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ACADEMIC ARTICLES

What is "Impossible" (ἀδύνατος) in Hebrews 6:4–6?

by ANDREW SPURGEON

Abstract: *Hebrews 6:4–6 is often considered a warning passage, suggesting that the fallen believers cannot* (ἀδύνατος) *be restored to repentance* (μετανοία)*, meaning salvation. Thus, it has become a contentious passage between those who believe in the assurance of salvation and those who believe in people's free will. Such an interpretation ignores an important structural clue: in verse 1, the author urged his readers to leave the elementary teaching, including "repentance* (μετανοία) *from dead works," and to move on to maturity. The two references to repentance must be interrelated and intentional. This essay, therefore, combines these two references to repentance together and proposes that those who have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, et cetera, cannot* (ἀδύνατος) *be renewed to the former lifestyle of repentance from dead works. The agrarian imagery in verses 7–8, an expansion of Genesis 3–4, Deuteronomy 28–29, Isaiah 5, and Mark 4, becomes the key to such an interpretation. Thus, Hebrews 6:4–6 becomes an assurance instead of a warning passage.*

Key words: Perseverance, Repentance, Security, Warning Passages

I. Introduction

Scholars consider Hebrews 6:4–6 to be a warning passage: those who fall away after receiving specific spiritual blessings cannot (ἀδύνατος) be restored to repentance (εἰς μετάνοιαν), that is, they would lose their salvation. With this basic premise, they offer various options: their faith is genuine or false, the situation is hypo-

thetical or real, and so on.[1] It has become a troublesome passage for those who believe in the assurance of salvation and an assurance to those who deny it.

Such an interpretation, however, ignores a key structural element: the presence of μετανοία (repentance) in verses 1 and 6. In verse 1, the author urged the audience to leave behind the first, or basic, teachings about Christ and move on to maturity. Then, he described a few of these basic teachings, one of which was "repentance (μετανοία) from dead works."[2] Once again, he said those who fall couldn't be renewed into repentance (εἰς μετάνοιαν). His repetition of μετανοία (repentance) wouldn't have been accidental. Leaving repentance from dead works was what the author intended, and returning to repentance would be a step backward, an undesirable state. But it would be impossible (ἀδύνατος) for those who have received specific spiritual blessings to return to the repentance from dead works.

In other words, this is not a warning passage as much as an assurance affirmation: people who have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of God's word and the ages to come cannot (ἀδύνατος) return to the fundamental teachings like the repentance (μετανοία) from dead works. They are like the land that, by constantly receiving rain, yields a crop that benefits the farmers who cultivate it and receive a blessing from God (6:7), and are unlike the barren land

[1] For four different views on the warning passages, see Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007). Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 21–59. Robert A. Peterson, "Apostasy in the Hebrews Warning Passages," *Presbyterion* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 27–44.

[2] All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

that grows thorns and thistles and is in danger of being burned and reprepared for harvest (6:8). In this interpretation, "repentance" is something undesirable, unlike the traditional view, in which repentance is turning from sin and to God, resulting in conversion. Mohler agrees that repentance is different here and sees it as an attempt to return to self-righteousness and/or Judaism.[3]

The larger context of Hebrews, too, supports this redefinition of repentance. The author of Hebrews uses the phrase "from dead works" only one other time: "How much more Christ's blood, who through the eternal Spirit has brought himself to God as unblemished, cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9:14). There, too, Christ's blood cleanses believers from a conscience of dead works that inhibits them from serving God. All believers are familiar with the cycle of sinning, repenting, swearing never to sin, and then sinning, repenting from dead works, and so on. This constant inability of fruitless repentance is what believers are freed from, made unable to do (ἀδύνατος). In other words, they are enabled to live a powerful and victorious Christian life (9:14b).

The author of Hebrews wasn't saying salvation was impossible for these people if they fall; instead, if they fall, they do not fall back all the way to the basic or primitive teachings of Christ, like the "repentance from dead works," where they were repeatedly trying to crucify the Son of God and put him to public shame (6:6), the vicious cycle of sinning, repenting, confessing,

[3] R. Albert Mohler Jr, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 87.R. Albert Mohler Jr, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 87.

and sinning, etc. When they who have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, and partaken of the Holy Spirit, et cetera, fall, they cannot return (ἀδύνατος) to the basic teachings of Christ, including the repentance from dead works.

II. Reexamining Certain Phrases

For this revised understanding of this passage to be acceptable, certain phrases need to be reexamined and re-translated. They are: 1. the meaning of the phrase τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον ("the word of the beginning of Christ") (6:1a); 2. the referent to the phrase "repentance from dead works" (6:1b); 3. the meaning of the phrase, "If (ἐάνπερ) God permits" (6:3); 4. the source of παραπίπτω ("fall" 6:6) and its implication; 5. the connection between ἀνακαινίζω ("renewed" 6:6) and Psalm 104:30; and 6. the meaning of crucifying and publicly displaying him with the reflexive pronoun, ἑαυτοῖς, in 6:6b.

II.1 The Teaching of the Beginning of Christ (v. 1)

The 1611 King James Version translated the phrase, τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον, as, "leauing [sic] the principles of the doctrine of Christ," without emphasizing ἡ ἀρχή ("the beginning"), translating τὸν . . . λόγον ("the word") as doctrine, and the genitive phrase τοῦ Χριστοῦ as "of Christ." Modern translations follow suit and translate the phrase as, "elementary teaching about Christ" (NASB, NIV), "elementary doctrine of Christ" (ESV), "elementary message about the Messiah" (HCSB), "basic thing … about Christ" (CEV), "basic teaching about Christ" (NRSV), "elementary principles of Christ" (NKJV), and "elementary instructions about Christ" (NET). The noun ἡ ἀρχή has two choices in these

translations: "elementary" and "basic." The singular τὸν . . . λόγον has both singular and plural options: teaching, doctrine, message, thing, principles, teachings, and instructions. And these translations offer two options for τοῦ Χριστοῦ: "of Christ" or "about Christ."[4]

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament suggests another meaning for ἡ ἀρχή in Hebrew 5:12: "Archē may also denote the first occurrence in a series, as in Mt. 24:8; Heb. 5:12 (the beginning of Christian instruction)." This interpretation of ἡ ἀρχή as "the beginning" matches several other uses of this word in the NT. For example, the NIV translates ἡ ἀρχή as "the beginning" in more than one-half of its 55 usages in the NT, including Mark 1:1, Luke 1:2, and John 1:1. Following this line of thought, I propose that we see "τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον" as a reference to the beginning words of Christ, the teachings in the Gospels, or the early teachings about Jesus Christ.[5]

The Gospels spoke of the doctrines that the author of Hebrews wanted his people to leave behind: repentance from dead works (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), faith in God (Mark 11:22), teachings of baptisms (John with water and Jesus by Spirit), laying of hands (Mark 5:23; 6:5; 8:23, 25), resurrection from the dead (Matt 22:30–31; Luke 20:35–36; John 11:25), and eternal judgment (Matt 5:21–22; 10:15; 11; 22, 24; 12:36; 12:41–42, etc.). As crucial as these teachings are, they are ἡ ἀρχή (the beginning or early) teachings from which the author of Hebrews wanted his readers to move away. Paul made similar requests of Titus and Timothy:

4 Sometimes, "Christ" is replaced by "the Messiah," as in HCSB.

5 Adams agrees. J. Clifford Adams, "Exegesis of Hebrews VI, 1f," *New Testament Studies* 13 (67 1966): 378–85.

"Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, arguments, and quarrels over law-teachings because these are unprofitable and useless" (Titus 3:9) and "Do not devote yourselves to myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations" (1 Tim 1:4a).

As important as knowing the origin of the Savior, his teachings, miracles, signs, and wonders, Jewish Christians (the Hebrews' audience) must move forward to doctrines that speak of Jesus's atoning work, such as his high priesthood and sacrificial atonement (Hebrews 8–12). They are meat that adults need for sustenance.

II.2 The Referent to the Phrase "Repentance from Dead Works" (6:1b)

While μετανοία means "to repent" or "turn around," and the preposition ἀπό ("from") shows what a person should repent from, what does the genitive phrase νεκρῶν ἔργων refer to? The NIV says, "repentance from acts that lead to death."[6] But are there sins that do not lead to death, and one doesn't need to repent from them?

Carlston sees the repentance in 6:4 as "equivalent to a completely new beginning of faith" and "same conditions for 'reconversion.'"[7] Although it might fit there, it certainly doesn't in 6:1 because the author wants the readers to move beyond this repentance, as it is an elementary teaching about Christ.[8]

6 Schreiner, too, supports this interpretation. Thomas, Schreiner, *Hebrews*, Evangelical Biblical Theological Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 175.

7 Charles Edwin Carlston, "Eschatology and Repentance in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78, no. 4 (1959): 299.

8 Contrary to the Hebrews writer's assertion of ἀφίημι ("leave"), Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 175, writes

Hughes rightly says, "In this Jewish context, [repentance is] turning away from the dead works of the Law."[9] He is closer to the author's intention, although the author might not see the Law as incapable of producing good works.

Nevertheless, while they were living under the Law (i.e., before the coming of Christ), their works were dead, lifeless, and needed to be revived. That was why John said, "You must produce holy fruit (καρπὸν ἄξιον) of repentance (τῆς μετανοίας)" (Matt 3:8/Luke 3:8), which leads "to forgiveness of sins (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁφαρτιῶν)" (Mark 1:4/Luke 3:3). This was the first or early (ἀρχή) teaching of the Gospels. It is primitive because John's baptism of repentance is superseded by Jesus's baptism by the Spirit.

In other words, the writer of Hebrews equated "repentance from dead works" with his Jewish readership's lives under the law and before Christ, calling it an "early teaching," from which they should move on to more mature teachings. Those who have been enlightened and tasted the goodness of God cannot (ἀδύνατος) return to this earlier teaching even if they fall.

II.3 The Meaning of the Phrase, "If (ἐάνπερ) God Permits" (6:3)

Although all translations translate this phrase as a form of

"They should never leave the foundational teachings behind, precisely because they are foundation. On the other hand, such teachings should be the basis and platform for further growth."

9 R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*: *An Anchor for the Soul* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 156. Hagner also connects the three pairs of teachings in 6:1–3 to the audience's Jewish background, especially since none refer to the work of Christ. Donald A Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews*: An Exposition, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 310.

permission—"God permitting" (NIV), "if God permits" (NET, ESV), "if God allows it" (CEB), and "if God is willing" (CEV)—they give the impression that the writer is speaking of a remote possibility. Only if God allowed, the author would be able to take his audience from infancy to maturity.

Although ἐάνπερ is a conditional clause marker, the two other uses of ἐάνπερ in the Hebrews do not imply a remote possibility. Instead, they forecast a positive outcome: "Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed [ἐάνπερ] we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory" (3:6, NIV) and "We have come to share in Christ, if indeed [ἐάνπερ] we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end" (3:14, NIV). In 6:3, too, the author projects a positive outcome, an anticipation, "if indeed God would permit," which results in his audience attaining maturity.

A more assertive interpretation is: "We will move on to maturity as indeed God had permitted this." Then, the following γάρ ("because") takes a more assertive stance, stating that the enlightened ones cannot return to their former lifestyle of repentance from dead works because God had not permitted (ἐπιτρέπω), that it, he had made it impossible (ἀδύνατος) for the matured Jewish Christians to return to the primitive teaching of repentance from dead works, even if they fall.

II.4 The Source of Παραπίπτω and Its Implication

The verb παραπίπτω (παρα "beside" and πίπτω "to fall") is a hapax legomenon, occurring only once in the NT. But since it appears eight times in the Septuagint, it is most likely that the author

of Hebrews drew the meaning from the OT usage of παραπίπτω.[10] In Esther, the king Xerxes commanded Haman to do for Mordecai everything he envisioned for himself: a royal robe and horses (6:10a). He concluded by saying, "Do not fall away or digress (παραπίπτω) from your word which you've spoken" (6:10b).

Παραπίπτω occurs twice in the Wisdom of Solomon, an apocrypha work included in the Septuagint, and in it, the author exhorted sovereign princes to listen to his words "so that they learn wisdom and not fall away (παραπίπτω) (6:9). Similarly, he prayed that the Lord would "warn those who fall away (παραπίπτω) by little offending words and thus sin to remember to put away their evil and to believe in the Lord" (12:2).

In four out of five occurrences in Ezekiel, παραπίπτω is paired with παράπτωμα ("transgression"): "Son of Man, if a land (γῆ) falls into transgression against me, I will stretch out my hand upon it and crush its food supply" (14:13); "I will make the land (γῆ) a desolate place because of them falling into transgression, says the Lord" (15:8); "None of the righteousness the unlawful one did will be remembered; instead, in his transgression in which he fell, in which he sinned, in these, he will die" (18:24); and "This is what the Lord says: Your fathers, in their transgression in which they fell against me, they angered me" (20:27). The final example says, "In their blood which you poured out, you have fallen; in your reasoning which you made, you polluted yourself. Your days are drawing near, and your years have come to an end. Therefore, I will give you as a disgraceful object to the nations and to the mocking of all the countries" (22:4).

10 All the following translations reflect the Septuagint and not the MT and thus vary from the English Bibles.

Most likely, the author of Hebrews borrowed the verb παραπίπτω from Ezekiel, using it with urgency, as transgression lurks in the background. His audience was not in danger of falling from salvation, but instead of falling into transgression against God. Christians, even matured, *falling into sin or transgression* was (and is) a reality. But that wouldn't return them to the primitive or a *priori* teachings of Christ.

The author's use of the agrarian parable (Heb 6:7–8) solidifies the connection. In Ezekiel's time, those who fell into transgression caused their land (γῆ) extreme stress, akin to a state of desolation. The Hebrew believers would have been familiar with this imagery. He, too, would use a similarly agrarian imagery to illustrate the seriousness of the need to move on to maturity (6:7–8).[11] Those who drank heavily in the falling rain should yield a bountiful harvest and receive a blessing from God. That would be the anticipated result.

II.5 Ἀνακαινίζω ("renewed") and Psalm 104:30

Ἀνακαινίζω is also a hapax in the New Testament, occurring only here. But it appears five times in the Septuagint, one of which is crucial for understanding Hebrews 6:6a: Psalm 104:30 (103:30 in the LXX). In this psalm, David praises God for his creative work in the creation of the world. He praised him from the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the seas, and everything in them. He sang about the animals one by one, describing how God alone gave them life and provided them with food. If he were to hide his face from them, they were terrified (104:29a). When he took away their breath,

11 This imagery also has close connections to Jesus's parable of a seed in a thorny land (Mark 4:7, 18–19), as will be explained later.

they died and returned to the dust (104:29b). In summary, God sent his Spirit, and everything was created. And God renewed the face of the ground (104:30).

This was, no doubt, a reference to the Genesis account where God's Spirit hovered over the waters (Gen 1:2). David envisioned God and the Spirit of God working together in creating everything and shaping or renewing (ἀνακαινίζω) the earth (γῆ) (Ps 104:30).

The author of Hebrews, too, argued that those who partook of the Holy Spirit (6:4b), if they fell into transgression, couldn't be "renewed to repentance" (6:6a), the elementary or fundamental state (6:1–3). Instead, they would be taken to a new state, like where "the face of the ground (γῆ)" (Ps 104:30b) itself would be renewed. They would yield unexpected fruit as do lands that receive an abundance of rainwater (6:7). Their renewal wasn't to their previous state but to a new and glorified, ever-yielding state.

II.6 Crucifying and Publicly Displaying Him

Scholars often view "crucifying" and "publicly displaying" as actions that accompany the falling away, combining them with the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτοῖς. Davis, for example, writes, "If they fall away, they are on their own in returning to God. This is so because 'on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.'"[12]

12 Casey Wayne Davis, "Hebrews 6:4–6 from an Oral Critical Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 4 (December 2008): 759. He further asserts that the "impossibility" refers to the author's impossibility to bring the readers who fall away to repentance than the readers' inability to repent.

But a key phrase interrupts their falling away and trying to crucify the Son of God: "to be renewed again into repentance. In other words, to be renewed to repentance, not falling away, would be trying to re-crucify the Son of God and publicly display him. Both "crucifying again" and "publicly displaying" being present participles indicate that these were simultaneous actions with the present infinitive "to be renewed again."[13] Suppose these enlightened believers who transgress were to return to repentance again, they would be crucifying and publicly shaming God's Son. Those who fall or slip aren't trying to re-crucify the Son; instead, those who return to the Gospel teaching of repentance are going back to the pre-cross, pre-atonement era.

The reflexive pronoun, ἑαυτοῖς, in 6:6b has been interpreted literally — "to themselves" (KJV, ASV, NASB) and "for themselves" (NET, JUB) — and dynamically: "to their loss" (NIV), "to their own harm" (ESV, CSB, HCSB), and "to their own detriment" (ISV). The dynamic translations imply that their actions harm them. Being a reflexive pronoun, it refers to the subject's actions with the verb. They think that by themselves, they could re-crucify the Son of God, an act that would publicly shame him. But it's not a reality: they couldn't truly re-crucify the Son of God to trigger repentance again.

III. Reevaluation of the Agrarian Imagery

Having established a revised way of looking at Hebrews 6:1–10, I turn to expanding on the imagery of the land. I will discuss: 1. The grammar of the agrarian imagery; 2. Retracing the imagery's historical roots; 3. Its connection to Jesus's parable (Mark

13 The author alliterates with ἀνακαινίζω and ἀναστραυρόω (v. 6).

4); and 4. How the imagery is used in Hebrews.

III.1 The Grammar of the Agrarian Imagery (6:7–8)

The author of Hebrews gives an agricultural illustration: "The land that was drinking the often-falling rain upon it and was yielding a fitting vegetation to those through whom it is cultivated shares in the blessing from God, δε ("but," "and") while it was bearing thorns and thistles, unacceptable and curse near, whose end for burning" (6:7–8). In these two verses, the author employed a single main verb in the present tense: "shares in" (μεταλαμβάνω) the blessing from God (6:7b). The verb with μετα "share" implies a mutual benefit to both the land and those who cultivate it, the farmers.[14] The presence of a single main verb should clue us to the fact that this is a single thought (and a single land), not two, as often understood.[15]

Three aorist participles surround this single main verb: the land was drinking (πιοῦσα), was yielding (τίκτουσα), and was bearing (ἐκφέρουσα). Aorist participles set the context for the main verb. Traditionally, the first two aorist participles are combined to present a positive outcome, while the third aorist participle is seen as a next event, giving a negative result. The presence of the δέ could justify such a contrast. But it doesn't have to make a stark and

14 When the people are redeemed, the land is redeemed (Romans 8) and, in return, can bless the people.

15 So argue Gareth Lee Cockerill, "A Wesleyan Arminian View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 277. Richard C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James*, Lenski's Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1938), 187. Tremper Longman III, "Hebrews–Revelation," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 56. Allen, *Hebrews*, 377 fn 425.

negative contrast. In other words, the participles can go together as follows: the land that was drinking the rainwater was yielding vegetation despite (δέ) bearing thorns and thistles and ready for burning. In other words, before the rain, it was a barren land that bore thorns and thistles, unacceptable to the farmers, cursed by the landowner, and ready for burning (to re-cultivate it, as in the "slash and burn" agricultural method). In this way, it illustrated how the pre-cross believers are turned into fruitful believers (6:9–10) by the constant rainwater of God's mercies: enlightened, tasted the heavenly gifts, partook of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the power of the ages to come (6:4–5). Once, they were barren and thorny, ready for recultivation. But now, they were full of fruit, sharing a blessing from God with the cultivators. Such a land could never envision returning to its former state of yielding thorns and thistles, ready for burning. Brown rightfully says, "The main purpose of this letter was to urge these Jewish Christians not to allow themselves, under pressure of persecutions, to abandon the distinctively Christian aspects of their faith and slip back into its purely Jewish elements."[16] Those who have been enlightened can never return to repentance or their former lifestyle, even if they fall. God will not permit it. He who once poured rain on it continues to do so (Heb 6:9–10).

This passage, then, is speaking of the impossibility of taking a Christian to the "pre-faith" state where he/she is constantly repenting for dead works, that is, wanting to do good but unable to do so, and then repent. Believers who have tasted the goodness of God cannot return to this state; instead, they can only produce

16 Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ Above All*, The Bible Speaks Today, ed. Stott, John R. W. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 113.

good fruit, just as a land that receives constant rain yields good crops and shares in God's blessing. Even when thorns and thistles grow around them to choke them, God will burn them and purify the land so that it can continue to bear good fruit, as do the audience of Hebrews. They have been serving the holy ones and will continue to serve them.

In a way, this is no longer a warning as much as an assurance to the readers of the impossibility of returning to the old ways after tasting God's goodness or returning to an unyielding state after receiving much rain and/or being burned by the thorns and thistles. Seeds that are in danger of being choked by the thorns and thistles that grow on the land have a relief—God burns off the thorns and thistles, so that the seeds yield thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold. Similarly, the writer of Hebrews is confident about the audience: they have been serving the saints faithfully and will continue to do so.

III.2 Retracing the Imagery's Historical Roots

Most scholars connect this imagery with Genesis 3, Deuteronomy 28–29, and Isaiah 5; imageries of divine punishment, which leads them to wonder about the Christians' fate.[17] I, however, think the author is also alluding to Mark 4:3–20 in his imagery. The land that once produced thorns and thistles has, in turn, become a land that makes plenty of harvest because of the relentless rain that falls upon it. But for that to happen, the thorns and thistles had to

17 For its background in Deuteronomy 28 and 29, see Brown, *Message of Hebrews*, 111. Allen, *Hebrews*, 382. For Isaiah 5 forming the background for Hebrews 6, see Verbrugge, Verlyn D., "Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 15 (1980): 61–73. Daniel J. Stulac, "Charting New Paths in Modern-Critical Exegesis: An Agrarian-Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 5," *Biblical Interpretation 27*, no. 3 (2019): 390–412.

be burned, as in the "slash and burn" agricultural method, which God does for those falling seeds. In Hebrews, then, the "warning" (6:1–5) is followed by a good yield (6:7) and a clearing (6:8) to assure the hearers of their good crop/works and to guarantee God's faithfulness (6:9–10). Such a reworking of the passage gives an alternative reading of 6:1–6, in that it speaks of the impossibility of the enlightened and those who have tasted the goodness of God (such as the land that drinks the abundance of rain) to return to the early teachings that they once held, "repentance from dead works," a state that resembles a field of thorns and thistles.

The earliest reference to a land, its curse, and the yield of thorns is in Genesis 3. When Adam disobeyed and ate the forbidden fruit, the Lord punished him with an unyielding ground: "Cursed (ἐπικατάρατος) is the land (ἡ γή) on account of your works. In grief, you will eat from it, all the days of your life. It will spring up thorns (ἀκανθα) and thistles (τριβόλος) for you, and you will eat the plants of the field" (Gen 3:17b–18, LXX). The writer of Hebrews repeats four of those words: the land (γή), the curse (κατάρα), the thorns (ἄκανθα), and the thistles (τρίβολος)—no doubt alluding to Genesis. But unlike Genesis, he adds a blessing: "a land ... that yields a bountiful harvest to the cultivator receives a blessing (εὐλογία) from God" (6:7).

The symbiotic relationship between a person's (Adam אדם) crime and the land's (Adamah אדמה) curse continues when Cain kills Abel: "And now you are cursed (ἐπικατάρατος) from the land (ἡ γή) that opened its mouth and drank from your hands the blood of your brother. So, when you till the land, it will not add its strength to enable you. You will moan and toil in the land (ἡ

γή)" (Gen 4:11–12, LXX). In addition to the land being cursed, it is empowered not to cooperate with a human.

And the link between the people and the land continues in the Mosaic covenant. When people fail to listen to the voice of the Lord God and guard his commandments and decrees, "Cursed (ἐπικατάρτα) … will be the harvest of the land (ἡ γή)" (Deut 28:18) and "The Lord's anger will burn against the land (ἡ γή) to bring upon it all the curses (κατάρα) written in this book of law" (Deut 29:27).[18]

The prophets also speak of this connection between the land and the people. When they provoke God's anger by burning incense to other gods of the land (γή) of Egypt, they will destroy themselves and become a curse (κατάρα) and object of reproach among all the nations of the land (ἡ γή) (Jer 44:8, LXX). Isaiah uses the imagery of a vineyard where the Lord clears the stones, plants the choicest of vines, and guards it. While he waits for the good grapes, the vineyard yields sour grapes (בְּאֻשִׁים, MT) or thorns (ἄκανθα, LXX). So, he makes it into a wasteland by neither tilling the ground[19] nor cultivating it but withholding the rain (ὑετός) so that thorns (ἄκανθα) alone grow on it (Isa 5:1–7). In addition, the whole land (ἡ γή) will be covered with thorns (ἄκανθα) and briers (7:24).

18 Gleason refers to this passage and sees the land (ἡ γή) as Palestine. Randall C. Gleason, "A Moderate Reformed View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 336. Such a specific reference in Hebrews might be stretching the analogy.

19 Since the Hebrew word עזק in Isaiah 5:2 refers to "the breaking of clods of earth and the removal of stones from the surface," and not mere digging. Eran Viezel, "A Note to ויעזקהו (Isaiah 5,2)," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 123, no. 4 (2011): 607.

The Lord will grieve over his people's land (ἡ γή) being covered with thorns (ἄκανθα) and grass (32:13). Hosea, too, prophesizes that because of Israel's sin, thorns (ἄκανθα) and thistles (τρίβολος) will grow in the temple and cover the altar as the people flee to the mountains and hills (10:8).

The land, then, is cursed because of humanity's disobedience, and it will refuse to cooperate with their efforts to harvest it. This symbiotic relationship is broken, however, in one's death, as Sirach says, "When humanity, made of earth (ἡ γή), returns to earth, the irreligious person's curse (κατάρα) will turn into his/her destruction" (Sir 41:10, LXX).

III.3 Its Connection to Jesus's Parable in Mark 4

Following the OT, the Lord Jesus also sees a close connection between the people and the land. In his kingdom, the meek will inherit the land (ἡ γή) (Matt 5:5). They become the salt that fertilizes the land (ἡ γή) (Matt 5:13). Their relationship is heightened in the parable of the sower and the seed, where the land's (ἡ γή) preparedness allows the humanity's success, portrayed as the seeds' growth. A farmer sows seeds, and they fall on four different lands: a hard path, a rocky place that does not have much land (γῆν πολλήν), a field with thorns, and a good land (τὴν γῆν τὴν καλὴν) (Mark 4:3–8). When the disciples are clueless, the Lord explains the parable where people are the land that is hard and the seeds (God's word) bounce off and the birds snatch them so that they might not grow in that land, or the land is shallow among the rocks and the seeds quickly grow only to wither at the heat of the sun because of not having enough land for the roots to draw water, or the land produces thorns (a cursed state) that squeeze the life from the seeds,

or the land is good where God's word takes deep roots (4:14–20). By equating the land with the people, the Lord continues to speak of the symbiotic relationship, but he sees redemption for the land and the people: it can yield thirty, sixty, and a hundred times—a bountiful crop (4:20).

As such, Mark 4 becomes the latest point of reference for the writer of Hebrews, alongside his knowledge of Genesis 3–4, Deuteronomy 28–29, Isaiah 5, and other prophets.[20] But unlike the OT references that speak only of the curse, Jesus spoke of the blessing. This becomes the key element in the writer of Hebrews' mind.

III.4 How the Imagery is Used in Hebrews

The author says, "A land (γή) that drinks the rain (ὑετός) that often falls on it and yields a bountiful harvest for those who cultivate it shares the blessing from God" (6:7). The land (אדמה), the representative of the people (אדם), is redeemed once again and can fulfill its mission of producing bountiful harvest and thus share the blessing from God. It is no longer under the curse of Genesis 3.

But, what if this land has[21] (ἐκφέρω) thorns (ἄκανθα) and thistles

20 Attridge and Brown also connect Hebrew 6 with Mark 4:3–20. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 172. Brown, *Message of Hebrews*, 114–15. Mohler, however, connects Hebrews 6 with Matthew 13, the parallel passage, and says, "The second and third soil types are the people warned about in Hebrews 6 … [and] the Matthew 13 connection is apparent. More importantly, it reinforces the sobering warning Jesus gives in the parable of the Weeds. Under pressure, under persecution, or just when distracted by the allure of the world, many who once claimed Christ will go back to the world." Mohler Jr, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, 91.

21 ἐκφέρω means "carrying" something in all its usages in the NT (Luke 15:22; Acts 5:6, 9–10, 15; 1

(τρίβολος),[22] and is unfruitful and nearing a curse (κατάρα), as the prophets predicted? Then, it faces "burning."

Exegetes understand the "burning" (καῦσις) of the land as adestruction, a divine judgment, a punishment.[23] But, the real contrast isn't between blessing and burning; instead, it is between blessing and cursing: when the land yields a splendid harvest, it shares in God's blessing, and when it produces thorns and thistles, unfruitful, it is nearing a curse (κατάρας ἐγγύς), not exactly under a curse.[24] Burning, then, is an additional step. As the land nears cursing because of the abundance of thorns and thistles, it is burned. Burning a field was a common way to clear it of thorns and thistles that choked the harvest.[25] Attridge writes, "The image might evoke the practice of burning a field full of weeds in order to clear it."[26] Allen agrees: "The purpose

Tim 6:5), and not "producing" as in τίκτω (Heb 6:7). In other words, the land doesn't produce thorns and thistles but has them — maybe an enemy planted them (Matt 13:25).

22 Lenski has written that Palestine has 200 species plants and 753 varieties of thistles. Lenski, *Interpretation of Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James,* 188.

23 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 47a:143. McKnight, "Warning Passages of Hebrews," 35. Grant R. Osborne, "A Classical Arminian View," 115. Allen, *Hebrews,* 383. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews,* Biblical Theology of the New Testament, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Andreas J. Köstenbrger, and Thomas R. Schreiner (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 191.

24 Scholars disagree and caution against minimizing the imminent destruction. Buist M. Fanning, "A Classical Reformed View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews,* ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 186 fn. 31. Longman III, "Hebrews–Revelation," 56. Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8, 47a:143.

25 So argues Ahlström, especially in the use of בער ("burn"). Gösta W. Ahlström, "Isaiah 6:13," *Journal of Semitic Studies 19,* no. 2 (Autumn 1974): 169–72.

26 Having said that, he connects it with κατάρας and concludes that this is a warning passage, "the finality of the judgment on apostates." Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* 173. Lenski too acknowledges that the fire burns the thorns and thistles, but also the land. Lenski, *Interpretation of Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James,* 188.

[of burning] was to cleanse the land of the 'thorns and thistles' so it would bring forth fruit. The land was not destroyed in the process."[27] Koester writes, "Sometimes an entire plot of land might be burned over to destroy unwanted growth."[28] Barnes agrees: "The object of burning land in this way was to render it available for useful purposes; or to destroy noxious weeds, thorns, and underbrush."[29] Cotton emphasizes, "The burning over of a grainfield did not destroy its fertility but only prepared the field for the new crop."[30]

The OT often speaks of fire as a purifying or cleansing agent. The Lord cleanses the dirt of the sons and daughters of Zion and the bloodstains of Jerusalem by the fire of his Spirit (Isa 4:4, LXX). The Lord grieves, "Who appointed me to guard the straws in the land?" Then he says, "I will burn them ... so that the children of Jacob, who come to the land, will sprout; Israel will bloom; and the inhabitants will enjoy their fruit" (Isa 27:4–6, LXX).

In Hebrews, then, the land (representative of the people) that once was cursed is now redeemed and receives an outpouring of rain, God's blessing, and then brings a bountiful harvest and shares in God's blessings (6:7). But, if it has thorns and thistles, then, God purifies it by burning (6:8) so that the land is devoid of thorns and thistles and the crop can grow unhindered and yield

27 Allen, *Hebrews,* 379. But then, he sees this passage as speaking of losing one's rewards, instead of seeing it as God cleansing the land of the thorns and thistles.

28 Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 317.

29 Albert Barnes, *Hebrews: Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical,* ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951), 136.

30 J. Harry Cotton, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* ed. George Arthur Buttrick, vol. 11, The Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abington, 1955), 653.

thirty, sixty, or one hundred times.

Hebrews 6:1–5 begins with an exhortation to move on to maturity: "Therefore, setting aside the foundational teaching concerning Christ … let us move on to maturity." Verses 9–10 conclude by affirming that the audience has moved on to maturity: "We are persuaded concerning you, loved-ones, of greater things, as those having salvation." They have good works and a love for God that drive them to continue serving the redeemed. Sandwiched in between these exhortations and affirmations is this metaphor of the land. It receives abundant rain, yields a healthy crop, and shares in God's blessing. Unlike the curse of Genesis 3, the land now yields a bumper crop. It illustrates the state of the Hebrews' mature audience. And (δέ) if the same land is teemed with thorns and thistles (yielded to pressures of this world or sin), it is burned, freed of thorns and thistles, so that the harvest can grow.

