sup>51</sup> Alfons Schulz, "Narrative Art in the Book of Samuel," *Narrative and Novella in Samuel*, H. Gressmann ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 121. He notes that Abigail (1Sam 25:29) and Achish also make use of imagery.

<sup>52</sup> Nicol considers the Tekoite woman functioning "purely and simply as an agent" who does no more than deliver the words of Joab to the king (2Sam 14.3, 19). However, as we have seen before, there are enough arguments to consider her as a full-fledged character of the narrative. See: George G. Nicol, "The wisdom of Joab and the wise woman of Tekoa," *Studia Theologica*, no. 36/2 (1982): 97.

## CONCLUSION

Women in the Books of Samuel are important catalysts in the plot of the narratives. They are present everywhere, shaping the events, and subsequently, shaping the history of Israel.

### *Literary observations*

One of the characteristics we may notice about the women in the Books of Samuel, is the detailed presentation of their story. We get generally much more information regarding them, than in other records of David's history. This shows the importance of these women in influencing Israel's and David's life: they earned more attention than many others.

The other characteristic is the very selective presentation of what have happened. The writer(s) included in their material only what was of vital importance. This is because these narratives are not included as exhaustive histories, but as God-authorized versions of how we should view that history. It supposes that we are going to identify with the point of view of the author.

### *Theological observations*

The delimited portion of the Bible, from Deuteronomy to 2Kings (excluding Ruth), includes the Books of Samuel, is called "Deuteronomistic History." We are not going to argue for, or object to the way the assumptions and applications of this hypothesis are used. But we can make the observation that the double message of hope and condemnation of the so called "Deuteronomistic School" is there, in both the Abigail and the Tekoite woman's narratives, as generally in all the narratives about women in the Books of Samuel. This is because all these stories are not about women, not even about David or Saul, but about the Covenant God of Israel, who keeps His promises and preserves His people among many perils. These narratives about women characters are directing us to the Lord, who does all things through His human, weak, often female instruments.

### *Practical observations*

Abigail is a proof that God has endowed women with unusual attributes of generosity and self-giving. Herein lies their greatest charm. It is seldom that God can use those of great talents, because gifted people are often proud. Abigail was used as a gifted instrument because of her deep humility. God prepares His female tools with great care, in special circumstances, to fit and equip them for the special deeds they are called for.

Jealousy is one of the most despicable of all sins. It destroys even the one who is harbouring it: destroyed Saul, and destroyed Michal as well. God's servants may expect opposition and ridicule from many, but it is the bitterest when these are coming from family and friends. We should always know that any attack on God's chosen servant is an attack against God Himself, who called him to His service. The battle is not ours alone, but His.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Books:*

Berlin, Adele. *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994.

Blaikie, W. G. *The Second Book of Samuel*, The Expositor's Bible, Cincinnati, OH: Jennings & Graham, 1903.

Brown, Francis. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, with the cooperation of S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979.

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990.

Davis, Ralph Dale. *1 Samuel: Looking on the heart*, 2 Vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994.

Davis, Ralph Dale. *2 Samuel: Out of every adversity*, Christian Focus Publications. Fearn, UK: Geanies House, 1999.

Hertzberg, Hans Wilhelm. *I & II Samuel*, The Old Testament Library. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1964.

Keil, C. E. and Delitzsch, F. *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Vol. III. *I & II Samuel*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976.

McCarter, P. Kyle, Jr. *2 Samuel*, The Anchor Bible Commentary. New York: Doubleday, 1984.

Mowinckel S. *He that Cometh*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1956.

Alfons Schulz, "Narrative Art in the Book of Samuel," *Narrative and Novella in Samuel*, H. Gressmann ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991.

### ARTICLES:

Bellefontaine, Elizabeth. "Customary law and citizenship: Judicial aspects of 2 Samuel 14:4-21," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 38 (1987): 47-72.

- Berlin, Adele. "Characterization in biblical narrative: David's wives [Michal, Abigail, Bathsheba, and Abishag]," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 23 (1982): 69-85.
- Gunn, David M. "David and the gift of the kingdom," *Semeia*, 3 (1975): 14-45.
- Hoftijzer, Jacob. "David and the Tekoite Woman," *Vetus Testamentum*, 20 (1970): 419-444.
- Levenson, Jon D. "1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 40 (1978): 11-28.
- Levenson, Jon D. and Halpers, Baruch. "The political import of David's marriages," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 99/4 (1980): 507-518.
- Miscall, Peter. "Literary Unity in Old Testament Narrative," *Semeia* 15 (1979): 27-44.
- Nicol, George G. *David*, "Abigail and Bathsheba, Nabal and Uriah: Transformations within a Triangle," *Scandinavian Journal for the Old Testament*, 12/1 (1998): 130-145.
- Nicol, George G. "The wisdom of Joab and the wise woman of Tekoa," *Studia Theologica*, 36/2 (1982): 97-104.
- Simon, Uriel. "Poor man's ewe-lamb," *Biblica*, 48/2 (1967): 207-242.
- Whybray R. N. "The Succession Narrative. A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2," *Studies in biblical Theology*, Second Series 9, London, 1968.

# “Live Coals Separated, Soon Die”: The Early Baptist Vision of the Church & Associations

Michael A.G. Haykin<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

From the very beginning of Baptist witness in the seventeenth century, both in England and New England, Baptists gave a lot of thought to the nature of the Church. In some ways, what is distinctive about being a Baptist is having a particular way of doing church. They were not alone in such a focus. Numerous Christians in the British Isles during the seventeenth century—usually denominated “Puritans”—were also deeply concerned to discover from the Scriptures what constituted the true form of church life and government. The Anglican and Presbyterian understandings of the church held the view that that it comprised all living within a certain geographical boundary, the “parish church.” On the other hand Baptists argued for a completely different church model. In the twenty-first century not many seem deeply concerned about these matters but how the church is ordered is basic as far as its witness or effectiveness is concerned.

KEY WORDS: Episcopacy, congregationalism, Presbyterianism, local church, Baptists.

### *The early Baptist vision of the local church*

In the seventeenth century, in England and New England, there was a great deal of discussion regarding the nature of the Church. Some, members of the state church in England and Wales, argued for episcopacy. Others, belonging to the state church in Scotland and also found in the ranks of the Puritans in England and Wales, argued for Presbyterianism. Yet others were convinced that the New Testament supported congregationalism, or what John Owen (1616–1683), an important advocate of this perspective, once called “the old, glorious, beautiful face of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> Today, different controversies energize Christians and this passionate concern about what is the true form of church government seems a mere relic from the past, interesting possibly from an antiquarian viewpoint but

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin is the Chair and Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality and Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. mhaykin@sbts.edu

<sup>2</sup> *A Vindication of The Animadversions On “Fiat Lux”* (*The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold [1850–1853 ed.; repr. Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 14:311).

of little relevance for the present day. Yet, this early modern discussion should be of importance to us, for at its heart lies a distinct desire to recover what made early Christian churches alive and vital.<sup>3</sup>

Over against the Anglican and Presbyterian understandings of the church as being comprised of all who live within a certain geographical boundary—what is called the “parish church”—Baptists argued for a completely different church model. In the words of an early Baptist statement of faith, *The First London Confession of Faith*, which was drawn up in 1644 by seven Particular Baptist congregations in London, a local church

is a company of visible saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and the Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the local church should consist only of those who have experienced conversion and who have borne visible witness to that experience by being baptized. This vision of the church as a body of converted individuals who have been baptized after their conversion clearly ran counter to a major aspect of the thinking of seventeenth-century Anglicans and Presbyterians. These two Christian communities conceived of church as an established state entity, where religious uniformity was maintained by the arm of the state and infant baptism required for citizenship.

Baptists, on the other hand, were convinced that the church is ultimately a fellowship of those who have personally embraced the salvation freely offered in Christ, not an army of conscripted men and women who have no choice in the matter. This conviction is underscored by the phrase “being baptized into that faith” in the passage cited above from *First London Confession of Faith* being placed after the words “profession of the faith of the Gospel.” It is those who have knowingly professed faith, and those alone, who should be baptized. Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), the most important theologian of the English Particular Baptist movement at the end of the seventeenth century, thus defined the church in his book on Baptist polity, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display'd* (1697), where he wrote:

---

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-1660* (1957 ed.; repr. Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2002), 1–3.

<sup>4</sup> *The First London Confession of Faith* XXXIII (William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* [Rev. ed.; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969], 165). The spelling and capitalization in citations from this work have been modernized.

