

# Foundations

An international journal of evangelical theology

EDITION 87 | February 2025

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# Foundations Theological Journal

*Foundations* is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and

evangelical ecumenism. It has been published by Affinity (formerly The British Evangelical Council) from its inception as a print journal. It became a digital journal in April 2011. The views expressed in the articles published in *Foundations* do not necessarily represent the views of Affinity or its partners although all content must be within the bounds of the Affinity Doctrinal Basis.

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## EDITORIAL

*He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:26, ESV)*

This, much delayed edition of *Foundations*, covers a wide variety of topics of interest to the church – ranging from the text of scripture to the role of men and women in the church.

Two of the articles either directly or indirectly continue from earlier editions of *Foundations*. Professor Ian Shaw provides the second part of his sobering consideration of “Slavery, The Slave Trade and Christians’ Theology.” (For part one see *Foundations* 86 - Spring 2024). It is humbling to consider the failings of the church, which were so serious. But it is encouraging to be reminded of those who rightly understood the Bible’s teachings and who, driven by Christian conviction, fought against slavery. Stephen Steele continues his examination of historical views on the original text of scripture. He previously argued (*Foundations* 85 - Winter 2023) that leading theologians around the time of the Westminster Assembly were not committed to “word for word” identification of the “Textus Receptus” with the original manuscripts of scripture. Building on this, Steele now turns his attention to the founding fathers of the Free Church of Scotland. Again, he seeks to demonstrate that they, far from viewing the “Textus Receptus” as sacrosanct, argued for the superiority of alternative readings of the original text. Any alternative understandings of the Free Church Fathers, or indeed any scholarly response to Steel’s first article, would be most welcome in *Foundations*. *Foundations* is an academic journal committed to dialogue within the range of views permitted by the Affinity basis of faith.

Alison Umpleby provides an important engagement with Nay Dawson’s recent book *She Needs: Women Flourishing in the Church* (IVP, 2024). This review article



is sympathetic to the aims of the book and yet also raises important questions as to how discussions over the role of men and women in the church are best addressed. In essence Umpleby argues that we cannot really see women flourishing in the church without agreement on “the big picture of who God is, his purpose in creating us male and female, and how individual men and women are called to live out our gifts and callings within that bigger vision.” I.e. the main thing is to understand the Bible’s teaching on what it means for women to flourish (even where that cuts across our culture’s desires). Umpleby makes the case (perhaps due to the purpose of the book) that this needed clarity is lacking.

The final two articles provide engagement with topics related to apologetics. With apologies to those with a fear of statistics, Nick Meader provides an examination of the likelihood of the resurrection based on a Bayesian approach. Meader’s article certainly provides interesting reading. The final article from Steve Bishop and Mark Roques considers the topic of mysticism, and specifically so-called Christian mysticism. This is relevant given cultural trends in the West, and Bishop and Roques provide a trenchant critique.

I trust these articles, and the book reviews in this issue, are all of help for the church.

*Dr Donald John MacLean*

*Editor of Foundations*

*Elder, Cambridge Presbyterian Church and President and Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Westminster Seminary (UK).*

*February 2025*

# SLAVERY, THE SLAVE TRADE AND CHRISTIANS’ THEOLOGY

## PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL THEMES

*Ian Shaw*

In the first article, I explored the different positions taken by Christians in America and Britain through the 17th to 19th centuries in regard to slavery and the slave trade (*Foundations* 86). In this second part, I reflect on the theological themes that framed how they thought, spoke, and acted to enable us to understand how they:

1. Grasped the implications of a Christian view of human nature.
2. Drew varying consequences for a Christian doctrine of God’s providence.
3. Believed, in some cases, that slavery was a national sin and hence raised the likelihood, if not repented, of national judgement; and,

Regarded slavery (in some cases) as a deep hindrance to the gospel and its abolition as promising gospel prosperity.