In the OT reference, a land under a curse produces thorns. As such, the author of the Hebrews couldn't be talking about the hearers having the choice of either producing good fruit or thorns. Instead, the thorns and thistles—persecution and trials from the world (Mark 19)—appear on the land on their own, and God removes them by burning them, so that the plants can grow, as the hearers of the Hebrews are (Heb 6:9–10). The metaphor, then, gives two possible scenarios: either an unhindered full crop (i.e., a land without thorns) or a hindered-but-cleansed full crop (i.e., a land that faces trials and persecutions that God removes so that it can yield its full crop). In both ways, the Lord preserves his people.

IV. An Alternative Interpretation of Hebrews 6:1–10

I have proposed that the verb "impossible" (ἀδύνατος) connects the two references to repentance (μετάνοια) in verses 1 and 6, yielding the meaning "those who have been enlightened once and for all, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the power of the ages to come, if they fall, cannot (ἀδύνατος) be returned (ανακαινίζω) to the original state of 'repentance (v. 6) from dead works (v. 1),' a pre-resurrection state where the Son of God was being crucified and put to public display" (6:4–6). The author gave a well-known but modified agrarian imagery to illustrate his point (6:7–8). Those who have tasted the goodness of God, the rain that often falls on them, have moved away from the basic (or Gospel) teachings of repentance from dead works and cannot return to that repentance, even when thorns and thistles (persecution and trials) grow around them and pressure them, or they themselves fall into transgression. They cannot return (or be in that cursed state) because God steps in and burns the opposition so they can continue in good works (6:9–10). God is not at all unjust to overlook their good works and love, which they showed and continue to show to the saints.

Their falling into transgression or being subject to intense persecution cannot (ἀδύνατος) bring them back to their former pre-Christ life. Before they go that far, God will burn the opposition and protect the enlightened ones. Believers who have tasted the goodness of the gospel and grace can never return to the earlier teachings of trying to obey the law, being unable to obey the law, and repent — the vicious cycle of the former lifestyle.

This passage, then, is speaking of the impossibility (ἀδύνατος)

of taking a Christian to the "pre-faith" state where he/she is constantly repenting for dead works, that is, wanting to do good but unable to do so, and then repent. Believers who have tasted the goodness of God cannot return to this state; instead, they can only produce good fruit, just as a land that receives constant rain yields good crops and shares in God's blessing. Seeds that are in danger of being choked by the thorns and thistles that grow on the land have a relief—God burns off the thorns and thistles, so that the seeds yield thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold. So, the writer of Hebrews is confident about the audience: they have been serving the saints faithfully and will continue to do so.

The Theological Significance of Jeremiah's Confessions

by **BALU SAVARIKANNU**

Abstract: *Scholars have approached Jeremiah's confessions from various perspectives (psychological-biographical, liturgical or cultic, synthetic, and synchronic views). These approaches engage with individual religion, communal witness, divine pathos, human suffering, and contextual theology. The article analyses these approaches and determines their theological scope. It then examines the theological significance of Jeremiah's confessions. I argue that Jeremiah's confessions are not mere complaints; rather, they are theological, highlighting the nature of God, His Word, and His covenant deeds.*

Key Words: Jeremiah, Confessions, Theology

I. Introduction

In the confessions of Jeremiah[1] (Jer 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13), the prophet wrestles with the justice of God and petitions God to vindicate that justice against his adversaries. Scholars have proposed different approaches to understanding the purpose of the prophet's confessions. These approaches can be classified into four categories: the psychological-biographical approach, the liturgical or cultic approach, the synthetic

1 The traditional description "the confessions of Jeremiah" may not be the precise term as the word "confession" is very much associated with Augustine's Confessions, in whose confessions there are confession of sin, conversion, of growth in grace. The phrase "the laments of Jeremiah" rather than "confessions of Jeremiah" makes good sense as there is a strong sense of complaint or lament throughout the texts. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that there is close affinity between the individual laments of the Psalter and that of Jeremiah. However, Jeremiah's laments are blended with lament, complaint, and confession. Tim Bulkeley, "Does Jeremiah Confess, Lament, or Complain," In Bier, Miriam J. and Bulkeley (eds), *Spiritual Complaint: The Theology and Practice of Lament* (Pickwick Publications: Oregon, 2013), chapter 2. For the sake of convenience, I prefer the term "confessions."

approach, and the synchronic approach. These approaches are significant for their appeal to individual religion, communal witness, the paradigmatic status of human and divine suffering, or the reworking of theology in a particular context.

The significance of the confessions of Jeremiah lies in their theological assumptions or their understanding of God, His Word, and His deeds.[2] Jack R. Lundbom rightly says, "(T)he guiding hand of Yahweh is recognized throughout Jeremiah's via dolorosa; it is simply that this theology is not explicitly stated."[3] Gary E. Yates sees Jeremiah as a theological symbol. In his anger and grief, the prophet represents God to his community.[4] Therefore it is essential to look at the confessions of Jeremiah from a theological perspective because the purpose of the Scriptures is to impart the knowledge of God and their implications to future readers.

This article analyzes the theological significance embedded in Jeremiah's confessions. First, it examines different scholars' perspectives on Jeremiah's confessions. Then, it explores the theological meaning of the prophet's complaint songs.

2 According to Claus Westermann, the theological significance is the perspective of what the biblical texts say about God, His Word, and His deeds. Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Edinburg: T&T Clarke, 1994), 222.

3 Jack R. Lundbom, "Jeremiah, The Book of," in David Noel Freedman (ed.), ABD, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 719.

4 Gary E. Yates, "The Prophet Jeremiah as Theological Symbol in the Book of Jeremiah," (2010), *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations* (2010), 372. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/372.

II. Approaches to Jeremiah's Confessions

II.1 The Psychological-Biographical Approach

Concerning the confessions of Jeremiah, Klaus Koach writes, "It is the first time in world history that the feeling of an individual was so expressively formulated."[5] The psychological-biographical approach sets the struggle of Jeremiah in his historical context. It interprets Jeremiah's confessions as the prophet's personal cries of despair due to the prophet's human frailty. This view sees the human weakness of the prophet and his struggle due to opposition to his ministry. The outcome of such a perspective is that the uniqueness of the confessions of Jeremiah was identified in the prophet's individualistic relationship with God, his living testimony of God's Word, and his dialogic and argumentative nature. John Skinner studies Jeremiah's confessions and argues for the individual religion in that the prophet expresses his personal emotions to God. According to Skinner, who discusses the place of prophecy in the life of Israel and emphasizes the relationship between personal beings and a national entity, Jeremiah's confessions are the prophet's outpourings during intense persecution. Jeremiah's tough life with his community and his strong commitment to God's call brought him closer to his God. Skinner writes,

> The characteristics of the confessions is that in the form, sometimes of monologue, but more frequently of strangely ingenuous and arresting colloquy with God, they lay bare the inmost secrets of the prophet's life, his fightings without

5 According Koach, the final composition of the confessions of Jeremiah could refer to the trauma of the exile. Still, originally, they express the pain and agony of an individual. Koach, "Latter Prophets: The Major Prophets," in Leo G. Perdue (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, 353-68 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 361.

> and fears within, his mental conflict with a diversity and doubt and temptation, and the reaction of his whole nature on a world that threatened to crush him and a task whose difficulty overwhelmed him.[6]

Thus, Skinner focuses more on personal religion, the individualism of Jeremiah's piety, his integrity, and the depth of his prayer to God. He goes on to say that the central aspect of the confessions of Jeremiah is the prophet's struggle between his fidelity to his call for the proclamation of the message of judgment on Judah and his natural feelings and impulses of his heart because of the rejection of his message and persecution.[7]

Baumgartner also assumed that the prophet's confessions provide access to the psychological life of the prophet, who skillfully used the lament tradition to convey his trauma. According to Baumgartner, in Jeremiah's confessions, "the prophet is occupied with his own person and his own well-being" rather than his concern about the people and their sins.[8] Baumgartner's statement is hard to agree with because a prophet is called to mediate between God and people. However, one can see in the confessions of Jeremiah the man Jeremiah and his personal struggle due to his prophetic office. Hence, the prophet's expressions could be seen as outbursts of the prophet's inner life.[9] Regarding its significance, Baumgartner says that

6 John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 202. Cited in A. R. Pete Diamond, "Jeremiah's Confessions in the LXX and the MT: A Witness to Developing to Canonical Function," VT 60 (1990), 33.

7 Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, 210.

8 Walter Baumgartner, *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament*, trans. David E. Orton (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 79.

9 Baumgartner, *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament*, 80.

they contribute to the enrichment of prophetic ministry, especially concerning its human side. For example, unlike other prophetical writings where the human ego and feelings are suppressed, Jeremiah's confessions come to the fore.[10] For Baumgartner, the significance lies in their dialogic nature, a dialogue between humans and God where profound religious thoughts came to the prophet in a time of great suffering.[11]

Gerhard von Rad's brief study on the confessions of Jeremiah is significant because he comes up with a different opinion compared to Skinner and Baumgartner. Von Rad agrees with Skinner and Baumgartner that Jeremiah's confessions are the prophet's cry of despair, but he rightly argues that those personal cries align with his prophetic office. He says that the confessions of Jeremiah are significant not only in the book of Jeremiah alone but in the entire prophetic corpus. He writes, "Prophetic visions, oracles, and warnings against the misuse of the cultus can be found in other prophetic works, but Jeremiah's confessions, those most intimate, solitary discussions with God, have their equal in no other prophetic book."[12] For von Rad, Jeremiah's confessions convey how the prophet became a living testimony of God's Word.[13]

Thus, the psychological-biographical interpretation of the confessions of Jeremiah tends to look at the prophet's subjective expressions. However, the limitation of this approach is that it needs to look more seriously at what shaped the prophet's character,

10 Baumgartner, *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament*, 98.

11 Baumgartner, *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament*, 100.

12 Gerhard von Rad, "The Confessions of Jeremiah," in James L. Crenshaw (ed.), *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 339.

13 Von Rad, "The Confessions of Jeremiah," 345-346.

theology, and life experiences. Therefore, this approach has received a wide range of criticism from the scholarly circle. Henning Graf Reventlow reacted strongly against such an approach and argued that the confessions do not represent Jeremiah's inner struggle. Rather, the community's cry is presented in an individual's dress because the prophet is the cultic mediator between nation and God. Thus, Jeremiah's confessions are liturgical and representative in character.[14] Looking at the dual presentation of the prophet and the community in the confessions of Jeremiah, Carroll rightly argues that no interpretation of the confessions of Jeremiah can dogmatically insist on only one strand of meaning, but "the liturgical nature of the poems should warn against using the poems too precipitately to reconstruct a biographical account of the life of Jeremiah."[15] Timothy Polk, in his study of the persona of the prophet presented in the Book of Jeremiah, sees Jeremiah as an exemplar and a metaphor. He criticizes Baumgartner's attempt to identify Jeremiah's confessions to the prophet's private self and argues that it does not adequately address the theological relevance of the confessions. However, Polk agrees with von Rad, who broke down the prophet's professional-private dimensions and said that the confessions are the prophet's outcry within his prophetic ministry.[16] In addition, McConville questions the purpose of the prophet's private prayers in canonical writings. Why are these personal outcries of an individual included in the public literature

14 Henning Graf Reventlow, *Liturgie und prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia* (Gutersloh: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, Gerd Mohn, 1963). Cited in A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama*, JSOTSup 45 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 39.

15 Robert C. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 130.

16 Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self* (Sheffield: JSOT Press), 127.

of canon?[17] McConville's argument that Jeremiah's confessions are both the genuine experience of the prophet as well as a part of his proclamation is convincing.

One must recognize the significance of the psychological-biographical approach because its contribution to personal religion is of great value. The confessions of Jeremiah convey the truth that religion is a close and intimate relationship between God and the individual. Skinner rightly says, "If anything is vital in Jeremiah, it is his experience of religion as immediate fellowship with God and his conviction that the reality of it consists in a right inward disposition, in the instinctive response of the heart to the revelation of God."[18] Sheldon H. Blank, who sees the confessions of Jeremiah as the prophet's prayers, quotes J. Philip Hyatt, who said that the uniqueness of Jeremiah's sanity is that "he did not hesitate to give vent to his feelings of despair and bitterness."[19] According to Elmer A. Martens, Jeremiah's confessions illustrate spiritual struggle in ministry. Those called to preach God's message to people are not free from wrestling with God. Jeremiah's confessions allow God's people to anticipate mounts of crisis, not plains.[20] Through his struggles, Jeremiah experienced a more intimate relationship with his God.

17 J. G. McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Leicester: Apollos, 1993), 63-64.

18 Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, 325.

19 Sheldon Blank, "Prophet as Paradigm," in James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis, *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 118.

20 Elmer A. Martens, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Jeremiah* (Pennsylvania: Herald, 1986), 138.

II.2 The Liturgic or Cultic Approach

If the psychological-biographical approach delineates individual religion, the liturgical or cultic approach argues for communal witness in the confessions of Jeremiah. It argues that there is no individual piety in Jeremiah's confessions because an individual is merged into a community's identity. The proponent of this approach is Reventlow, whose evaluation of Jeremiah was largely new and a real contribution. While many stressed Jeremiah's confessions as individual outpourings, Reventlow argued that they are representational because the prophet brought the concerns of the Jewish community before God, even when he spoke in the first person. Through his petitions, laments, and prayers, Jeremiah acted liturgically, in the strongest solidarity with his people. Thus, the prophet kept his prophetic office in focus even amidst his outbursts. For Reventlow, the "I" of the confessions is representational.[21] The prophet is merged with the community, and there exists one identity, the identity of the community of God. Therefore, Jeremiah's confessions give voice to the community in the face of God's rejection. Reventlow's cultic approach contributed immensely to the setting of Jeremiah's confessions. He set those prophetic confessions in Israel's cultic settings.[22] However, Reventlow's thesis is not free from criticism. McConville sees the cultic or liturgical approach as inadequate because such a view arises at the expense of the prophet's personality.[23] John Bright refutes Reventlow's cultic approach and endorses the view that the confessions of Jeremiah are

21 Reventlow, *Liturgie und prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia.* Ignatius Hunt, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1964), 278–79. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43720732.

22 Leo G. Perdue, "Jeremiah in Modern Research: Approaches and Issues," in Leo G. Perdue & Brian W. Kovacs (eds), *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 25-27.

23 McConville, *Judgment and Promise,* 62.

the prophet's reaction to his persecution. The use of conventional language does not diminish the psychological-biographical sketch of the prophet's personal anguish. Bright rightly sees the significance of Jeremiah's confessions in that they clearly portray Jeremiah's humanity. They portray the prophet as a weak mortal yet faithful to God's calling to minister to Him.[24]

However, Holladay and Carroll agree with Reventlow that Jeremiah's confessions are not melancholic solo songs. Rather, they represent the corporate agony in exile, but Holladay and Carroll differ in their interpretation of Jeremiah's confessions. For Holladay, the very reason why Jeremiah's confessions were preserved in the Book of Jeremiah is that these prophet's complaint prayers were useful in Israel's communal worship.[25] Carroll argues that the confessions of Jeremiah are communal lament psalms, not individual lament songs, because they contain many motifs that address the threat posed to Israel by the opponent nations. Jeremiah's confessions, on the other hand, depict the Deuteronomistic portrayal rather than the historical Jeremiah.[26] Carroll's views are controversial. The difference between the individual and communal laments is far-fetched. Jeremiah's confessions are intrinsically related to his suffering.

24 John Bright, "A Prophet's Lament and Its Answer: Jeremiah 15:10-21," in Leo G. Perdue & Brian W. Kovacs (eds), *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah's Studies* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 325-30.

25 William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 359.

26 The motifs such as the communal problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous (11:19-23), the enemy from the north (15:12), the assurance of salvation (12:1-4; 15:19-21), Jeremiah's intercessory role (15:11; 18:20)—all assume cultic settings and communal gatherings. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, 109-122.

Thus, the liturgic or cultic approach portrays Jeremiah the prophet as a cultic mediator. Jeremiah is a representative of the community of God's people. He is so merged with his community that he loses his individual identity and becomes one among the community. Hence the community's cry is put in the individual's mouth. According to Yates, the prophet represents people to God. His prayers for his personal deliverance give voice to Israel's prayers for deliverance from exile, especially for the righteous who suffer through national calamity despite their personal godliness (cf. 11:20; 12:1-4; 15:15; 17:14, 18; 20:12). His claims of innocence (15:10, 15, 19; 17:16; 18:16-17) and accusation against Yahweh (15:17-18; 20:7) motivate the godly to bring their complaints to the presence of God boldly.[27]

II.3 The Synthetic Approach

The paradigmatic status of the prophet as an embodiment of individual, communal, and divine suffering has received considerable attention among proponents of the synthetic approach. The synthetic approach to the confessions of Jeremiah combines the two extreme approaches: the psychological-biographical (focusing more on the prophet's private life) and the liturgic or cultic (focusing more on the prophetic office). It views the confessions of Jeremiah as the outpourings of an individual and the community. It goes on to say that Jeremiah's cry also embodies divine suffering. Craigie et al. accept both psychological-biographical and liturgical approaches to the confessions of Jeremiah. They see the confessions as the prophet's reflection of his inner struggle, his community's cry, and even that of God's suffering.[28] It is Walther Zimmerli who suggested

27 Yates, "The Prophet Jeremiah as Theological Symbol in the Book of Jeremiah," 8.

28 Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 172-173.

that Jeremiah's pain reflects YHWH's own pain at having to punish his own people.[29] That is, the very cry of the prophet's despair points to the personal suffering of God (Jer. 12:7ff; 45:4ff). Therefore, Jeremiah's confessions give voice to the suffering of humankind and the heart of God. However, it may be argued whether the writers of the Hebrew Bible believed YHWH could feel pain. Also, the prophet and God are far from being equal. YHWH is the inflictor of pain, according to Jeremiah 20:7. The fact that YHWH caused pain to Jeremiah (also Ezekiel) proves that YHWH was with the prophet in a historical moment of suffering and doubt.[30]

Polk values the psychological-biographical interpretation of the confessions of Jeremiah but with the persona of the prophet depicted by the text rather than the reconstruction of the historical Jeremiah. The locus of the meaning of the text lies in the text. However, biblical texts are not a textbook of spirituality. Instead, one must determine their poetry and metaphoric nature, which need imaginative presentation. Hence the confessions of Jeremiah are literary creative artwork with certain theological truths rather than the reconstruction of the history of Judah or that of the prophet. Thus, Polk regards the confessions as "an effort of literary and religious imagination."[31] Polk's premise that biblical writings are artistic is convincing and should be welcomed. The debate on the historicity of the Scriptures is still on. While some consider biblical history at face value, interpreting everything that the Bible says literally, some deny the very existence of Israel, monarchy, and so

29 *Walther Zimmerli*, Old Testament Theology in Outline, trans. D.E.Green (London: Bloomsbury, 1978), 206–07.

30 Rosanne Liebermann, "Divine Presence, Divinely Inflicted Pain, and Forced Migration in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," *NTT Journal of Theology and the Study of Religion,* vol. 79, no. 1 (April 2025), 37–60.

31 Polk, *The Prophetic Persona*, 166-167.

on. However, God's truth can be communicated through human creativity. The Bible is a unique art form that blends historical memory with literary creativity.[32] Human creativity embedded in the Bible's writings does not invalidate the reliability of the Scriptures. Through His Holy Spirit, God inspired the Scriptures that were preserved by tradition and penned by God's people.

Jeremiah shows solidarity with the community. The confessions do not center on the conflict between the prophet and his adversaries but on Judah's covenant infidelity in contrast with YHWH's covenant loyalty (chesed). The prophet is a paradigm for the community's attitude to the non-actualization of God's judgment based on His covenantal promise. The prophet's suffering is a prophetic call to the community's future suffering. Thus, the prophet is an example of righteous suffering and a metaphor for God's judgment on Judah.[33] The life of the prophet becomes a paradigm of the mission of God. Thus, the confessions of Jeremiah are the paradigmatic expressions of the literary portrait of the prophet who embodies God's pathos and purpose. McConville sees the confessions of Jeremiah as the genuine expression of the prophet as well, as they are part of the prophet's vocation. He says that in the confessions, one sees the prophet's identification with his community, and such communal solidarity is inseparable from his identification with the plan and purpose of God for the nations. The prophet does not lose his identity when he becomes a paradigm for the suffering of the people and the suffering of God.[34]

32 V. Philip Long, *The Art of Biblical History,* Vol. 5, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 76-87.

33 Polk, *The Prophetic Persona,* 131-143.

34 McConville, *Judgment and Promise,* 62-67.

II.4 The Synchronic Approach

The synchronic approach argues that the confessions of Jeremiah are not isolated units from the message of the book of Jeremiah. Rather they significantly contribute to the message of the book. The confessions that occur in the book's first half go in line with the message of doom, the fall of Judah, which is very much proclaimed in the first twenty-five chapters.[35] The significance of the synchronic approach may be seen in the contribution that the confessions make to the message of the book as a whole. The book of Jeremiah speaks both the message of judgment and the message of hope, the basic prophetic message of the preexilic prophets.[36] Therefore, the confessions in the first twenty chapters of the book convey the message that just as the people of Judah rejected the prophet, God would reject them and punish them for their sins. If it were correct, what of those confessions that Jeremiah seems to address to God Himself—the ones where he identifies YHWH as the antagonist rather than the people of Judah (Jer. 20:7-13). The prophet sees God as the source of his affliction caused by his people. He is lamenting over the absence of God during those tumultuous times. However, the prophet, set apart from life's enjoyments for the cause of the mission of God but suffered at the hands of his community, functions as a paradigm to the sinful people who God would punish. However, there is also a message of hope that, like

35 The major studies on the synchronic approaches to the confessions of Jeremiah are: A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah* in *Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama*, JSOTSup 45 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretations and Role in Chapters 1-25*, SBLDS 94 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); Mark S. Smith, The Confessions of Jeremiah and *Their Contexts: A Literary and Redactional Study of Jeremiah* 11-20, SBLMS 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

36 J. Daniel Hays outlines the basic message of the preexilic prophets: the breach of the covenant, judgment, and hope beyond judgment. Hays, *The Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 64.

Jeremiah, he was assured of salvation and was brought out of prison by the Babylonians. The people of Judah would be delivered and restored after the exile. The righteous prophet functions as the persona of judgment and hope to the people of Judah. Thus, the confessions of Jeremiah are not simply the prophet's solo songs; rather, they play a crucial role in his community's theological and spiritual healing. On theological grounds, the confessions of Jeremiah purport to challenge traditional theology, which says that any punishment from God is due to human sin. Rather, the confessions place God at risk. They expose the ambiguous and uncertain ways of God. On spiritual healing, the confessions of Jeremiah let the community hold on to faith in God even amid misery and despair.[37]

According to the synchronic approach, Jeremiah's confessions are neither the prophet's personal prayers nor the community's cries of despair. The redactors used the original lament form, which consisted of an individual lament and an oracle of salvation, to complement the theme of the prophet's suffering in the biographical narratives.[38] According to Holladay, the confessions of Jeremiah show how the redactors rearranged the theology of retribution in the exilic period and that they "broke new ground in mapping the relation between Yahweh and his people."[39] For Bruce C. Birch et al., the confessions of Jeremiah move beyond the conventional theology of blessing and curse. They introduce the dimension of suffering into the tradition of Jeremiah.[40] It is

37 Kathleen O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," *Interpretation* 35 (January 2008) 34-47.

38 Perdue, "*Jeremiah in Modern Research*," 25-27.

39 Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 361.

40 Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 334-335.

interesting to learn that Jeremiah's confessions overturn traditional theology that humans are at fault for any catastrophe. In contrast, the prophet's confessions point out that "God is at fault." They rhetorically show divine responsibility and human innocence.[41] They are creatively written lament poems borrowed from lament tradition to give the community a new theology, especially during exile. They teach the community to hold faith in God amidst troubles and tribulations. They let the people unburden their suffering but put them on the shoulder of God. They allow the people to come to God with real issues and protest God if needed. However, they teach a valuable lesson: to cling to God with absolute loyalty. They question the stereotypical interpretation of the fall of Judah, that the fall is due to human sin and God's innocence. In contrast, the confessions of Jeremiah show that exile is God's responsibility. They portray the ambiguous and uncertain ways of God. However, they display godly faith and survival even amidst catastrophes.[42] One might question the evidence for such assertions. However, the synchronic approach helps see the rewriting of a theology in a new context.

III. The Theological Significance of Jeremiah's Confessions

The psychological-biographical approach to the confessions of Jeremiah contributes to the theological intent that God loves and cares for everyone, enabling that to have an intimate relationship with God and to wrestle with life's realities in prayer. The liturgical or cultic approach emphasises the communitarian nature of God and that the community's solidarity and witness for God are important.

41 O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," 40.

42 O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," 45-47.

The synthetic approach's portrayal of the prophet as a paradigm for human and divine suffering that YHWH punishes Judah's infidelity to YHWH. The synchronic approach does point to the reworking of theology in context to give the message of hope that God is faithful in keeping His covenantal promise. Thus, all these approaches contribute to certain theological emphases. Whether all four of these approaches can be considered equal in value or effect is difficult to answer. However, all four approaches contribute to the purposes of Jeremiah as a prophet and his paradigmatic status in the message of God to the community. Only when it comes to the authorship of the confessions will there be tension among these four approaches. The authorship of the confessions of Jeremiah is not the focus here. However, from a canonical perspective and considering the similarities between the Book of Jeremiah and Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah is the author of the confessions. Regarding the theological significance of Jeremiah's confessions, much could be said and the following focus on the nature of God, God's Word, and God's covenant relationship.

III.1 God as Sovereign Judge

Jeremiah's confessions assume the prophet's strong fidelity to God and His Word in contrast to Judah's infidelity. Miller says, "It is only the person who truly believes that God can and will help will dare to challenge the Lord forthrightly."[43] For the prophet, God is the sole savior; hence there is little wonder that when the prophet became convinced that God neglected him, he complained to God.[44] We hear such complaints in lament psalms (for example,

43 Patrick D. Miller, *The Book of Jeremiah, New International Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 730.

44 John Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old

Pss 3, 6, 13, 22, etc.) and also at the crucifixion (Matt 27:46). One of the theological intents of Jeremiah's confessions is that God is to be believed as sovereign, powerful, all-knowing, and supreme Judge who establishes justice. According to Lundbom, Jeremiah's confessions express the idea of grand universalism that God is the God of the entire cosmos. Such an idea is also part of the wisdom tradition of Israel. The knowledge of God is very much stressed. Jeremiah, the God of Israel, is the living God (15:18). He knows everything (12:3; 15:15; 18:23). He sees everything (12:3), even things that are done in secret. He is a righteous Judge (11:20) even though His ways are incomprehensible (12:1-2). He is always victorious (20:7), even though Jeremiah suffers and rejoices when the salvation of God comes (20:13).[45] The power of Yahweh is vividly portrayed, especially in the final lament of Jeremiah. Yahweh's power is directed against the prophet (20:7-8) as well as against the prophet's persecutors (20:11-12). "Yahweh is portrayed as the overwhelming powerful God, with little or no regard for the plight of his prophet…the prophet calls upon this powerful God to rescue him from his persecutors. Yahweh is an enemy and ally at the same time."[46] The confessions envision the justice of God, that God is the supreme Judge, and that He establishes justice in His time. The imprecatory thoughts reflect God's righteous hatred of Judah's sins (11:20; 12:3-4; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:12).[47] Blank states that God is portrayed as the supreme Judge in Jeremiah's confessions and that the prophet approaches Him for justice. He writes, "…the words and phrases with a legal flavor are nowhere so abundant as

Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 419.

45 Lundbom, "Jeremiah, The Book of," 717-721.

46 S D Snyman, "The Portrayal of Yahweh in Jeremiah 20:7-13," *HTS* 55 (1999), 180.

47 Yates, "The Prophet Jeremiah as Theological Symbol in the Book of Jeremiah," 5.

they are in Jeremiah's confessions."[48] Samuel E. Balentine recognizes the power struggle in the confessions of Jeremiah. The confessions of Jeremiah acknowledge that God is all-powerful. For Balentine, the prophet's complaint prayers suggest a struggle between the divine and human, the two unequal powers. Such a power struggle recalls the prophet's call, where the prophet passively submitted to the divine call. However, the prophet stands tall and argues against divine deeds in the confessions. This raises the question of whether the relationship between God and humans is based on power. If so, when can humans submit to or refuse to submit to the powerful God? Balentine rightly says, "God's sovereignty and power do not always elicit mute collaboration."[49] What constitutes such a stance and boldness to cry to God is the nature of God as the sovereign judge to the nations. Within the prophet's complaint to God, there is a cry for justice. Like Job, who laments to God the redeemer, Jeremiah seeks God's justice.

III.2 God's Word is Powerful

Throughout the confessions of Jeremiah, the characteristics of God and the nature of God's Word are mentioned together (11:20-21; 15:15-16; 17:15-16; 18:18-19; 20:8-9, 11). According to Gary E. Yates, there is an impeccable connection between the prophet and the Word of God because the prophet's life interprets his message.[50] The power of God's Word is emphasized in the confessions of Jeremiah. Just as God Himself is powerful, His Word, which is His revelation, is powerful. The Word of God has its compelling power.

48 Blank, "Prophet as Paradigm," 118.

49 Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 166-167.

50 Yates, "The Prophet Jeremiah as Theological Symbol in the Book of Jeremiah," 1.

The prophet could not withhold himself from prophesying. He did not want to preach the message of doom on Judah (20:8-9). But, the Word of God had become a terror to the prophet that he could not resist but prophesy. His own people of Anathoth persecuted him because of the content of the message, the message of doom. They accused him (17:15; 20:8). They rejected Jeremiah and wanted to destroy him because he preached so "in the LORD's name" (11:21), whereas his colleagues, i.e., other prophets, preached the message of peace. However, Jeremiah loved and lived with God's Word, which was his food, part of his body, and inseparable from his being.[51] The Word of God means nothing to those who speak lies. They speak good and pleasing words (20:6). The prophet seems to have believed in people's optimistic sayings, but they cheated him (20:7-10; 11:18-19). The nature of God and that of His Word are recurrent themes in the confessions of Jeremiah. In addition, the grace and salvation of God are highlighted in those confessions. The LORD's assurance in Jeremiah 1:8 is repeated in 15:20-21. The oracle of assurance in 17:14-18 and 20:11-13 are good examples of how Jeremiah believed in the salvific act of God.[52]

III.3 God's Deeds are Covenantal

Biblical lament prayers are rooted in biblical covenant tradition. Such covenantal understanding of faith allows questioning the justice of God.[53] The confessions of Jeremiah also are covenantal in their expressions. The historical deeds of God are assumed behind the expressive language of the prophet's confessions. The prophet believed that God's covenant with His people still stands.

51 Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 83.

52 Lundbom, "Jeremiah, the Book of," 717-721.

53 Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 4.

The oracles of salvation intend to show that God is faithful to His covenant. The prophet's prayer to God that God would remember him and visit his cause (15:15; 18:20) is related to the emphasis on God's remembrance in the book of Deuteronomy. Memory is seen as about God. When God remembers, He acts; hence memory is an active thing. The "Remember" motif in the book of Deuteronomy, the book of the covenant, creates an urgency to obey the LORD's commandments recounted in the law. According to Miller, the confessions of Jeremiah focus on the covenant and its articulations. They assume that God is receptive to the prophet's complaints and protests not because of his covenant faithfulness but because of His covenant faithfulness.[54] The justice question is articulated based on the covenant significance. The confessions under study portray the intimate relationship of God with His people. God is receptive to the protests and emotions of the petitioner. In the final lament, the prophet has been overpowered by Yahweh (20:7-8). Yet the prophet confesses that Yahweh is with him and that he can trust Him and reveal his cause (20:12). Thus, "The powerful, almost ruthless God is at the same time also the personal and present God who can be called upon and who should be praised…What is remarkable is that the tension between the powerful God and the personal and present God remains unresolved in this confession."[55] However, seen from the covenantal perspective, the final lament makes good sense that the Almighty God personally relates to His people.