A Church of Christ, according to the Gospel-institution, is a congregation of godly Christians, who as a stated assembly (being first baptized upon the profession of faith) do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one to another, according to the will of God...<sup>5</sup>

Especially noteworthy in this passage and the text from the *First London Confession* is the “mutualism” in the description of the church.<sup>6</sup> In the words of the *First London Confession*, believers are “joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement.” Keach puts the very same idea this way: “Christians... do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one to another.” These texts are both emphasizing that a church is not simply a group of individuals who have put their faith in Christ. It is a *community* of belief—men and women who have owned Christ, been baptized as believers, and in so doing committed themselves to one another.<sup>7</sup>

Then, congregational church government is clearly affirmed in five articles of the *First London Confession*: Articles XXXVI, XLII to XLV. Thus, on the basis of Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4, it is affirmed that “Christ has ... given power to his whole Church to receive in and cast out, by way of excommunication, any member; and this power is given to every particular congregation, and not one particular person, either member or officer, but the whole.”<sup>8</sup> The members of the local church acting together have the authority and power to receive new members into their midst as well as to disfellowship those who refuse to walk under Christ’s lordship as revealed in Holy Scripture.

Furthermore, “every Church has power given them from Christ, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of pastors, teachers, elders, deacons.”<sup>9</sup> It was also stressed that “none other have power to impose” leaders on the congregation from the outside.<sup>10</sup> While later editions will limit the names of the leaders of the congregation to “elders” and “deacons,” there will be no retreat

---

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display'd* (London, 1697), 5–6. The spelling and capitalization have been modernized in this and subsequent citations from this text. For Keach, see Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.; Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> For this term, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, “‘A Company of Professed Believers Ecclesiastically Confederate’: the message of the Cambridge Platform” ([http://www.firstparishyarmouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ucc.org-\\_Company\\_of\\_Professed\\_Believers\\_Ecclesiastically\\_Confederate\\_the\\_message\\_of\\_the\\_Cambridge\\_Platform.pdf](http://www.firstparishyarmouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ucc.org-_Company_of_Professed_Believers_Ecclesiastically_Confederate_the_message_of_the_Cambridge_Platform.pdf); accessed June 7, 2019). This paper was given as part of a conference marking the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Cambridge Platform* (1649).

<sup>7</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, “A Company of Professed Believers.”

<sup>8</sup> *First London Confession of Faith* XLII (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168).

<sup>9</sup> *First London Confession of Faith* XXXVI (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166).

<sup>10</sup> *First London Confession of Faith* XXXVI (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166).

from the fact that “the ministry was ... firmly subordinated to the immediate authority of the covenanted community.”<sup>11</sup> B.R. White has pointed out that this jealous concern for congregational autonomy was motivated by a deep desire to be free to obey Christ and not to be bound by the dictates of men and human traditions.<sup>12</sup> Undergirding this concern for congregational autonomy also appears to have been a profound concern for God’s freedom to be Lord of his church. Human religious traditions that were not sanctioned by God’s Word were seen as an affront to God’s sovereign freedom and a violation of his prerogatives.<sup>13</sup>

### *An early Baptist view of the association*

Balancing this strong affirmation of congregational autonomy, which could easily lead to isolationism, was Article XLVII, in which it was declared:

Although the particular congregations be distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help of one another in all needful affairs of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.<sup>14</sup>

First of all, the autonomy of each local congregation is recognized as a biblical given: every congregation is “a compact and knit city in itself.” But, second, the authors of this confession are also cognizant that each congregation ultimately belongs to only one body—here, in essence, is the idea of the universal church—and that each congregation shares the same head, the Lord Christ. Reinforcing the idea of the unity of these seven congregations is the fact that they all “walk by one and the same rule,” that is, Scripture.<sup>15</sup> It was incumbent upon local congregations, therefore, to help one another.

The biblical basis of the thinking of those who drew up this *Confession* can be discerned in the proof texts that were placed alongside this article in both its 1644 and 1646 editions. The biblical texts cited in the first edition of 1644 are as follows:

---

<sup>11</sup> B.R. White, “The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 19 (1968): 581; *idem*, “The Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 25, no.4 (October, 1990): 46. The first of these articles by White is particularly helpful in thinking through the ecclesiology of this *Confession*. On the fact that there should be only two church offices, those of elder and deacon, see the remarks of Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 15–16.

<sup>12</sup> White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 584.

<sup>13</sup> Philip E. Thompson “People of the Free God: The Passion of Seventeenth-Century Baptists,” *American Baptist Quarterly*, 15 (1996): 226–231.

<sup>14</sup> *First London Confession of Faith XLVII* (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168–169).

<sup>15</sup> White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 583–584.

1. 1 Corinthians 4:17, which speaks of the links between the churches in the Apostolic era.
2. 1 Corinthians 14:33, 36—these verses stress that there was common teaching as it relates to worship practice and at the same time assume that these churches were not islands to themselves—they were to be united under the Word of God (“one and the same rule”).
3. 1 Corinthians 16:1, which refers to the collection of money that Paul gathered from congregations in Greece and Asia Minor for the poor in the church at Jerusalem.
4. Matthew 28:20: reinforces the fact that churches received one and the same teaching.
5. 1 Timothy 3:15: there is a uniformity of praxis.
6. 1 Timothy 6:13–14: churches must adhere to the truth—this explains what is meant by “one and the same Rule.” Common teaching as relates to doctrine. The *Confession* envisions the association as a means of helping preserve congregational integrity and orthodoxy.
7. Revelation 22:18–19: the same point seems to be made here as with previous verses.
8. Colossians 2:6: the word “walk” is the key term—it is used in the article to refer to the churches’ agreement to walk together under the “one and the same Rule.”
9. Colossians 2:19, which highlights the unity of the churches in Christ “their only head.”
10. Colossians 4:16, in which the church at Colossae is urged to share Paul’s letter to them with the church at Laodicea and vice versa.

In the 1646 edition, some proof texts were dropped—namely, Matthew 28:20; Revelation 22:18–19; Colossians 2:6, 19; 4:16—and some added:

1. Psalm 122:3: source of the origin of the phrase “compact and knit city.”
2. Ephesians 2:12, 19, which speaks of the unity of different ethnic groups in Christ.
3. Revelation 21 describes the heavenly Jerusalem—churches are a reflection/manifestation of this.
4. Acts 15:2–3, which deals with the Jerusalem Council—churches meeting together to discuss doctrinal matters. In other words, the authors of this *Confession* envisioned the churches giving advice with regard to doctrinal and ethical matters.
5. Song of Songs 8:8–9, which is understood as a call to help weaker churches in light of the fact that this text is interpreted as an allegory of Christ’s love for the Church and vice versa.
6. 2 Corinthians 8:1, 4, which has to do with the collection of money for the church at Jerusalem. Inclusion of this text means that the framers of the

*Confession* envisioned churches helping one another in areas of financial need.

7. 2 Corinthians 13:14: this verse is very important, the key phrase for Article XLVII is “communion of the Holy Ghost.”

These proof texts bear witness to “the active concern of the men of 1644 with unity of doctrine, polity, and action among the churches and their recognition that the tool for building that unity was ‘the counsel and help of one another’.”<sup>16</sup>

These early Baptists were thus convinced that when they gathered together as believers the Spirit was present in power to bring glory to Christ by binding them together in submission to him as their sole Lord. What was true for individual congregations was also true for their fledgling associations. In other words, the conviction of these early Baptists about these associations was that they were not organizations as much as entities indwelt by the Spirit. These associations were manifestations of the one true Church that had Christ alone for its head.

#### *Further insight from the Abingdon Association*

The seven churches that drew up this *Confession* are the first example of a Baptist association.<sup>17</sup> Five of them had their origins in a semi-Separatist congregation in London in the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey, where they learned the importance of associational life, a key feature of this congregation.<sup>18</sup> By 1660, at least five other associations had been formed:

1. 1650: The South Wales Association
2. 1652: The Abingdon Association
3. By 1653: The Western & Irish Associations<sup>19</sup>
4. 1655: The Midlands Association

These associations were critical to the expansion of the Particular Baptists from 7 congregations in 1644 to 130 in 1660.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 583.

<sup>17</sup> B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Rev. ed.; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 68.

<sup>18</sup> White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 586.

<sup>19</sup> It would be out of the Western Association that the leading Baptist seminary in the eighteenth century, the Bristol Baptist Academy, would be formed in the early decades of that century.