### *I. Human Nature*

Michael Haykin says that “what it means to be human” was “*The* central ethical dilemma for eighteenth-century, transatlantic British society, namely, the ethics of running the slave-trade and of owning slaves”, and it was only resolved when this question was answered (Haykin, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Roe notes key themes in the preaching of the Particular Baptists towards the close of the Eighteenth Century, the first of which being

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Haykin, “‘To promote...cordial affection for our neighbor’: Abraham Booth and his sermon against the slave trade and slavery.” in Michael A.G. Haykin with Victoria J. Haykin, eds., “*The First Counsellor of Our Denomination*”: *Studies on the Life and Ministry of Abraham Booth (1734–1806)* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 2011), 80–102.

the inherent equality of all human beings. It appeared, for example, as the title page image of a sermon by James Dore.<sup>2</sup>

Their arguments sometimes were very general – John Beatson referred to the “benevolent spirit of the gospel”, saying, “Are we not under obligation to exercise the offices of kindness, independent of complexion, language, colour, religion, or any other tie than that strongest of relations – one common nature?” Robert Robinson made clear he believed that “the enfranchisement of slaves is one act of justice naturally proceeding out of evangelical doctrine”.<sup>3</sup> Robert Hawker (1753-1827), a vicar in Plymouth, published two relevant items. *The Injustice of the African Slave Trade, Proved from Principles of Natural Equity* was a sermon given in January 1789 at the height of the lobbying for the abolition of the slave trade. He later published *An Appeal to the Common Feelings of Mankind on Behalf of the Negroes, in the West-India Islands* in the form of “A Letter to William Wilberforce” (Roe, 2021b). He concludes that the African slave trade “is the most palpable violation of all equity, and an outrage to every law of nature, reason, and religion.”<sup>4</sup> The memorial to William Knibb outside Falmouth Baptist Chapel reads:

*The same God who made the white made the black man. The same blood that runs in the white man's veins, flows in yours. It is not the complexion of the skin, but the complexion of character that makes the great difference between one man and another.*

This generality may have been due in part to their argument's target being those who were not confessing Christians.

Dore perhaps had most to say on this theme. He cites the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, Petition of Rights, and the Coronation Oath, waxing lyrical: “And shall we

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2 M. E. Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives: Particular Baptist Sermons on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Privately Published: 2021).

3 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 53.

4 M. E. Roe, ed., *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Robert Hawker on the Slave Trade and Slavery*. (Southampton: The Huntingonian Press, 2021), 34-35.

be tenacious of liberty at home, and rule with the iron rod of slavery abroad? How inconsistent! How preposterous!”<sup>5</sup> On the British trade he says, “You are men: respect humanity.”<sup>6</sup> Of “the prince upon the throne, the peasant in the cottage, the proud European Lord, and the poor Negro slave”, we “all spring from one common stock. We took our rise from Adam, we all descended from Noah; we are all brothers and sisters, members of one great family. Let us *love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous*”.<sup>7</sup>

*Are not men naturally free? Is not liberty the gift of God to every man? And can we trample on the sacred rights of the humankind without invading the prerogative of heaven? There are natural rights which belong to men, as men... Civil government is then only conducive to general happiness when it protects men in the enjoyment of their natural rights, such as their right to their lives, their liberty, the fruit of their labour, and to the use, in common with others, of air, light and water.*<sup>8</sup>

Some in his church wrote him a letter praising his “repeated exertions to advance the cause of Humanity and Universal Freedom” and asking for “a Course of Lectures on the principles of non-conformity, and of civil and religious Liberty”.<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps it is in the voice of John Newton that the most telling, because most personal, words can be heard. He challenged assumptions about ethnicity and human nature. Pressed on this point in his evidence to the House of Commons in 1790, he was asked “what conclusions did you form respecting the capacity of the Negroes, compared with that of other men in the same period of society?” He replied “I always

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5 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 88. I have not addressed the complex question of whether and in what ways The Enlightenment shaped, knowingly or unknowingly, the thinking of Christians campaigning against slavery. Dabney, Thornwell, and those who shared his thinking, appeared to have seen a close intertwining, and one that was wholly inimical to a Christian position. Thornwell held the conviction that ‘Opposition to Slavery has never been the offspring of the Bible. It has sprung from visionary theories of human nature and society; it has sprung from the misguided reason of man; it comes as natural, not as revealed truth’, (James Henley Thornwell, “Report on Slavery” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (January 1852), 390-1) and we have seen Dabney’s view that the Abolitionist agenda was of rationalistic origin. However, care is needed in drawing any direct line from the Particular Baptists’ preaching of the 1790s to Southern states theology seventy years later.