IV. Conclusion

Various views on the confessions of Jeremiah, in some ways, contribute to the nature and characteristics of God. For example,

54 Miller, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 669-699.

55 Snyman, "The Portrayal of Yahweh in Jeremiah 20:7-13," 180-181.

the psychological-biographical approach implies God's love and care of an individual; the liturgic or cultic approach, which proposes communal witness, conveys the communitarian nature of God; the synthetic approach sees the prophet as the paradigm of human and divine suffering, points to the tension of God when He punishes His people; and the synchronic approach that argues for the reworking of theology in exilic context says about God's covenant faithfulness. Among the four views, the synthetic view that sees the prophet as the paradigm of human and divine suffering seems to be contributing more to the theological value. However, they lack clarity as to how Jeremiah's confessions reveal the nature of God, His Word, and His covenant relationship with the people of Judah.

It is argued that the confessions of Jeremiah are the prayers that spring from a strong faith, a faith that is rooted in the knowledge of God, His Word, and His deeds. They affirm God's sovereignty, righteousness, justice, covenant faithfulness, mercy, and salvation. They emphasize the sovereignty and justice of God. God is sovereign over the nations, and He does things in His own ways that will bring glory to Him. He is loving but also just. Hence, He punishes the wicked and establishes justice. Jeremiah's confessions acknowledge that God's Word is powerful and compelling. In addition, the confessions under study vividly identify the covenant nature of God's deeds. God is faithful to His covenant made with Abraham to bless the nations through His chosen race, Israel (Gen. 12). The so-called weeping prophet's confessions are theologically sound, revealing the deep faith in God's justice, the power of God's Word, and the loyal love of God in keeping His promises in history.

The Good Shepherd and the Sheepfold in John 10:1-18: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading

by **THAWNG HNIN**

Abstract: *This paper is a socio-rhetorical reading of John 10:1-18, utilizing Vernon K. Robbins' five textures: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. By analyzing these textures, the writer explores the text's literary, historical, social, ideological, and theological aspects. This approach offers a deeper understanding of how the text functions as a narrative and a theological statement within the Gospel of John.*

Key Words: Socio-rhetorical criticism, Jesus, Good Shepherd, sheep, thieves-robbers.

I. Introduction

John 10:1-18 represents a crucial passage in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the "Good Shepherd," emphasizing his willingness to sacrifice his life for the sheep. This paper employs Robbins' Socio-Rhetorical criticism to interpret John 10:1-18. In doing so, the writer seeks to address the question: How does the socio-rhetorical context of John 10:1-18 shape the portrayal of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and what are the implications for the identity and beliefs of the early Christian community? Furthermore, in what ways can the portrayal of Jesus be critically interpreted and contextually appropriated within the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary Indian Christianity, particularly concerning the formative influence of communal and hierarchical structures on Christian identity and leadership paradigms? Before delving into

the mentioned issues, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the history of interpreting John 10:1-18, along with a concise examination of socio-rhetorical criticism (hereafter SRC).

II. The Then of John 10:1-18

Historical-critical scholars, focusing on source, form, and redaction, offer distinct approaches to interpreting John 10:1-18. The source critics examine the origins/sources of the material, exploring whether the "Good Shepherd" imagery is derived from earlier Jewish traditions, such as Ezek 34 or Ps 23, or other cultural sources.[1] Form critics analyze the literary genre and structure of the text, identifying features such as the parable of the Good Shepherd and investigating how these forms function within the gospel.[2] Redaction critics focus on how the author of John has edited and shaped the sources to convey specific theological messages, such as Jesus' authority, sacrifice, and role as the Good Shepherd.[3] Together, these approaches offer complementary perspectives of John 10:1-18, addressing its origins, literary form, and theological shaping within the broader narrative of the Gospel of John. In contrast, Narrative critics focus on the text's literary aspects, examining the narrative's construction, the character's portrayal, and how the story functions within the broader gospel. A key focus is on characterizing Jesus as the "Good Shepherd," analyzing how his role as the one who "lays down his life for the

1 E.g., Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Commentary on Chapters 5-12*, trans. Cecily Hastings et al., vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 275-278.

2 E.g., Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John,* 275-278; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1971), 358ff.

3 E.g., Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 351ff; C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 134ff.

sheep" is developed through dialogue and metaphor.[4]

In recent years, scholars have increasingly employed the social-scientific approach as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting the Fourth Gospel.[5] This approach applies social science insights to explore the social and cultural contexts behind the text. Critics examine the roles of shepherds, sheep, and hired hands in the ancient Jewish and Mediterranean worlds, where shepherds were low-status figures responsible for the care of the flock.[6] The critics also consider the patron-client relationship, where Jesus, as the shepherd or patron, offers protection and life to his followers (the clients), creating a dynamic of loyalty and mutual care.[7]

Recent scholarship has also seen rhetorical (literary) criticism as a hermeneutical approach to interpreting the Gospel of John.[8] The critics focus on the persuasive strategies used to convey a theological message and persuade the audience. In John 10:1-18, John employs ethos, as Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd, an ethical and authoritative figure trustworthy and worthy of loyalty, primarily through his claim that he lays down his life

4 One of the leading scholars in the narrative study of the Gospel of John is R. Alan Culpepper. His seminal work, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), is considered groundbreaking in the field.

5 E.g., Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Philip F. Esler, "Social-Scientific Readings of the Gospel and Letters of John," in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 237–258.

6 Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science*, 182-183.

7 Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science*, 179.

8 E.g., Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel of John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

for the sheep. Furthermore, John employs pathos, as the emotional imagery of sacrifice and care evokes compassion and devotion, creating an emotional connection between Jesus and the audience. In logos, Jesus contrasts himself with the thief, robber, and hired hand, presenting logical arguments for why he, as the true shepherd, is the only legitimate leader worthy of trust.

One might ask: What makes SRC unique? The uniqueness of SRC lies in its integrated approach that combines social context with rhetorical strategies. Why is this approach considered an integrated approach? Robbins answers, "The hyphenated prefix 'socio-' refers to the rich resources of modern anthropology and sociology that SRC brings to the interpretation of a text."[9] He continues, "The term 'rhetorical' refers to how language in a text is a means of communication among people."[10] The uniqueness of SRC lies in its integration of approaches such as literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, postmodern criticism, and theological criticism.[11] The following provides a brief discussion of SRC.

III. Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

SRC is an approach to literature that "focuses on values, convictions, and beliefs both in the texts we read and in the world in which we live."[12] Historically, SRC has been primarily associated with two prominent scholars: Vernon Robbins and Ben Witherington III. Witherington is especially renowned for his extensive contributions to the Socio-

9 Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of the Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1.

10 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 1.

11 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 1-2.

12 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 1.

Rhetorical Commentary Series.[13] For him, SRC is a combination of socio-scientific criticism and rhetorical criticism.[14] His method closely aligns with George Kennedy's rhetorical criticism.[15] For instance, Kennedy asserts that rhetorical criticism focuses on elements such as persuasion, an audience-centered approach, the rhetorical situation, invention and arrangement, ethos, pathos, logos, style and delivery, rhetorical proofs, and genre and context.[16] What distinguishes Witherington's method from Kennedy's is his emphasis on the "social elements" within the text.[17] This paper, however, employs Robbins' SRC. Due to the constraints of word limitations, a comprehensive explanation of the key elements of the SRC cannot be provided.[18] Robbins, in his SRC, identifies five distinct textures of the text: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture.

III.1. The Inner Texture: Getting Inside a Text

Inner texture focuses on the literary and rhetorical structure within the biblical text itself. It examines how language, phrases, and sentences are constructed and how patterns, such as repetition,

13 E.g., Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

14 Arren Bennet Lawrence, "Socio-Rhetorical Criticism," in *Approaches to the New Testament: A Handbook for Students and Pastors,* ed. Arren Bennet Lawrence (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2018), 145.

15 See George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

16 Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3-38.

17 Lawrence, "Socio-Rhetorical Criticism," 146.

18 For detailed information on SRC, see Robbins, *Exploring the Texture, 7-131; The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996); "Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation," in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 192-219.

progression, and contrast, contribute to the meaning of the text.[19] Within this texture, Robbins identifies six textures: (a) repetitive, (b) progressive, (c) narrational, (d) opening-middle-closing, (e) argumentative, and (f) sensory-aesthetic texture.[20] These textures help uncover how the text functions internally by highlighting the relationships between ideas, events, and characters.

III.2. The Intertexture: Entering the Interactive World of a Text

Intertexture explores how the biblical text interacts with other texts and traditions within the Bible and from external sources. Robbins writes, "Intertexture is a text's representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the 'world' outside the text being interpreted."[21] Four textures constitute intertexture: (a) oral scribal intertexture, (b) historical intertexture, (c) social intertexture, and (d) cultural intertexture.[22] This texture involves understanding the intertextual references, where the text alludes to, quotes, or adapts material from other scriptures and external sources such as cultural practices, historical events, or secular literature.[23]

III.3. The Social and Cultural Texture: Living with a Text in the World

Social and cultural texture focuses on the historical context, social structures, and cultural norms that influenced the creation and

19 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 7.

20 For a detailed explanation of each of these textures, refer to Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 7-37.

21 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 40.

22 Robbins, *The Tapestry,* 96; *Exploring the Texture,* 40. For a detailed explanation of each of these textures, refer to Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 40-58.

23 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 40. This texture reflects the role of source criticism.

reception of the text.[24] According to Robbins, "Investigation of the social and cultural texture of a text includes exploring the social and cultural 'location' of the language and the type of social and cultural world the language evokes or creates."[25] It explores how the text reflects or critiques the social identity of its audience, including their religious, political, and economic realities.[26] Further, this texture emerges "in specific social topics, common social and cultural topics, and final cultural categories."[27] Additionally, this texture examines the social dynamics at play in the text, such as class distinctions, gender roles, and power relationships.

III.4. The Ideological Texture: Sharing Interests in Commentary and Text

Ideological texture looks at the ideas, values, and worldviews embedded in the text, uncovering the belief systems and doctrines it expresses or critiques. According to Robbins, "the primary subject of ideological analysis and interpretation is people."[28] He continues, "Ideological analysis of a text, then, is simply an agreement by various people that they will dialogue and disagree with one another with a text as a guest in the conversation."[29] It concerns "the particular ways in which our speech and action, in their social and cultural location, relate to and interconnect with resources, structures, and institutions of power."[30] This texture involves identifying the dominant ideologies promoted in the text,

24 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 71.
25 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 71.
26 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 71.
27 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 71.
28 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 95.
29 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 95.
30 Robbins, *The Tapestry*, 36.

such as views on morality, salvation, politics, and religion. It also examines how the text may challenge or subvert existing ideologies, providing new perspectives on shared ideas and practices.

III.5. The Sacred Texture: Seeking the Divine in a Text

Sacred texture explores the spiritual and theological significance of the text, concentrating on its portrayal of divine presence, revelation, and sacred truths.[31] As Robbins writes, this texture concerns "seeking the divine in a text."[32] This texture explores how the text communicates concepts such as deity, holy person, spirit being, divine history, human redemption, human commitment, religious community, and ethics.[33] It examines how events, teachings, and characters reflect divine purposes, as well as the sacred dimensions of the message.

IV. John 10:1-18: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading

In John 10:1-18, John presents a profound exploration of the metaphor of the "Good Shepherd," where he presents Jesus offering a compelling vision of leadership, sacrifice, and divine care. The text, rich in literary, rhetorical, and theological features, is pivotal for understanding the nature of Jesus' mission and his relationship with his followers.

IV.1. Inner Texture of John 10:1-18

The first texture of Robbins' method, inner texture, refers to the literary and rhetorical characteristics of the text, as mentioned

31 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 120.

32 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 120.

33 See Robbins, *Exploring the Texture,* 120-131.

earlier in the paper. This texture primarily concerns how the text is constructed and how its narrative and linguistic devices contribute to shaping its meaning. In John 10:1-18, the literary features are pivotal to understanding the depth of Jesus' words, particularly his use of metaphor, repetition, contrast, and misunderstanding. These devices help convey John's theological message and guide the reader to interpret the underlying themes.

IV.1.a. Metaphor

The metaphor of the shepherd is the most prominent literary device used in John 10:1-18. Jesus identifies himself as ho poimēn ho kalos – the good shepherd (e.g., 10:11, 14), a figure known in the OT[34] and Jewish tradition as one who guides, protects, and cares for the flock.[35] The shepherd's role is not merely that of a leader; the shepherd is a protector, a guide, and one intimately involved in the well-being of the sheep. In John 10:11, Jesus explicitly states, *Egō eimi ho poimēn ho kalos. Ho poimēn ho kalos tēn psuchēn autou tithēsin huper tōn probatōn* – I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Here, Jesus employs the articular adjective ho kalos (lit. the good)[36] to highlight a contrast between himself and the Jewish leaders of the past and his contemporaries. The verb *egō* (I or I am) is the subject nominative of *eimi* (I am) and is fronted for emphasis. The noun ho *poimēn* (the shepherd) is the predicate nominative of *egō eimi* (I am). In this context, the article *ho* can be understood as

34 E.g., see Ps 23:1-4; Ezek 34:2-4; 23-24, Isa 40:11; Jer 23:4.

35 E.g., see 4QMessAp 4Q521; 1 En. 89:57-59, Ber. 33b; Pss. Sol. 17:21-22; *J.W.* 6.5.4; T. Levi 18:10-12; Sib. Or. 3:672-674.

36 *Kalos* in John 10:11 and 14 is variously translated as noble, ideal, model, true, or good. For a more in-depth discussion, see Jerome H. Neyrey's article, "The 'Noble Shepherd' in John 10: Cultural and Rhetorical Background," *JBL* 120/2 (2001): 267-291.

"par excellence," signifying both "the best of a class" and "the worst of a class."[37] This usage emphasizes that Jesus is the greatest shepherd, unparalleled and unmatched by anyone.

The second part of John 10:11 describes the key character trait of the ideal shepherd: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John uses the present active indicative *tithēsin* ("he/she/it lays down"). The present tense here can be interpreted as gnomic present - "a statement of a general, timeless fact."[38] The gnomic present frames Jesus' self-sacrifice as not merely a historical event, but as an essential, timeless characteristic of who He is. He is not just someone who once laid down His life, but the kind of shepherd whose very identity is defined by self-giving love. This metaphor sets up a stark contrast between Jesus and other figures who claim to lead or govern the people of Israel. The "Good Shepherd" is characterized by his sacrificial nature, contrasting sharply with the behavior of thieves, robbers, and hirelings who do not care about the sheep (vv. 1, 8, 12-13).[39] The metaphor emphasizes the intimate, sacrificial relationship between Jesus and his followers, providing a theological framework for understanding his mission and purpose.

IV.1.b. Repetition

In John 10:1-18, John strategically utilizes the literary device of repetition to reinforce and develop significant theological themes and conceptual motifs within the narrative as outlined in the chart below.

37 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 222.

38 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 523.

39 We will discuss the idea of contrast later in the paper.

Divine-Human Relationship	Voice	3, 4, 5, 16	Highlights intimacy and recognition; the sheep know and follow the shepherd's voice.
Christological Identity	Good Shepherd	11, 14	Identifies Jesus as the ideal leader, fulfilling OT imagery and embodying sacrificial care.
Sacrificial Death	Lays down his life	11, 15, 17, 18	Emphasizes Jesus' voluntary and redemptive death for his sheep.
Exclusive Mediation	Door	7, 9	Symbolizes Jesus as the only legitimate access to salvation and a relationship with God.
Obedience and Intimacy	Follows/ Knows	Follows: 4, 5, 14; Knows: 14, 15	Depicts relational trust and mutual knowledge between Jesus and his followers.
False Leadership	Hired hand flees	12, 13	Contrasts true shepherds with false leaders who lack commitment and abandon the flock.
Opposition and Threat	The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy	10	Highlights the danger of false teaching and destructive influences opposed to Jesus.

These repeated themes reinforce the contrast between Jesus, the true shepherd, and the false leaders, and they highlight his sacrificial love and the intimate bond with those who follow him.

IV.1.c. Structure

Another crucial feature of the inner texture is the structure of the text. Scholars have proposed various structures for this passage. Jerome H. Neyrey views 10:1-27 as a unified section and interprets it rhetorically, framing it as a "forensic proceeding."[40] He identifies four forensic structures within the passage: the claim, where Jesus is presented as both the door and the noble shepherd (vv. 1-18); the witnesses, where accusations arise, asserting that Jesus has a demon, but he is defended as a saint (vv. 19-21); the *cognitio*, where a direct inquiry is made, asking Jesus to declare if he is the Christ (v. 24); and the defense, where Jesus' defense transforms into an accusation (vv. 25-27)[41] On the other hand, Rudolf Bultmann divides the text into three parts: 1-10, 11-13, and 14-18.[42] Similarly, Raymond E. Brown offers a three-part structure with a slight variation: the parable (vv. 1-6), the gate (vv. 7-10), and the shepherd (vv. 11-21).[43] Brown's structure is most appealing. Verses 1-6 introduce the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep, setting up the basic framework of the relationship. Verses 7-10 elaborate on Jesus' identity as the good shepherd and contrast him with the thief and the robber. In verses 11-18, the theme of sacrificial love and the good shepherd's willingness to lay down his life for the sheep is fully developed. This progression from the introduction of the metaphor to the revelation of the shepherd's self-sacrifice mirrors the overall movement of the gospel, which begins with the revelation of Jesus' identity and gradually unfolds the depths of his mission.

40 Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 316.

41 Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 316-317.

42 *Bultmann, The Gospel of John*, 360.

43 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII: Introduction, Translation, and Notes,* AB (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 383-385.

IV.1.d. Contrast

Another key literary device in John 10:1-18 is contrast, which highlights the difference between true and false shepherds, genuine care and neglect, and life-giving leadership versus destructive intent. These contrasts, outlined in the chart below, deepen the theological impact of the passage.

No.	Contrasting Elements	Verses
1	Thief and robber (enters unlawfully) vs. True shepherd (enters by the door)	1–2
2	Good shepherd (sheep recognize his voice and follow) vs. Strangers (sheep flee from them)	3–5
3	Thief (steals, kills, destroys) vs. Good shepherd (gives abundant life)	10
4	Hired hand (abandons sheep in danger) vs. Good shepherd (lays down his life)	12–15
5	False shepherds (sheep did not listen) vs. Jesus, the true shepherd (knows his sheep intimately)	8, 14
6	Current fold vs. Other sheep (who will also listen and be united under one shepherd)	16

These contrasts assure the Johannine community of Jesus' unique role and divine purpose, inviting them into a deeper relationship with him while warning against false leaders.

IV.1.e. Misunderstanding

One of the key literary devices in John's Gospel is "misunderstanding,"[44] often following a statement -

44 For example, see John 2:19-22, 3:3-4, 4:10-15, 6:41-42, 6:52, 7:33-34, 7:37-39, 8:21-22, 8:33-34,

misunderstanding-clarification pattern.[45] This formula is demonstrated in John 10:1-18. Jesus begins by stating that he is the "door" of the sheep, emphasizing the necessity of entering through him for eternal life and explaining the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep (vv. 1-5). The people, however, misunderstand his words, as indicated in v. 6: "Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what He was telling them." Jesus then clarifies by expanding on the metaphor, explaining that he is not only the door but also the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, in contrast to the hired hand (vv. 7-18). John uses the misunderstanding as a literary (rhetorical) device to "advance the argument."46 David W. Wead aptly observes, "This misunderstanding becomes an opportunity for the author to advance or emphasize his case."47 In the context of John 10, the misunderstanding serves to further John's thesis that Jesus is the good shepherd. Furthermore, it creates a dialogical structure where misunderstanding leads to clarification, moving the plot and theological argument forward through conversation.

IV.2. Intertexture of John 10:1-18

The second texture of Robbins' method, intertexture, explores how the text connects with other texts, whether within the same biblical tradition or from external sources. In the case of John 10:1-18, the "Good Shepherd" metaphor draws upon a rich history of biblical texts that feature shepherd imagery, and understanding these intertextual references is crucial for a deeper appreciation of the passage.

9:1-12, 11:11-14, 14:1-4, 16:16-19.

45 Johnson Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs: A Polyvalent Analysis of John 1:19-12:50,* Biblical Interpretation Series 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 418.

IV.2.a. The Shepherd Metaphor in The Old Testament

The imagery of the shepherd is deeply embedded in the OT, where God himself is called Israel's "Shepherd"[46] and his people, the "sheep of his pasture."[47] Of the many OT references, Ezek 34 is outstanding.[48] In Ezek 34, God condemns the leaders of Israel, who are described as "shepherds of Israel" who have failed to care for the flock.[49] Ezek 34:2-4 reads,

> Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them-- to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them (NRSV).

Here, the failure of Israel's leaders to protect and nurture the people is highlighted. Not only have they failed to protect and nurture, but the Jewish leaders are also in the process of destroying the sheep

46 E.g., Gen 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1; 28:9; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; Isa 40:11; Jer. 31:10; Ezek 34:11-31.

47 E.g., Ps 74:1; 78:52; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3; Ezek 34:31.

48 The majority of Johannine scholars consider Ezek 34 as the "classic intertext" of John 10:1-18. E.g., see George R. Basley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Word Books, 1999), 168; Jey J. Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2005), 324; Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 185.

49 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 324.

(34:10).[50] In contrast, God promises to become the shepherd of Israel and gather the scattered flock. Jesus' declaration in 10:11 and 14 that he is the "Good Shepherd" connects directly to this OT prophecy, where God promises to send a true shepherd who will care for his people.

Thus, through intertextuality, John presents Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophetic expectations concerning the coming of the true shepherd. By echoing and reinterpreting key shepherd imagery found in texts such as Ezek 34, John situates Jesus within the theological trajectory of divine shepherding, portraying him not merely as a moral guide or teacher, but as the divinely appointed shepherd who embodies God's promise to gather, protect, and give life to his people. This intertextual connection reinforces Jesus' identity as the Messianic Shepherd, contrasting him with the false or negligent leaders of Israel and affirming his unique role in God's redemptive plan.

IV.2.b. The Shepherd Metaphor in Jewish Literature

Beyond the OT, the shepherd metaphor in Jewish literature, particularly from the Second Temple period, appears in several key texts that help illuminate its significance and leadership expectations during that time. In 1 Enoch (89.9-10), the shepherd metaphor describes those who lead the people, with corrupt shepherds leading the flock astray, while a true shepherd arises to restore the people, echoing messianic expectations. In the Qumran literature, specifically in the Community Rule (1QS 8.3), leaders are depicted as shepherds guiding the faithful according to God's will. The War

50 Carter, *John*, 186.

Scroll (1QM) also employs the shepherd metaphor in the context of spiritual leadership and protection. The Psalms of Solomon (17.23-24) also portrays a righteous king as a shepherd who will rule with justice, further underscoring messianic imagery. In the Talmud (Ber. 63b), the rabbis discuss the role of spiritual leaders as shepherds who guide the people in righteousness, emphasizing the responsibility to care for the community.[51] These references from Jewish literature offer a rich context for understanding the shepherd metaphor in the Gospel of John, where Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd would resonate with the Jewish audience familiar with these themes, particularly concerning the expected restoration of Israel.

IV.2.c. The Shepherd Metaphor in Other New Testament Writings

The metaphor of the shepherd, while unique to the Gospel of John, also resonates in the Synoptic Gospels. In Matt 9:36, Jesus observes that the crowds are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," echoing the concern for lost sheep found in John (cf. Mark 6:34). In Matt 25:31-46, Jesus uses the imagery of separating the sheep from the goats during the final judgment, highlighting his role as a shepherd who cares for his followers. In Luke 15:4-7, the parable of the lost sheep further develops the theme of God's seeking and saving love for the lost. Furthermore, the early church referred to Jesus as the shepherd and Christians as his sheep (Mark 14:27, 28; Acts 20:28-30; 1 Pet 5:2-4).[52] Thus, the NT writers share a common thematic concern with the care and protection of God's people, strengthening the broader biblical narrative of the

51 References from the Jewish literature are borrowed from Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 801.

52 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 324.

shepherd's significance. Through these intertextual connections, John offers a deeper understanding of Jesus as the good shepherd who fulfills the long-standing biblical and Jewish expectations of a leader who guides, protects, and sacrifices for his people despite the Jews' rejection of him.[53]

IV.3. Social and Cultural Texture of John 10:1-18

The social and cultural texture refers to the social and historical context in which a text was written and the cultural practices and norms that shape the text's message. In the case of John 10:1-18, understanding the first-century Jewish context and the Roman occupation provides crucial insights into the significance of the "Good Shepherd" metaphor and the themes of leadership and authority.

IV.3.a. The Shepherding Profession

In first-century Judea, shepherds were a familiar presence in the rural landscape, playing a vital role in caring for and leading sheep to pasture. On the positive note, shepherds were often regarded as symbols of leadership, particularly in the context of the Israelite kingship.[54] Furthermore, rulers and leaders were often portrayed as shepherds, not only in Israelite traditions but also in Greco-Roman traditions. The Greeks depict rulers such as Agamemnon and Cyrus as shepherds concerned with the welfare of their flock.[55] The Greek concept is further embedded in the Roman tradition, where the

53 E.g., see Matt 23:37; 27:22-23; Luke 13:34-35, John 1:11; 5:39-40; 7:5; 8:59.

54 Key OT references that portray kings or leaders as shepherds include 2 Sam 5:2, Ps 78:70-72, Ezek 34:1-10; 23–24, Jer 23:1-4, and Isa 44:28.

55 See Homer's *Iliad* (2.84-86, 243, 254) and Odyssey (3.156, 4.24), Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (1.1.2-5), and Plato's *Republic* (1.343-345). These references are borrowed from Carter, John, 186, 200.

emperor or king was seen as ruling for the benefit of the people. For instance, Suetonius recounts how Emperor Tiberius rejected a provincial governor's requests for increased taxes by saying, "It is part of a good shepherd to shear his flock, not skin it" (Tib.32). These examples reflect the positive aspects of the shepherd imagery.

However, the shepherding profession was also associated with negative social stigma. The shepherds were seen as "dirty and smelly since they spent most of their time outdoors with animals."[56] For example, Aristotle said that among men, the "laziest are shepherds, who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks having to wander from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm" (Pol. 1.8).[57] Many Romans believed that the shepherds "practiced highway robbery."[58] Likewise, shepherding was often a low-status occupation in Jewish traditions. They were usually considered sinners or held in low regard by Jewish religious leaders due to their work with animals and the associated ritual impurity. The Talmud (e.g., Ber. 45b and Šabb. 30b) reflects this perception, indicating that shepherds were frequently viewed as unfit to serve as witnesses in legal matters due to their low social status and impure profession. Similarly, the Mishnah (e.g., Shekalim 1.5 and Avot 1.6) suggests that shepherds, due to their occupation, were exempt from specific religious duties and were perceived as lacking moral and spiritual integrity. In Josephus' Ant. (17.21), the historian describes shepherds as being looked down upon in society, further emphasizing their marginalization. The Qumran community

56 James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 21.

57 The reference is borrowed from Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World,* 21.

58 Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 21.

(1QS 8.3-5) also regarded shepherds as impure and outside the community's ideal of holiness.

The aforementioned discusses both the positive and negative cultural-religious connotations associated with shepherding in the first-century context, which are crucial for interpreting John's use of the shepherd metaphor in John 10. On one hand, the positive connotation draws upon rich biblical and Jewish traditions in which shepherds symbolize responsible and compassionate leadership, most notably seen in figures such as David and God's role as Israel's shepherd (e.g., Ps 23; Ezek 34). This understanding aligns with Jesus' self-identification as the "Good Shepherd," a title that conveys his intimate care, sacrificial love, and guiding presence for his followers. On the other hand, the negative perception of shepherds during the first century, especially in Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural settings, portrayed them as socially marginalized, ritually impure, and morally suspect. By deliberately adopting this image, Jesus subverts cultural expectations and underscores the radical, inclusive nature of his mission: to seek, know, and lay down his life for those considered unworthy or excluded by society.

IV.3.b. Roman Empire

Since the defeat of the Greeks in 146 BCE, the Roman Empire regarded itself as invincible and the most powerful Empire in history. In Jesus' era, Tiberius Caesar was the Roman Emperor (14-37 CE), with Judea and its inhabitants under his political control, while Pontius Pilate served as the governor of Judea.[59] Beginning

59 Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 30-31. The NT references to Pontius Pilate include Matt 27:2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-5, 13-25; John 18:28-40, 19:1-16; Acts 3:13; 4:27, while references to Tiberius Caesar are found in Luke 2:1;

in the first century CE, Roman emperors increasingly promoted the idea that they were divine or semi-divine figures, sons of the gods, and were widely perceived by their subjects as the guarantors of Pax Romana, or Roman Peace.[60] The Pax Romana, which lasted approximately 200 years, from 27 BCE under Emperor Augustus to 180 CE under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, is often celebrated as a period of unprecedented stability and peace across the Roman Empire.[61] However, this so-called Pax Romana must be understood within the framework of Roman political supremacy. As Warren Carter rightly observes, "For the Romans, peace meant submission to Rome enforced by military might or negotiated through treaties and alliances."[62] Carter continues, "Peace and security described a world under elite hierarchical control and ruled for the benefit of a few."[63] In other words, the peace that the Romans spoke of primarily benefited the dominant group, ensuring stability and order for the ruling class while often suppressing the rights and freedoms of the marginalized or subjugated peoples within the Roman provinces.

IV.3.c. Jewish Religious Leadership

In addition to the Roman political hegemony, John 10:1-18 engages with the Jewish religious leadership. According to the first-century historian Josephus, Jewish society was shaped by three major philosophical schools: "one formed by the Pharisees, another by the Sadducees, and a third, which adheres to particularly strict rules,

3:1, and John 19:12.

60 Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 89.

61 See Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1987).

62 Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 89. Italic is mine.

63 Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 89.

formed by the so-called Essenes" (J.W. II, 119).[64] In light of these three, who are the thieves and robbers mentioned in John 10:1 and 8? Jey J. Kanagaraj answers, "In the light of chapter 9, they (thieves and robbers) are the Pharisees …"[65] Likewise, Keener writes, "John refers to Israel's disobedient leaders, in particular the Pharisees he (Jesus) has just been reproving."[66] To this, Carter includes the Ioudaioi—the Jews (9:18, 22), who are the leaders of the nation allied with Rome.[67] In John 9, we see a key confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, which sets the stage for understanding the "thieves and robbers" mentioned in John 10:1 and 8.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees had already established distinct communities where they rigorously followed the commandments of the Law. The OT commandments concerning priestly purity, originally intended for priests and Levites, became binding for all members of the Pharisaic community, who regarded it as their specific duty to carefully observe both these regulations and the commandments regarding the tithe in their daily lives.[68] Anyone who came into contact with something unclean, such as a corpse or a dead animal, or experienced a bodily discharge would lose their cultic purity. To regain it, they were required to undergo a purification bath and, in some cases, observe a waiting period

64 Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*, trans. J. E. Steely (London: SCM Press, 1976), 74.

65 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 326. Italic is mine. In contrast, J.N. Sanders suggests that "the thieves and brigands are pseudo-Messiahs, similar to figures like Theudas and Judas" (Acts 5:36-37). See his book *The Gospel According to St. John,* ed. Brian A. Mastin (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 249. Similarly, Oscar Cullmann writes, "It seems to me all but certain that the Zealot leaders like Judas of Gamala are in mind here." See his work *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 22.

66 Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 805. Italic is mine.

67 Carter, *John*, 185.

68 Lohse, *The New Testament*, 78.

before being considered clean again.[69]

The Pharisaic leadership, unfortunately, was often characterized by self-interest, exploitation, and a lack of concern for the people. Jesus' accusation that they are "thieves," "robbers," and "hirelings" is a powerful critique of the religious system of the time, which he saw as corrupted and self-serving.[70] Kanagaraj writes, "Like thieves, their (Pharisees') approach was secret and crafty, and like robbers, they were engaged in violence and destruction."[71] Similar to the Roman ruling classes, the Jewish leaders exploit the Law for their gain and oppress those who acknowledge Jesus as the Christ.[72] The contrast between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders is striking. While the latter focused on preserving their power and status, Jesus' leadership was defined by self-sacrifice, humility, and a genuine commitment to the well-being of his followers. These social and religious critiques underscore the radical nature of Jesus' ministry and his call to a new form of leadership, i.e., one based on service rather than domination.

IV.4. Ideological Texture of John 10:1-18

The ideological texture of a text examines the worldviews, values, and beliefs embedded within it. In John 10:1-18, John presents several important ideological themes, particularly in his portrayal of Jesus' leadership and the ethical implications of his role as the Good Shepherd.

69 Lohse, *The New Testament*, 78.

70 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 330.

71 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 330. Italics are mine.

72 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 326.