<sup>20</sup> See B.R. White, “The Organisation of the Particular Baptists, 1644–1660,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 17 (1966): 209–226.

Further insight regarding the purpose behind the formation of these associations comes from the inaugural statement of the Abingdon Association in 1652.<sup>21</sup> In this text, the following reasons for working together are cited:

1. For advice and mutual help in times of controversy (they cited Acts 15 for support).
2. To help with financial needs (they referenced 1 Corinthians 16 as support). A good example in this regard took place in 1657 when Abraham Cheare (1626–1668) informed the churches in London about the poverty of a number of Baptist ministers in the West Country. The London churches responded by seeking to set up a fund for their help.<sup>22</sup>
3. “There is the same relation betwixt the particular churches each towards other as there is betwixt particular members of one church.”<sup>23</sup> This is a key theological principle for creating Associations. Churches are bound together as believers are bound together.<sup>24</sup> These Baptists rightly discerned that in the New Testament the call to follow Jesus Christ, while intensely personal and directed at the individual heart, inescapably involves being part of a community of disciples and maintaining firm links with other like-minded churches. In other words, as David Kingdon has put it: “Inter-church fellowship is no more an option than is church membership for the individual believer in the local church.”<sup>25</sup> When Benjamin Keach thus observed near the conclusion of his *The Glory of a True Church* that “Live coals separated, soon die,”<sup>26</sup> this has application to not only individual believers, but also local churches.
4. To help keep each other pure.<sup>27</sup>
5. As “proof of their love to all saints.”<sup>28</sup>
6. So that “the work of God” might be “the more easily and prosperously carried on by a combination of prayers and endeavors.”<sup>29</sup> These

---

<sup>21</sup> *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660. Part 3. The Abingdon Association*, ed. B.R. White (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1974), 126–127. References to this text will be cited thus: *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3 with the appropriate page.

<sup>22</sup> White, “Organisation of the Particular Baptists,” 226.

<sup>23</sup> *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:126.

<sup>24</sup> White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> David Kingdon, “Independency and Interdependency” in James M. Renihan, ed., *Denominations or Associations? Essays on Reformed Baptist Associations* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press/Carlisle: PA: The Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, 2001), 13–14.

<sup>26</sup> Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> See White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:126.

<sup>29</sup> *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:126.

associations were critical to the halcyon days of Particular Baptist growth during the 1640s and 1650s.

7. To help “quicken [each other] ... when lukewarm, to help when in want, assist in counsel in doubtful matters and prevent prejudices in each against other.”<sup>30</sup>
8. Finally, as an expression of the unity of the Body of Christ—John 17: “to convince the world, for by this shall men know by one mark that we are the true churches of Christ.”<sup>31</sup> Would that believers today had a similar passion!

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Goold, William H., *A Vindication of The Animadversions On “Fiat Lux” (The Works of John Owen)*, ed. 1850–1853 ed.; repr. Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.

Nuttall, Geoffrey F., *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-1660* (1957 ed.; repr. Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2002).

Lumpkin, William L., *The First London Confession of Faith XXXIII in Baptist Confessions of Faith* [Rev. ed.; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969].

Keach, Benjamin, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display’d* (London, 1697)

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E., “ ‘A Company of Professed Believers Ecclesiastically Confederate’: the message of the Cambridge Platform” (<http://www.firstparishyarmouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ucc.org>-accessed June 7, 2019).

White, B. R., “The Organisation of the Particular Baptists, 1644–1660,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 17 (1966): 209–226.

“The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 19 (1968).

*Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660. Part 3. The Abingdon Association*, ed. B.R. White (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1974), 126–127.

“The Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 25, no.4 (October, 1990).

*The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Rev. ed.; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996).

---

<sup>30</sup> *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:127. See, for example, the Letter of the Abingdon Association to its member churches, April 11, 1656 (*Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:148–150).

<sup>31</sup> *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:127.

Thompson, Philip E., “People of the Free God: The Passion of Seventeenth-Century Baptists,” *American Baptist Quarterly*, 15 (1996): 226–231.

Kingdon, David, “Independency and Interdependency” in James M. Renihan, ed., *Denominations or Associations? Essays on Reformed Baptist Associations* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press/Carlisle: PA: The Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, 2001).

# Apprenticed to Christ: Reshaping Disciple-Making around Christ's Commission

Paul Coulter<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Discipleship is widely recognised as a pressing need in evangelical churches, but models of disciple-making are many and varied, revealing little agreement about what discipleship is and how disciples are made. If our aim is biblical faithfulness, we must develop a clear biblical understanding of these subjects. Disciples are apprentices learning from the master's words and example, and Christians are called to be apprentices of Christ. The so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 expands Jesus' mission within Israel to all nations and bridges between Jesus' call to discipleship by following him prior to his death and the mission of the Church after his departure. It describes two activities within disciple-making: baptism in the triune name into the community of disciples and teaching, through words and example, of obedience to Jesus' commands. Underpinning these activities are two assurances: Jesus' universal authority and his constant presence. When evaluated against these principles, two major deficiencies are identified in contemporary disciple-making models: a focus on one-to-one relationships, which, in the New Testament, are more typical of leadership development, and curricula that may emphasise accumulation of knowledge over transformed lives. In the Great Commission, Jesus calls his people to a mission of disciple-making that transcends all barriers and extends throughout time until the end of the age.

**KEY WORDS:** Discipleship; Disciples; Disciple-making; Great Commission; Mission

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been an increased interest in discipleship across evangelical churches. The main driver for this development has been a recognition that many people who profess faith do not seem to progress to maturity in the faith, accompanied by a sense that traditional church activities do not actively promote such growth. This is a reaction against a sense that evangelicals have too often aimed to “‘evoke decisions’, whereas Jesus’

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Paul Coulter PhD, Head of Ministry Operations, Living Leadership, Director of the Centre for Christianity in Society, and adjunct faculty, Irish Baptist College.

command was to make disciples.”<sup>2</sup> Discipleship, it seemed, was a “lost art.”<sup>3</sup> Books on discipleship have proliferated since the 1980s, often proposing models for disciple-making programmes or techniques. There is, however, considerable variation in these books about what discipleship is and how disciples are made. As people committed to the authority of Scripture, it is imperative that evangelicals return to the New Testament for an understanding of what it means to make disciples. This article presents the so-called ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28 as a key text in this process and evaluates some contemporary models of disciple-making against its emphases.

## DISCIPLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Greek word commonly translated ‘disciple’ in the New Testament is *mathētēs* (plural, *mathētai*). In the first century world it referred to a ‘learner’ or ‘apprentice’.<sup>4</sup> The term apprentice may seem old-fashioned to twentieth century readers, but it may be the best way to conceive of discipleship, since it indicates a person who attaches himself to an older, more experienced master with the intention of learning the skills of the trade by close observation and verbal instruction. Apprenticeship, thus, encompasses four ideas which are vital to understanding discipleship: a goal of which the master is the epitome; intentional commitment to learn from the master; words and example as dual means of teaching; and close relationship as the context of learning. Thus, “a disciple is both a learner and a follower”,<sup>5</sup> who observes a master in order to learn how to think, act and speak like him. In the Gospels, *mathētēs* is used of the followers of Jesus as well as those who were apprenticed to other teachers such as John the Baptist and the Pharisees.<sup>6</sup> The practice of people apprenticing themselves to learned rabbis, who had themselves been disciples of earlier rabbis, was well established in the time of Jesus and remained a central feature of education in rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>7</sup> In the time of Jesus, there appears to have been no formal requirement for ordination of a rabbi, with teachers appointing their own successors much as Jesus did.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 322.

<sup>3</sup> As suggested in the title of LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: IVP, 1992), 746.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 2:18.

<sup>7</sup> See Jacob Neusner, *The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1999), viii.

<sup>8</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 573.