6 He cites Proverbs 22:2, Malachi 2:10, and 1 Peter 3:8.

7 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 83.

8 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 83-84.

9 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 71.

judged that with equal advantages they would be equal to ourselves in point of capacity. I have met with many instances of real and decided natural capacity among them.”<sup>10</sup>

The very title of Abraham Booth's sermon – “Commerce in the Human Species” – signalled his central argument:

*Be the station of an innocent Negro ever so obscure, his poverty ever so great, his manners ever so rude, or his mental capacities ever so contracted, he has an equal claim to personal liberty with any man upon earth. For the rights of humanity being common to the whole of our species, are the same in every part of the world.*

*For though they are ignorant of the true God, and unacquainted with our concern to promote their happiness; yet they are men, they are brethren of the human race: agreeable to that saying. God hath made of one blood all nations of men.*<sup>11</sup>

It was at this point that Booth took sharp issue with William Rogers of Philadelphia in a letter of 1795, where he takes expressions from Rogers and responds. His irony is scathing when, on Rogers' phrase, “We are *all citizens*”, he says, taking a constantly cited text and reasoning from human nature:

*That is, we who have the happiness and honour of wearing not black, or mulatto,<sup>12</sup> but white skins, possess liberty, personal, civil and political; are capable of acquiring large property, and are eligible to the first honours in the federal government... It is indeed asserted in an old book, now but little regarded, “That God made of one blood all the nations of men”, but we, the genuine sons of liberty, will never be persuaded that our blood is specifically the same with that which flows in the veins of a black or mulatto.*<sup>13</sup>

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10 House of Commons, *Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, Volume 73* (Scholarly Resources, 1975), 140.

11 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 178. The reference is to Acts 17:26.

12 This, for today, offensive term was much used in the Southern States to describe persons of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent. Analogous to how ‘Eurasian’ is used now in parts of Asia.

13 Abraham Booth, “American Slavery” *The Baptist Magazine* 1839 Volume 31 (Series 4, Volume 2), 528.

John Rippon's 1807 verses following the ending of the Slave Trade included:

*Let charity, benevolence,  
And every smiling grace,  
In golden links of brotherhood  
Unite the human race.*

Telling applications of this biblical principle can be found in numerous writings. Carey, for example, writes,

*Barbarous as these poor heathens are, they appear to be as capable of knowledge as we are; and in many places, at least, have discovered uncommon genius and tractableness; and I greatly question whether most of the barbarities practised by them, have not originated in some real or supposed affront, and are therefore, more properly, acts of self-defence, than proofs of inhuman and blood-thirsty dispositions.<sup>14</sup>*

James Montgomery gave it expression in his poem, "The West Indies":

*Is he not Man, though knowledge never shed  
Her quickening beams on his neglected head?  
Is he not Man, though sweet religion's voice  
Ne'er bade the mourner in his God rejoice  
Is he not man, by sin and suffering tried?  
Is he not man, for whom the Saviour died?  
Belie the Negro's powers: —In headlong will,  
Christian! thy brother thou shalt prove him still.<sup>15</sup>*

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14 William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. In Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, are Considered* (Leicester, 1794), 63-4. This argument was not new-born in the late 18th Century. We saw previously that Cotton Mather wrote to similar effect when he said, 'It has been cavilled, by some, that it is questionable whether the Negroes have Rational Souls, or no. But let that Brutish insinuation be never Whispered any more.' We noted also that Samuel Rutherford referred to 'nature's law' when he insisted, 'A man being created according to God's image, he is res sacra, a sacred thing, and can no more, by nature's law, be sold and bought, than a religious and sacred thing dedicated to God.' Richard Baxter, we have seen, wrote, 'they are of as good a kind as you, that is, they are reasonable creatures as well as you, and born to as much natural liberty', applying, 'how cursed a crime it is to equal men to beasts!' We have quoted Sewall, in 1700, writing, 'It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life.'