IV.4.a. Jesus as the Door and the Good Shepherd

In John 10:1-18, John characterizes Jesus as the *thura* (gate/door) of the sheep (vv. 7, 9) and *ho poimēn ho kalos* - the good shepherd (vv. 11, 14).[73] While the image of God as a shepherd is well-established in the OT, Kanagaraj rightly notes that the OT never explicitly presents God as the "door."[74] Nevertheless, in OT, the phrase 'gate of heaven' is used to denote the means of God's revelation to humans (Gen 28:17; see also Ps 78:23; 118:19-20). In the synoptic gospels, the word 'door' or 'gate' denotes "the point of entrance into the heavenly life or eternal destruction (e.g., Matt 7:13,14; Mark 9:43; Luke 13:24, 25).[75] This dual role underscores Jesus' unique position as the legitimate and only path to eternal life.[76] The statement that Jesus is the only door to eternal life is strengthened by John's use of the articular *hē thura*—the door. Here, *hē* is the article par excellence,[77] highlighting its uniqueness and exclusivity. Thus, by referring to Jesus as the gate, John implies that Jesus is the only entrance through which people must pass to find eternal life.

IV.4.b. Legitimacy of Jesus' Leadership

John contrasts Jesus with "thieves and robbers" who do not enter through the gate (10:1, 3). The "thieves and robbers" represent false leaders, likely referring to the Pharisees,[78] who deceive and exploit

73 For an explanation of the phrase "the good shepherd," refer to the section on the social and cultural context of John 10:1-18.

74 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 329.

75 Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 329.

76 Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 810; Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 330.

77 For the par excellence use of the Greek article, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 222. For John's depiction of Jesus as the good shepherd, refer to my discussion on the Social and Cultural Texture of John 10:1-18.

78 For an explanation of the Pharisees, refer to my discussion on the social and cultural context of

the people for personal gain. John also contrasts Jesus with the hired hand (10:12-13), who abandons the sheep in times of danger. Many shepherds in the rural Empire worked for others, like tenant farmers, and hired hands were common, even in moderately sized landholdings. In some modern Middle Eastern villages, locals might hire a stranger, a "hireling," to tend their flock if no one from the community is available. The hired hand cares only about the wages, not the well-being of the sheep.[79] These comparisons highlight the corruption of the Jewish religious system and affirm the legitimacy of Jesus' divine authority.[80]

Another factor that reinforces the legitimacy of Jesus' leadership is his actions on behalf of the sheep: Jesus calls – *phōnei* - his sheep by name and leads – *exagei* - them out (v. 3); he knows – *ginōskō* - them intimately (vv. 14, 27); he lays – *tithēsin* - down his life for them (vv. 11, 15, 17, 18); the sheep know – *ginōskousin* - him (v. 14); they listen - *akouousin* - to his voice (vv. 3, 27); and they follow – *akolouthousin* - him (v. 27). Interestingly, John uses all the verbs in the present tense, active voice, and indicative mood. The present tense of these verbs can be interpreted as either a progressive present, which describes "a scene in progress,"[81] or a gnomic present, which expresses "a general, timeless fact."[82] When Jesus speaks in the present tense, it emphasizes that his actions (such as calling, knowing, and leading the sheep) are ongoing. This conveys the immediacy and active involvement of Jesus in the lives of his

John 10:1-18.

79 Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 454.

80 For a detailed analysis of John's contrast between Jesus and other leaders, refer to my discussion on "Contrast" in the inner texture of John 10:1-18.

81 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 518.

82 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 523.

followers. The continuity of Jesus' actions and relationship with his followers does not terminate with his earthly life but persists beyond his resurrection and ascension to the Father, continuing throughout the ages. On the other hand, the gnomic present conveys that Jesus' actions are not limited to a specific moment but represent the universal facts about his relationship with his sheep. It portrays his roles as eternal and applicable across all time, transcending all distinctions of race, color, gender, and religion.

IV.4.c. Inclusivity and Universal Mission

In John 10:16, Jesus introduces the concept of *alla probatē* - other sheep. Scholars have held various views on the identity of the "other sheep" Jesus refers to.[83] However, the most widely accepted interpretation is that the phrase refers to the Gentiles.[84] Interestingly, Bultmann regards 10:16 as "a secondary gloss" added by the editor, suggesting that ecclesiastical editors were motivated by their "ecclesiastical interest."[85] However, Bultmann's argument is unconvincing, as the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God constitutes a central and consistent theme throughout the NT.[86]

83 E.g., Brown argues that the "other sheep" are Christians, not Gentiles still to be converted. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in the New Testament Times (*New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 90; "Other Sheep not of this Fold: the Johannie Perspective on Christianity Diversity in the Late Frits Century," JBL 97/1 (1978): 5-22.

84 For example, Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 819; D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 388; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 306-307; "Jesus the Good Shepherd who will also Bring Other Sheep (John 10:16): The Old Testament Background of a Familiar Metaphor," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12.1 (2002): 67-96; Basley-Murray, John, 171; Gerald L. Borchert, John 1-11, NAC 25A (USA: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 335; Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 363.

85 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 383

86 For example, Matt 28:19-20, where Jesus commands making disciples of all nations, aligns with the mention of "other sheep" in John 10:16. Similarly, Acts 1:8 and Luke 24:47 emphasize the gospel's

The inclusive scope of Jesus' mission, particularly as it pertains to Gentile inclusion and the formation of a unified community of believers, is a significant theme in Johannine theology.[87] Brown writes, "The question of the Christian mission to the Gentiles was a burning one in the early church …"[88] Similarly, Paul N. Anderson notes, "Jesus' desire to bring them (other sheep) into 'one fold' under 'one shepherd' displays a radically open view of fellowship."[89] This reflects the inclusive nature of Jesus' mission, emphasizing the universal effect of his self-sacrifice and extending beyond Jewish identity to embrace all who believe in him, regardless of ethnicity.

IV.5. Sacred Texture of John 10:1-18

The sacred texture of a text refers to the spiritual and theological significance woven within the text. It delves into how the text conveys divinity, holiness, spirit beings, divine history, human redemption, commitment, religious community, and ethics.[90] However, not all of

reach to the Gentiles, while Rom 1:16 affirms salvation for "everyone who believes." Eph 2:11-22 and Gal 3:28 highlight the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. Reve 5:9 envisions redemption for people from every tribe and language. These passages together support the inclusivity of Jesus' mission and show that John 10:16 is integral to the gospel, not a later addition.

87 John emphasizes the inclusive scope of Jesus' mission and the formation of a unified community of believers. Jesus is introduced as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29), and God's love is extended to "whoever believes" (3:16-17), pointing to a universal offer of salvation. His interaction with the Samaritan woman (4:1-42), especially His words about worshiping "in spirit and truth" (vv. 21–24), breaks ethnic barriers. John 11:51-52 further reveals that Jesus died not only for Israel but to gather "the scattered children of God." Finally, in John 12:32, Jesus declares He will "draw all people" to Himself, highlighting the global and unifying aim of His mission.

88 Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 396.

89 Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 224. Italic is mine.

90 For a more comprehensive understanding, consult my analysis of the sacred texture of John 10:1-18.

these sacred elements necessarily appear in every text.

IV.5.a. Divinity

How does John establish and present the divinity of Jesus in John 10:1-18? John establishes and presents Jesus' divinity through several key elements. John depicts Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" (vv. 11, 14), a title that aligns him with the divine role of God, who is often depicted as the shepherd of Israel in Jewish tradition (e.g., Ps 23). By adopting this title, Jesus claims a unique role in guiding and protecting his people, suggesting his divine authority and mission. Secondly, John emphasizes Jesus' intimate relationship with the Father, stating in 10:15, "just as the Father knows me and I know the Father," which highlights a profound mutual knowledge that implies equality and unity with God, further affirming Jesus' divine nature. Thirdly, in 10:17-18, Jesus asserts his authority over life and death, declaring, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." This control over his life and death, his voluntary sacrifice, and the promise of resurrection underscore his divine power and identity.

IV.5.b. History of Salvation

Another significant sacred texture John presents is the history of salvation. In John 10:15, 17-18, this is portrayed through Jesus' sacrificial act of laying down his life for his sheep. Jesus emphasizes that his death is a voluntary act in obedience to the Father's will, central to God's plan of salvation. As the Good Shepherd, he provides the way for humanity to be reconciled to God. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus opens the door to eternal life,

assuring believers of everlasting life with God, free from the power of sin and death. In 10:10, Jesus states, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," signifying that the life he offers transcends earthly existence. Jesus' statement must be understood within the context of Roman political supremacy.

In the first century CE, Roman emperors were hailed as saviors and benefactors of life, possessing the power to subject, liberate, and execute individuals at their will.[91] This political framework, where emperors held authority over life and death, contrasts with Jesus' promise of a life that transcends earthly power, focusing on spiritual fulfillment and eternal salvation. For the Johannine community,[92] living under Roman rule and facing Jewish persecution, this contrast reminds them that their true hope lies not in earthly rulers but in the eternal life Jesus offers, providing comfort, strength, and purpose beyond their present struggles.

IV.5.c. Jesus' Commitment to the Sheep

Jesus' commitment to the sheep is deeply woven in his words and actions as the Good Shepherd. Jesus emphasizes his profound dedication to his sheep by describing his intimate relationship with them. In 10:14, He states, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep, and my sheep know me," highlighting a bond of trust and mutual understanding that signifies His deep commitment to their well-being. This commitment extends beyond mere care;

91 *Carter, John*, 238-239. For a more detailed analysis, refer to my examination of the social and cultural texture of John 10:1-18.

92 By "Johannine Community," we refer to the group of Christians who faithfully follow and confess Jesus as the Christ. For a detailed study on the Johannine Community, see Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 59-91.

it encompasses the ultimate sacrifice. In 10:11, Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus' willingness to lay down his life demonstrates the highest commitment, i.e., self-sacrificial and unconditional. Unlike a hired hand who would abandon the sheep in times of danger, Jesus remains steadfast, even in the face of death, to ensure the safety and security of his flock. This sacrificial commitment is not only to his immediate followers but extends to all people, as in 10:16, where He says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also." This signifies that Jesus' commitment encompasses all who hear and follow his voice.

V. Shepherding Leadership Principles for the Indian Christian Leaders

Although John 10:1-18 was written in the first century CE, it continues to deliver a timeless message for Christians and the world. In this passage, John employs gnomic language.[93] Johnson Thomaskutty explains, "Gnomic language is universalistic in scope and atemporal in its duration, sense, and meaning contrary to temporal and descriptive linguistic phenomena found either within an oral discourse or in a literary unit."[94] The following outlines shepherding leadership principles modeled by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, for Indian Christian leaders.

93 In John 10:1-18, terms such as sheep (vv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16, 27), shepherd (vv. 2, 11, 14), gate (vv. 7, 9), thief (vv. 1, 8), robber (v. 8), voice (vv. 3, 4, 16, 27), pasture (v. 9), life (vv. 10, 11, 15, 17, 18), and hireling (vv. 12, 13) can be understood as examples of gnomic language. For further information on the gnomic language in John, see Johnson Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John: A Universalistic Reading*, BHR 25 (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020), 3-14.

94 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 3-4.

V.1. Sacrificial Love over Selfish Love

The first principle constitutes sacrificial love. Indian Christian leaders can follow the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, by prioritizing the well-being of others. Sacrificial leadership, as exemplified by Jesus, entails selflessness and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the community. Just as Jesus laid down his life for his sheep, leaders should be willing to place the needs of their followers above their own. This can be demonstrated in various ways, such as providing financial, spiritual, and emotional support, being present during challenging moments, and advocating for the marginalized within the community. As shepherds of God's flock, we must constantly remember that preaching informs the mind; living the message transforms the heart and moves the hand.

V.2. Intimacy over Distance and Ignorance

The second principle calls on Christian leaders to cultivate deep, personal relationships with community members. Today, Christianity remains one of the world's fastest-growing religions, particularly in the Global South, resulting in a significant increase in church congregation numbers. For example, churches like New Life Assembly of God (NLAG) in Chennai have over 35,000 members or even more.[95] While the rapid expansion of Christianity amid persecution is encouraging, it simultaneously presents challenges, notably the increasing relational and pastoral distance between clergy and congregants. For instance, in a conversation with Pastor Chadwick Mohan, who leads the English service at the NLAG in Chennai, he acknowledged that due to the large size of the

95 Michael Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 70.

congregation, he is not personally acquainted with each member.[96] This reflects a significant challenge in large congregations. In light of Jesus' greater commitment to engaging with marginalized individuals, such as the poor, the outcast, and the socially excluded, rather than with the wealthy, high-caste individuals or through temple-centered activities, Indian church leaders should likewise strive to cultivate a deep understanding of their congregants by intentionally investing time to comprehend their needs, struggles, and aspirations.

V.3. Inclusivity over Exclusivity

The third principle calls on Indian church leaders to embrace a vision of unity that surpasses cultural, ethnic, and social divisions. It encourages leaders to actively include marginalized groups and cultivate a sense of belonging for all individuals. Unfortunately, within the context of Christianity in India, practices such as casteism and tribalism persist,[97] and there is often favoritism towards wealthy Christians, with some pastors prioritizing their needs over those of poorer congregants. In response, Christian leaders are urged and challenged to recognize the diversity within the community and value each person's unique contributions. Doing so can create an inclusive environment, reflecting Jesus' mission to bring "other sheep" into one fold. This inclusivity strengthens the community and aligns with the broader Christian call to love and accept all

96 During a Spiritual Life Conference at Hindustan Bible Institute and College, where Pastor Chadwick Mohan was invited as one of the guest speakers, I had an informal conversation with him. He shared that, while he is personally acquainted with some members of his congregation, he does not know the majority of them.

97 Ariana Monique Salazar, "8 Key Findings about Christians in India," *Pew Research Center*, July 12, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india/?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed April 2, 2025.

people, irrespective of gender, color, caste, class, ethnicity, language, social status, or tribal identity.

V.4. Guidance and Protection over Misguidance and Vulnerability

The fourth principle challenges contemporary church leaders in India to provide clear direction and support to community members. Imitating Jesus the Good Shepherd, church leaders are called to act as guides, helping individuals navigate challenges and offering protection from harmful influences. The Good Shepherd leads and ensures the flock's safety, emphasizing the importance of proactive leadership in addressing the community's needs. Church leaders can foster a sense of security, stability, and trust by offering guidance, personal attention, and protection, creating an environment where members feel safe, supported, and thrive, even in the face of persecution.

V.5. Servant Leadership over Dominant Authority

The fifth principle constitutes the well-known concept of servant leadership. Robert K. Greenleaf writes, "The servant-leader is servant first … It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first."[98] Jesus exemplifies servant leadership through his portrayal as the Good Shepherd. Unlike traditional leadership models focused on authority and control, Jesus demonstrates leadership rooted in humility, care, and self-sacrifice. He prioritizes the well-being of others over personal gain or power, guiding, protecting, and caring for the flock. The Good Shepherd's intimate knowledge of each sheep and his willingness to lay down His life for

98 Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 13.

them highlight the selfless nature of true leadership. Jesus' servant leadership model challenges leaders to adopt a posture of humility and service, focusing on the community's needs rather than seeking power or status. Servant leadership involves putting others first, offering guidance, protection, and love without seeking personal recognition.

VI. Conclusion

The socio-rhetorical reading of John 10:1-18 provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Through the exploration of various literary devices, such as metaphor, repetition, contrast, and misunderstanding, the passage reveals profound theological insights into Jesus' identity and mission. The analysis of the text's inner, inter, social, ideological, and sacred textures enriches our understanding of the socio-cultural context in which it was written, illustrating the significance of Jesus' role as a protector and sacrificial leader. By contrasting himself with false leaders, Jesus affirms his unique authority and commitment to the well-being of his flock, inviting the Johannine community and, by extension, all believers into a deeper relationship with him. Furthermore, the inclusive nature of Jesus' mission, as indicated by his reference to "other sheep," underscores the universal call to faith that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries. This passage serves as a theological cornerstone for early Christian communities and continues to resonate with contemporary believers, challenging them to embody the values of sacrificial love, ethical leadership, and communal belonging. Ultimately, John 10:1-18 invites contemporary Indian Christian leaders to reflect on the radical nature of true leadership and the transformative power of Jesus' self-giving love, encouraging a faithful response to his call in their lives.

The Paraclete in the Shadows: A Study of Johannine Pneumatology

by KAILENGOU KIPGEN

Abstract: *This article explores the reason why the Spirit is both significant and less prominent compared to the Father and the Son in the Fourth Gospel. The paper employs a thematic and exegetical approach to analyze the Spirit's titles, symbols, and mission within the Johannine narrative. The article depicts the increasing promise of the Spirit in the Book of Glory, especially in the Farewell Discourse, where the Spirit as the Paraclete takes on roles as teacher, advocate, and comforter. The article concludes that the Fourth Gospel emphasizes the relationship between Father and the Son, while remaining silent about the connection between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Several reasons are proposed: John's presentation of salvation, his opposition to Gnosticism, the thematic progression of pneumatology in Johannine theology, and high Christology as the central theme.*

Keywords: Holy Spirit, Gospel of John, Fourth Gospel, Johannine theology, Paraclete, Pneuma, Farewell Discourse, Book of Signs, Book of Glory, Johannine pneumatology, significant, less prominent

I. Introduction

The concept of the Holy Spirit is one of the intriguing themes in the Fourth Gospel. While the Spirit plays a significant role in Johannine theology, its prominence is less than that of the Father and the Son. In terms of frequency, the Markan Gospel mentions the Holy Spirit five times,[1] Matthean twelve times,[2] and Lukan seventeen

1 Mark 1:8, 12; 3:29; 12:36; 13:11.

2 Matt 1:18, 20; 3:11, 16; 4:1; 10:20; 12:18, 28, 31, 32; 22:43; 28:19.

times.[3] In contrast, there are twenty-five occurrences of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel.4 Statistically, then, the Holy Spirit features more prominently in the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, when viewed within the broader theological framework of John, the Spirit's role remains subordinate to the central emphasis on the Father–Son relationship.

In the Fourth Gospel, John presents the Father and the Son as the protagonists. For instance, Jesus repeatedly describes God as "the Father who sent me" or "him who sent me."[4] The Son's dependence on and obedience to the Father are also portrayed in numerous ways. For instance, Jesus states that he cannot do anything on his own except what he has received from the Father.[5] Jesus also states, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30),[6] but he is silent about his relationship with the Holy Spirit. The following questions are essential: Why does John portray the Father and Son as the protagonists, whereas the Holy Spirit is less significant? Why does Johannine Jesus not say that he and the Spirit are one? How does John portray the Holy Spirit? In exploring these critical questions, the article examines the titles, references, symbols, personhood, and mission associated with the Holy Spirit, as well as the theological and narrative reasons for the Spirit's relative marginalization in the Johannine account.

3 Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26, 27; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12.

4 John 4:34; 5:23; 6:38; 7:28; 8:29; 12:44; 14:24.

5 On Son's dependence upon the Father, see John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 7:16-18; 8:28—29; 10:17—18; 12:49—59; 14:10, 31; 15:10; 17:4; 17:8, 18.

6 John 5:18; 10:33; 14:9—10; 17:5, 10, 21—23.

II. Johannine Pneumatology: A Concise Review of Scholarship

Johannine scholars have historically held various views on the Fourth Gospel's depiction of the Holy Spirit. In his discussion of the Holy Spirit in John, Gary M. Burge argues that the Fourth Gospel maintains an intimate unity between Jesus and the Spirit, which is explicitly evident in Jesus' glorification. Additionally, he considers that "to some degree, pneumatology is absorbed or subsumed into the Christology of the Gospel."[7] Burge rightly observed the intimacy between Jesus and the Spirit and that pneumatology in John is subsumed under Christology; however, he fails to address the absence of ontological equality between the Son and Spirit as the Father-Son relationship, nor does he explain why pneumatology is subsumed in Christology. In his discussion of the Holy Spirit, Paul A. Rainbow argues that the Spirit-Son relationship is like that of the Father-Son relationship.[8] According to Rainbow, just as the Son functions only in alignment with the Father, the Spirit also speaks and does what He hears, not on His authority (John 16:13).[9] In that way, he sees a shared divine unity. While Rainbow rightly pointed out the functional equality, ontological equality between the Spirit-Son is not focused on, as in the Father-Son. D. Moody Smith acknowledges the inevitable role of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel, where he views the Spirit as Jesus' presence to the disciples.[10] While Smith depicts the Spirit as Jesus' successor, he leaves the

7 Gary M. Burge, "The Gospel of John," in Trevor J. Burke and Keith Warrington, eds., *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit* (London: SPCK, 2014), 243.

8 Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, The Epistles, and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 239-48.

9 Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 247.

10 D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139-44.

ontological gap unaddressed. Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger observe a thematic progression in the presentation of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel: no reference to the Spirit in the Prologue, a handful of passages in the Book of Signs, and a drastic increase in the Book of Glory.[11] Johnson Thomaskutty argues that John attempts to present a distinctive emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit, which is grounded in a missional focus.[12] He also suggests that there is a narrative progression in John's presentation of the Holy Spirit within the framework of the Fourth Gospel.[13] Allison, Köstenberger, and Thomaskutty rightly notice the narrative progression of John's pneumatology; however, they do not address whether this progression is intentional or a literary device. Although these Johannine scholars have made significant contributions to the understanding of the role of the Spirit in the Fourth Gospel, they have not answered the question, "Why is the Spirit both significant and comparatively less prominent than the Father and the Son?"

III. The Titles of the Holy Spirit

The Fourth Gospel contains twenty-five passages that mention the Spirit.[14] From twenty-five passages, the Fourth Gospel attributes three titles to the Holy Spirit: Spirit, Spirit of Truth, and Paraclete.

11 Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, eds., David S. Dockery, Nathan A. Finn, and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 84-91.

12 Johnson Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John: A Universalistic Reading* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020), 97.

13 Thomaskutty, *Universalistic Reading of John*, 109.

14 John 1:32, 33 [x2]; 3:5, 6, 8 [x2], 34; 4:23, 24; 6:63 [x2]; 7:39 [x2]; 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:7—11, 12—15; 20:22.

III.1 Spirit *(pneuma)*

One of the titles employed for the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel is *pneuma* (Spirit, sometimes Holy Spirit; John 1:33; 7:39; 14:26; 20:22). This term frequently occurs throughout the four gospels, but the Synoptics often use it to portray demonic powers aligned against Jesus (Luke 9:39).[15] Or, the term sometimes refers to the life of a person (Luke 8:55).[16] However, John never uses *pneuma* to refer to a demon, nor does he record a single exorcism in which the power of the Spirit in Jesus conquers the power of Satan as it is described in Matt 12:28.[17] Garry M. Burge argues that John has integrated the Spirit into his Christology in striking ways developed beyond the Synoptic portraits.[18] In the Fourth Gospel, the presentation of the Holy Spirit as *pneuma* serves both theological and literary significance. As *pneuma*, the Holy Spirit is introduced early with John's baptism (John 1:32—33), where He sets the stage for Jesus' ministry. Additionally, *pneuma* is portrayed as the agent of regeneration (John 3:6—8), revelation (John 14:26; 16:13), and empowerment (John 20:22) for believers. Although the Spirit's role remains subordinate to the central emphasis on the Father–Son relationship in the broader Johannine theological framework, the Spirit shares divine attributes, such as life-giving, truth-revealing, and world-convicting. The term *pneuma* does not simply name, but it indicates a specific role and function of the Holy Spirit.[19] Similarly,

15 Matt 8:16; Mark 1:23—27; 3:11; 9:17; Luke 4:33—36; 6:18; 9:39—42.

16 Burge, "The Gospel of John," 232; see also Luke 23:46; Matt 27:50; Mark 2:8; 8:12; 14:38; Luke 1:47, 80.

17 Burge, "The Gospel of John," 232.

18 Burge, "The Gospel of John," 232.

19 Hermann Kleinknecht, "πνεῦμα," in Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Volume VI: Π-P), trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 332-39 (henceforth *TDNT*).

Craig R. Koester observes that Spirit in the Fourth Gospel is more emphasized in terms of function than personal naming.[20] This is explicit in the role of the Holy Spirit, where *pneuma* functions as life-giving, truth-revealing, and world-converting.

III.2 Spirit of Truth

The Holy Spirit is also called the "Spirit of truth" (John 15:26; 16:13). The term "truth" is also a characteristic Jesus uses to describe Himself. While *'to pneuma tēs alētheias'* (the Spirit of truth) could be understood as a genitive of source, the more fitting interpretation within this passage is a descriptive genitive. If it were a genitive of source, it would imply that the Holy Spirit is the origin of the truth. However, in John 15:26 and 16:13, the Spirit is a 'sent one' and does not speak on His own authority. This context rules out the genitive of source. According to Daniel B. Wallace, "the descriptive genitive describes the head noun in a loose manner."[21] The genitive *tēs alētheias* here describes the head noun, to pneuma. In other words, *tēs alētheias* modifies to *pneuma*. Therefore, this title highlights the function and character of the Holy Spirit as the one who embodies and conveys truth. The title indicates the characteristic of the Holy Spirit as a teacher.[22] G. R. Beasley-Murray says that the task of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth in bearing witness to Jesus describes "his acting as a prosecuting attorney or as one giving evidence against the world."[23] Köstenberger also argues

20 Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 140.

21 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 79.

22 Elmer L. Towns, *The Names of the Holy Spirit* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 63.

23 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 74.

that the Spirit of Truth is involved in five aspects in the Fourth Gospel: "he accurately represents the truth regarding Jesus; he is the eschatological gift of God; he imparts true knowledge of God; he is operative in both worship and sanctification, and points people to the person of Jesus."[24] These functions focus on the trustworthiness of the witnesses of the Spirit about Jesus.

The "spirit of truth" language was also common in Jewish literature. The Qumran community believed that God created two spirits: "spirits of truth and deceit" (1QS 3:18). However, James H. Charlesworth states that the "spirit of truth" in the Qumran literature and "Spirit of truth" in John are similar only in language, not in thought.[25] While these parallels are part of an ethical dualism in Second Temple literature, John's Gospel does not feature a "spirit of error" parallel to the Spirit of truth.[26] Instead, the Spirit of truth in John's Gospel is the "other helping presence"[27] who will come in place of Jesus.

III.3 *Paraclete*

The name *"Paraclete"* for the Holy Spirit appears only four times in the Fourth Gospel.[28] The term *'paraclete'* is a Greek transliteration of paraklētos. It is not used outside of the Johannine corpus in the New Testament. However, this concept was not foreign to the Jewish and Greco-Roman texts. In the fourth century BCE, secular

24 Köstenberger, A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters, 398.

25 James H. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS iii, 13-iv, 26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Fourth Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 15 (1969), 389-418.

26 Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 398.

27 Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 398.

28 See John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7.

Greek, the term *paraklētos* was used in the sense of "a person called in to help, summoned to give assistance,"[29] connotating the meaning of helper in court. This term does not occur in the LXX, but Job 16:2 uses *paraklētoi*, meaning comforters. In Job 16:2, it refers to Job's companions. The Hebrew term *peraqlit* is a loanword from Greek *paraklētos*, and the rabbinic Jewish literature often used in the sense of advocate.[30] In the writings of Philo, this term is understood as advocate in several ways: first, advocate in the strict legal sense of those who speak before rulers on behalf of the accused (Philo, Flacc., 13, 151, 181); and second, in the religious sense, it is used of advocates for sinners before God (Philo, Vit. Mos., 2.134). The history of the term *paraklētos* in both known Jewish and Greco-Roman connotes the picture of a legal advisor or helper, or advocate in the court. While the Fourth Gospel implies this meaning in its presentation of the Holy Spirit as *paraklētos,* it is not limited to this meaning.

The farewell speech of Jesus to his disciples in John 13—17 uses this imagery to convey the function and activity of the Spirit.[31] It can be translated as advocate, helper, and comforter. The KJV translates the word as comforter, NASB helper, and NIV advocate. In light of 1 John 2:1, the translation "advocate" is suitable, as Jesus intercedes for the believers to the Father as an Advocate. However, in the Fourth Gospel, the function of the paraklētos is not confined to advocacy.[32] For instance, in John 14, the Holy Spirit is the teacher

29 Behm, "παράκλητος," in *TDNT*, 5:801.

30 Behm, "παράκλητος," in *TDNT,* 5:802.

31 John T. Carroll, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 94.

32 Behm states that no single word can provide adequate rendering of παράκλητος in the Fourth Gospel, see Behm, "παράκλητος," in *TDNT*, 5:800-814. For further reference of παράκλητος, see Behm, "παράκλητος," in *TDNT,* 5:800-814.

who will teach the disciples (John 14:26). In John 15, *paraklētos* functions as the witness. Subsequently, in John 16, the *paraklētos* is introduced while the disciples are in deep sorrow (because of the future persecution and the departure of Jesus). At this moment, the disciples needed a comforter to comfort them (John 16:5-15).[33] Thus, unlike 1 John 2:1, *paraklētos* in the Fourth Gospel does not have a fixed meaning. Instead, it conveys all meanings, such as advocate, helper, and comforter.[34] As *paraklētos,* John T. Carroll states,

> The Spirit continues the work of Jesus after his departure, revealing the character and life-imparting activity of God and tutoring Jesus's followers to remember, interpret, and communicate his words and acts-an abiding, consoling presence with the disciples and a vigorous witness to the truth before an often-hostile world.[35]

Carroll explains that the Spirit as the Paraclete is not merely a replacement for Jesus, but an extension of Jesus' mission, both in continuity and in presence. The Paraclete takes diverse functions: advocate, comforter, helper, teacher, and witness. In portraying the role of the Paraclete, the Spirit is framed more as divine delegate than equal collaborator (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13—14). In that sense, while the ontological equality of Father-Son is emphasized,

33 Of course, a good number of scholars do not uphold the translation "comforter." See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, vol.1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 954. Behm, "παράκλητος," in *TDNT*, 5:805. G. Braumann, "παράκλητος," in *NIDNTT*, 1:91.

34 Unlike this view, Keener holds the Paraclete of the Fourth Gospel in the forensic sense. See, Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 961.

35 Carroll, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament,* 94.

the Fourth Gospel is silent about the ontological equality of the Son-Spirit relationship; instead, functional continuity of Jesus' mission passed on to the Spirit is emphasized.

IV. The References to the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel

The Fourth Gospel does not mention the Holy Spirit in the Prologue (John 1:1—18). The Spirit is referenced in the Book of Signs (John 1:19—12:50) and in the Book of Glory (John 13:1—20:31). Later, the role of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Glory becomes more prominent than in the Book of Signs, as the Spirit's role increases significantly in both number and importance in the disciples' missions after Jesus' departure and return to God the Father. In the Book of Signs, the Holy Spirit appears during the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (John 1:32); in Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus during the Cana cycle (John 3:3—5); and during the festival cycle, references to the Holy Spirit are found in John 6:63 and 7:38—39, where the Holy Spirit is described as the life-giving Spirit. In the Book of Glory, references to the Spirit are notable in the farewell discourse and the scene where Jesus commissions his disciples. In the farewell discourse, several references to the Holy Spirit are made (John 14:15—26), in which Jesus predicts the giving of the Spirit after his exaltation (John 15:26; 16:7—11, 12—15). The final mention of the Spirit occurs in Jesus' commissioning statement, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Throughout the Fourth Gospel, it is noticed that the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in the Prologue; there is a progressive development on His presence in the Book of Signs; and His role reaches its climax in the Book of Glory, with the departure of Jesus. Despite the emergence of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Signs and His centrality in the Book of Glory, none of the crucial references (John 1:32; 3:5—8; 4:24; 14—16) present the Spirit in mutual relationship with the Son.

V. The Symbols of the Holy Spirit

In the Fourth Gospel, various symbols represent the Holy Spirit. These symbols describe the works and the characteristics of the Holy Spirit. There are about three explicit symbols attributed to the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel.

V.1 Dove

At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended as a dove (John 1:32).[36] Each of the four gospels emphasizes the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove "out of heaven," which stresses that the Holy Spirit has come from the presence of God in heaven. However, Cerinthus taught that after baptism, Christ descended upon Jesus in the shape of a dove from the Authority that is above all things. However, in the end, Christ flew off from Jesus.[37] Cerinthus' teaching is objectionable because explicit evidence in the Fourth Gospel distinguishes the Holy Spirit and Jesus. For instance, in John 15:1—17, Jesus' monologue about His relationship with the disciples and the Father is emphasized. Verses 26 and the following talk about the Holy Spirit.

Paul Enns argues that the dove portrayed the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus at the beginning of His public ministry, thereby emphasizing the power of the Holy Spirit upon Christ.[38] Enns further argues that the dove is a symbol of purity and a representation of peace.[39] While Enns' argument is intriguing, he tends to minimize the

36 See also in the Synoptic Gospels, Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22.

37 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 1.26.1, accessible online at https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

38 Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 169-70.