The term disciples appears frequently in all four Gospels and in Acts. Jesus called people to be his disciples by taking up their cross to follow him.<sup>9</sup> From among a wider group of disciples, he chose the Twelve to learn from him in a more focused way by leaving their professions and homes to live alongside him on his travels as well as hearing his instruction.<sup>10</sup> In Acts, ‘disciples’ is a common term for believers in Christ. By contrast, the word is not found at all in the epistles or Revelation. This total absence cannot be explained by authorial preferences. The fact that none of those who wrote epistles – James, John, Jude, Paul and Peter – used the word must surely indicate that it was not the dominant form of address among Christians. Luke’s use of *mathētēs* in Acts may reflect his emphasis on the continuity of the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus through the Spirit and apostles with his ministry before the cross as recounted in Luke’s Gospel, rather than widespread usage within the early churches. Indeed, the word only appears in dialogue once in Acts, on the lips of Peter speaking at the Jerusalem Council.<sup>11</sup> The epistles indicate that the predominant way in which Christians referred to one another was as “brothers and sisters” (Greek *adelphoi*). Even in Acts, *adelphoi* appears more often than *mathētai* (33 times and 25 times respectively). Other terms for those who believed in Jesus appearing in Acts include: believers (five times);<sup>12</sup> ‘saints’ (four times);<sup>13</sup> ‘Christian’ (twice, most likely as a derisory term);<sup>14</sup> ‘follower of the way (once);<sup>15</sup> and ‘Nazarene’ (once, also as a derisory term).<sup>16</sup> Unlike ‘disciples’, most of these terms (the exception being ‘Nazarenes’), continue into the epistles, in similar proportions, with *adelphoi* remaining predominant.

It would, however, be premature to conclude from the disappearance of the term ‘disciple’ that discipleship, which was such an important concept for Jesus, does not continue in the Church. The core concepts in discipleship – Jesus as the definition of maturity, the need for commitment to him, the importance of words and example, and close relationship as the context – continue throughout the epistles. The shift to *adelphoi* from *mathētai* as the main collective terms for believers does not indicate an abandonment of these principles but their integration with a fifth – the Church as the household and family of God within which believers learn and mature. *Mathētēs* may also have been a less appropriate term in contexts outside the Church’s origins in Judea and Galilee

---

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 16:24.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 3:14 says that Jesus appointed the twelve “so that they might be with him” and Mark 10:28 indicates that they had “left everything” to follow him.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 15:10.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 5:14; 10:45; 15:5; 16:1; 19:18.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 26:10.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 11:26; 26:28.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 24:14, NIV.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 24:5.

where different concepts of education were prevalent.<sup>17</sup> As the Church began to experience persecution and faced potential divisions, it may also have become increasingly important to emphasise the ‘horizontal’ relationships indicated by *mathētai*.

The nature of the ‘vertical’ relationship of believers with God was also different from the experience of the disciples in the Gospels, who followed Jesus around, eating and sleeping with him. Those who believed in Jesus through the message these first disciples preached were still followers of Jesus, but after his ascension and the coming of the Spirit, following him no longer meant walking around after the incarnate Son, but following the leading of the indwelling Spirit sent to be a Helper like him.<sup>18</sup> The metaphor of walking to describe the Christian life is important in the epistles – we are to walk in love and obedience to the truth, in a manner worthy of God and like Christ – but it is not walking after the physical embodiment of God in Christ but after the leading of God the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, the word *mathētai*, which predominates in the Gospels, gives way in the epistles to *adelphoi* (“brothers” or “brothers and sisters”), but the concepts inherent in discipleship continue in terms of life in the Spirit and in community.

## THE GREAT COMMISSION AS A KEY TEXT

Having established that discipleship continues to be important, we must now consider how disciples are made. Our central text for these purposes is Matthew 28:18-20, generally known as the ‘Great Commission’. Since at least the nineteenth century,<sup>20</sup> this is undisputedly the most influential passage in the history of Protestant missions.<sup>21</sup> Given its significance, the passage deserves to be quoted in full.

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, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them

---

<sup>17</sup> A similar argument may be made for the paucity of references to the ‘kingdom of God’ in the epistles, where it gives way to language of Jesus’ Lordship.

<sup>18</sup> John 14:15.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:15; 2 Corinthians 5:7; 10:2; Galatians 5:16,25; 6:16; Ephesians 2:10; 4:1; 5:2,8,15; Philippians 3:17; Colossians 1:10; 2:6; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 4:1,12; 1 John 1:7; 2:6; 2 John 1:4.6; 3 John 1:3,4

<sup>20</sup> For a history of the use of the phrase ‘Great Commission’ see David Wright, “The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary”, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (2007): 153ff.

<sup>21</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 340-341.

to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Biblical scholars have proposed various literary forms for this passage based on Old Testament and other ancient Near Eastern precedents, but there does not appear to be any direct parallel.<sup>22</sup> What is clear is that the passage contains three sentences: a central command sentence surrounded by two assurances.

Some missiologists have argued that an excessive focus on the Great Commission has unhelpfully limited the scope of mission. Some appeal to post-resurrection commissioning passages in the other Gospels and Acts for additional elements in mission, while others argue for a wider canonical basis for mission. These arguments cannot be rehearsed here but considering the text I maintain that it is not, however, exegetically irresponsible to see this passage as central to our understanding of the mission of the Church. Several features in the text indicate its importance: its positioning at the end of the Gospel; the framing of the commands between statements of Jesus’ authority and his presence; the repeated reference to universality (*all* authority, *all* nations and *all* I have commanded); and the allusions to major Old Testament themes, including God’s promises to Abraham and Daniel’s visions, that are fulfilled in it. We will see as we examine the Great Commission that the emphases of other commissioning passages are also implicit in it: witness in the Spirit’s power to the person of Jesus (Luke-Acts); Jesus sending the disciples in the same way that the Father sent him (John); and declaration of the forgiveness of sins (Luke and John).<sup>23</sup>

In summary, we can agree with David Wright’s assertion that this “is the single most important statement of commissioning of the Christian church, from the risen Christ” and that “the New Testament contains no other passage of comparable significance” for the priorities of the Church.<sup>24</sup> In the next three sections of this article we will explore the meaning of the Commission.

#### THE SCOPE OF THE COMMISSION: “GO ... ALL NATIONS”

The command sentence in Matthew 19-20a contain four verbs, but only one, *mathéteuó* (translated “make disciples”) is an imperative. The other three verbs – “go”, “baptising” and “teaching” – are participles of this central command and

---

<sup>22</sup> For a review of the options see Peter O’Brien, “The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?”, *Reformed Theological Review* 35, no. 3 (1976): 66-78.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; John 20:21-23. I have not referred to the commissioning text from the long ending of Mark (16:15ff.) here since, although influential in the past, it is no longer widely regarded as original.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, “The Great Commission”, 135.

auxiliary to it.<sup>25</sup> The verb “go” is what makes these verses a commission. Similar “Go and” grammatical constructions elsewhere in Matthew indicate that the going is necessary for them to do what he commands.<sup>26</sup> “Go” must at least mean that the disciples are not to stay with Jesus on the mountain. nor are they to leave the earth with him. Rather, they are to return into human society and multiply their number. Furthermore, the reference to “all nations” indicates a global scope, just as the phrase “ends of the earth” does in the Acts commission.<sup>27</sup> Some scholars, suspicious of the idea that Jesus may have commanded mission beyond Israel, have suggested that “all nations” (Greek *panta ta ethne*) refers to the Jews of the diaspora.<sup>28</sup> The three earlier instances of the phrase in Matthew, however, indicate that it means people from every people group – both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>29</sup> This reading is further supported by the facts that the relevance of Jesus to all people runs as a theme throughout Matthew.

It is clear, then, that this commission is the flowering of the theme of Jesus’ relevance to all nations that runs through Matthew as he extends the reach of his teaching beyond the “lost sheep of Israel”<sup>30</sup> on whom he focused prior to his death.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, that theme originated long before Jesus’ time with God’s promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him.<sup>32</sup> The Septuagint uses *panta ta ethne* in those passages and Matthew’s use of the same phrase here indicates that it is through the testimony of the disciples to Jesus, the seed of Abraham, that all nations will be blessed. The Great Commission is, thus, the pinnacle of God’s unfolding plan of salvation.

An additional comment is in order concerning the tendency for advocates of modern mission strategies aiming to evangelise “unreached people groups” to translate *panta ta ethne* as “all ethnic groups.” Martin Goldsmith writes that “[w]hile it cannot be denied that God has used such movements to stimulate many in the church to a renewed vision for primary evangelism and church planting, the biblical foundation for such movements is unacceptable.”<sup>33</sup> The

---

<sup>25</sup> O’Brien, “The Great Commission”, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7.

<sup>27</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>28</sup> This view is associated with D.W.B. Robinson by O’Brien, “The Great Commission”, 73.

<sup>29</sup> See O’Brien, “The Great Commission”, 74. The other instances of *panta ta ethne* in Matthew are found in 24:9 (all nations will hate the disciples), 24:14 (the gospel will be preached to all nations) and 25:32 (all nations will be brought before the Son of Man for judgement). Each of these certainly points to Gentile people rather than Jews and can most naturally be taken to indicate that both Jews and Gentiles alike are included.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 15:24.