15 Poetry was a powerful voice in both the UK and USA. A helpful volume which provides a magisterial collection of such poetry, with 400 titles from more than 250 different writers is J. G. Basker, *Amazing Grace: An*



We have seen how John Newton challenged assumptions about ethnicity and human nature in ways that were central to the Christian response to slavery. Countering suggestions that “African women are negroes, savages, who have no idea of the nicer sensations which obtain among civilized people”, he responded to the House of Commons committee,

*I dare contradict them in the strongest terms. I have lived long, and conversed much, among these supposed savages. I have often slept in their towns, in a house filled with goods for trade, with no person in the house but myself, and with no other door than a mat; in that security, which no man in his senses would expect in this civilized nation, especially in this metropolis, without the precaution of having strong doors, strongly locked and bolted. And, with regard to the women, in Sherbro, where I was most acquainted, I have seen many instances of modesty, and even delicacy, which would not disgrace an English woman.<sup>16</sup>*

He insisted, in similar terms:

*I have often been gravely told, as a proof that the Africans, however hardly treated, deserve but little compassion, that they are a people so destitute of natural affection, that it is common among them for parents to sell their children, and children their parents.... But... I never heard of one instance of either, while I used the coast.<sup>17</sup>*

He was asked, “What opinion have you formed of the temper and disposition of the Negroes?” He gently reminds the committee that it would be as impossible to give “a general character” of people in Africa as it would be of the people of Europe, but that of the area he was familiar with – Sierra Leone – “The people ... are in a degree

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*Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). In addition to Cowper and Montgomery, we should mention the Puritan, Michael Wigglesworth 1631-1705, Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley 1753?-1784 (‘In the context of slavery in English literature, Wheatley is the most important figure of the eighteenth century’, Basker, *Amazing Grace*, 170), the ‘pious Bostonian, Jane Dunlap (fl. 1765-1771), Lemuel Haynes, Hannah More (1745-1833), Olaudah Equiano (c 1745-1797) and Timothy Dwight (1752-1817). Even B. B. Warfield tried his hand, with the ironic short piece, ‘Wanted: a Samaritan.’ The life and coming to faith of Olaudah Equiano can be read in Taylor (1999), e.g. Chapter 10.

16 John Newton, *The Posthumous Works of the Late Rev. John Newton*, Volume 2 (London: W.W. Woodward, 1809), 240.

17 John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (London, Buckland and Johnson, 1788), 31.

civilized, often friendly, and may be trusted where they have not been previously deceived by the Europeans. I have lived in peace and safety among them, when I have been the only white man among them for a great distance.”<sup>18</sup> Newton often made unfavourable comparisons with the Europeans encountered by the tribes of Africa. He recalls, “The most humane and moral people I ever met with in Africa were on the River Gaboon (*sic*), and they were the people who had the least intercourse with Europe at the time.”<sup>19</sup> He had heard these people actually speak against the slave trade, and asked to illustrate, said,

*One man of consequence said, “If I was to be angry, and to sell my boy, how should I get my boy back again, when my anger was gone away?” For the same reason they would not use firearms in their petty quarrels, though they had them, for they said, “If I kill a man when I am angry, I cannot bring him back to life when my anger is over.”*

## II. Providence

We have heard the voices of Winthrop, Thornwell, Palmer, Dabney, Girardeau, and J. W. Alexander, discerning the hand of God’s providence in the order of society in general and domestic slavery in particular. What are we to make of this? We cannot make good sense of these arguments without recognising that understandings of God’s providence were being used by them and others in several quite different ways.

In some cases, as by John Winthrop, Christians were referring in a general way to how God orders society in general, or one’s life in particular. John Newton spoke in this way when looking back on the time he had worked in the slave trade:

*I felt greatly the disagreeableness of the business. The office of a gaoler, and the restraints under which I was obliged to keep my prisoners, were not suitable to my feelings; but I considered it as a line of life which God in His providence had*

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18 House of Commons, Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, Volume 73, 140.