39 Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology,* 170.

dove imagery without engaging with the rich cultural backgrounds. He overlooks the Jewish and Greco-Roman influence of the dove imagery. Keener, on the other hand, rejects the modern readers' perspective on the dove as a symbol of peace in the context of the Fourth Gospel.[40] He argues that in early Jewish texts, a dove was most often used as a symbol of Israel and only rarely for the Holy Spirit. There is no reason to think of Israel symbolically descending on Jesus at his baptism. In this context, Jesus is not a representative of Israel.[41] Keener reduces the theological depth of dove imagery by emphasizing the dove as a public affirmation sign that authenticates Jesus' identity and mission. In Johannine theology, metaphors are often presented with multiple layers of meaning. In that sense, Keener reduces the symbolic richness of the dove imagery.

To better understand the Johannine presentation of the dove imagery, one needs to explore it in the light of the Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the dove appears as a multi-layered symbol, representing purity in sacrificial rites (Lev 1:14; 5:7), gentleness, and hope in the context of the Noahic narrative (Gen 8:8—12). According to the rabbinic interpretation, the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Gen 1:2 is interpreted as a dove hovering over her young (Gen. Rab. 2:4), implying that the dove is a metaphor of the Spirit. In the Greco-Roman world, the dove was a bird associated with the gods. It was linked to Aphrodite (Greek) or Venus (Roman), the goddess of love and fertility, representing love, beauty, and feminine charm.[42] The Fourth Gospel adopts and redefines its meaning, not as a symbol of

40 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 459.

41 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 460.

42 See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 152–53; Joan E. Taylor, *What Did Jesus Look Like?* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 67.

romantic love or national identity, but as a visible sign of the descent and abiding presence of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus (John 1:32—33). In the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit does not descend and leave. However, it remains on Jesus, signifying the permanent indwelling, focusing on Jesus' unique role as the bearer and dispenser of the Spirit. Thus, the Fourth Gospel transforms the widely rich cultural symbol into a theologically rich affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah and His mission anointed by the Spirit.

V.2 Water

Another symbol used to portray the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel is water. John 3:5 reads, "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (author's translation). In this context, Jesus is having a dialogue with Nicodemus. Scholars have sundry views on the phrase *hydatos kai* (water and). For instance, Köstenberger argues that this passage does not refer to the person of the Holy Spirit, but rather to the spiritual nature of the birth required for entrance into God's kingdom.[43] Raymond E. Brown contends that 'water' is a reference to Christian baptism.[44] This view can be seen as an anachronistic reading, as the Christian baptism was not yet instituted at this point in the Gospel narrative. Besides, Rudolf Bultmann suggests that the words 'water and' *(hydatos kai)* were not a part of the original text, and that the ecclesiastical editor later added them.[45]

43 Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 94.

44 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 139-41.

45 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans., G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 138-39.

However, there is no textual support for the omission of hydatos kai. D. A. Carson sees it as a symbol of purification, echoing Ezek 36:25—27.[46] While Köstenberger and Carson view hydatos kai as the echo of Ezek 36:25—27, the earlier view it as a spiritual birth, and the latter view it as the Spirit as agent. The discussion in John 3 is the regeneration of the Holy Spirit; thus, Carson's view is more likely here. From the grammatical point of view, "since both nouns are anarthrous and are governed by a single preposition,"[47] likely, *kai* functions here epexegetically, Spirit is the explanation of what water is, hence "water, i.e., the Spirit."[48] John's explicit explanation of water as the Spirit in John 7:39 is in coherence with John 3:5. The symbol of the Holy Spirit as water signifies eternal life (John 7:38—39) and a new heart, of which the Holy Spirit is the agent. John 4:10—14 and 7:37—39 support the reading of 'water and the Spirit' as a unified metaphor of the Holy Spirit's regenerative work.

V.3 Wind

The term 'wind' is the most natural representation of the Holy Spirit since *pneuma* can be translated as wind and Spirit. In explaining the concept of new birth to Nicodemus, Jesus compared the birth by the Holy Spirit to the wind (John 3:8). Barrett argues that translations such as "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes and whither it goes; or, the Spirit breathes where he wills and you hear his voice, but you do not know" are wrong.[49] The reason for his argument is that the point of

46 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 195.

47 Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 166.

48 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 550.

49 Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John,* 176.

John's Greek is that it means both. He, thus, translates, "The Spirit, like the wind, is beyond both the control and the comprehension of man. It breathes into this world from another."[50] Thus the symbol of the Holy Spirit as wind signifies that "men cannot in themselves fathom the operation of the Spirit, but the Spirit himself can bring them within the sphere of his activity and impart his properties to them."[51] In the Jewish understanding, the term *rûaḥ* can mean wind, breath, or spirit, often portrayed as God's active, life-giving, and prophetic presence (Gen 1:2; 2:7; Ezek 37). In the Greco-Roman thought, the wind was a cosmic, relational, and impersonal force, not a person.[52] Unlike the Greco-Roman concept, the Fourth Gospel redefines wind as the personal and sovereign Spirit who regenerates and indwells the believers.

Each of the three metaphors demonstrated the significance of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel avoids giving the Spirit the narrative dominance that the Father and the Son receive.

VI. The Person of the Holy Spirit

According to the Fourth Gospel, the Holy Spirit is portrayed is a unique individual who actively participates in the regeneration, instruction, and direction of believers rather than merely as an impersonal force or divine influence. Building on the rich metaphoric representations of the Holy Spirit, it becomes necessary to explore the personality of the Holy Spirit within the Johannine theological framework.

50 Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 176.

51 Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 176.

52 Kleinknecht, "πνεῦμα," in *TDNT*, 6:332-39.

VI.1 *Paraklētos*

The term *paraklēto*s is not only a title but also reflects the personality of the Holy Spirit. The term is applied to the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). In John 14:16, Jesus says that He will pray to His Father, and His Father will give another Paraclete. The adjective "another" *(allos)* is used here, which means "another of the same kind."[53] Whereas *heteros* implies another of a different kind. 1 John 2:1 also states that Jesus is described as *paraklētos*. Jesus, the *paraklētos,* was personally experienced by the Johannine Community.[54] Given Jesus' statement, linking the Spirit's coming with Jesus' departure means that the Holy Spirit replaces Jesus and will carry the same role.[55] The similarity in their function indicates that the Holy Spirit, like Jesus, is a person. Elsewhere, John employs *allos* to indicate 'another of the same kind.' For instance, John 18:16 reads, "But Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple *[allos mathētēs]*, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in" (NASB). *Allos mathētēs* here refers to a disciple who is equal in kind, rather than belonging to a different category. Thus, the use of allos concerning *paraklētos* is intentional, affirming the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

VI.2 The Spirit glorifies the Son, affirming His personhood within the Trinitarian mission

In the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit's personhood vibrantly arises through His relational and functional continuity with the Son. Just

53 Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 357–61.

54 Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 963.

55 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1009.

as Jesus often claims that He is doing the will of the Father and that His mission is to glorify the Father by doing His will (John 5:19; 6:38; 17:4), Jesus likewise announces that the Spirit will glorify Him (John 16:14). In other words, as the Son, a member of the Trinity, serves the Father, another member of the Trinity, the Spirit, a member of the Trinity, also serves the Son, another member of the Trinity. Here, the function of the Spirit is to glorify the Son.[56] This mutual glorification within the Godhead reflects Trinitarian harmony and also affirms the personhood of the Spirit. Subsequently, the paraclete passages (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13—15) depict that the Spirit assumes diverse roles which were previously taken up by Jesus: teaching, guiding, comforting, bearing witness, and advocating for the believers. In 1 John 2:1, Jesus is depicted as the Paraclete before the Father; in the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit is depicted as the Paraclete to the community. As much as Jesus the Paraclete is a person, the Spirit, as *allos paraklētos* (another of the same kind), is a person. While mutual glorification is vivid in the Godhead, the Son does not glorify the Spirit.

VIII. The Missions of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel

With regards to the missions of the Holy Spirit, Thomaskutty states, "The Fourth Gospel foregrounds the Holy Spirit as a gnomic and divine force that leads people to missions, inspires them for ministry, and teaches them the realities of the world from above."[57] There are numerous instances of the missions of the Holy Spirit recorded in the Fourth Gospel, and this paper categorizes them into three categories.

56 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1009.

57 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 97.

VII.1 The Mission of the Holy Spirit to Jesus

The Fourth Gospel introduces the role and function of the Holy Spirit in relation to the mission and ministry of Jesus. In John 1:32—35, John the Baptist informs his disciples concerning the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus.[58] As Jesus is introduced to the world, the people are informed about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon him as the one who initiates the mission of God. For this reason, M. M. B. Turner elucidates that the Fourth Gospel underscores the mission of Jesus in alliance with the works of the Holy Spirit.[59] Brown states that Jesus' coming with total and permanent possession of the Holy Spirit enables him to fulfill the Messianic role among the people.[60] With regards to the mission of the Spirit to Jesus, Thomaskutty rightly says, "Jesus's Spirit-endowment is manifested through his various activities within the gospel. His interlocutors understand him as the Lamb of God and the Son of God (1:29, 34, 49), the Messiah (1:41), the 'one Moses wrote about' (1:45), and the King of Israel (1:49)."[61] John 6:63 asserts that the Spirit enables Jesus' words and deeds.

VII.2 The Mission of the Spirit to the Disciples and Believers

There is a shift of emphasis on the mission of the Holy Spirit between the public ministry of Jesus narrated in John 1:19—12:50 and the personal ministry among the disciples narrated in John 13:1—17:26.[62] While the former emphasizes the bequest of the Spirit in

58 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 98.

59 M. M. B. Turner "Holy Spirit," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* eds., Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 347-51.

60 Brown, *The Gospel according to John, i-xi,* 62-68.

61 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 99.

62 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John,* 102.

Jesus' involvement in mission, the latter emphasizes the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.[63] Scholars argue that John 7:37—39 is the foreground of the coming of the Holy Spirit with the future mission of the disciples.[64] In that sense, in the Book of Glory, the coming of the Holy Spirit is associated with Jesus' glorification. Although the Holy Spirit is present in the Book of Signs (John 1:19—12:50), the coming of the Holy Spirit is more concrete in the Book of Glory (John 13:1—20:31). The following considers the works of the Holy Spirit.

VII.2.a Regeneration

Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus is well known for the Johannine soteriological saying, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Donald Guthrie states that this statement has great importance for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.[65] Here, Jesus talks about birth by the Spirit, the regeneration. The words of Jesus in this dialogue implied something so radical that it cannot be attained by human effort.[66] In the context, regeneration of the Spirit is in view. With regards to the phrase 'born of water and the Spirit,' *kai* (and) functions epexegetically, Spirit is the explanation of what water is, hence "water, i.e., the Spirit."[67] Thus, regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit.

63 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John,* 102.

64 See also Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 102. G. L. Borchert, *John* 1-11, NAC 25A (Nashville: B & H Publishers, 2002), 289-91.

65 Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), 527.

66 Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 585-86.

67 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 550. For the discussion of the major scholarly views of the phrase 'born of water and the Spirit,' see the section: "The Symbols of the Holy Spirit-Water."

VII.2.b Permanent Indwelling

The new work of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Glory involves a permanent indwelling within God's people.[68] Jesus says, "…I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you" (John 14:16—17, NASB). Key Greek phrases such as *meth' hymōn* (with you; v.16), *par' hymin* (with you; v.17), and *en hymin* (in you; v.17) deserve attention. When *meta* is used with genitive, it can refer to an association, a spatial relation, or manner.[69] In verse 16, *meth' hymōn* best fits the category of association, where the Spirit is no more a visitor, but a permanent companion of the believers. Both *par' hymin* and *en hymin* function as dative of association. Para often indicates nearness/support, connoting that the Spirit is personally present with believers. Subsequently, *meta* often portrays close personal relationships, indicating intimate indwelling of the Spirit in the lives of the believers.[70]

VII.2.c Revelatory Work

Another mission of the Holy Spirit to the disciples (and the believers) is the mission of revelation. As the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 16:13), the Spirit will bear witness to the truth and lead people into the more significant revelation of redemptive truth.[71] Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead his disciples into all the truth (John 16:13), which is the complete revelation of the mind of

68 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament,* 332.

69 Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 377.

70 Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics,* 372.

71 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 332.

God in redemption.[72] Not only will the Spirit teach the disciples, but he will also remind them of all that Jesus has said to them (John 14:26).[73] Regarding this revelatory work, George Eldon Ladd states, "Jesus was conscious that his instruction was incomplete because the disciples were not able to receive all that he could impart to them."[74] Ladd's argument has textual support from John 16:12—13; however, this does not mean that Jesus' instruction was incomplete. It suggests that His teaching was complete in substance, but not fully comprehended until the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not reveal new revelation today, but illuminates Jesus' teaching.

VII.2.d Empowering the Disciples

Not only does the Spirit indwell and reveal to the disciples, but the Spirit will also empower the disciples. In John 16:7, Jesus says, "…I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you." Ladd argues that this passage should be understood as "Jesus's disciples are to perform greater works than he (Jesus) did,"[75] which he has linked with John 14:12. The greater works in view here are the expansion of the mission beyond borders, rather than more miraculous works.

VII.2.e Teaching

Teaching is another essential mission of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and believers (John 14:26). As a teacher, the Holy Spirit will

72 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament,* 332.

73 Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 468.

74 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 332.

75 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament,* 333.

teach them all that Jesus had spoken.[76] Keener states, "the Spirit's teaching is neither wholly innovative nor simply repetitive, but explanatory and applicational, like the exposition of Jewish sages."[77] In this verse, John uses the Greek word *didaskein.* Elsewhere, he also used *hodēgein,* which means to guide or to instruct (John 16:13). In this context, *hodēgein* is related to the *didaskein* of 14:26, "to instruct," or "to teach."[78] Elsewhere, *hodēgein* is also used to indicate to guide or instruct. For instance, Jesus calls the religious teachers of his day as *hodēgoí typhlōn* (blind guides; Matt 15:14). The idea is that the mission of the Holy Spirit as a teacher is not only to teach but also to instruct believers. The Spirit's role is no less active now than then; thus, the Holy Spirit still teaches and instructs contemporary believers based on Christ's teachings.

VII.3 The Mission of the Spirit to the World

Although John is antagonistic towards the world, the Johannine Holy Spirit does have a mission with the world (John 16:8—11). The Spirit's mission towards the world is to convince the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment.[79] The context in view is the hostile and unbelieving system that stands in opposition to Jesus. Jey. J. Kanagaraj comments that the work of the Paraclete concerning the world is described in general terms (v.8) and then in particular terms (vv. 9—11).[80] Schreiner deliberates that "the sin of the world centers on the failure to believe in Jesus,"[81] "the

76 Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 978.

77 Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 978.

78 Michaelis, "ὁδηγέω," in *TDNT*, 5:101.

79 Schreiner, *New Testament Theology,* 469.

80 Jey J. Kanagaraj, The Gospel of John, A Commentary, vol.2 (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2017), 106.

81 Schreiner, *New Testament Theology,* 469.

Spirit will convince them that Jesus is the righteous one of God, and as a consequence, the world is unrighteous."[82] Furthermore, about judgment, Bultmann argues for the divine, eschatological judgment.[83] The three missions of the Holy Spirit in the world are all interpreted Christologically.

VIII. The Overlooked Role of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel

The Holy Spirit occupies both a prominent and seemingly limited role in the Fourth Gospel. The role of the Holy Spirit is less significant than that of the Father and the Son. John presents the Father and the Son as the protagonists. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Jesus repeatedly describes God as "the Father who sent me" or "him who sent me (John 4:34; 5:23; 6:38; 7:28; 8:29; 12:44; 14:24).[84] Indeed, Son's dependence on and obedience to the Father are portrayed in numerous ways. Moreover, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), but he is silent about his relationship with the Holy Spirit. The following arguments outline why the Holy Spirit appears to hold a less prominent role than the Father and the Son in the Fourth Gospel.

VIII.1 The Salvific Presentation

The Fourth Gospel articulates a salvific presentation of the role of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this regard, Köstenberger and Swain comment, "the relationships between the Father, the

82 Schreiner, *New Testament Theology,* 470.

83 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 566.

84 Christopher Cowan, "The Father and Son in the Fourth Gospel: Johannine Subordination Revisited," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49/1 (March 2006): 117.

Son, and the Spirit are presented in John's Gospel within a clearly defined relational as well as the salvation-historical framework."[85] In relational terms, the Father sends the Son, not otherwise. Likewise, the Father and the Son send the Spirit rather than vice versa.[86] In other words, the Triune God is actively participating in the salvific plan. For instance, it is the Father who initiates salvation by sending the Son (John 3:16), the Son accomplishes it through His mission (John 17:4; 19:30), and the Spirit continues this work (John 14:26; 16:8—11).[87] This 'triadic schema' reveals a narrative asymmetry, where the Holy Spirit—though essential—is portrayed as less prominent compared to the Father and the Son.

VIII.2 John's Antagonism to Gnostic Teachings

Johannine scholars have considered that part of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel is a polemic against Gnosticism.[88] Keener states that Gnostics probably found the gospel helpful partly because it provided them a sense of continuity with the apostolic past.[89] They used many of their ideas with the gospel. The church father, Irenaeus, battling Gnostics, used the Fourth Gospel. Irenaeus argued that John wrote the Fourth Gospel as a polemic against them (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.11.1). In support of this view, scholars such as W.G. Kümmel and Hans Conzelmann state that the

85 Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit*, 105.

86 Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit,* 105. In the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit's eternal procession is from the Father (John 15:26); however, the sending of the Spirit in mission is by both the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7).

87 Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit,* 155.

88 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 161; Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament,* trans., John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 331; Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 45–78.

89 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 161.

real religion and philosophy behind John is Gnosticism.[90] Taking these views as the foreground, the Gnostic influence of dualism is also evident in the Fourth Gospel. Of course, in several instances, the Fourth Gospel criticizes the flesh in favor of the Spirit (John 3:6; 4:20—24).[91] Unlike Gnostic dualism, which portrays the material world as evil and the spirit as good, the Fourth Gospel does not view material reality as inherently corrupt. The Johannine prologue, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us…" (John 1:14; NASB) is the most explicit affirmation of material goodness in the Gospel. The logos did not merely appear in human form, but became flesh. Besides, in John's portrayals of the signs of Jesus, physical elements such as water and wine (John 2:1—11), mud and saliva (John 9:1—7), bread and fish (John 6:1—14), and corpse and tomb (John 11:1—44) are designed to reveal the identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Thus, in presenting the Gospel against Gnosticism, John proves that matter is not evil. Hence, in so doing, it is most likely that he gives less significance to the Holy Spirit.

VIII.3 Thematic Progression of the Holy Spirit within the Fourth Gospel

The Johannine pneumatology reflects a thematic progression within the Fourth Gospel.[92] In the Book of Signs (John 1:19—12:50), the

90 Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament, 331. Keener, The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 159-60.

91 Urban C. Von Wahlde, *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century,* Library of New Testament Studies, ed., Chris Keith (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 43.

92 By thematic progression, the author does not deny the widely accepted date for the composition of the Fourth Gospel between 90 and 100 CE. Nor should it be understood as the Johannine pneumatology in the making; rather, it should be understood in the sense of expansion of the theme. For instance, there is no reference of the Holy Spirit in the Prologue; in the Book of Signs, the Spirit is less prominent, where He is mentioned chiefly symbolically (eg., dove, water, wind); however, in

Spirit's ministry is confined to the baptism of Jesus and his public ministry. Whereas, in the Book of Glory (John 13:1—20:31), the emphasis is laid on the promise of the coming of the Spirit upon the disciples.[93] In the farewell discourse, the Spirit, whose main responsibility is to get the disciples ready for the time after Christ's departure and return to the Father, takes center stage.[94] The Holy Spirit's role in the Book of Signs is less significant than in the Book of Glory. For instance, the Spirit was not promised in the earlier, but it was promised in the latter. In the Book of Glory, the role of the Spirit is increased dramatically in both number and prominence in the disciples' mission after Jesus's departure and return to God the Father.[95] The shift in emphasis and role is evident throughout the gospel. This progression is an intentional authorial design where the author intentionally delays clarity about the Spirit for rhetorical and theological emphasis. On the other hand, Christology is developed even at the outset of the Gospel (John 1:1—18). Thus, this gradual progression of the Spirit directly speaks to why the Holy Spirit appears less prominent than the Father and the Son.

VIII.4 John's Core Thesis: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God

Christology is the central focus of the Fourth Gospel. It is testified by the prologue (John 1:1—18) and summary thesis statement (John 20:30—31).[96] Keener calls John's Christology the complete Christology.[97] John 20:30—31 reads, "Many other signs, therefore,

the Book of Glory, the Spirit becomes prominent as Jesus introduces the coming of the *paraklētos*.

93 Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 102.

94 Köstenberger and Swain, Father, Son and Spirit, 95.

95 Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters,* 393.

96 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 281.

97 Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 281.

Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (NASB). Johannine scholars believe this statement to be the core of John's thesis.[98] Thus, Christology as the core thesis of the gospel precedes pneumatology.

IX. Conclusion

The concept of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel is intriguing. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, the reference to the Holy Spirit is more prominent in the Fourth Gospel. On the other hand, the Fourth Gospel presents the Father and the Son as the protagonists, paying much more attention to them and making the Holy Spirit's role in the triune relationship is less significant. Several titles, such as "Spirit," "Spirit of Truth," and "Paraclete," are attributed to the Holy Spirit, and each title describes the character of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, the reference to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Glory is more significant than in the Book of Signs. The Fourth Gospel also uses symbols like a dove, water, and wind, describing their characteristics. Subsequently, the Fourth Gospel presents the personality of the Holy Spirit: "another paraclete" and the one who will glorify Jesus. The Fourth Gospel is unique in its pneumatology because it presents the mission of the Spirit in three areas: to Jesus, to believers, and to the world.

Having explored the Fourth Gospel's conception of the Holy Spirit, the following arguments are considered as to why John gives less significance to the Holy Spirit than to the Father and the

98 See also Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 281.

Son in their relationship. First, John's soteriology focuses on the Father and Son. Second, John's antagonism to Gnosticism makes him wary of giving too much significance to the Holy Spirit. Third, John wants to provide a thematic progression of pneumatology. Finally, the focal point of the Fourth Gospel's thesis is the messianic presentation of Jesus: "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). The Fourth Gospel's subtle depiction of the Holy Spirit—slowly revealed, closely linked to Jesus's exaltation, and rich in function as the Spirit of Truth, Paraclete, and divine witness—shows that what appears to be insignificance is narrative development rather than theological marginalization. The apparent insignificance of the Spirit in the Johannine theology signifies a profound expression of divine self-effacement and harmony within the Trinity. Thus, Johannine pneumatology should not be considered as presenting a subordination or neglect of the Spirit, but rather as portraying the Spirit as a dynamic personal presence that constantly points to Christ, shapes the community, and grounds believers in truth and mission.

An Alternative Reading of the Clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι ("to be well-pleasing to him") in 2 Corinthians 5:9

by **HRUAIKIMA REANG**

Abstract: *2 Corinthians 5:9 presents a syntactical challenge regarding the function of the clause* εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι *"to be well-pleasing to him." This clause may be interpreted as expressing purpose, result, or cause. The classification significantly influences the interpretation: if taken as a purpose clause, it suggests that Paul's ambition is to please the Lord; as a resultative clause, it implies that pleasing the Lord is the outcome of his ambition; and as a causal clause, it indicates that his ambition stems from already being pleasing or acceptable to the Lord. These interpretive options shape the theological implications of Paul's statement, particularly in relation to whether believers can actively please the Lord after death. This paper argues that* εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι *can be read causally as a viable alternative to the more common purpose or resultative interpretations. Under a causal reading, the verse suggests that to love/seek recognition is well-pleasing and acceptable before the Lord. Such a reading enhances the rhetorical force of Paul's defense of his apostleship, framing his ministry as a response to divine acceptance.*

Key Words: Purpose, Resultative, Causal, Identity markers, Finite, Infinite, Transitive, Intransitive, Substantival, Linguistic clues

I. Introduction

The syntax of 2 Corinthians 5:9 presents a notable challenge. As Victor Paul Furnish observes, the syntactical function of this verse is "particularly difficult to determine."[1] A central issue lies in

1 Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1984), 305.

determining the syntactical function of the clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι ("to be well-pleasing to him").[2] This clause is syntactically ambiguous and could be interpreted as expressing purpose, result, or cause, since it lacks explicit markers that definitively indicate its function. The syntactical classification bears significant exegetical weight: if understood as a purpose clause, it suggests that Paul's ambition is to please the Lord; if taken as resultative, it implies that pleasing the Lord is the outcome of his ambition; and if read causally, it indicates that the ambition stems from already being well-pleasing or acceptable to Him.

Most scholars—including Margaret E. Thrall,[3] Ralph P. Martin,[4] and Murray J. Harris[5]—favor the purpose interpretation, primarily on contextual grounds. However, this paper proposes an alternative reading: that the clause functions causally, based on both linguistic features within the Greek and contextual considerations. The argument is developed through a combination of exegetical and rhetorical analysis, aiming to demonstrate that a causal reading better accounts for Paul's theological and rhetorical intent in the passage.[6]

2 This clause consists of adjective (εὐάρεστοι, well-pleasing/acceptable persons), infinitive (εἶναι, to be) and personal pronoun (αὐτῷ, to him). Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992), 671.

3 Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* Vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 392-3.

4 Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1986), 113.

5 Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 413.

6 Douglas Estes defines, "Rhetorical criticism is a critical method of interpretation that identifies and examines various language devices within communication that are designed to pursuade and audience. As a critical method, it is based on the use of rhetoric, the technique of creating persuasive oral (and written) communication." Douglas Estes, "Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament" *Literary*

II. Purpose Clause

Scholars often interpret εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι as a purpose clause, indicating an intention to please the Lord. Margaret E. Thrall argues that "Paul's aim to act in ways that are pleasing to Christ, both now and hereafter, as the participles 'in the body' and 'away from the body' qualify εὐάρεστοι εἶναι rather than φιλοτιμούμεθα."[7] Ralph P. Martin similarly states, "Paul expresses the Christian's ambition to please the Lord."[8] Murray J. Harris notes that "the infinitive clause following φιλοτιμούμεθα implies a goal or aim."[9] David E. Garland also considers that "Paul's ambition is to gain Christ's approval whether in the body or out of the body."[10] Victor Paul Furnish emphasizes that "our sole objective is to please the Lord."[11]

However, the purpose interpretation faces significant challenges due to the absence of common purpose markers such as ἵνα, ὅπως, μή, or μήποτε, as well as the lack of articular infinitive constructions typically used to express purpose (e.g., εἰς + infinitive or noun [2 Cor 10:8], πρός τό + infinitive [Luke 18:1], τοῦ + infinitive [Luke 11:50], or ὡς + infinitive).[12] As Stanley Porter observes, "It is often difficult to decide whether purpose or result is being expressed by use of the infinitive, even when it follows a preposition such

Approaches to the Bible, ed. Douglas Mangum and Douglas Estes. Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 1.

7 Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 392-3.

8 Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 113.

9 Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* 413.

10 David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians, The New Americal Commentary,* Volume 29. (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 267.

11 Furnish, *II Corinthians,* 304.

12 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 590-91.

as πρός or εἰς."[13] If even the presence of these markers does not definitively establish purpose, their absence in 2 Corinthians 5:9 further complicates the case for a purposive interpretation.

Moreover, if Paul had intended to express purpose, it is plausible that he would have used a transitive verb followed by an infinitive, as he does elsewhere in his writings. For instance, he uses ἀρέσκειν "to please" in Galatians 1:10 and θεῷ ἀρὲσαι "to please God" in Romans 8:8, both in constructions involving the aorist infinitive to indicate purpose. The absence of such a syntactical structure in 2 Corinthians 5:9 suggests that Paul may not have intended a purpose clause. These linguistic and contextual considerations point toward an alternative function for the clause εὐάρεστοι εἶναι αὐτῷ, possibly indicating a causal rather than purposive relationship.

III. Resultative Clause

The clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι can also be interpreted as resultative, suggesting that being pleasing to the Lord is the outcome of being ambitious.[14] However, this reading is unlikely due to the absence of typical resultative markers, such as ὥστε followed by an infinitive, indicative, or participle. Additionally, other common

13 Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. Biblical Languages Greek 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 199. See also his comment, "This dilemma is caused in part by inherent difficulty in analyzing the preposition, and in part by the conceptual overlap of the categories of purpose and result. The difference in translation may often be reflected in phrasing like 'for the purpose of' versus 'with the result that'. Perhaps one of the most disputed uses is ὥστε with the infinitive. Many grammarians believe that in Hellenistic Greek ὥστε with the infinitive can have either a purpose or a result sense."

14 Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics,* 592, notes that "the infinitive of result indicates the outcome produced by the controlling verb." The controlling verb in 2 Corinthians 5:9 is φιλοτιμούμεθα, and the result clause is εὐάρεστοι εἶναι αὐτῷ.

indicators of consequence—such as elliptical constructions like διό "therefore", καὶ ἐγένετο + clause (frequently used in the LXX to express consequence in narrative contexts), διὰ τοῦτο, ἐξ οὗ/ἐξ ἧς αἰτίας, τοσοῦτος/τοσαύτη/τοσοῦτον...ὥστε, and οὕτως...ὥστε—are entirely absent from the passage.[15]

More significantly, the immediate context does not support the notion that Paul's ambition results in being pleasing to the Lord. Rather, the emphasis of the passage lies in Paul's identity—who he is in the Lord. This emphasis is rooted in the clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι, which reflects not merely an outcome of action but a state of being. The theological focus, therefore, shifts from performance to identity, as further demonstrated in the subsequent discussion.

IV. Causal Clause

This paper proposes that the clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι functions as a causal infinitive clause, suggesting that the ambition Paul expresses arises because he is already pleasing or acceptable to the Lord.[16] This interpretation is supported by the flexibility of the Greek infinitive, which can convey causality even in the absence of explicit causal markers. As Porter notes, "The infinitive may be used to indicate a causal connection,"[17] thereby affirming the plausibility of a causal reading in this context.[18]

15 Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics,* 677, 762.

16 Wallace, Greek Grammar beyond the Basics, 596, denotes that "the causal infinitive indicates the reason for the action of the controlling verb." The controlling verb is φιλοτιμούμεθα and the causal infinitive is εὐάρεστοι εἶναι αὐτῷ.

17 Porter, *Idioms of the New Testament Greek,* 200.

18 Porter, Idioms of the *New Testament Greek*, 198, denotes, "It is not always easy to classify a given instance of the infinitive, since the contextual indicators may not be decisive. The infinitive often occurs without any modification or not within any tightly connected syntactical structure. When

IV.1 Linguistic Clues

The syntactical function of the clause is significantly influenced by its surrounding context. Porter underscores this point, stating, "Most of the categories of interpretation rely upon the interpreter's evaluation of the context apart from specific syntactical indicators."[19] Similarly, Philipp Buttmann observes, "That sometimes (when the governing word is a general term, such as εἰπεῖν and πιστεύειν) ambiguity is easily occasioned by this mode of expression cannot be denied; hence in such cases the decisions rest wholly with the reader who carefully examines the context."[20] These observations reinforce the notion that context plays a decisive role in determining syntactical function.

Accordingly, in 2 Corinthians 5:9, the context provides important clues that support a causal interpretation. These include the use of the adjective εὐάρεστοι "well-pleasing", the infinitive verb εἶναι "to be," and the personal pronoun αὐτῷ "to him." Together, these linguistic elements point not merely to a goal or result but to a foundational identity in relation to the Lord, from which Paul's ambition arises.

IV.1.a. The adjective usage of εὐάρεστοι

The infinitive εἶναι ("to be"), when paired with εὐάρεστοι, a substantival adjective meaning "well-pleasing" or "acceptable

an infinitive is used as part of a prepositional phrase, this syntactical construction must be taken seriously, although even then it may not clarify every use. The infinitive after τοῦ may be placed in a number of the following categories."

19 Porter, *Idioms of the New Testament Greek*, 194.

20 Alexander Buttmann, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Andober: Warren F. Draper, 1891), 273.

persons," emphasizes identity rather than action.[21] The term εὐάρεστοι appears eight times in the New Testament (Rom 12:1–2; 14:18; 2 Cor 5:9; Eph 5:10; Phil 4:18; Col 3:20; Tit 2:9; Heb 13:21), seven of which occur in Pauline literature. In these instances, the term consistently conveys a state of being rather than a specific action or behavior. Also, according to The Complete Word Study Dictionary, the adjective εὐάρεστος is frequently used in reference to God, denoting that which God wills and recognizes as acceptable.[22] Within this semantic range, the emphasis is on divine evaluation of the person's state, not merely external conduct.