<sup>31</sup> Morris, *Matthew*, 746.

<sup>32</sup> Genesis 18:18; 22:18.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel Through Jewish Eyes* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 200-201.

primary significance of the term, as we have seen, is to indicate that the Jesus movement will spread beyond Israel to the Gentiles. It would be reductionist, though, to say that *panta ta ethne* simply means the Gentiles. The phrase must surely imply that each *ethnos* among the *ethne* will be reached. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus had said that “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations [*pasin ethnesin*]; and then shall the end come.”<sup>34</sup> *Pasin* means *each* of the nations and it seems reasonable to carry that sense over into the Great Commission.

It seems, then, that there is some merit in saying that the Church has a responsibility to make disciples among each *ethnos*. The term does not refer to a geopolitical nation in the modern sense of the word, but to a recognisable group of people, closer to what we would today call an ethnic group. The difficulty for the unreached people group theorists is that we have no list of the *ethne* which existed at Jesus time, or of which of them have been reached at some point since he issued the Great Commission, or how they map onto ethnic groups identifiable today. Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra argue that *ethnos* is “the most capacious term to define a group of people linked by a common history, culture or community allegiance.”<sup>35</sup> It is unlikely, then, that Jesus could have meant the many thousands of “people groups” that modern mission strategists identify and it is anachronistic to equate, as the Joshua Project does,<sup>36</sup> an *ethnos* in Matthew 28:19 with a contemporary “people group” defined as “The largest group through which the gospel can flow without encountering significant barriers of acceptance or understanding.”<sup>37</sup> Such concepts may help mission organisations to identify priorities and formulate priorities, but they should be read back into the Great Commission. To do so, especially if combined with undue emphasis on “Go”, may wrongly imply that those who do not prioritise unreached groups are disobedient to the Commission. The command to make disciples is to every believer whether they cross cultures or not.

In summary, the Great Commission provides a firm basis for global mission to all people, but the nations should not be equated with contemporary people groups, and the Commission is just as relevant to ministry within one’s own ethnic group.

---

<sup>34</sup> Matthew 24:14.

<sup>35</sup> Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Nottingham: IVP, 2003), 183.

<sup>36</sup> “People Groups”, Joshua Project, accessed February 11, 2021, [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups).

<sup>37</sup> Lausanne Movement, *Hidden and Forgotten People Including Those Who are Disabled* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 35A).

## BAPTISM: INITIATION OF DISCIPLESHIP

As mentioned above, the imperative in the command section of the Great Commission is “make disciples”, which translates *mathéteuó*, the verbal form of *mathētēs*. The term could alternatively be translated ‘to disciple’, although this use of ‘disciple as a verb is not universally recognised.<sup>38</sup> *Mathéteuó* appears twice before this in Matthew and only one other time in the New Testament (see below). In Matthew 13:52, Jesus uses it of scribes who have “*trained for the kingdom of heaven*”, most likely meaning members of the group of Jewish religious leaders who have become his disciples.<sup>39</sup> Matthew 27:57, meanwhile, says that Joseph of Arimathea “*also was a disciple of [Lit. ‘had been disciplined to] Jesus.*” These instances add little to our understanding of discipleship other than reminding us that people are disciplined to Jesus and into the kingdom. The means of disciple making are revealed in the other two verbs that follow *mathéteuó* as participles of it: ‘baptising’ and ‘teaching’.

The command to baptise indicates that conversion is essential for discipleship. The only occurrence of *mathéteuó* outside Matthew’s Gospel affirms this principle, linking the making of disciples in Derbe with the preaching of the gospel by Paul and Barnabas.<sup>40</sup> The emphasis on preaching and forgiveness of sins in the commission passages in Luke and John is, therefore, implicit in Matthew’s Great Commission. In recent years, the idea of ‘pre-conversion discipleship’ has gained currency.<sup>41</sup> It is often a corrective to evangelistic approaches that insist that crisis conversions as normative and neglect the reality that many people come to faith in Jesus gradually rather than in dramatic experience. Its advocates argue that people should be included within the community of the Church before they are believers, since in that context they may hear gospel truth and experience God’s love through his people. Belonging, and even behaving, can precede believing. The aim is still conversion, but there is a less clear line between unbelief and belief than evangelicals have traditionally expected. There is, it is argued, a precedent for this approach in the

---

<sup>38</sup> ‘Disciple’ is not listed as a verb in many popular-level modern English dictionaries, such as those from Oxford and Cambridge, whilst those that do include the verb, such as Collins and Dictionary.com, describe it as ‘archaic’. In this author’s experience, the verb is making a resurgence among evangelicals.

<sup>39</sup> An alternative understanding, that the reference is to a subgroup of Jesus’ disciples who were given a special function as teachers is proposed by Hans Kvalbein, “Go Therefore and Make Disciples: The Concept of Discipleship in the New Testament”, *Themelios* 13, no.2 (1988): 48-52.

<sup>40</sup> Acts 14:21.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Alan Hirsch, *Disciplism: Reimagining Evangelism Through the Lens of Discipleship* (Exponential, 2014), 25, 28.

example of the disciples who grew gradually to believe in Jesus as they were disciplined by him.

It is undoubtedly true that people may learn about Jesus before conversion and some change of lifestyle may result, but is the idea of pre-conversion discipleship consistent with the Great Commission? Matthew 28:19 presents baptism as a starting point in disciple-making. This is not an innovation after the resurrection. We know from John's gospel that Jesus and the disciples were "making [*poiei*] and baptising [...] disciples [*mathētas*]" from an early point in Jesus' ministry.<sup>42</sup> The verb *mathēteuó* is not used, but the parallel with the Great Commission is clear. The Great Commission is a continuation of this practice of initiating new disciples through water baptism. This may appear to support the idea of pre-conversion discipleship, since even the Twelve who baptised others had not yet grasped who Jesus was and could not yet be trusting in his death, which was future. There is, however, a flaw in this logic. We cannot reconstruct from a passing reference in John 4 what was understood in the baptisms Jesus' disciples performed, but we do have a clear understanding from Acts and the epistles of what baptism meant after the Great Commission and its central emphasis on identification with Jesus in his death and resurrection, which could only develop after those events, clearly indicates conversion.<sup>43</sup> It was after believing that people were baptised in Acts 2 and belonging to the Church community was subsequent to that.<sup>44</sup> The order was believing, then belonging and behaving. We cannot read the pre-cross pattern of disciple-making forward into Matthew 28 or make it our basis for ministry today.<sup>45</sup>

Disciple-making after Pentecost differs from the process through which Jesus made disciples during his earthly ministry because the significance of baptism is more fully developed and conversion in the fully Christian sense is possible because of the Spirit's coming. The Twelve and others came to a gradual understanding of Jesus' identity and mission. That was inevitable since they were the first witnesses of his life and teaching and they lacked the indwelling Spirit. There is no such pattern in Acts, which describes Christian initiation in terms of the triad of faith, water baptism and reception of the Spirit. Disciples are converted people who are apprenticed to Christ. As with the instance of *mathēteuó* in Acts, the priority given to baptism in the Great Commission ties disciple-making closely to gospel proclamation which is, of course, central to the commissioning passage in Luke 24. Evangelism is implicit in the Great

---

<sup>42</sup> John 4:1.

<sup>43</sup> Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12-14.

<sup>44</sup> Acts 2:37-41.

<sup>45</sup> This discussion assumes believers' baptism, which is the author's conviction. A justification of that position and is not possible within an article of this length. Paedobaptist evangelicals may well place belonging in the covenant community before believing.

Commission, but discipleship starts with a response of faith to the gospel expressed in baptism. People are not disciples until they have declared their loyalty to Jesus as Lord. Jesus' radical call to discipleship – denial of self to follow him – continues after the resurrection but is met with the regenerating work of the Spirit who empowers the believer for growth in godliness.