Thus, in 2 Corinthians 5:9, Paul's expression of ambition (φιλοτιμούμεθα) can be understood as arising from his identity as one who is already εὐάρεστος to the Lord. The clause, therefore, highlights a foundational theological truth: Paul's ministry and desire to please the Lord are grounded in who he is in Christ, not merely in what he does. This supports a causal reading of the infinitive clause, emphasizing identity as the basis of ambition.

IV.1.b. The usage of the εἶναι

The word εἶναι is an infinitive form of the verb "to be," typically used to express a state of being rather than an action. In the context under consideration, Paul emphasizes being over doing, which appears to be a deliberate choice. Had he intended to highlight action or purpose, he likely would have employed a finite verb, as he does elsewhere in his writings. For example, in Romans 15:1 (καὶ μὴ ἑαυτοῖς ἀρέσκειν), Galatians 1:10 (ἀρέσκειν), 1 Thessalonians 4:1 (καὶ ἀρέσκειν θεῷ), and Romans 8:8 (θεῷ ἀρέσαι), Paul uses either

21 Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*, 671.

22 Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*, 671.

present or aorist infinitives in contexts that clearly convey purpose or action. The consistent use of finite verbs in those passages underscores his intent to express purposeful action.

By contrast, the absence of such a construction in the present context suggests that Paul did not intend to communicate a purpose clause with εἶναι. As Campbell aptly observes, "choosing one [grammatical structure] is equal to un-choosing the other option available, and it implies meaning."[23] Thus, Paul's decision not to use a finite verb or an action-oriented infinitive here should be interpreted as intentional, reinforcing the idea that he was focusing on a state of being rather than an intended action or purpose.

IV.1.c. The Personal Pronoun αὐτῷ

The pronoun αὐτῷ in 2 Corinthians 5:9 most plausibly functions as a dative of sphere or location, conveying the sense of being "before him"—that is, well-pleasing or acceptable in the Lord's presence.[24] While grammatically it could be taken as a direct object, such a reading is less likely, given that the verb preceding it is not a finite verb but rather the infinitive εἶναι "to be."[25] This interpretation is further supported by the following verse (v. 10), which states that all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ,

23 Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 63. See also Halliday M. A. K. Halliday and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 23, who claim, "A language is a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice."

24 Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics,* 153. Wallace also states that "there are literal and figurativ location expressed with a word."

25 Andreas J. Kostenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper With New Testament Greek, An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament* (Nashvile: B&H, 2020), 139.

reinforcing the spatial and relational orientation implied by αὐτῷ.

In this light, Paul's statement in verse 9 is not primarily a call to action or an exhortation to moral effort; rather, it functions as a description of the believer's present status—being accepted and pleasing before the Lord.[26] This reading supports a causative interpretation of the clause, suggesting that Paul's ambition flows out of his secure identity in Christ. As such, this theological affirmation undergirds Paul's defense of his apostolic ministry, a line of argument that continues to unfold in the subsequent verses.

IV.2 Contextual Clues

The context offers several indicators that support a causal reading of the clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι. These include the broader literary and theological context of 2 Corinthians 5, as well as the semantic and syntactic features of the verb φιλοτιμούμεθα in 2 Corinthians 5:9.

IV.2.a. Broader Context of 2 Corinthians 5

In 2 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly defends his apostolic ministry against various accusations, including charges of insincerity (1:15–22) and criticisms of his unimpressive physical presence and rhetorical style (10:10). Chapter 5 fits squarely within this broader apologetic framework. As Mark Seifrid observes, "Chapter 3 begins the body of the letter as a presentation of the nature of the apostolic ministry. Paul then begins to speak about himself directly, first in relationship to God and the message of the Gospel that he bears as an apostle of Christ (4:1–5:10), and then as God's agent with

26 H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1939), 132.

respect to the Corinthians (5:11–21)."[27] Similarly, Andrew C. Clark notes that "in 2 Corinthians 2:14–7:4, Paul defends his apostolic claims, describing himself and his colleagues as 'commissioned by God' (2:17), 'ambassadors for Christ' (5:20), and 'ministers of a new covenant' (3:6)."[28]

Additional textual indicators within chapter 5 reinforce Paul's defensive posture. These include references to appearing before the judgment seat of Christ (5:10), being well known to God (5:11), and responding to those who "boast in appearance and not in heart" (5:12). N. T. Wright aptly explains, "The reason Paul is saying all this is not simply that he wants the Corinthians to understand the resurrection hope (though of course he does, and the present passage is an important supplement to what he said in 1 Corinthians 15). It is, rather, that he wants them to understand that his present work as an apostle, though it carries death about with it, also carries, by the spirit, the sure hope of resurrection. Once they realize that, they may learn to see not only him, but their own selves, in quite a new light."[29]

Therefore, within this context, Paul's emphasis is not on exhorting action but on describing his standing before the Lord—as one who is "well-pleasing" and "acceptable" to God. This supports a causal reading of εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι in 5:9, as it highlights a state of being rather than a call to moral striving. Paul's focus on

27 Mark Seifrid, "The Message of Second Corinthians: 2 Corinthians as the Legitimation of the Apostle" *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 19.3 (2015): 9-19, 13.

28 Andrew C. Clark, "Apostleship: Evidence From the New Testament and Early Christian Literature," *Vox Evangelica* 19 (1989): 49-82.

29 N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2004), electronic edition, Chap. [2 Corinthians 5]

identity over activity is further illuminated by his use of the verb φιλοτιμούμεθα, which will be examined in the following discussion .

IV.2.b. The verb φιλοτιμούμεθα

The verb φιλοτιμούμεθα is intransitive; it does not require an object to complete its sense, as it inherently conveys the idea "we are ambitious" or "we aspire."[30] Because it stands complete without needing an accusative object or a purpose clause, it allows space for a causal reading of the surrounding clause. Under a causal reading, the action expressed by the controlling verb (φιλοτιμούμεθα) is understood as resulting from the preceding state described in the clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι.[31] Thus, the translation would read: "Since we are well-pleasing or acceptable before the Lord, therefore we are ambitious." This interpretation appears more coherent than readings emphasizing purpose or result.

The compound nature of φιλοτιμούμεθα—formed from φίλος (love) and τιμή (honor)—conveys the idea of "loving honor" or "striving eagerly," as noted in A Greek-English Lexicon[32] and affirmed by Philip E. Hughes, who observes that the verb communicates "to love honor."[33] When considering this compound meaning, it becomes clear that interpreting the clause εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι as a purpose clause leads to an awkward redundancy:

30 Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 29, notes that the "transitive verb takes a direct object to complete a sentence, and intransitive verb does not take the indirect object to complete a sentence."

31 Kostenberger, *Going Deeper With New Testament Greek*, 366, 367-8, 371.

32 Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1941.

33 Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eermands, 1962), 178. See also, Cleon L. Rogers JR & Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 402.

for example, "we love honor in order to be pleasing to the Lord" sounds forced and illogical. Additionally, as a middle deponent verb, φιλοτιμούμεθα implies that the action is reflexive—directed toward oneself—further suggesting that the ambition or aspiration is internally motivated.[34] This internal focus supports a causal reading, indicating that Paul's ambition arises because he is already acceptable before the Lord, rather than aiming to please the Lord.

Accordingly, the translation would best capture the sense of the text as: "We are ambitious for ourselves, since we are well-pleasing and acceptable before the Lord." This raises the question of what it means to "love honor" in this verse. The verb φιλοτιμούμεθα here refers to Paul's ultimate desire for recognition—specifically the divine acknowledgment of his faithfulness and integrity. Importantly, this verb carries a positive connotation whenever it appears in the New Testament (e.g., Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 5:9; 1 Thess 4:11), where it describes noble aspirations rather than selfish ambition.[35]

In the context of 2 Corinthians, this recognition is intimately tied to Paul's apostolic ministry, which was under scrutiny among the Corinthians. Paul longed for this recognition either in the present age or, ultimately, at the eschatological judgment before the Lord, which he explicitly references in 5:10.[36] As Jerry W. McCant notes,

34 Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics,* 414-5, explains that "in the middle voice the subject performs or experiences the action expressed by the verb in such a way that emphasizes the subject's participation. It may be said that the subject acts 'with a vested interest.'"

35 Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, See comment on φιλότιμος.

36 The clause "whether at home or away from home" functions rhetorically. As Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Erdmanns, 1997), 273, observes, "This is stated for rhetorical reasons, to preserve the symmetry begun in verse 6."

"Paul engages eschatological ideas to challenge misunderstandings of his apostolic ministry."[37] Paul confidently asserts that the Corinthians will inevitably recognize his true apostleship—if not during his earthly ministry, then certainly before Christ's judgment seat, where every person will appear and be revealed (5:10).

V. Implication

A causal reading of 2 Corinthians 5:9 is not only possible but contextually and grammatically compelling. First, Paul's deliberate use of the adjective εὐάρεστοι alongside the infinitive εἶναι "to be"—rather than employing a finite verb such as ἀρέσκειν or ἀρέσαι, which he typically uses to express purpose—suggests an emphasis on being rather than doing. This syntactical choice favors a reading that focuses on identity rather than intentional action. Second, the nature of the verb φιλοτιμούμεθα supports a causal interpretation. As a compound, deponent, and intransitive verb meaning "to love honor" or "to aspire" (especially for oneself), it does not require an object or purpose clause to complete its sense. This allows the following clause, εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι, to function naturally as the reason or ground for Paul's ambition. Third, the broader context of 2 Corinthians reveals that Paul is engaged in a sustained defense of his apostolic identity and ministry. In this light, reading εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι causally—i.e., "since we are well-pleasing or acceptable before the Lord"—fits the rhetorical and theological thrust of the passage more effectively than a purposive reading. The clause, therefore, is

37 Jerry W. McCant, "Competing Pauline Eschatologies: An Exegetical Comparison of 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 23–49. 25. See also Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* 273, who considers that "the purpose/determination of pleasing the Lord both now and after is because of the eschatological judgment mentioned in verse 10 that both the action of good and evil will be judged."

less likely an exhortation "to please the Lord" and more plausibly an affirmation of Paul's status and identity as already pleasing to God, thereby reinforcing his defense of his apostleship.

While 2 Corinthians 5:9 is not primarily framed as an exhortation to believers, it implicitly affirms that, like Paul, they are already accepted and well-pleasing in the Lord. On this basis, believers are called to cultivate a godly ambition—not as a means to earn divine favor, but as a response to their established identity in Christ—especially in light of the eschatological reality that all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (5:10).

PASTORAL ARTICLES

To Acquire without Becoming: How Replacing the Doctrine of "Perseverance of the Saints" with "Eternal Security" Removes the Telos of the Evangelical Gospel

by **KEVIN STORER**

Abstract: *This article argues that those Evangelicals who consciously reject a traditional doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints and replace it with a doctrine of Eternal Security have introduced a holistic shift in the doctrine of salvation from a focus on the internal good of God's progressive transformation of the believer into Christ, to a focus on acquiring external goods such as heaven, salvation, and grace, without necessarily being changed by these realities. As a result of this shift, such Evangelicals have found it necessary to redefine terms central to salvation in an extrinsic manner, and therefore have begun to articulate the Gospel quite differently from their Protestant heritage. Consequently, they have lost continuity with the historic Christian faith and have lost sight of the intrinsic telos of the Christian life. The article suggests that these loses can be undone only by locating assurance of salvation once again in the historic doctrine of Perseverance.*

Key Words: Perseverance of the Saints, Free Grace Movement, Grace, Faith, Heaven, Salvation, Eternal Security

I. The Switch from Internal and External Goods

In his influential book, After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that in the modern world the pursuit of virtue—the progressive shaping of internal character (what he calls "internal goods"), has been eclipsed by a willingness to do whatever one must do in order to get the thing one wishes to acquire (what he calls "external

goods"). To the ethical question, "Why be good?" the answer used to be, "To become a good person," but in the modern world the answer has become, "To acquire the thing that I want." McIntyre illustrates the difference between these two kinds of goods through the example of a young child being motivated to play chess. The child is capable of learning the game, but, being a child, has little interest in the game. The adult, wanting the child to learn chess, must begin by motivating the child by offering "external goods" like candy (something that the child wants very much), for playing and for winning. So long as the motivation to win a game of chess comes merely from "external goods," the child has every reason to cheat if he or she can get away with it. However, McIntyre suggests that

> "we may hope [that] there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands. Now if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not [the adult], but himself or herself."[1]

Here we can distinguish between "two kinds of good[s]" which might be sought in playing chess: external goods—those which are "externally and contingently attached to chess playing" (like getting candy or becoming famous), and internal goods—those "which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game

1 Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology,* 3rd Ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 203.

of that specific kind" (like concentration, logical deduction, strategic thinking, etc.).[2] And, McIntyre tells us, it is precisely in the shift from the quest for *external goods* to a quest for *internal goods* that marks the emergence of a quest for virtue (the development of certain habits in order to become a certain kind of person). The external goods achieved may be quite "good," but prioritizing the quest for them over the quest for internal goods means that character development has ceased to be a primary goal. One central purpose of McIntyre's book is to show how the very idea of "internal goods" was largely lost in the Enlightenment, so that today morality has become defined by "external goods," where persons define an action as being "right" by that action's ability to obtain the desired (external) reward. For McIntyre, modern persons exist in a crisis of ethics precisely because they have lost sight of "internal goods"—the development of virtue to be a certain kind of person.

McIntyre's insight is illuminating, not just for ethics, but also when considering Evangelical views of salvation. The purpose of this article is to show that those Evangelicals who consciously reject the doctrine of "Perseverance of the Saints" in favor of a doctrine of "Eternal Security" are forced to switch the focus of salvation from the historic Christian focus on *internal goods* (goods which necessarily change the individual as they are received) to a focus on salvation as a set of *external goods* (goods that can be acquired without any necessary reshaping of the individual).[3] For Eternal

2 McIntyre, *Ibid.*

3 The distinguishing feature of these Evangelicals is their conscious rejection of the doctrine of "Perseverance of the Saints" (the view that God will preserve the believer's faith, and that faith preserved by God will result in newness of life), and the replacement of that doctrine with a doctrine of "Eternal Security" (the view that one momentary act of faith brings about salvation, and that assurance is absolute, whether or not the believer grows or continues in newness of life). The most

Security Proponents, the Gospel has become less about how God's grace reshapes individuals into God's image, and more about what one must do to "go to heaven" or "receive eternal life" without necessarily being changed. This shift from viewing salvation as a matter of internal goods to viewing it as the acquiring of external goods forces such "Eternal Security" Evangelicals to redefine central terms about salvation like "faith," "grace," and "heaven" to make them into external goods (goods that can be achieved without being changed by them). While it may seem odd that such a small change in terminology (from "Perseverance" to "Eternal Security") has created such a great shift from historic Christian teaching, we will see that this change has significant consequences in the way one

radical of these strains of Evangelicalism has labeled itself the "Free Grace Movement," and is led by Zane Hodges and Bob Wilkin (see https://faithalone.org/). However, more significant for this article is a more moderate strand of Eternal Security Proponents, which has included theologians like Charles Ryrie and Norman Geisler, as well as popular pastors like Charles Stanley. Theologians in this more moderate strand significantly disagree with many of the radical emphases of the "Free Grace Movement," and desire to retain continuity with historic Christian soteriology, yet they stand united with the "Free Grace Movement" in their rejection of "Perseverance of the Saints," in favor of saying that one moment of faith guarantees salvation forever, no matter what newness of life may emerge in the professing believer after the initial moment of conversion. Eternal Security Proponents have generally been associated with Dispensationalist tradition since within Dispensationalism it is normal to posit two eschatological judgments: one judgment for "salvation" (the Great White Throne Judgement) and another judgment for "good works" and "rewards" (the Bema, or the Judgment Seat of Christ). So long as the separation between these judgments is maintained, "Justification" (which is now identified with "Salvation") and "Sanctification" (which is now associated with "earning rewards in heaven") can be kept in different conceptual realms (for a proponent of this argument, see Grant Hawley, *Dispensationalism and Free Grace: Intimately Linked,* Dispensational Publishing House, Taos, NM, 2017, 34ff.). Moderates such as Charles Ryrie at times almost equate Eternal Security with Perseverance (see Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 63 and 18, respectively, where he admits that "every true believer will bear some fruit, even if that fruit is not seen by others," and that "a true believer will not remain a "carnal" Christian all of his/her life"). Yet the point of the article is to show that this switch from Perseverance to Eternal Security is much more consequential than Moderates like Ryrie might believe.

views God's ongoing work in the persons whom God saves.[4]

II. The Redefining of Christian Concepts

The shift from internal to external goods is perhaps seen most clearly in the way that Eternal Security Proponents redefine central Christian terms about salvation. In this section we will see how traditional Protestant definitions given to terms like "grace," "heaven," "faith," and "salvation" specified these realities as "internal goods" (goods which can be received only as the receiver is changed into them; thus realities which intrinsically shape the character of the receiver into the likeness of God). And we will see that Eternal Security Proponents have changed the traditional definitions to make these realities into "external goods" (realities that can be acquired regardless of a change in the receiver). The examination will show that a significant change has occurred in the way in which the doctrine of salvation is approached and appropriated among Eternal Security Proponents.

II.1 Grace: Unmerited Favor or God's Transforming Presence?

We begin with the term "grace." Ever since Augustine's writings

4 We will use the definition of **Eternal Security** given by Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 137, as "that work of God which guarantees that the gift of salvation, once received, is possessed forever and cannot be lost." What is emphasized in Eternal Security is the simple promise that the "gift of salvation" is irrevocable. We will use the definition of **Perseverance of the Saints** given in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (accessible online at https://epc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/WCF-Online-Version.pdf), that, "Those whom God has accepted in his Son and has effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit can never completely or finally fall out of their state of grace. Rather, they shall definitely continue in that state to the end and are eternally saved." What is emphasized in Perseverance of the Saints is that God will continue *God's* work of perseverance, and therefore will renew and transform the believer until this work is completed in glorification.

against Pelagius (415-420CE) and the Council of Orange II (529CE), grace has been understood as God inwardly producing newness of life in the believer (John 6:45 and Phil. 2:13-14), so that grace is understood to be the cause of the believer's salvation in its aspects of both justification and sanctification.[5] This means that in the broader Christian Tradition, grace has been understood either simply as the presence of God to the believer turning the will of the believer toward Godself, or as the transforming effect of God's presence in the believer.[6] The Christian Tradition never set grace against works, but instead always emphasized that grace produces good works. In terms of this article, Christians always believed that grace produces internal goods (grace remakes the believer into the image of Christ) rather than merely distributing external goods (such as a status of acceptance before God or a future promise of heaven).

This understanding of grace as God's transforming work in the believer was carried on faithfully by Luther and Calvin. Luther insists that "in His grace…[God] gives His very self," and this means that God has chosen "to give us Christ and to pour into us

5 The Council of Orange (accessible online at https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/councilorange.html) declares that any "good" thing that human beings do occurs precisely because "God is at work in us and with us, in order that we may do so" (Canon 10). Canons 24 and 25 use the image of the vine in John 15 to show that it is the life of Christ in believers which produces their newness of life, and Rom. 5:5 to show that the love by which we love God is first poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

6 It was always understood that the Holy Spirit, as Gift, was the agent of grace which transforms believers' lives into Christ-likeness. Yet not wanting to say that our transformation makes us "become" the Holy Spirit, the Medieval Scholastics also spoke of grace as a "quality in the soul" to show that the transforming *effect* of grace is itself the gift of grace (see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 110, Articles 1-3, accessible online at https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2110.htm).

the Holy Ghost," leading naturally and inevitably to good works.[7] Calvin agrees that grace is the transforming presence of God, noting that the Holy Spirit, the "bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself," brings the "double grace" of justification and sanctification.[8] Thus the Holy Spirit on the one hand "nourishes into vigor of life those on whom he has poured the stream of his grace" by "enflam[ing] our hearts with the love of God [Rom. 5:5]," and on the other hand is "persistently boiling away and burning up our vicious and inordinate desires."[9] Grace, for the Reformers, is "the cleansing, regenerating, and transforming work of God in the lives of believers," which must be "identified with the work of the Holy Spirit," and which "finds practical expression as it changes believers into what God would have them be."[10] Grace can, of course, be described simply as "unmerited favor," yet the "favor" that grace brings is that it "matures us in the faith and uses us to bring glory to [God's] name while here on earth."[11] It seems clear that even as the Reformers place greater emphasis on God's action in salvation, they preserve the traditional Christian emphasis on grace as an "internal good"—a gift that reshapes the believer into the image of Christ. The Reformers insisted that anyone who has

7 Luther, "Preface to the Letter of Paul to the Romans," cited in Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13. Philip Melanchthon, "Loci Communes Theologici," in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1969), 82-83, claims that "in Holy Writ 'grace' means 'favor,'" yet Melanchthon goes on to insist that grace "is the Holy Spirit himself, whom God has poured out into their hearts."

8 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 3.1.1.

9 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3.

10 Carl Trueman, *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God: What the Reformers Taught…and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 45, and 100, nt. 11, respectively.

11 Trueman, *ibid*, 24.

genuinely received God's grace would be in the process of being transformed by that grace to live the Christian life. If grace is the presence of God turning our will toward God and transforming us into God's image, then "grace" cannot ultimately be pitted against "good works," for "grace" is the very cause of all the believer's good works.[12]

Evangelicals, by contrast, often define grace merely as God's "unmerited favor," without understanding that grace is the presence of God producing newness of life.[13] This over-generalized definition often leaves Evangelicals unable to articulate how, and even whether, God's grace progressively transforms believers into God's image.[14] In their well-intended efforts to avoid Pelagianism, Evangelicals often think of "grace" as being opposed to "good works": Since grace is free, and since works are performed or earned, they reason,

12 The kind of "works" that the Bible contrasts to "grace" are those in which persons seek to justify themselves before God. It is true that grace (as the presence of God) will overthrow any attempt by human beings to earn their way to God; yet it is also true that grace (as the presence of God) will produce the newness of life that makes persons capable of dwelling with God (see again the Council of Orange, Canons 24-25).

13 So Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 17. (See also Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation (Wheaton: Crossway,* 1997), 49, and Trueman, Grace Alone, 24, who also define grace initially as "unmerited favor.") It is telling that the "Grace Evangelical Society" (the central website of the "Free Grace Movement") does not ever define "grace" in their doctrinal statement, but merely assumes it is 1) opposed to works, and 2) associated with the moment of salvation (see https://faithalone.org/beliefs/).

14 Ryrie's expanded definition of grace (ibid, 156), is actually much more substantial: "The unmerited favor of God in giving His Son and all the benefits that result from receiving Him." When this larger definition is developed to explain the "benefits" that come from union with Christ, Ryrie seems to imply that grace produces good works and inner transformation in the way the historic Christian Tradition has claimed. However, this remains implicit, and most Evangelicals take only the "unmerited favor" part of the definition.

works must be seen as the dialectical opposite of grace.[15] When grace and works are so opposed, it becomes possible to assume that good works cannot be in any way intrinsic to "salvation" (the move made by Eternal Security Proponents).[16] But notice how the term "grace" has subtly been made into an external good: when "grace" is defined merely as "unmerited favor," the "favor" is viewed variously as "forgiveness," "getting saved," "being justified," etc. (all realities that have already been acquired by the believer), and so grace is no longer viewed as the ongoing and transforming presence of God's own life in the believer.

John Piper provides two contrasting images for God's grace which enable us to see the difference between internal and external goods. Piper notes that some Evangelicals think of assurance of salvation like a "vaccination" which was given once in the past yet keeps the believer immune from falling away. Yet Piper suggests, in opposition to this image, that believers ought to think of assurance of salvation "like a life-long therapy program in which the great physician stays with you all the way."[17] In this second image, "grace" is the ongoing presence of Christ to the believer, and the ongoing renewal of the believer which flows from this union with Christ. This image corresponds to a doctrine of "Perseverance." In the first image, "grace" is envisioned as a change of status which does

15 See Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 71-73, for a list of the common prooftexts used by Free Grace Proponents for this grace vs. works conception.

16 It is from here a small step to assumed that "works" must be something that human beings perform *by themselves* toward God; i.e. that "works" (the process of sanctification) are *our actions* rather than the product of God's grace (see here Hodges, *ibid*, 74-76). What is lost is that God is *by grace* actively producing those works.

17 Piper, *Five Points: Toward a Deeper Experience of God's Grace* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2013), 73.

not necessary change one's character—it corresponds to "Eternal Security." Anyone who defines "grace" in such a way that one could "get saved" through one momentary act of belief and then never become engaged in the process of sanctification is clearly thinking of grace like a "vaccine." The vaccine model provides an extrinsic understanding of grace. One could, on this account, "acquire" grace (God's unmerited favor) without being reshaped by grace. Such grace could be "received" at the moment of conversion, without that grace ever transforming one's life. Of course Eternal Security proponents do not wish to deny the Spirit's transforming work in the believer; it is just that their over-generalized definition of grace as God's "unmerited favor," along with their tendency to set "grace" against "works," prevents them from thinking of grace as God's own life bringing renewal, and thereby prevents them from seeing the intrinsic link between justification and God's continued transforming work.

II.2 Heaven: A Place of Delight or The Immediate Presence of God?

The most basic definition of heaven held by all Christians at all times is unending life in "the immediate presence of God."[18] In

18 See the Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1024-1025, accessible online at https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/II/: "This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity - this communion of life and love with the Trinity…is called "heaven." "To live in heaven is 'to be with Christ'….For life is to be with Christ; where Christ is, there is life." See also Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 125, who defines heaven as "The place beyond earth that is the abode of God. In Christian theology, it is the future eternal abode of those who receive salvation in Jesus Christ. It is portrayed as a place of blessedness, without pain or evil, distinguished by the presence of God." The elements of this definition most useful to us here are the phrases "the abode of God" and "distinguished by the presence of God."

the Christian Tradition this definition leads necessarily to the observation that one cannot truly desire heaven unless one truly desires the immediate presence of God, and this means that to desire heaven requires a desire for conformity to the Lordship of God (Matt. 6:9-10). Heaven can be "heaven" only for persons who truly desire and who actually seek the immediate presence of God through the conformity of their own lives to God. Persons who are disinterested in God, and therefore disinterested in obedience to God could only find the holy presence of God infinitely oppressive. Heaven simply could not be heaven for persons who do not desire personal conformity to God.

The Reformers, especially Calvin, provide particularly useful language to understand this traditional understanding of heaven. Calvin rightly recognizes that since "nothing less than the complete observance of the Law is allowed in heaven," real delight in obedience to God's Law (which can only be produced by the Spirit) is a prerequisite for the reality of heaven.[19] Calvin insists that the task of repentance and growth in holiness has been entrusted to believers (and produced by the Holy Spirit in believers), as preparation for heaven. Unless God is shaping the individual into a new creation through grace, the individual will not desire, and thereby will not be capable, of existing eternally in the immediate presence of God.

Heaven, in traditional Christian language, is entirely about internal goods, as only God's reshaping of one's character will

19 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.14.13. Calvin, *ibid*, III.3.2, finds it greatly significant that both Jesus and John the Baptist began their ministries emphasizing "repentance" as preparation for the "Kingdom of Heaven."

enable that person to want the reality of heaven, and thus to be capable of it. With his characteristic clarity, CS Lewis puts it this way: "The point is not that God will refuse you admission to His eternal world if you have not got certain qualities of character: the point is that if people have not got at least the beginnings of those qualities inside them, then no possible external conditions could make a 'Heaven' for them."[20] Only the person who has been built for heaven by God's grace will be capable of seeing heaven as heaven, since heaven is the triumph of God's grace conforming believers to Godself. If "heaven" is the immediate presence of God, and if God's will is absolute in heaven, then only those who desire the immediate presence of God on God's own terms could possibly find this place to be heaven.

By contrast, Evangelical presentations of the Gospel all too often promise "heaven" (or "eternal life") without carefully defining the term.[21] Hearers simply assume that "heaven" must be a better place than "hell," and reason that they may as well "receive" the free gift of heaven. In the language of Eternal Security proponents, "heaven" is promised absolutely, based on one act of belief. And since heaven can never be lost, the transformation of one's life by God is seen as a secondary and optional process; not to be confused with the absolute assurance that one is, in fact, going there.

20 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 2001), 81.

21 It is significant to notice that the Grace Evangelical Society never provides a definition of the heaven to which one mere act of faith guarantees admission (see again https://faithalone.org/beliefs/, where "heaven" is only mentioned to distinguish it from the Millennial kingdom). Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, also does not mention heaven in his list of key terms about salvation. While this may seem like an argument from absence, that is exactly the point: Eternal Security Proponents easily assure persons irrevocable admittance to "heaven" based on one act of faith, without ever defining what such a heaven must be like, and therefore what those citizens who inhabit it must be like.

Promises of the certainty of heaven, acquired through one act of faith, lead Eternal Security Proponents to some quite strained exegesis of the Gospels. For example, in Matthew 24-25, Jesus describes a "wicked, lazy servant" who will be "cut to pieces" and "assign[ed]…a place with the hypocrites….[W]here there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 24:51). Emphasizing the absoluteness of eternal security after one act of conversion, Free Grace Proponents insist that this servant will certainly still "go to heaven."[22] Yet to make such an insistence, these interpreters must posit a heaven which contains a "place [for] the hypocrites" and which contains a place of "outer darkness" where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Now this seems clearly to be a different kind of heaven than the "immediate presence of God" in which the Church has always believed. To envision heaven as a place where an unrepentant person could reside, eternally distanced from the presence of God, is to invent a heaven in which Traditional Christianity has never believed.

The exegetical moves described above should seem absurd, but they illustrate the alarming consequences of the switch from internal to external goods. Whenever absolute assurance is connected primarily to one past "born-again experience," the term "heaven" will tend to function simply as an alternative to hell, rather than as the immediate presence of a God to Whom persons must be conformed. "Heaven" will then be envisioned much more in terms of the fulfillment of one's own desires than the full conformity of one's desires to God. Such an understanding of heaven encourages

22 Such is the claim of Robert N. Wilkin, "Christians Will Be Judged according to Their Works at the Rewards Judgment, but Not at the Final Judgment," in Alan P. Stanley, ed., *Four Views on the Role of Works at the Final Judgment*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 28-53.

a person to ask, "How little can I do to 'get saved,'" or "How little must I do to remain a Christian," or to believe that, "I need not follow Christ in practice, since I will still go to heaven."[23]

Now Eternal Security Proponents would likely respond that since no one could ever love or desire God completely in this lifetime, and since God will perfect each believer instantly at the moment of his/her death anyway, the reality or extent of the believer's transformation does not much matter.[24] But this again simply shows the extent to which "heaven" has become a matter of external goods.[25] For Eternal Security Proponents, it appears that the life that the individual lives on earth need have little or

23 This quest to identify the minimum knowledge necessary for belief to be "absolutely saving" seems to be a major preoccupation of the Free Grace Movement (see Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 143-163). Yet even moderate Eternal Security Proponents become stuck in a quest for a "minimum content" since the assumptions that one act of faith makes one "saved" (Acts 16:31) and "absolute assurance" (it is impossible to "lose" salvation once it has been given—John 10:28) act as first principles from which to reason everything else about salvation (see Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 40-41, for his discussion of "minimum content").

24 The claim of instantaneous glorification at the moment of death is a standard Protestant view. See, for example, John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), 125, who claims that, "Scripture suggests that the moment a believer dies, his soul is instantly glorified and he enters God's presence….It is a graceful, peaceful, painless, instantaneous transition." MacArthur is an archenemy of "Free Grace" theology, yet his description of glorification is typical of Evangelicalism, and is used by all who would say that since God simply makes a person perfect at the moment of death, it is of no relevance to one's "salvation" whether genuine sanctification is taking place.

25 Scripture seems abundantly clear that God's grace must ordinarily begin its transforming work in this lifetime, and that without such transformation, heaven simply could not be heaven for an individual. Jesus claims that it is the "pure in heart" who will "see God" (Matt. 5:8); Paul declares that "Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:8); and the author of Hebrews commands his readers to "Make every effort to…be holy," because "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:4).

no continuity whatsoever (aside from one single moment of faith) with the kind of person he/she will be eternally. Yet if there is no continuity between my faith, hope, and love in this life and the fulfillment of those realities in heaven, it is difficult to imagine how it would, in any meaningful sense, be "me" who will be in heaven.

II.3 Faith: A Momentary Human Act or Instrumental Cause of Union with Christ?

The shift from internal goods to external goods is probably seen most clearly in the Eternal Security Proponents' reduction of the term "faith." For the Reformers, faith was understood to be the instrumental cause of union with Christ. Luther spoke of faith as the gift which "apprehends" Christ or "takes hold of" Christ.[26] For Calvin, faith is the instrument by which union with Christ occurs.[27] To understand these Reformation claims, we might envision faith operating like a hitch that connects the passenger car of a train to the engine car. The hitch is the instrument which keeps passengers connected to the engine; if the hitch were removed, the passengers would no longer be in contact with their source of power, and their movement would cease. In the same way, in the Christian life, if faith were removed so also would union with Christ. For the Reformers, it seemed obvious that faith itself must persevere if our salvation is to continue.[28] Only as we remain united with Christ do we have salvation, and faith is the instrument that keeps us united

26 For a good discussion, see Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Justification and Participation in Christ The Development of the Lutheran Doctrine of Justification from Luther to the Formula of Concord (1580)*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, 19-36.

27 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.7.

28 As Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2002), 24, puts it, "Justification is not a benefit that Christ confers upon us, which we then possess independently of him."

with Christ.[29] John Piper speaks for the whole Reformation tradition when he says: "'We are justified by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.' Faith that is alone is not faith in union with Christ. Union with Christ makes his perfection and power ours through faith. And in union with Christ, faith is living and active with Christ's power."[30] For the whole Reformation tradition (and the entire Christian Tradition before it), it is impossible for someone to walk away permanently from faith and yet to remain permanently united to Christ.

Yet Eternal Security Proponents insist that saving faith need only be a one-time, momentary act which, once performed, can never be undone. Consider, for example, Norman Geisler, who explicitly denies that faith must continue for assurance to be absolute. Geisler likens momentary faith in Christ to "suicide" or "jumping off a cliff"—all decisions that, once made, cannot be undone.[31] For Geisler, this one "act" may be a single, isolated event in one's life, yet its consequences are absolute. Typical proof-texts for Geisler's perspective are drawn from verses like Acts 16:31—"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved,"

29 Now of course union with Christ *begins* through a first act of faith—this no one doubts. But the faith that grasps Christ is a faith that continues. John Piper, *Five Points,* 70, explains that "God justifies us completely through the first genuine act of saving faith, but this is the sort of faith that perseveres and bears fruit."

30 John Piper, "Forward," in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 16.

31 Norman L. Geisler, "A Moderate Calvinist View," in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson, 61-112 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 82. Geisler, ibid, 87, explicitly claims that, "Receiving the gift of salvation is not dependent on a continual act of faith. The initial act of faith is the means through which salvation comes to us." Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 59, likewise claims, "If the gift of eternal life is ours forever, then the act of faith which appropriates the gift is definitive and final."

or Romans 10:9—"If you…believe in your heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead, you will be saved." Such passages are said to mention nothing about any requirement of ongoing faith, and so it is assumed that a person can be absolutely assured of salvation based on that one momentary act of faith, whether or not that faith continues and leads to any identifiable newness of life.

Notice here both how "faith" itself has become extrinsic, and how "faith" has become a means to acquire a completely extrinsic good. Faith, on this account, is needed only for a moment, and then its ongoing presence becomes entirely irrelevant for "salvation." Further, one can use such momentary faith to acquire the gift of "eternal life," without necessarily being changed by faith. It is worth noting that Christians have often disputed whether those who permanently abandon their faith lose the salvation that they once received (Catholics, Orthodox, and Arminian Protestants), or whether they were never saved at all (Calvinists). And the reason Christians debate this issue is because they have consistently believed that faith is an internal good, a gift given by God which also must be preserved by God, and a gift which unites one to the living, active Christ who intends to transform one's life. That the Eternal Security Proponents' extrinsic articulation of faith is tolerated at all in Evangelicalism demonstrates the prevalence of this extrinsic view of salvation within the Movement.

II.4 Salvation: Mere Justification or Union with Christ

Perhaps unsurprisingly, even the term "salvation" has been redefined by Eternal Security Proponents to reflect an external rather than internal good. For the Reformers (as for the whole Christian Tradition), the term "salvation" has included not only

justification, but also the progressive sanctification and the eventual glorification of the believer.[32] While Lutherans always seek to clarify that works to not in any way lead to initial justification, they remain insistent that good works will naturally and necessarily flow from justification. In the Smalcald Articles, Luther insists that "faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sins is followed by good works. And…. [I]f good works do not follow, faith is false and not true."[33] And after Luther's death, the Formula of Concord set the normative position of Lutheranism by stating, "But after man has been justified by faith, then a true living faith worketh by love, Gal. 5:6, so that thus good works always follow justifying faith, and are surely found with it, if it be true and living; for it never is alone, but always has with it love and hope."[34] John Calvin further explains that "salvation" is based on union with Christ, and that this union results in the "double grace" of justification and sanctification together. In his "Brief Confession of Faith," Calvin states, "Jesus Christ not only justifies us by covering all our faults and sins, but also sanctifies us by his Spirit, so that the two things (the free forgiveness of sins and reformation to a holy life) cannot be dissevered and separated from

32 Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 405, defines "salvation" as "God's activities in bringing humans into a right relationship with God and with one another through Jesus Christ. They are saved from the consequences of their sin and given eternal life."

33 Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles,* III.13, accessible online at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/273/273-h/273-h.htm.

34 *Formula of Concord*, Article 3, Affirmative Theses 8, in *The Formula of Concord: Epitome*, accessible online at https://wolfmueller.co/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FormulaOfConcordEpitomeCover.pdf. The Formula of Concord (1577CE), was written to provide a standard expression of faith for the Lutheran tradition, and the authority for Lutheranism ever since has been the Augsburg Confession as understood through the Formula of Concord. See also the *Formula of Concord* Article IV, Affirmative Thesis 1,31, which further affirms that "good works certainly and without doubt follow true faith, if it is not a dead, but a living faith, as fruits of a good tree." See again the *Formula of Concord,* Article IV, Affirmative Thesis 3, 31, which states, "We believe, teach, and confess also that all men, but those especially who are born again and renewed by the Holy Ghost, are bound to do good works."

each other."[35] To separate justification and sanctification would be, for Calvin, to "tear Christ in pieces."[36] Quite significantly, Calvin "does not speak of justification as the cause of sanctification nor of the latter as the fruit or consequence of the former. Both are the fruit and consequence of union with Christ."[37] While recognizing the clear distinction between justification and sanctification, the entire Reformation Tradition has uniformly rejected separation between them, and has uniformly agreed that both are essential parts of salvation. No one who identifies "salvation" simply with justification is able to claim continuity with the historic Protestant tradition. As Thomas McCall puts it,

> "[I]t would be a mistake to ignore or downplay the very

35 John Calvin, *Brief Confession of Faith* (accessible online at https://www.the-highway.com/brconfess_Calvin.html).

36 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,* Vol. 1, ed. and trans. John Pringle, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, comment on 1:30, 69, (accessible online at https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.html). Calvin, *Institutes*, III:11:6, explains further that, "As Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable - namely, righteousness and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image."

37 Lane, *Justification by Faith,* 25. The Reformed tradition has faithfully preserved Calvin's emphasis that justification and sanctification are the two inevitable "graces" or "benefits" of union with Christ. *The Belgic Confession*, Article 24 (accessible online at https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/BelgicConfession.pdf), states that "it is impossible for this holy faith to be unfruitful in a human being, seeing that we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls 'faith working through love,' which moves people to do by themselves the works that God has commanded in the Word." *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 11.2 (accessible online at https://epc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/WCF-Online-Version.pdf), likewise notes that while faith "is the only means of justification," faith "is always accompanied by all the other saving graces and is not a dead faith, but works by love." *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 16.2, insists further that "good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruit and evidence of a true and living faith."

> important common ground shared by Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Wesleyan understandings of sanctification. All reject any notion that sanctification is somehow an optional add-on feature of salvation—as if to really be saved is merely to be justified. All affirm that when God saves a person, not only is the person's legal status changed, but so is the person. All reject views that reduce salvation to justification, and all affirm that salvation brings decisive transformation. All believe that salvation turns sinners into saints."[38]

Yet despite this agreement among confessional Protestants, Eternal Security Proponents equate "salvation" with "justification" simply.[39] If one can be "saved" by one momentary act of faith without any internal change in one's life, sanctification must have a secondary and optional status. What is significant for us is that in such a conflation, the term "salvation" is changed into a merely external good: It is viewed more as a change which takes place in the mind of God about how he views the individual than about the

38 Thomas H. McCall, Caleb T. Friedeman, and Matt. T. Friedeman, *The Doctrine of Good Works: Reclaiming a Neglected Protestant Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 115.

39 The most clear statement comes from the Free Grace Movement, which states that, "No act of obedience, preceding or following faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, such as commitment to obey, sorrow for sin, turning from one's sin, baptism or submission to the Lordship of Christ" is to be associated with "salvation" (see https://faithalone.org/beliefs/). Moderates like Charles Ryrie are much more in line with historic Christianity. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 45, states that, "Every Christian will bear spiritual fruit. Somewhere, sometime, somehow. Otherwise that person is not a believer. Every born-again individual will be fruitful. Not to be fruitful is to be faithless, without faith, and therefore without salvation." Yet Ryrie, *Basic Theology,* 384, also claims that, "God never takes back the gift of his salvation once it is received. Believers will not always persevere in godliness …. Lot did not (2 Pet. 2:7). At the Judgment Seat of Christ here will be some whose works will be burned and who will be saved through fire (1 Cor. 3:15)." Ryrie's insistence that a minimum content of belief (i.e. 1 Cor. 15:3-8) saves absolutely, and that one who is saved will never lose salvation, seems to force this ambiguity.

remaking of the whole person into the likeness of Christ. Salvation (i.e. "justification") is viewed as "God's work," while sanctification is viewed as "the believer's work;" a work that is must be considered optional in order to safeguard God's "free gift" of salvation (i.e. "justification"): perhaps one should do good works out of gratitude to God; perhaps one might be happier as a result of obedience; perhaps one could earn rewards in heaven by performing good deeds; but these are all optional elements in the Christian life. Such outcomes are then viewed as extrinsic goods that must be acquired through various activities without these realities necessarily transforming the character of the believer.

III. Implications

What may initially sound like a small change in terminology reveals a much larger theological fault line about how Evangelicals view the reality of salvation. When the move from "Perseverance of the Saints" to "Eternal Security" is made, essential concepts about salvation must be redefined, and Gospel promises are reduced to a set of extrinsic goods—realities which can be acquired without the holistic transformation of the self. The implications of this shift are significant, as Eternal Security Proponents lose continuity with their historic Christian Tradition, and lose the ability to describe consistently the telos of the Christian life.

III.I Loss of Continuity with the Christian Tradition

It is worth reflecting on the way in which this switch from internal goods to external goods has placed Eternal Security Proponents in tension with the Historic Christian Tradition. We have already seen that the Reformers (specifically Luther and Calvin and their

respective Protestant traditions) have viewed God's saving work as an internal reality that reshapes the whole individual.[40] This insistence on newness of life is all the more significant as the Reformers were decidedly against any form of works salvation, and their unique focus on "forensic" righteousness was an attempt to clarify that the power for our change of character came from union with Christ and from the work of the Holy Spirit rather than from the believer's own efforts. Nonetheless, they did not lose sight of salvation as a matter of internal goods, consistently showing that the reception of God's free gifts necessarily transforms the individual into the image of Christ.

Further, we should notice that the Evangelical Movement itself has historically understood the Gospel as a matter of internal goods. The three significant founders of Evangelicalism (Jonathan Edwards the theologian, George Winfield the preacher, and John Wesley the organizer) all strongly opposed antinomianism and all emphasized consistently the necessity of inward change in the life of a true believer.[41] In fact, Evangelicalism as a whole has so greatly

40 It would be tempting to say that the change in focus from internal to external goods occurred in the Reformation itself, where the Medieval understanding of "inherent" infused righteousness was changed to the distinctly Protestant understanding of "forensic" imputed righteousness. This appears to be the argument of Christopher Ben Simpson, *Modern Christian Theology* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2016), 33, who claims that even for the Reformers, "Justification" begins to be understood "not [as] something that changes in the world or in us, but it is something that changes in the mind of God….This, then, is what really matters—the way God regards us." Yet as we have seen, the Reformers are much more nuanced, and are quite committed to making salvation a matter of internal goods.

41 For a good discussion, see Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 196-206, as well as John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Evangelicalism: A Very Short Introduction,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, Chapter 1: "Original Evangelicalism."

emphasized the inevitable character change of the true believer, that this emphasis could be said to be one of the distinguishing marks of the movement historically. John Stackhouse argues that,

> Evangelicals generally have been fiercely against "antinomianism," the idea that because God has "saved" you, you can now do anything you like without regard for the law (nomos) of God. Instead, evangelicals have taught that while entry into God's adoptive family is truly free…the obligations of familyhood are total. One is obliged to behave now like a child of God, and one embarks on a lifelong regimen under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit to become a consistently dedicated (= "holy") child of God.[42]

This consistent opposition to antinomianism and the insistence on newness of life is all the more significant in that Evangelicals have traditionally placed great emphasis on individual conversion and assurance, yet have consistently insisted on growth in the Christian life.[43] Stackhouse thus argues that "evangelicals all agree that merely being born again is not enough; maturation is required to enter the world to come."[44] While one might question the extent of Stackhouse's historical research—"all" Evangelicals seem not to believe in this requirement of sanctification, since this article is being written about those who reject it—it seems safe to

42 Stackhouse, *Evangelicalism,* chapter 1, (epub version).

43 David W. Bebbington, "The Nature of Evangelical Religion," in, Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George M. Marsden, eds., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, And Could Be,* 31-55 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 40, notes the centrality of both elements as he claims that, "The novelty of Evangelical religion…lay precisely in claiming that assurance normally accompanies conversion."

44 Stackhouse, *Evangelicalism,* chapter 2, (epub version).

say that Eternal Security Proponents stand in a great deal of tension with their own Evangelical tradition. Such marked discontinuity with their Evangelical heritage, their Reformation heritage, and indeed their historic Christian heritage ought to give Eternal Security Proponents pause as they consider the significance of their innovation.

III.2 Loss of a Telos to the Christian Life

Perhaps the more concerning result of a switch to Eternal Security is the loss of a telos intrinsic to the Christian life. In a very real way, a "self" is the whole collection of beliefs, desires, and loves that lead to actions and result in the shaping of character. When one's telos is lost, what is lost is a holistic picture of how a person's desires and actions, the consistent pattern of a person's life, constitute that person to be a particular kind of person. As McIntyre has shown in *After Virtue,* the consequence of a shift in ethics from internal goods (virtue) to external goods (defining "right" as "what I need to do to acquire what I want") has been the loss of a telos for one's life, a loss of a consistent picture of what the individual is striving to become.[45] In like manner, when Christians so definitively separate "salvation" from the "Christian life" by saying that one can "go to heaven" based on one isolated incident in one's life, and when they redefine their traditional terms about salvation to be goods that can be acquired without themselves being reshaped, they lose the ability to visualize how God's initial and ongoing work together develop them into the "selves" that God desires them to become.[46] (On the

45 McIntyre, *After Virtue,* 271.

46 As Thomas H. McCall, Caleb T. Friedeman, and Matt. T. Friedeman, *The Doctrine of Good Works,* xiii, ask, "When earnest Christians are repeatedly told that their *good works have nothing to do with salvation,* why should we be surprised when they believe what they hear? Why would we be puzzled when they

Eternal Security account, it seems possible to say that "John" has received the gift of heaven, while not being able to say that "John" is a Christian, since "John" may not have continuing faith and may not desire to be conformed to the image of Christ.)[47] We will conclude by showing several ways in which the focus from "Perseverance" to "Eternal Security" loses sight of the telos of the Christian life.

First, Eternal Security draws the believer's attention backward, to a remembrance of conversion, while Perseverance draws the believer's attention forward, to the ongoing process of becoming shaped into the image of Christ. Eternal Security necessarily focuses backward on the "minimum content" of knowledge which must be believed for someone to be given the gift of heaven. The believer must think of "salvation" as a past moment which has already occurred, rather than viewing him/herself on a journey begun and continued by God. "Faith" was a past moment of belief; "grace" has been given, "salvation" has occurred completely, and "heaven" is simply a place where one is going someday no matter the shape of his/her life. This leads believers to think of the "Gospel" itself as a past reality already "received" or "accepted," and which now must simply be "remembered" and "shared with others."

Perseverance, by contrast, necessarily focuses forward on God's ongoing action to draw the believer into the Triune Life of God. By "faith" one is united to Christ to be changed by His life; "grace" is the presence of God causing newness of life; the

live accordingly?"

47 As we have seen, some in the moderate strand of Eternal Security Proponents, like Charles Ryrie, seem to admit with proponents of Perseverance of the Saints that the person's faith is not real unless it produces *some* good works (see again footnote 39). Such moderates seem uncomfortably stretched between the historic doctrine of Perseverance and the reductionistic tendencies of Eternal Security.

"salvation" which began in justification is being accomplished by God who wills and works; and "heaven" is the only intrinsically fitting completion of this process. The "Gospel" itself is the whole promise that the God who has "begun a good work…will carry it on to completion" (Phil. 1:6). Every moment of life can be viewed as an opportunity for God's reshaping work in the believer to be accomplished.

Second, Eternal Security requires the believer to think of sanctification as disconnected from "salvation" and therefore optional, while Perseverance requires the believer to think of every choice and action in life as an integral part of God's saving plan. Eternal Security leads the believer to think, "I have already been saved, and should now consider doing some good works to 'earn' reward in heaven." As God's "saving" work and God's "transforming" work are necessarily separated into two distinct conceptual fields, several implications result. First, "earning rewards" begins to sound like something that I myself must do for God, and this shifts attention away from God's grace causing all my good works. Second, "obedience" begins to be seen merely as something that I "must do to avoid God's judgment," or as something that I "should do to earn rewards," without being seen as God-given opportunity for the development of my character into the image of Christ. Third, the optional nature of sanctification forces believers psychologically to imagine a balance scale of punishment to reward in every moment of temptation and to weigh each choice on that scale (i.e. if a particular sin holds out the promise of great happiness right now, it becomes easy to justify the loss of some heavenly reward to achieve the pleasure of sin in the short term). In short, conformity to Christ comes to be viewed more as a series of transactional decisions that must be made by each believer about

reward and punishment, rather than as God's holistic shaping of the character to shape the believer into a heavenly person.

Perseverance, by contrast, forces the believer to hold together Eph. 2:8-10, recognizing that God has created the believer for "good works" and has "foreordained" these to be accomplished, as well as Phil. 2:12-13, recognizing that the reason believers "work" is because God is "working in" them to conform them to Christ.[48] It is precisely because "faith" unites persons to the living Christ, because "grace" is Godself turning persons will and enabling them to love Him, because "salvation" includes both justification and sanctification as "double grace," and because God will shape believers into persons who desire "heaven" on God's terms, that Christians can envision the purpose and goal of God's ongoing work in their lives.

Of course, Eternal Security Proponents affirm the importance of sanctification just as much as advocates of Perseverance, and their theological innovation is intended to give comfort to believers who desire assurance of God's saving grace. Yet their desire to strengthen the absoluteness of eternal security by dismissing the doctrine of Perseverance is purchased at a high price, as it has forced them to dismiss the equally comforting promise that the God who begins a good work will continue that work (Phil.

48 At this point Eternal Security Proponents accuse Perseverance Proponents of making the preservation of salvation dependent on the continuation of the believer's "works." But notice that Eternal Security Proponents can only make this claim because they have changed the definition of grace, and therefore do not allow the premise that "grace produces works." Were they to look back to the Council of Orange they would recognize that grace produces every good work that any human being has ever done (see Canons 9-11). The promise of "salvation" is much greater on the Perseverance model, because "grace" includes a promise of renewal, not just a change of status.

1:6). The price to be paid for a rejection of Perseverance in favor of Eternal Security is nothing less than a loss of continuity with the Historic Christian Tradition in the doctrine of salvation, as well as the loss of an intrinsic telos to the Christian life. By contrast, the traditional Reformed doctrine of "Perseverance of the Saints" preserves both the traditional definitions of terms about salvation and the intrinsic telos of the Christian life. In short, the doctrine of Perseverance keeps the Gospel a matter of internal goods.

ARTICLES FROM EMERGING SCHOLARS

Towards a New Ontological Framework: Converging Thomistic Ontology and New Materialism

by CHUBATEMSU KICHU

Abstract: *This paper explores the possibility for an ontological convergence between 'Thomistic ontology' and 'New Materialism,' examining their implications for eco-theology, religious naturalism and the scope for multifaceted contemporary discourse. It critically assesses and reimagines theological views on creation, immanence, and transcendence in light of New Materialistic perspectives on material agency, ecocentrism, and immanence. Using a comparative approach through a constructive lens, the study analyses Thomas Aquinas's hierarchical ontology alongside New Materialism's fluid, non-dualistic approach, drawing insights from key thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jane Bennett, Thomistic scholars, and Christian apologists. The study shows how New Materialism's challenge to anthropocentrism and theism may offer valuable critiques, but risks neglecting unique aspects of human agency and the influence of any transcendental order. In this light, the paper proposes an integrative eco-theological model grounded in the cosmic presence of Christ that harmonizes New Materialism's emphasis on interdependence and agency with a theistic vision of divine presence in creation without slipping into pantheism and radical panentheism. It supports a relational approach towards creation, suggesting practical implications for Christian praxis and proposes a framework from multiple perspectives (Evangelical and non-evangelical theology, Asian tribal theology, etc.) for responding to environmental ethics and justice, ecological and technological stewardship, transhumanism, atheism, naturalism, posthumanism, etc., within contemporary contexts.*

Keywords: Thomistic Ontology, Nature, Creation, New Materialism, Immanence, Transcendence, Ecology, Anthropocentricism, Post-Structural, Cosmic Christology.

I. Introduction

Christian theology is significantly influenced by classical scholasticism, particularly Thomistic philosophy.[1] As a result, when Aquinas' views are challenged, it questions many tenets of theology. Materialistic theories do precisely this. In this vein, Sam Mickey states that Plato was wrestling with materialism when he coined the word 'theology,' arguing that "there was never a theology that was not already thinking about materialism."[2] However, contemporary materialism encompasses a range of interpretations. In this context, 'New Materialism' emerges as a significant discourse, one that challenges foundational positions of Christian theology.[3]

Catherine Keller and Jane Rubenstein, taking cues from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, highlight how New Materialism traverses ecological, political, and sexual discourses today, overturning traditional frameworks of human thought.[4] New Materialism has emerged as a notable philosophical framework that presents a non-hierarchical perspective of reality, viewing all material entities as active participants within an ecocentric immanent cosmos.[5] This

1 "Aquinas' Philosophical Theology | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy," accessed October 20, 2024, https://iep.utm.edu/thomas-aquinas-political-theology/.

2 Sam Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology" (Brill, 2022), 9, https://brill.com/display/title/63078.

3 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 1.

4 Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms,* Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 1.

5 Daniel Colucciello Barber, *Deleuze and the Naming of God: Post-Secularism and the Future of Immanence*

stands in stark contrast to the theocentric Christian worldview, which positions God as the ultimate source and hierarchical head of all existence.[6] This discussion revolves around ontology, with many scholars viewing such naturalistic theories as a departure from medieval ontology, particularly those articulated by Thomas Aquinas.[7] In this context, Thomistic scholars argue for a continued significance of Thomistic ontology, especially Aquinas's concepts on origins and potentiality of matter as a strong response to modern naturalism.[8] Conversely, some critics find Aquinas's rigid ontological framework limiting and advocate for a more fluid, relational understanding of reality, as proposed by New Materialism.[9] In the middle ground, there is a call for an integration between classical religious thought and materialistic naturalism.[10] However, despite these tensions and a call for a constructive synthesis, there has been limited engagement between Thomistic ontology and New Materialism, creating a rich opportunity for further exploration around the discussion between transcendence and immanence and the hierarchical order in contemporary discourse.

In this context, this paper will explore the interplay between Thomistic thought and New Materialism, highlighting both the tensions and points of convergence, particularly

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 41.

6 Jeffrey E. Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

7 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 183.

8 Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White, eds., *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas,* Cambridge Companions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 117–21.

9 John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event,* Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 210–11.

10 Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

regarding transcendent and immanent realities, potentiality, and anthropocentrism. Additionally, a constructive proposal will attempt to show the possibility of bridging the gaps through an ecological framework that incorporates Asian perspectives. It is important to note, however, that the scope of this paper is limited to contrasting and exploring via media between Thomistic ontology and the vitalistic non-horizontal perspectives of New Materialism.

II. Materialistic Ontology

The emergence of modern secularisation, as articulated by early social theorists such as Max Weber and Karl Marx, suggests that modernisation defuses religious influence.[11] Charles Taylor echoes this sentiment, noting that medieval scholastics championed by Aquinas made a crucial distinction between the natural and the supernatural, granting autonomy to the latter. However, following the scientific revolution, philosophers like John Locke began to reject the classical understanding of normative reality, instead embracing material science over Aquinas' realism.[12] Additionally, post-Galilean concepts of natural laws marginalised sacred metaphysics, giving primacy to scientific reason.[13] Contemporary philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida also adopted critical views of metaphysics. They saw metaphysics as a hierarchical approach characteristic of Western philosophy.[14] These metaphysical views, notably held by Aquinas, incorporated Aristotelian hylomorphic and Platonic ideals in his understanding

11 Alexander J. B. Hampton, "Transcendence and Immanence: Deciphering Their Relation through the Transcendentals in Aquinas and Kant," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 189.

12 Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 183.

13 Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 271.

14 Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology,* Illustrated edition (London: Pelican, 2018), 9.

of God and creatures where the entire creation is fully dependent on the power of the transcendent God.[15] However, Taylor notes that since the Enlightenment period, there has been a growing anti-platonic sentiment and a "detachment of the Aristotelian matrix."[16] Given these shifts, Graham Harman asserts that the contemporary understanding of 'being' is better represented by the term 'ontology,' which he considers more rigorous for modern discourse over the term 'metaphysics.' Defining ontology as the study of being, rooted in the Greek term 'Ontos,' Harman argues that, unlike metaphysics, ontology is devoid of metaphysical connotations, making it more appropriate for contemporary discussions.[17] This reflects the ontological perspective assumed by New Materialism as opposed to Thomistic ontology.

III. Thomistic Ontology

Thomas Aquinas believed that two preliminary things must be considered to understand God: the rational analysis of whether God exists and who God is in the light of our reality (ontology). He cites Rom. 1:20, which states that "the hidden things of God can be clearly understood from the things that he has made," affirming that human reasoning can lead to the knowledge of God, as supported by scripture.[18] He maintained that the cosmos can be categorized under two ontological types: God and creatures. To him, God is an incorporeal being, while creatures are dualistic, with a mix of both

15 Gyula Klima and Alexander W. Hall, *Hylomorphism and Mereology,* Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics, volume 15 (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 67.

16 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 183.

17 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 10.

18 Rudi A. te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The Divine Science of the "Summa Theologiae,"* Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 37–38.

corporeal and the incorporeal, where "all creatures display a radical form of dependence on God."[19] Aquinas explores this relationship through the lens of hylomorphism, which asserts that matter takes on form, thus intertwining matter and form within each being, ultimately directed and initiated by God.[20]

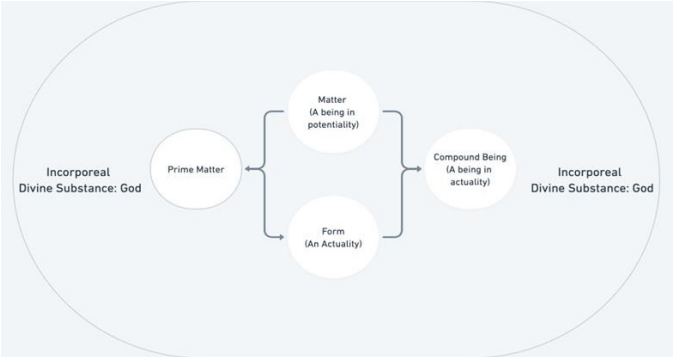

Figure 1.1. *Matter, Form, and Being (A Thomistic Model)*

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, Aquinas viewed matter, form, and compound being as three fixed types of existence. Matter and form share a relationship with the compound being, where the potentiality of matter is actualized by the form.[21] Furthermore, Aquinas's ontology extends beyond the corporeal world to include the incorporeal realm (God, angels and souls). However, God alone is the divine substance not composed of any form or matter.[22] Additionally, speaking of God and creation, Aquinas presents

19 Jeffrey E. Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

20 Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World,* 4–5.

21 Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World,* 6.

22 Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World,* 12–13.

cosmological and teleological arguments in the Summa Theologica to establish God's existence with God as the ontological head using normative rationality to justify his ontology.[23] As a result, Aquinas's ontology is theocentric, placing God as the ultimate causal source, while also being anthropocentric due to his reliance on the superiority of humans over all other creations.[24] Nevertheless, Aquinas acknowledged that beings possess the potentiality to change; as per hylomorphic thought, beings can change their physical nature and take on new forms. In this context, James Rooney suggests that Aquinas would accept the concept of naturalistic evolution and changes in the human body (abiogenesis) since his ontology permits God to oversee chance events (potentiality) and secondary causality within the created world. Additionally, Aquinas's idea of creation ex-nihilo resonates with contemporary scientific theories, such as the Big Bang, providing a coherent and unified explanation for existence.[25] Therefore, it can be argued that since New Materialism is grounded on naturalism, which endorses abiogenesis and evolution, it sets the ground for a deeper engagement with Thomistic ontology.

IV. New Materialistic Ontology

New Materialism can be defined variably, but for this discussion, it will be understood through the lens of Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy of vitalistic immanence, where the corporeal world is viewed as active, fluid, and changing.[26] Both were influential French thinkers, and they contributed to the modern post-structural

23 Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 37–38.

24 "St. Thomas Aquinas: Of God and His Creatures - Christian Classics Ethereal Library," accessed October 21, 2024, https://ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/gentiles.v.lxviii.html#fnf_v.lxviii-p1.2.

25 Stump and White, *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas,* 117–21.

26 John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Post-Humanism,* 2nd ed, Routledge Key Guides (London: Routledge, 2008).

framework of New Materialism.[27] Their work emerged from the mid-20th century movement of 'matter matters,' born out of the realisation that the significance of science has been neglected.[28] According to Kenneth Surin, Deleuze and Guattari have three important ontologies, namely, 'filmic', 'semiotic', and the ontology of 'desiring-production.' They revolve around the subject matter of images of thought, the semiosis of infinities, and the belief that desire actively shapes concepts and social landscapes.[29] However, this paper will focus on the rhizomatic mode of thought, which falls under process ontology, a model of fluidity and multiplicity. For context, before Plato, the term 'rhizomatic' (meaning 'roots') was used to describe elements, reflecting a hylozoistic view that considers matter to be alive. Stoic philosophers developed this view and saw the entire world as a divine, living entity engaged in endless cycles of creation and destruction.[30] Likewise, Deleuze and Guattari expanded on this philosophy, envisioning society as a network of organisms which exists by exploring enough differences in its relation to other organisms and systems over time, a perspective grounded in naturalism and evolution.[31] Later, in the 1970s, they introduced the concept of 'Schizoanalysis,' a socio-political and clinical concept that represents a rhizomatic mode of thought, asserting that all material aspects, including humans, are fluid and free, unbound by immaterial or social-human consciousness.[32]

27 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 6.

28 Ulrike Kissmann et al., eds., *Discussing New Materialism: Methodological Implications for the Study of Materialities* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019), 16.

29 Kenneth Surin, *Deleuze and Guattari: Selected Writings* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 16–20.

30 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 5.

31 Kissmann et al., *Discussing New Materialism,* 21.

32 Kissmann et al., *Discussing New Materialism,* 4.

Unlike Thomistic thought, form (essence, identity) and matter are interconnected and dynamic rather than fixed. Likewise, Bennet speaks of matter as having 'agentic capacity' just as humans are composed of "the minerality of our bones... or the electricity of our neurons."[33] However, she warns that the failure to recognize the uniqueness of humanity could objectify humans. To address this concern, she argues for "a strong distinction between subjects and objects to prevent the instrumentalisation of humans."[34] This highlights New Materialism's challenge to conventional views of humanity.

New Materialism also challenges Aquinas's notion through the concept of difference by asserting that "the attribute, or form, has intrinsic modes" and argues against the view that forms are fixed and invariable.[35] Furthermore, when discussing God hypothetically, Deleuze asserts that if God is the cause of all things, he identifies himself with the cause (creation), suggesting that the divine is inherently involved in the processes of existence. However, he distinguishes between cause and effect. Here, he introduces the idea of difference and becoming and argues that the effects of the being that arise from this divine source must have their form of agency.[36] In other words, the creator no longer exerts control over the actions of the created matter. In agreement with Deleuze, John Caputo questions the essentialist, metaphysical frameworks of Aquinas that rely on rational discourse, suggesting instead that faith arises from

33 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 25–26.

34 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 27.

35 Daniel Colucciello Barber, *Deleuze and the Naming of God: Post-Secularism and the Future of Immanence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 41.