The link between baptism and inclusion in the Church, which is explicit in Acts, is also implicit in the Great Commission. The triune formula – three persons, but only one name – is remarkable, but it is well attested as original both from the manuscript evidence and from early Christian quotations.<sup>46</sup> It is a declaration of commitment and of a new identity, a marker of “entrance into an allegiance” to,<sup>47</sup> or “passing into the possession of”, the triune God so that the “baptized person is under new management.”<sup>48</sup> It also indicates inclusion within the eternally-existent community within the godhead and, by extension, oneness with all who are, likewise, baptised. Whilst the Great Commission does use the word *ekklēsia* (“Church”), it concludes the only Gospel that includes explicit references to the Church. Indeed, the wording of these verses draws together all of the Gospel's major themes, including the ecclesiological.<sup>49</sup> The link becomes clear with Jesus' promise of his presence in verse 20, which echoes his earlier promise to be present among his followers as they gather in his name, a statement that defines the *ekklēsia* he mentions in the same passage.<sup>50</sup> That reference is, of course, speaking of the process which may lead to the exclusion of an unrepentant person from the community of disciples. People may well feel welcome in gatherings of the church community before conversion – that is surely to be hoped for – but no one can truly belong in the Church without believing and a person who will not repent of sin and so is not progressing as a disciple cannot continue to be counted among the church community, which is the primary context for disciple-making. Discipline is inseparable from discipleship.

## TEACHING: CONTINUATION OF DISCIPLE-MAKING

Baptism is a single experience that initiates discipleship, but teaching, the second activity within disciple-making, is lifelong and regular. Baptised believers *are* disciples, but they continue to be *discipled* as they are taught. Specifically, the Great Commission teaches that disciples grow by learning to obey the things that

---

<sup>46</sup> Green, *The Message of Matthew*, 322-323.

<sup>47</sup> Richard France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Volume 1, reprinted format (Nottingham: IVP; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 420.

<sup>48</sup> Peskett and Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission*, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 57; Terence Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 170.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew 18:17, 20.

Jesus taught, so disciple-makers must teach them all that Matthew and the other Gospels record of Jesus' teaching about life in the kingdom of God. At the centre of this teaching is the Great Commandment to love God with our whole being and others as we love ourselves.<sup>51</sup> As such, in the words of G. Campbell Morgan, this is "a great and gracious and spacious commission" that insists on "the ethic of the Kingdom."<sup>52</sup> As John Stott wrote, "The Great Commission neither explains, nor exhausts, nor supersedes the Great Commandment."<sup>53</sup> Rather, it is through the Great Commission that the Great Commandment is fulfilled – love for God motivates us to obey it and love for others motivates us to bring them into discipleship – and expanded – those who become disciples will obey the commandment.

This link between Great Commission and Great Commandment reminds us that, while the Church's mission is disciple-making and formation of church communities in which it proceeds, that mission's outworking will be holistic, responding to material needs and issues that harm the people Jesus commands us to love.<sup>54</sup> Keith Ferdinando helpfully describes disciple-making as the "innermost of [...] four concentric circles" that have been said to define mission.<sup>55</sup> He accepts that the other circles may be aspects of mission, but argues that disciple-making is the "*sine qua non* of authentically Christian mission." Other aspects of mission, such as engagement with the world and social action for the good of others, are fulfilled as disciples are made, but if those other aspects displace disciple-making as the essence of mission, there will be no disciples to further them.

Since the Great Commission calls us to teach obedience to what Jesus commanded, we might conclude that teaching from the Gospels should be central in Christian development. It would, however, be wrong to drive a wedge between the Gospels and the epistles. The things Jesus taught the disciples include the truths they could not receive during his earthly ministry, into which the Spirit he promised led them after his departure.<sup>56</sup> Disciple-making should, then, include teaching from all of Scripture, even if there is a special attention to the Gospels.

---

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 22:34-40.

<sup>52</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1976), 321.

<sup>53</sup> John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 29.

<sup>54</sup> See also Paul Hertig, "The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God's Reign in Disciple Making." *Missiology: An International Review* 29, no. 3 (2009): 348-349.

<sup>55</sup> Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition", *Themelios* 33, no. 1 (2008): 46-59.

<sup>56</sup> John 16:12-13.

Another principle about the nature of this teaching must not be neglected. It is not simply knowledge of these truths that is to be taught, but obedience. This means that teaching must be not only with words but also by example, just as it is in apprenticeship. The apostles must both instruct people in the truth *and* model lives of Christlikeness. The pattern continues in the writings of the apostle Paul, who emphasised both the things he taught and his life as a pattern of obedience to the truth.<sup>57</sup> The concern in disciple-making is not simply with producing people who believe the right things, but who also behave the right way. The development of disciples always entails these two means.

## TWO RESOURCES FOR DISCIPLE-MAKING

Disciple-making happens through baptism and teaching. These are human activities, conducted by people. But no one can make disciples without the resources provided through the two assurances that surround Jesus' command: Jesus' universal authority (verse 18) and enduring presence (verse 20b). Jesus' first assurance is that he has received all authority from the Father. The clause "in heaven and on earth" echoes the words of the prayer he taught his disciples: "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>58</sup> This prayer will be answered through obedience to the Commission of the Lord Jesus who bridges between heaven and earth because he has all authority in both. In this link, Jesus is identifying himself with his Father and positioning himself as the one means through which people can come to God.

Authority is another of the themes in Matthew that is tied together in the Great Commission. Jesus' teaching had authority unlike the scribes.<sup>59</sup> He did not follow their custom of describing themselves as "disciples of sages."<sup>60</sup> Jesus was no one's disciple. The scribes built on the authority of earlier rabbis, but Jesus claimed no authority but his own. He even claimed authority to forgive sins.<sup>61</sup> His opponents debated with him about his authority in the lead up to his crucifixion.<sup>62</sup> Now that dispute is settled once and for all. Jesus, the true descendant of David,<sup>63</sup> recognised as the king of the Jews by magi from the east,<sup>64</sup> resistant to Satan's false offer of all the earth's kingdoms,<sup>65</sup> entered Jerusalem in royal triumph only to be crucified outside its walls under a mocking

---

<sup>57</sup> Philippians 4:9; 2 Timothy 3:10ff.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 6:10.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 7:29.

<sup>60</sup> Neusner, *The Four Stages*, vii.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 9:6.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew 21:23ff.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 1:1-17.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew 2:1-12.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 4:8-9.

declaration of kingship.<sup>66</sup> Now he is revealed to be sovereign not only over Israel but over all. *All* authority has been given to him: to forgive sins and to teach. The Great Commission is the natural outworking of this authority – baptising those who trust in him for forgiveness of sins and teaching them to obey his teachings.

Recognising that Jesus presents himself as king, some scholars have described the Great Commission as an enthronement speech,<sup>67</sup> or at least as sharing “similar motifs” with that genre.<sup>68</sup> Jesus describes his reception of all authority in the past tense, indicating that his death and resurrection were his enthronement.<sup>69</sup> This declaration of authority received resonates with Daniel’s vision of one like a “son of man” (Jesus’ favourite self-designation in Matthew’s Gospel) receiving universal authority from the Ancient of Days.<sup>70</sup> The parallel is inexact, since the son of man comes with the clouds in Daniel’s vision. In his ‘little apocalypse’ in Matthew 24, Jesus linked that vision to a future time at the “close of the age” (*sunteleias aiōnos*) when he will return in glory.<sup>71</sup> Now he tells the disciples that he has already been enthroned by the Ancient of Days through his resurrection, even if his visible revelation in glory in the clouds is future. In the interim, until the “end of the age” (*sunteleias aiōnos*, verse 20) – the same phrase as in Chapter 24 – they must make disciples who recognise him as king and surrender to him as Lord.

This presentation of himself as authoritative concludes another major theme in Matthew. Throughout his teaching ministry, Jesus has spoken of the kingdom of heaven. He now reveals himself as its king. Discipling others to Jesus equates to discipling them in the kingdom.<sup>72</sup> The authority of Jesus emboldened the apostles as well as assuring them that none of the peoples to whom they would go were outside his saving power. It reminds us, too, that the commission is to make disciples of the Lord Jesus, who alone has authority.<sup>73</sup> Not followers of us, but of him. Not obedience to our will, but to his. Not a community under our control, but under him. This sets Christian disciple-making apart from the

---

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 21:1-11; 27:37.

<sup>67</sup> Hertig, *The Great Commission Revisited*.

<sup>68</sup> O’Brien, *The Great Commission*, 67-68.

<sup>69</sup> France, *Matthew*, 419 points to the resurrection as the enthronement. I have added the cross because John’s Gospel contains a special emphasis on the crucifixion as the exaltation of Jesus as king through the double meaning of the phrase “lifted up” (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32,34).

<sup>70</sup> Daniel 7:13-14; See Craig Blomberg, “Matthew”, in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 100.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew 24:3,30; see also Matthew 26:64.

<sup>72</sup> Remember, *mathēteuó* in Matthew 13:52 refers to discipling in the kingdom.