36 Colucciello Barber, *Deleuze and the Naming of God,* 45–46.

natural events.[37] He builds on Deleuze's idea and proposes that God is not a fixed sovereign entity but an unpredictable event, open-ended and disruptive.[38] Referencing Amos 5:21-24, Caputo asserts that God desires justice, not fixed rituals or religion.[39] Here, he advocates for process ontology and a pantheistic vision of God. In this light, Daniel Barber asserts that while Aquinas found power in divine creation, Deleuze locates power in difference and the process of becoming inherent in existence.[40] He also draws on Nietzsche's idea of 'eternal return,' which emphasizes that reality does not revert to identical forms but instead reflects a rhizomatic and dynamic process of becoming. Thus, Deleuze concludes that "Returning is being, but only the being of becoming," meaning that true existence (being) is tied to the process of change rather than being fixed.[41] The example of Korean kimchi serves as an excellent illustration of this philosophy. In kimchi, various vegetables, spices, and fish sauces are combined and fermented through the action of anaerobic bacteria. This process not only transforms the ingredients into a distinctive pickle but also allows the flavour to deepen and evolve, becoming tangier and more authentic as it ages. This interplay among different species, microbes, and life forms reflects a rich network of chemical interactions, embodying a state of infinite becoming. It exemplifies a nuanced understanding of how New Materialism views the concepts of difference and transformation.

37 Caputo, *The Weakness of God,* 210–11.

38 Caputo, *The Weakness of God,* 380.

39 Caputo, *The Weakness of God,* 327–28.

40 Colucciello Barber, Deleuze and the Naming of God, 86.

41 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003), 56.

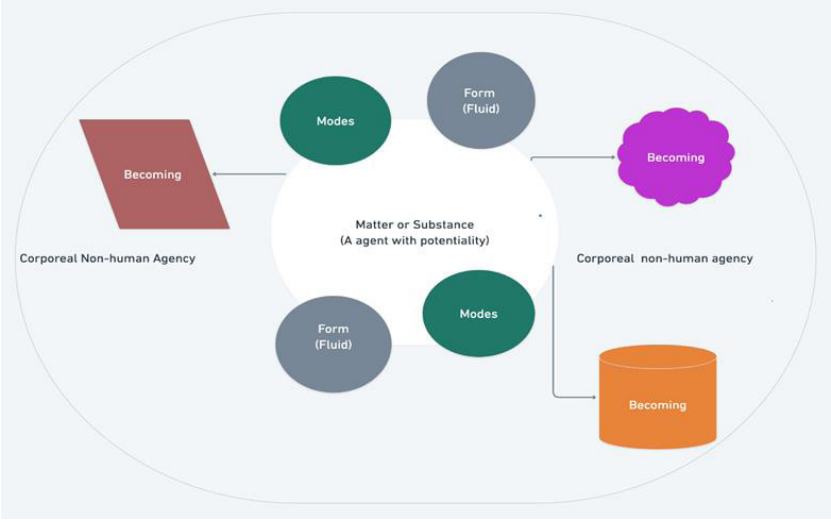

Figure 2.1. *Form, Matter and State of Becoming (A New Materialism Model)*

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, the ontological understanding of matter is not fixed because the form itself is fluid, and matter is always in a state of becoming. Similarly, modes represent the various expressions or manifestations of matter which remains fluid.[42] Moreover, it is important to note that matter emerges as a result of naturalistic processes within the corporeal world. Unlike Thomism, there are no hierarchies, structures, or influence of a transcendent or metaphysical reality, exemplifying an immanent naturalistic framework.

42 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 56.

V. Engaging with the Tension

V.1 Immanence, Transcendence, and Potentiality

Wolfhart Pannenberg critiques Aquinas for employing dualism and a hierarchical view of metaphysics to elevate theology and relegate other sciences by merely using rationality.[43] Likewise, Manuel Delanda presents the limitation of New Materialism by asserting that it cannot completely dismiss the ontology of medieval scholastics, particularly medieval hylomorphism. This is because New Materialism, which embraces emergence and rejects fixed essences without any teleological purpose, struggles to explain why certain systems and materials develop more organized forms and sustain stability.[44] Furthermore, New Materialism overlooks the discourse about the origin of matter itself, which can be a significant limitation. In contrast, Aquinas held that God participates in the sustenance of creation with a teleological purpose that rests in the eschatological hope and person of Christ. Therefore, in the discourse of God, immanence cannot be divorced from transcendence.[45] However, Deleuze identifies a problem in such relationships. He argues that such plurality is self-defeating because though the multiplicity of reality is a given, 'positive multiplicity' must arise from natural dialectics.[46] In this case, the subject of transcendental ideas is rendered irrelevant. Matter, in its natural sense, alone holds intrinsic agency. In this context, Mickey highlights the distinction between transcendent and immanent realities, stating that people no longer say, "'You've got a soul, and you must save it,

43 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 230–31.

44 Manuel De Landa, *Assemblage Theory,* Speculative Realism SPRE (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 141–42.

45 Hampton, *"Transcendence and Immanence,"* 193.

46 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 231–33.

but: 'You've got a sexual nature, and you must find out how to use it.'"[47] This shift illustrates how the emphasis on the immanence of nature and matter overshadows transcendental realities. This is why Mickey asserts that New Materialism can be a strong "anti-religious force."[48] Therefore, expectedly, New Materialists are critical towards philosophies that were imbued with theism. For context, Friedrich Hegel believed in a totality of wholeness in reality, where each part reflects and reproduces the whole. Henry Somers argues that Søren Kierkegaard criticized this philosophy due to the prioritization of the immanent reality and the undermining of all human experiences.[49] However, in agreement with Hegel's view, Deleuze and Guattari came up with the thought model of the "rhizome," the "imageless thought," in contrast to Kierkegaard's views, which observe reality without any transcendental influence.[50] Furthermore, in the debate over Nietzsche's view of God, Deleuze argues that thinkers like Kierkegaard represent the culmination of Emmanuel Kant, placing faith as the means to address the speculative death of God.[51] This is so because Deleuze maintained that the adventure of faith is where "one is always the clown of one's faith, the comedian of one's ideal."[52] Regarding faith and the material, he argued that "one is actual, the other virtual; one is horizontal, the other vertical."[53] Deleuze and Guattari also held that "climate, wind, season, hour are

47 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 23.

48 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 28.

49 Henry Somers-Hall, "Kierkegaard and Deleuze: Anxiety, Possibility and a World Without Others," in *Kierkegaard and Possibility,* ed. Erin Plunkett (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2023), 100–101, https://philarchive.org/rec/SOMKAD.

50 Somers-Hall, "Kierkegaard and Deleuze," 116.

51 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 114.

52 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 115.

53 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 103.

not of another nature than the things, animals, or people."[54] Thus, New Materialism contests the Thomistic perspectives where animals and vegetation are relegated beneath humans. In agreement, Eileen Joy argues that "the human is both a structural position" and the elevation of it over animals and nature.[55] Thus, it is clear that New Materialism seeks to overturn Thomistic hierarchies, objectivity, anthropocentrism and dependence on a transcendent reality.

It is also important to recognize the limitations of New Materialism. According to Keller and Rubenstein, New Materialism traverses new boundaries and "seeks to displace human privilege by attending to the agency of matter itself."[56] However, Benjamin Boysen and Jesper Rasmussen argue that New Materialism falls short of its claims, noting that even in the premodern enchanted world, power and meanings resided "in things, or various kinds of extra-human... subjects."[57] Consequently, the question arises as to whether New Materialism represents a genuinely new strand of thought or merely a modern version of atheistic naturalism. If so, it must be noted that contemporary scholars provide updated interpretations of Thomistic thought that can engage with such naturalistic theories. For Instance, Foucault, an atheist influenced by Deleuze, posited that "all stages of human development are merely shifting interpretations" devoid of any external or spiritual

54 Eileen Joy, "Like an Old Inscription That Has Been Scratched Away and Covered with Leaves: A Meditation on the Face," accessed October 22, 2024, https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2008/10/like-old-inscription-that-has-been.html.

55 Joy, "Like an Old Inscription That Has Been Scratched Away and Covered with Leaves."

56 Keller and Rubenstein, *Entangled Worlds*, 1.

57 Dr Benjamin Boysen and Dr Jesper Lundsfryd Rasmussen, eds., *Against New Materialisms: Craving for Reality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 10.

forces.[58] In contrast, Theodore Walker argues that God signifies the all-encompassing whole of reality, asserting that the atheism espoused by Deleuzian scholars is logically flawed because there remains no scientific evidence that disproves the transcendental engagement of a designer with the cosmos.[59] In support, thinkers like William Craig, Richard Swinburne, and Paul Copan have revitalised Aquinas' cosmological arguments, linking them to Edwin Hubble's discovery of the Big Bang expansion to present a rationale for the existence of a transcendent designer.[60] Swinburne, building on Aquinas, proposed the requirement of a theistic teleology from the perspective of design and order.[61] Similarly, Craig contends that Aquinas' perspective of a priori potentiality and the hylomorphic integration of forms and matter, where existence derives from an external force, provides a strong theistic argument.[62] Given that New Materialism opposes metaphysical views of creation, a theistic case for creation that is naturalistically charged becomes relevant. Therefore, if New Materialism is indeed a reconfigured form of naturalism, then the revitalised views of Aquinas pose a significant challenge to the foundations of New Materialism. This highlights the relevance of situating Aquinas within contemporary discussions.

The tension between Thomistic ontology and New Materialism is evident, yet there are mutual points of convergence.

58 Boysen and Rasmussen, *Against New Materialisms.*

59 Keller and Rubenstein, *Entangled Worlds*, 223.

60 Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (London: Baker Academic, 2004), 195–222.

61 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God, 2nd ed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 155–57, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199271672.001.0001.

62 Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Arguments of the Finitude of the Past,* The Kalām Cosmological Argument (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 59–60.

Forinstance, Aquinas's concept of privation, which explains 'becoming' or potentiality as the fulfilment of an absence in nature,[63] partially aligns with New Materialism's view on matter and form as always in a state of becoming/evolving. Deleuze and Guattari, through their concepts of assemblages, highlight the continuous transformation and interaction between humans and non-humans, forming dynamic networks that enable new modes of existence.[64] This idea falls under process ontology and trans-humanism. From this viewpoint, John Boyer and Geoffrey Meadows suggest that Aquinas would support transhumanism, as he recognized that improvements in the body enhance intellectual activity without altering human nature (phenotype).[65] Here, Aquinas' perspective on the potentiality inherent in beings permits a fluid understanding of change and the concept of becoming, facilitating a dialogue with New Materialism's focus on matter's vibrancy and potentiality.

V.2 Challenging Anthropocentrism

In New Materialism, there also exists a notable tension between the human and non-human realms, largely stemming from the negative impact of humanity on the natural world. In this light, Anne Elvey points out that many new materialists think of humankind as a "geological force" of destruction.[66] Tony Birch frames the current

63 Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Matter and Form and the Elements: A Translation and Interpretation of the De Principiis Naturae and the De Mixtione Elementorum of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 20–21.

64 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003), 332–34.

65 John Boyer and Geoffrey Meadows, "Thomas Aquinas: Teacher of Transhumanity?," in *Thomas Aquinas: Teacher of Humanity,* ed. John Hittinger and Daniel C. Wagner (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 183, https://philarchive.org/rec/BOYTAT-2.

66 Anne F. Elvey, *Reading with Earth: Contributions of the New Materialism to an Ecological Feminist*

global climate crisis as a human war against the earth.[67] Likewise, Dipesh Chakrabarty states that "freedom of humans from... nature... projects of mastery over the natural world."[68] Additionally, Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robin argue that "New Materialism is a 'radical theological vision' against false spirituality.[69] In this vein, critiquing human cultures, Rosi Braidotti and DeLanda draw on Deleuzian thought and challenge all human constructs to be dismantled.[70] In response, Mickey argues that such radicalness ends up affirming John Stewart's statement that "human identity is no different in category from a wave, flame, or wind."[71] In contrast, Slavoj Žižek describes this as "a kind of spiritualism without gods" where matter becomes a god while ironically seeking to dismiss spirituality.[72] He also warns against transhuman innovations like 'Neuralink,' which aims to create brain-computer interfaces, arguing that connecting the human brain to digital networks poses existential risks. He highlights how the energy demands of these technologies are often underestimated. Likewise, economist Jeffrey Sachs argues that technology can exacerbate ecological destruction because its efficiencies lead to greater economic development.[73] In this context, Jürgen Habermas posits that naturalistic philosophies (New Materialism) as such often fail to accurately reflect reality due to their conflicting and incompatible ontologies.[74] He concludes that the shortcomings of

Hermeneutics (New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 104.

67 Elvey, *Reading with Earth,* 107.

68 Boysen and Rasmussen, *Against New Materialisms,* 176.

69 Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism, Radical Theologies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17.

70 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 22.

71 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 11.

72 Boysen and Rasmussen, *Against New Materialisms,* 11.

73 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 66–67.

74 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 167.

post-metaphysical thought create opportunities for neo-Thomism to respond towards a better understanding of faith and reason in the contemporary philosophical landscape.[75] This calls for caution within New Materialism and the need for Thomistic engagement.

V.3 Bridging Realms: Engaging Thomistic Thought and New Materialism through an Eco-Theological Framework

New Materialism is characterised by a naturalistic ecocentric view, while Thomistic ontology is grounded in an anthropocentric and theocentric framework. In this context, like Rooney, Thomas Joseph White establishes the relevance of Thomism in engaging with modern cosmological debates on causation and naturalistic theories.[76] He suggests that while naturalism presents a flat immanent theory, Thomistic ontology, culminating in the figure of the incarnate Christ, provides both immanent and transcendental purposes of creation.[77] Similarly, John Polkinghorne critiques classical theism as promoted by Aquinas for placing too much emphasis on divine transcendence, often neglecting God's immanent relationship with the world. He suggests a more balanced approach that centres on the eschatological hope found in Christ, referencing the work of Jürgen Moltmann.[78] In response to modern naturalism, N.T. Wright also calls for a deeper Christian cosmology that recognizes the active presence of Christ in His human nature throughout the entire

75 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion,* 242–43.

76 Thomas Joseph White, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Book 1: On the Nature of Theology,* Thomistic Ressourcement Series, volume 23 (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 132–37.

77 Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology,* Thomistic Ressourcement Series, volume 5 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 478–80.

78 J. C. Polkinghorne, *Faith, Science, and Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 89–93.

cosmos.[79] Consequently, one could address this divide by considering a Cosmic Christological perspective. In light of this, Paul Santmire's position becomes relevant. He develops his theology based on Joseph Sittler's concept of 'Cosmic Christology,' arguing that Christ has a redemptive purpose for the material world. He points out that classical theology often holds a negative outlook towards creation.[80] He critiques Aquinas for distancing the creator from creation due to his understanding of God's overtly transcendent governance over creation, advocating an unrelatable vertical relationship between God and creation.[81] Santmire challenges Aquinas, who claimed that God was the first cause of creation before the primordial age,[82] arguing instead that God is an "ever-present final cause" who is actively engaged with creation today and not distanced.[83] He opposes Aquinas' ontological perspectives by asserting that God is 'not the above' because God fills all things (Eph. 4:10). This view revitalises nature, highlighting that all created entities partake equally in God. Furthermore, he discusses how the cosmic journey of Christ with all creation will "enter into joy of Godself... the glorious climax."[84] This presents an idea of 'becoming,' which may align with a more nuanced view of New Materialism. Santmire also mentions Christian martyrs alongside animals such as dogs and elephants, known for their sacrificial acts to protect others, highlighting how

79 N. T. Wright, Surprised by *Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 78–82.

80 H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology,* Theology and the Sciences (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 33.

81 Santmire, *The Travail of Nature,* 86–88.

82 Santmire, *The Travail of Nature,* 86–88.

83 H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 52.

84 H. Paul Santmire, "Toward a Cosmic Christology: A Kerygmatic Proposal," *Theology and Science, Routledge 9,* no. 3 (August 1, 2011): 169, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2011.587664.

creation mirrors Christ's self-sacrificial character.[85] He suggests that the exposition of these themes could be further enriched by drawing on Luther's concept of ubiquity, which captures a mystical and paradoxical understanding of Christ's omnipresent suffering and kenotic experience with all of creation.[86]

Rosemary Radford Ruether states that nature and matter have frequently been perceived as subhuman, with natural divinities dismissed as false gods, arguing that European dualism has skewed biblical notions of nature, a view shared by New Materialism.[87]Agreeing with Santmire, she identifies Christ as the logos redeemer of all things.[88] Likewise, Keith Woodhouse argues against post-structural extremists who put animals over humans[89] but also appreciates Santmire's stand against "man's transcendent power over nature."[90] M. M. Thomas also discusses the need to engage eschatological dimensions and transcendence of human existence with the "philosophy of secularism," highlighting the interplay between human and non-human forces in shaping discussions about genuine humanity.[91] Furthermore, Thomas speaks of gender and racial identities in the Asian context, where religion must

85 H. Paul Santmire, *Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 148–49.

86 Santmire, "Toward a Cosmic Christology," 289.

87 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (California: HarperSanFranscisco, 1992), 207.

88 Ruether, *Gaia & God,* 232.

89 Keith Makoto Woodhouse, "In Defence of People: Environmentalism and the Religious Right in Late Twentieth-Century American Politics," in *Religion and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars,* ed. Darren Dochuk, New Directions in a Divided America (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 267.

90 Woodhouse, "In Defence of People," 269–70.

91 M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1971), 42–43.

propose a new "structure of human existence" where equality and unity of all cultures are maintained as we struggle towards freedom from historical subjugation and classifications.[92] Likewise, Kwok Pui-Lan also critiques Eurocentric notions of nature where cultural constructs dominate women and nature, rather asserting that Asian traditions must be lifted where harmony with nature alongside women is celebrated in many Asian cultures.[93] These positions are commendable because they highlight both the relevance of theology and the significance of post-structural theories, which traverse multiple discourses.

Mickey concludes that New Materialism gives total epistemological prioritization to matter, while theology prioritizes the human and the spiritual.[94] Taking the middle ground, he argues that theology must rethink "the meaning of materiality from many different theoretical perspectives" because both address common existential, social, and environmental challenges. He aligns with Santmire by suggesting that the incarnation of the divine logos exemplifies this New Materialism, particularly in the "entanglement of word and flesh in sacraments like the Eucharist."[95] In agreement, Keller argues that we must create new theological materialisms where, along with matter, the "body of Christ" is lifted with it.[96]Likewise, Wati Longchar speaks of how in some North-East Indian indigenous beliefs, God, who is 'Lijaba,' 'Li' meaning 'land' and 'jaba' meaning 'real,' portrays the supreme being as "the real

92 M.M. Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1977), 95.

93 Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 114–15.

94 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 31–32.

95 Mickey, "New Materialism and Theology," 33–34.

96 Keller and Rubenstein, *Entangled Worlds,* 9.

soil."[97] These views link back to Santmire's ubiquity theology and the representation of Christ as a cosmic ecological figure, both immanent and transcendent.

In sum, an ontology that is partially rhizomatic and theistically informed can be understood as a dynamic process of potentiality, as indicated by both New Materialism and Thomistic ontology. A constructive framework built on these principles values the naturalistic focus on interconnectedness and the vibrancy of matter while also aiming for eschatological fulfilment in Christ or a transcendent ideal. Such cross-learning perspectives foster open dialogue, facilitating discussions on topics such as naturalism, new atheism, technological and material stewardship, ecological issues, etc. For instance, Deleuze's concept of "collective rhizomatic web of relations"[98] aligns with contemporary research that demonstrates vegetation as possessing agency and revealing a deep interconnectedness within forest ecosystems. Studies indicate that trees, fungi, and plants communicate through their root systems, exchanging information and resources such as sugars, calcium ions, and carbon dioxide, essentially serving as agents for ecological support, especially in response to threats like insect attacks and deforestation. (Where resources are shared as a form of payment).[99]This demonstrates that vegetation and minerals possess a form of agency, actively contributing to the maintenance of ecological balance and life on Earth. These findings

97 Wati Longchar, M.M. Ekka, and Hrangthan Chhungi, *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia: Towards New Frontiers* (Nagpur: NCCI/GTC/SCEPTRE, 2012), 200.

98 Daniel Warren Smith and Henry Somers-Hall, *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze,* Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 175.

99 Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2016), 43.

encourage theology to acknowledge the vibrancy in nature and adopt a less hierarchical approach towards ecology and promote greater environmental justice amid current ecological crisis. Furthermore, the emerging trend of post-metaphysical thought, which rejects the idea of a transcendental reality, can be critiqued for its lack of existential hope, contradictions, purpose and sense of material origins. In contrast, a theistic perspective grounded in Christ's eschatological teleology offers a deeper sense of meaning. Thereby, achieving a balance between transcendental and immanent viewpoints serves as an apologetic response to theistic naturalism, which often appeals to younger generations. In this context, recognizing both transcendental and immanent realities fosters a more balanced and open-ended approach to complex issues and possibility for deeper engagement, enriching discussions while affirming Christ as Lord and God having divine precedence over creation, distinct yet universally present and active.

VI. Conclusion

The interplay between Thomistic ontology and New Materialism presents a fertile ground for evaluating theology and human-matter-nature relationships. While Thomistic thought emphasizes the transcendence of God and the hierarchical ordering of creation, New Materialism challenges these frameworks by prioritizing the agency and intrinsic value of non-human entities. The integrated insights of Mickey, Santmire, Keller, Wright, Craig etc. along with other Asian ecological theologies where there is already a recognition of agency and vibrancy in the material world, facilitate a nuanced dialogue that bridges these seemingly opposing views by proposing an eco-ontological model that recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings, both human and non-human through the cosmic

presence of Christ, while maintaining a theistic perspective of reality. Ultimately, this integrative approach not only enriches theological discourse but also promotes further research on religious naturalism, existentialism, socio-religious, environmental ethics, etc. In sum, this discourse becomes relevant in the light of multifaceted contemporary discourses.

In conclusion, this paper introduces the possibility for constructive synthesis from both evangelical and non-evangelical perspectives. Here, the paper considers the possibilities for an Eco-cosmic Christology that ensures God's hierarchical significance and Christ's cosmic presence in creation while avoiding a slide into pantheism and radical panentheism by maintaining the hierarchical order and distinction between God and creation. It also examines the strengths, weaknesses and points of convergence between New Materialism and Thomistic ontology. Ultimately, the research aims to affirm the importance of theistic ontology and contribute to the formation of interdisciplinary conceptual synthesises that engage with New Materialism and related discussions on naturalism, new atheism, technology, transhumanism, posthumanism, ecology, and related contemporary discourse.

BOOK REVIEWS

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Mere Christian Hermeneutics: *Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically,* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024. Pp. 424, ISBN: 9780310234388. Reviewed by Kevin Storer

In recent decades something of a civil war has broken out among Evangelicals about which interpretive methods should be employed in the reading of Scripture. Some Evangelicals believe that Evangelical identity depends on employing the historical-grammatical method alone, thereby restricting Scripture's meaning to human authorial intent, while other Evangelicals have sought to retrieve certain premodern hermeneutical insights, thereby placing greater focus on the intention of the divine Author and attempting to ground interpretive adequacy more within the rule of faith than in the original historical context. The first group (we might call them Evangelical "Modernists") worry that premodern approaches lead to fanciful and arbitrary renderings of Scripture's plain sense, while the second group (we might call them Evangelical "Premodernists") worry that the historical-grammatical method tends to restrict the meaning of Scripture to mere historical reference and fails to attend adequately to God's present communicative action in Scripture. In this book Kevin Vanhoozer seeks to move beyond this present Evangelical divide by proposing a Mere Christian Hermeneutics, a set of "principles used everywhere and at all times by those who read the Bible as Scripture" (402), which enable readers to attend to both human and divine authorship, to view Christ as the ultimate referent of the canon, and to read with the goal of transformation into Christ.

To articulate this Mere Christian Hermeneutic, Vanhoozer leads readers along three steps. The first step (Part I) is to show that Christians have always viewed the Bible as divine address given for the purpose of creating a community faithful to God, and to enable readers to approach the text with these theological presuppositions. Vanhoozer's unique contribution in this section is to show that the present conflict of interpretations is less about discerning the meaning of the text than it is about determining which "frames of reference" exegetes must employ when they read the Bible (122). A frame of reference is a "set of assumptions… that influences or determines what one thinks the text is about" and thereby "conditions the readers' perception of the literal sense" (401). Vanhoozer notes that Modernism has typically employed an "immanent" frame of reference (seeing Scripture as being merely about human events and communication), while Postmodernism has more recently favored "identity" frames of reference (viewing interpretation as being determined by the readers' own context and interests). While biblical interpretation will always require multiple frames of reference to do justice to the Biblical subject matter (and hence a plurality of methods will always be used), only a "grammatical-eschatological exegesis" (a respect for the literal sense set within an eschatological frame of reference) will enable the reader to view the whole canon as a unified narrative leading to Christ.

Vanhoozer's second step (Part II) is to show that literal reading must include figural reading to attend faithfully to both human and divine authorship. Recognizing that there has never been final agreement on the definition of the literal sense ("literal" has been variously defined as the "verbal," "historical," or "literary"

sense, as "authorial intent," or as "ruled reading" (114-121)), Vanhoozer suggests that "literal interpretation will mean something different in the church than the academy thanks to the respective frames of reference each privileges" (144). Drawing upon Jesus's own claims that the Scriptures bear witness to Him (Luke 24:27, John 5:46, etc.), Vanhoozer argues that figural reading just is literal reading under the eschatological frame of reference. Because "Jesus is eschatologically present in all the Scriptures" (142), the Church must see Christ as "the Bible's literal referent" as it reads "in canonical context to hear the divine address" (144). Here the "literal sense" is still the "plain sense," but this "plain sense" is "plain" only to those who approach Scripture from an eschatological frame of reference, seeing the whole Bible as leading to Christ.

Vanhoozer's third step (Part III) is to show that because the purpose of the Bible is about the transformation of the believer, literal reading under the correct frame of reference (and therefore figural reading) requires transfigural reading: a canonical reading which "discerns the glory of Christ in the letter of the text" (402). Crucial to Vanhoozer's argument is his claim that just as there was no "substantial" change in Jesus's body in the transfiguration, so also there must be no change in meaning in the literal sense of the text as new frames of reference enable readers to see and be transfigured by Christ's glory in Scripture. Transfigural reading is "ultimately a spiritual exercise…requiring readers to have the 'eyes of their hearts' enlightened by the Spirit" (270).

Vanhoozer's great achievement in this book is to define the "literal sense" of Scripture in such a way that it includes both "figural reading" (looking for the pattern of events ordered by God

to lead to Christ in salvation history) and "spiritual reading" (the movement beyond the mere "history" or "literal sense" of the text to reading in light of Christ by the rule of faith) through the use of an eschatological "frame of reference." This decisively "Christian" construal of the literal sense allows Vanhoozer to insist that the "sense" of Scripture remains the same whether it is considered in its historical context, its canonical context, or its ultimate telos of transforming readers in Christ, and to likewise insist that "readers who refuse to expand their referential horizons, insisting on the immediate historical referent only," finally fail to attend adequately even to Scripture's literal sense (248). The equation of literal, figural, and transfigural reading thus provides the framework for a *Mere Christian Hermeneutic,* one which prioritizes careful attention to Scripture's divine and human authorship, Scripture's canonical and Christ-centered structure, and Scripture's inherent goal of transfiguring the reader in the economy of light. Such literal, figural, transfigural reading, in turn, becomes the Christian criterion by which to judge the usefulness of all interpretive methods. Within the bounds of this Mere Christian Hermeneutic, we may hope that Evangelical "Modernists" and "Premodernists" will together pursue readings of Scripture that reflect the light of Christ and will result in the transformation of readers.

Fred Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity & Soteriology.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021, 221pp. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7810-6. Reviewed by Simar Bindra

Coming from a Sikh background, I remember my enthusiasm when I first learned about the Triunity of the God of the Bible. But I came to find that this is not a commonly shared excitement

for many Evangelical Christians. My friend, a pastor's son, once mentioned that he heard the Triune Name of Godhead only during baptism. On another occasion, I was questioned about my interest in pursuing Trinitarian theology because I was "irreverently curious" about the incomprehensible mystery. These instances made me aware that while Christians affirm the Triunity of God, very few can articulate basic Trinitarian doctrine, and even fewer appreciate the implications of Triune theology for the Christian life. Fred Sanders also expresses concern about this reductionistic tendency among Evangelicals with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, and writes this book to revive Trinitarian theology by showing the intrinsic connection between Trinitarianism and all other Christian doctrines.

Sanders begins the book by demonstrating the vastness, relevance and purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity (chapters 1 and 2). The doctrine is vast because it is a bedrock for all other doctrines. The doctrine is relevant because it is necessarily related to the gospel. The doctrine's primary purpose is to articulate the connection between God and the economy of salvation (33-34). Sanders then demonstrates the practical significance of Trinitarian doctrine for Evangelical theology by showing how the Trinity governs other doctrines relating to God's outward movement towards creation (chapters 3-7). Throughout these chapters, Sanders uses the imagery of God as the divine fountain—the fountain of salvation based on Isaiah 12:1-3—to avoid a mechanical rendering of the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity and Salvation. Conceptually, this means that every time one thinks of salvation, he/she should think of God as a fountainhead where the Father sent the Son and the Spirit in the economy. Systematically, this means that the doctrine of the Trinity must act as a comprehensive

field giving shape to the doctrines of atonement, ecclesiology, Christology and Pneumatology (chapters 3-7). Finally, Sanders presents his own systematic approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, which he calls the "Nicene style" (chapters 8-10). This approach has several features: first, it follows the salvation history to introduce the three persons; second, it expects readers to adopt a retrospective reading to relate the economic Trinity (temporal missions) to the immanent Trinity (eternal processions); and third, it makes doctrine of the Trinity a unifying source for all theological disciplines (Old and New Testament; historical, systematic and practical theology; ethics and apologetics) (149-151).

Throughout the book, Sanders argues that the tendency among Evangelicals to underemphasize the doctrine of the Trinity effaces the rich biblical language about God's work in salvation and reduces salvation history to a mere set of propositions and prescriptions. Sanders encourages Evangelicals to develop their Trinitarian theology by emphasizing a close relationship between the Trinity and the gospel, which he calls "gospel trinitarianism" (136,137). By this, Sanders promotes a gospel-centered language to articulate the Trinity, which makes the doctrine of the Trinity much more practical in the minds of ordinary Christians. For example, Sanders argues that the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son has immediate relevance to soteriology because it makes the Christian experience of salvation by adoption more than a metaphor, as the eternal generation of the Son is the foundation for the adoption of believers (104-05). Further, Sanders argues that the eternal procession of the Spirit has immediate relevance to soteriology, because by receiving the Holy Spirit (the gift), we are invited into a relation with the whole Godhead (the giver), as

the eternal procession of the Spirit is the foundation for believers seeking the spirit of wisdom and revelation (122). Throughout the book, Sanders prefers the Irenaean image of the Father with two hands, the Son and the Spirit, over the Augustinian rule that God's external actions are undivided because it helps Christians approach the doctrine of the Trinity in close relation with Christology and Pneumatology (138,139). Moreover, Sanders suggests that Irenaeus's "ambidextrous" analogy prevents theologians from relying too exclusively on geometry to explain the doctrine of the Trinity (141).

Sanders' concern about Evangelical "anti-trinitarian timidity" is legitimate and needs attention. However, Sander's proposal to rehabilitate Trinitarian theology by studying it primarily in light of the gospel may lead to a different kind of reductionist approach where the content of Trinitarian theology is reduced to God's action in the economy of salvation. Sanders accepts the ontic priority of the immanent Trinity and the epistemic priority of the economic Trinity (42), yet this distinction is not always kept clear when he articulates the relation between the processions (immanent) and missions (economic). At times, missions are described as so closely corresponding to processions that there seems little room to speak of the immanent Trinity for its own sake (see 49, 72,73,92-95). Some contemporary theologians (such as Katherine Sonderegger) would worry that if the only thing Evangelicals can say about the inner life of God is how it corresponds to God's outward actions in salvation, they may still be reducing the Trinity by seeing the Godhead through an anthropocentric lens. If articulation of the importance of the Trinity for the sake of salvation does not lead to a recognition of the importance of the Trinity for the purpose of knowing and worshipping God for God's own sake, Trinitarian

theology has not yet reached its telos.

This book will be most useful for seminarians who have already taken courses in Trinitarianism and Soteriology. It would be particularly useful in a course on theological method, as chapter 8 invites theological students to consider the arrangement of doctrines in a systematic theology and how other doctrines should interact with the doctrine of the Trinity.