<sup>73</sup> It is also significant that, unlike his delegation of authority over unclean spirits and to heal when he commissioned the disciples for mission within Israel in Matthew 10, the Great Commission contains no delegation of authority.

rabbinic pattern. Rabbis hoped to train others to take over from them, but Jesus remains the rabbi for all Christians. Jesus had taught his disciples that they were “not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.”<sup>74</sup> As Hans Kvalbein writes, “For his adherents, Jesus alone is Teacher and Master, Rabbi. A Christian is always and only a student in relation to Jesus.”<sup>75</sup> Disciple-making can never mean domination over those being disciplined.

The eleven men who first received the Great Commission had heard all the teaching of Jesus and had learned from him how to live. As apostle appointed by Jesus, they had authority to lay down the foundational teaching of the Church and they would pass on the faith to subsequent generations of the Church. Disciple-makers today, by contrast, have not heard and seen Jesus directly. They do, however, have faithful records of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles recorded in Scripture. The Bible is, therefore, the authoritative resource for making disciples.

Jesus’ second assurance follows closely from the thoughts that Jesus remains the Master of every believer and that Scripture is God’s means of revealing Christ to us. His promise to be with the disciples is reminiscent of several Old Testament passages in which God commissions people to his service and assures them of his presence.<sup>76</sup> In this New Testament equivalent, Jesus assumes the place of Yahweh. As in the two other major events in Matthew that occurred on mountaintops – his first teaching discourse and his transfiguration – Jesus is identifying himself with God.<sup>77</sup> This is the culmination of the theme of God present with his people in the person of Jesus that runs through Matthew from the reference to Isaiah’s Immanuel prophecy at the nativity.<sup>78</sup> This post-resurrection promise assures us that God’s immanent presence with his people was not a temporary interlude in history during the years of Jesus’ life on earth. It has become permanent. The Lord who commissions the disciples is not simply a figure from history on the pages of a book. He is risen and alive and will continue to be with his apostles as they go to make disciples. Within the context of the whole New Testament, we know that Jesus’ continuing presence is through the Holy Spirit who indwells his people. The empowering presence of the Spirit in mission, explicit in the commissions in Luke-Acts, is implicit here. The power to conform people to the pattern contained in the authoritative Scriptures is not in the teacher. It comes from the Spirit. Disciple-making is a process of Word and Spirit. This, as we have said already, is the vital difference

---

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 23:8.

<sup>75</sup> Kvalbein, “Go Therefore”, 49.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example: Genesis 17:4; 28:15; Exodus 4:11-12; Joshua 1:5-6, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 5:1; 17:1; See Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*.

<sup>78</sup> Matthew 1:23.

between discipleship after Pentecost compared with discipleship before the crucifixion.

Importantly, Jesus assures the apostles that his presence will endure to the “end of the age”, indicating that the command to make disciples is not only for the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking but for Christians in all generations. It seems that after the Reformation and throughout the seventeenth century, the consensus among Protestant theologians was that “the Great Commission was binding only on the apostles.”<sup>79</sup> A rediscovery of the command’s enduring relevance was instrumental in the birth of Protestant global missions from the early eighteenth century onwards.<sup>80</sup> The continuing nature of the commission is also implicit in the command sentence of the Commission. New disciples are to be taught to obey *everything* Jesus commanded, which includes this final command to make disciples. A perpetuating chain of disciples making disciples who make disciples is set in motion.

In summary, disciples are made through baptism and biblical teaching accompanied by examples of obedience in the context of the community of believers who recognise the authority of Jesus and experience his presence through the Spirit. Its goal is total obedience to Jesus as Lord and participation in the ongoing mission of making disciples and its means is the empowering presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Understanding that all of this is at least implicit in Matthew 28 helps us to see that the emphases of the epistles on the Spirit and the Church far from departing from what Jesus said, flow from and continue his words. In the final section of this paper it remains to compare these emphases from the Great Commission with contemporary models of disciple-making.

## EVALUATING MODERN DISCIPLESHIP MODELS

The purpose of this section is not to attempt a complete review of contemporary approaches to disciple-making, but to evaluate a sample of models against Matthew 28. Table 1 summarises nine models that are discussed below. Similar models operate in other contexts under different names.

---

<sup>79</sup> Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 18. For a helpful exploration of the neglect of Matthew 28 as a commission to the Church throughout the ages, see Wright, “The Great Commission”, 2007.

<sup>80</sup> William Carey famously made the Great Commission the touchstone of his call for world missions.

TABLE 1. NINE MODELS OF DISCIPLE-MAKING

Model	Source	Goal	Means
Competencies	Barna, 2000, 108-111	Developing 30 competencies in relationship to God and others to fulfil the Great Commandment and the Great Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worship service for core teaching and inspiration</li> <li>• Learning communities (30-50 people) on Sunday mornings after service</li> <li>• Small groups (10-12 people)</li> <li>• Personal study</li> <li>• Optional topical classes</li> </ul>
Missional	Barna, 2000, 111-114	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. More passionate commitment to Christ</li> <li>2. Evaluating everything by biblical standards</li> <li>3. Deep commitment to healthy family</li> <li>4. Moral purity</li> <li>5. Boldness in evangelism</li> <li>6. Social responsibility and impact</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8-week introductory course</li> <li>• Small groups (8-14 people) fortnightly</li> <li>• Specialty classes and events for theological content and practical skills</li> </ul>
Neighbourhood	Barna, 2000, 114-117	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Biblical knowledge</li> <li>2. Practical ministry skills</li> <li>3. Outreach</li> <li>4. Prayer</li> <li>5. Accountability</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inquirer's class for newcomers</li> <li>• Neighbourhood congregations (15-20 people) twice monthly for nurture, care and envisioning</li> <li>• Discipleship teams (5-9 same gender people) led by disciplers for personalised growth</li> </ul>

			<p>through three-year curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialty classes and events for theological content and practical skills</li> </ul>
Organic (mentoring)	McCallum and Lowery, 2006	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Character</li> <li>2. Understanding</li> <li>3. Ministry capability</li> </ol>	An individual Christian invites a person of the same sex to be discipled through weekly meetings for study and prayer for a clear vision of God's goals in the individual's life
Worldview	Barna, 2000, 117-119	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thinking and acting biblically</li> <li>2. Increased participation in church</li> <li>3. Increased service to others</li> <li>4. Understanding issues and making decisions biblically</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual study (60-90mins per week)</li> <li>• Discovery class weekly for applied Bible study following two-year curriculum</li> <li>• Small groups serving together with care by peer mentors for up to three others in the group</li> <li>• Special events to feed into and supplement Discovery classes</li> </ul>
Lecture-lab	Barna, 2000, 119-123	Knowledge and relationships promoting godly character and enduring service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sermons with clear application in 4-12 week themed series and accompanying individual study materials</li> <li>• Small groups (10-16 people) meeting for 10-weeks to apply truths from sermons, with leaders overseen by trainers</li> </ul>
Coaching	Hull, 2006, 210-214	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Model basic skills of life and ministry</li> </ol>	One-to-one relationship with multiple meetings to

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Motivate people</li> <li>3. Point to good resources</li> <li>4. Observe service, evaluate and give feedback</li> </ol>	set goals, evaluate progress and provide feedback
Triads	Ogden, 2003	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Opening hearts in transparent trust</li> <li>2. Biblical truth</li> <li>3. Mutual accountability</li> </ol>	One person leads two others in a covenanted relationship through a Bible-based curriculum in weekly 90-min meetings over a year, after which each member invites two others into a new triad
Life-on-Life Missional Discipleship (LOLMD)	Pope, 2013	Imparting one's life, the gospel and Scripture to others with the aim of maturity in the faith	LOLMD groups meeting weekly in covenanted relationship to work through a three-year curriculum, supplementing sermons and small groups and bridging into mission and personal growth

There are some commonalities across these disciple-making models. Their goals are broadly similar, recognising the need for growth in knowledge that leads to life transformation. Reflecting the evangelical convictions of their authors, they are broadly agreed that Scripture sets the standard towards which people are to grow. Seen through the lens of Matthew 28, it is notable how little emphasis is placed on baptism in these contemporary models. The worldview model is an exception in emphasising baptism as a vital subject early in the process, although the other models may assume that people have already been baptised. Given, however, that many so-called 'parachurch' organisations describe their mission as making disciples but do not baptise people, baptism as an essential starting point for discipleship should not be assumed. In light of the Great Commission, what is being achieved is not truly discipleship if it does not include baptism and participation in the Church.

There are also some clear differences between models. They can be categorised into two broad groups: those that proceed primarily through one-to-one relationships (coaching, triads and LOLMD) and those that operate through

larger groups. Most models wrestle with the question of how churches' main worship services can contribute to discipleship, suggesting either small groups or one-to-one relationships as adjuncts to services through which truths learnt from the pulpit are applied in practice. The emphasis on teaching in the Great Commission suggests that corporate teaching by those gifted and appointed to teach is vital for disciple-making. At the same time, pastors must not focus so much on pulpit ministry that they have little time to relate closely to people who can see their own progress in the faith.<sup>81</sup> They must be examples to the flock they shepherd.<sup>82</sup> This must surely entail some degree of transparency as well as sharing ordinary life experiences with them in relationships within which their obedience to Jesus' commands can be seen, including dealing with their sins and weaknesses in humility. Jesus' example of living closely with his disciples, eating and travelling with them as well as engaging in formal instruction, is instructive for those who are called to be his under-shepherds in the Church.

Alongside the ministry through word and example of pastors, there is a role for every believer in modelling obedience to Jesus to one another and the close and open relationships that can develop in smaller groups would seem to be an ideal context for that. Within such relationships, the New Testament expects that believers will exhort and instruct each other.<sup>83</sup> The task of disciple-making cannot and should not be restricted to pastor-teachers. Rather, their equipping ministry should enable every member to contribute to disciple-making.

Some disciple-making models (notably the competencies and missional models) suggest that small groups for discipleship should comprise people who are similar in life-stage and interests. This approach is at variance with a number of emphases in the Great Commission. Such groups can hardly reflect the nature of the Church as a community of disciples from all nations or serve as a context for making disciples from peoples other than one's own. They may also fail to facilitate modelling of obedience by people who are further along as disciples and the idea of limiting membership is contrary to the view that baptism is the sole criterion for inclusion in the community of discipleship. Indeed, reducing discipleship into homogeneous groups may be said to be disobedient to one of the commands of Jesus the Great Commission calls us to observe: 'For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?'.<sup>84</sup>

Some of these problems with homogeneous small groups also apply to models that advocate one-to-one disciple-making. These are often predicated on the

---

<sup>81</sup> 1 Timothy 4:15.

<sup>82</sup> 1 Peter 5:3.

<sup>83</sup> Colossians 3:16.

<sup>84</sup> Matthew 5:46.

claim that it is exemplified in the New Testament examples of Jesus with the twelve and Paul with individuals like Timothy and Titus. The proof text is 2 Timothy 2:2: “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” There are two problems with this reading of Scripture. Firstly, Jesus and Paul are not described as spending significant amounts of time alone with any individual for the purposes of discipleship. Jesus teaches the twelve as a group and his interactions with individual disciples tend to be in the hearing of the others. Other than Paul’s letters to individuals, the apostle is depicted working with a group among whom individuals like Timothy or Titus could hear and observe him. Even 2 Timothy 2:2 commands that the passing on be done to *men* (plural) rather than *a man*.

The second problem is that the twelve and Paul’s associates were being prepared not merely to be disciples, but teachers and leaders. Jesus’ and Paul’s focus on a small group of men is a model of leadership development rather than disciple-making. The epistles lack any command to one-to-one discipling of others, suggesting instead that people grow through multi-directional relationships with other believers in the Church community. Some people, especially those recognised as elders, may be outstanding examples to follow and the ministry of the Word has a pivotal part in disciple-making, but people grow as disciples together, just as the Great Commission implies. Baptism into the Church, with its diverse personalities and gifts, is the beginning of discipleship rather than an invitation into a triad or Discipleship Group.

The challenge facing churches, then, is not how to supplement existing activities with additional programmes focused on disciple-making, but how to ensure that all activities further discipleship. As several models suggest, this singular focus has implications for preaching, which should always be biblical and applied. Good teaching is not, however, an end in itself, but a means to the end of good learning. Teaching in the main gatherings may be modified with this in view to include discussion and responses or, as many models propose, supplemented with more intimate gatherings in which the truths are applied, although these should be intentionally diverse. It would seem odd not to learn from Jesus’ example of teaching his disciples, which involved not merely monologues, but also discussion, as well as a variety of formats including both didactic statements and narrative parables.

Another feature of most of the models is the proposal of a curriculum of subjects to be taught, often over a defined period of time. Whilst it may be helpful to have an idea of what truths people should know, there are dangers with this approach. It may wrongly imply an end to the process of discipleship, rather than the lifelong growth expected in the Great Commission. It may also result in a

selective approach to teaching, with content reduced to less than “all that [Jesus] commanded.” Perhaps the greatest risk of curriculum approaches, however, is that, contrary to the stated aim of models that advocate it, it may inadvertently emphasise accumulation of knowledge over life transformation. The emphasis in the coaching model on practice with feedback from the discipler mitigates against this risk, although its one-to-one nature is problematic for other reasons, as discussed above.

## CONCLUSION

The concern for a renewed focus on disciple-making among evangelicals in recent decades is appropriate given the central importance of Matthew 28. Disciples are apprentices of Christ. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 establishes disciple-making as the primary task of the Church throughout the ages and calls individual believers to commit to lifelong growth in obedience to Christ. As Robert Conrad writes, “If today's disciples are to be life-long followers of Jesus in good times and bad, teaching and learning must be a vital part of their lives.”<sup>85</sup> The themes inherent within the Great Commission suggest that this happens most effectively in a community of baptised believers marked by strong commitment to multi-directional relationships of mutual exhortation under Christ, with pastors who are attentive both to biblical teaching Scripture and modelling biblical faithfulness. This community must notice who is missing from its number – groups of people nearby and globally who are less reached – and should expect that some of its members will go with its support to make disciples among these groups. Its disciple-making mission is underpinned by confidence that the Lord Jesus has all authority and is at work in his people by the Spirit even to the end of the age. The Christ who has all authority calls all his people to make disciples who obey all he commanded from of all nations for all time.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barna, George. *Growing True Disciples*. Ventura: Issachar Resources, 2000.  
Boer, Harry R. *Pentecost and Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961.  
Blomberg, Craig L. “Matthew.” In *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MA: Baker Academic; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007.

---

<sup>85</sup> Robert Conrad, “Making Disciples for the 21st Century”, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24, no. 3 (1997): 210.

- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Conrad, Robert. "Making Disciples for the 21st Century." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24, no.3 (1997): 209-213.
- Danker, Frederick W., ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Donaldson, Terence L. *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985.
- Eims, LeRoy. *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*. Grand Rapids, MA: Zondervan, 1978.
- Ferdinando, Keith. "Mission: A Problem of Definition." *Themelios* 33, no.1 (2008): 46-59.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, third edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.
- France, Richard T. *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Volume 1, reprinted format. Nottingham: IVP; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008.
- Goldsmith, Martin. *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel Through Jewish Eyes*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001.
- Green, Michael. *The Message of Matthew*, The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester: IVP, 2000.
- Hertig, Paul. "The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God's Reign in Disciple Making." *Missiology: An International Review* 29, no. 3 (2009): 343-353.
- Hirsch, Alan. *Disciplism: Reimagining Evangelism Through the Lens of Discipleship*. Exponential, 2014.
- Hull, R.W. *The Complete Book of Discipleship*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006.
- Joshua Project. "People Groups." Accessed February 11, 2021. [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups).
- Kvalbein, Hans. "Go Therefore and Make Disciples: The Concept of Discipleship in the New Testament." *Themelios* 13, no. 2 (1988): 48-52.
- Lausanne Movement. *Hidden and Forgotten People Including Those Who are Disabled*, Lausanne Occasional Paper 35A, 2004.
- McCallum, D. and Lowery, J. *Organic Disciplemaking*. Houston, TX: TOUCH, 2006.
- Morgan, G. Campbell. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1976.
- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans; Leicester: IVP, 1992.

- Neusner, Jacob. *The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- O'Brien, Peter. "The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?" *Reformed Theological Review* 35, no. 3 (1976): 66-78.
- Ogden, G. *Transforming Discipleship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Peskett, Howard, and Ramachandra, Vinoth. *The Message of Mission, The Bible Speaks Today*. Nottingham: IVP, 2003.
- Pope, R. *Insourcing: Bringing Discipleship Back to the Local Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.
- Stott, John R.W. *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1975
- Wright, David F. "The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary." *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (2007): 132-157.