19 House of Commons, Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, Volume 73, 140.

*allotted me, and as a cross which I ought to bear with patience and thankfulness till He should be pleased to deliver me from it. Till then I only thought myself bound to treat the slaves under my care with gentleness, and to consult their ease and convenience so far as was consistent with the safety of the whole family of whites and blacks on board my ship.*<sup>20</sup>

The problem with the appeal to Providence is that it sounds a little different from an appeal to custom and practice. Calvin remarks on this that,

*Naturally, if men's judgements were just, custom would be based on those that are sound. The reverse, however, has often been the case, because whatever the majority was seen to do acquired the force of customary law. Now men's lives have never been so well ordered that most men like the best things. Thus, the individual faults of the many have produced collective error, or rather a common conspiracy in evil, which these worthies would now pass off as law*<sup>21</sup>

William Wilberforce constantly referred to God's providence over and in his life. A small sample of extracts from his spiritual journals will suffice. In a letter to his mother soon after word of his conversion had become more widely known, he said "It would merit no better name than desertion...if I were to fly from this post where Providence has placed me".<sup>22</sup> On September 4, 1796, he gave thanks for "My being providently engag'd in the Sl: Trade Business, thro' what we call accident, I remember well how it was. What an honourable Service".<sup>23</sup> On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1807, shortly before the passing of the bill outlawing the slave trade, he wrote,

*Never surely had I more cause for gratitude than now, when carrying the great object of my life, to which a gracious Providence directed my thoughts twenty-six or twenty-seven years ago, and led my endeavours in 1787 or 1788. O Lord, let*

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20 J. Bull, *The Life of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 47.

21 John Calvin, "Prefatory Letter to Francis I" in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Trans. Robert White; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), xxviii.

22 M. McMullen, *William Wilberforce: His Unpublished Spiritual Journals* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2021), 52.

23 McMullen, *William Wilberforce*, 214.

*me praise Thee with my whole heart... Oh may my gratitude be in some degree proportionate.*<sup>24</sup>

At the high point of his life, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1807, he recorded, “How wonderful are the ways of Providence! The Foreign Slave Bill is going quietly on”.<sup>25</sup>

We may think of this primarily as observing God’s providence working for his glory through the life of a Christian. The southern theologians appealed to providence in a rather different way as an example of *national* providence. “Providence has given us slavery” (Thornwell). It was a “providential trust” that should be not only conserved but perpetuated (Benjamin Palmer). In America at least, slavery was “the righteous, the best, yea, the only tolerable relation” (Dabney). Kelly’s criticism of Dabney and his fellow advocates of slavery is the least that can be said.

*Dabney was not overly biblical on this subject; on the contrary, he did not go as far as the Bible should have taken him. Like all other fallen men, including theologians, he had blind spots where his devotion to the culture made it difficult for him to interpret the will of God... Undoubtedly Dabney’s greatest blind spot in this whole matter was... his underestimation of the power of the gospel in the life and culture of the blacks (which can make saints, leaders, and heroes of them as well as of any other people).*<sup>26</sup>

Calvin wisely observed that “Although providence, when correctly understood, is an enormous help in confirming faith, there are very few who rightly comprehend or reflect on it”.<sup>27</sup> He concludes that “our heart is resolved on this: nothing will happen that God has not ordained”, but this does not remove the need for prudence and caution. That would be to “muddle heaven and earth”.<sup>28</sup> For example, he rejects the position of

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24 McMullen, *William Wilberforce*, 327.

25 McMullen, *William Wilberforce*, 319.

26 Douglas Kelly, “Robert Louis Dabney” in David Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America: A History of its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 214, 226.

27 Calvin, *Institutes*, 499.

28 Calvin, *Institutes*, 502.

those who hold that “whatever does happen they so ascribe to God’s providence that they disregard the person who does the deed”.<sup>29</sup>

While Calvin does not address the question of slavery, he gives several case examples that may be thought analogous. For example, “If a child lets his father die without helping him, he could not, they argue, have resisted God who had decreed that this should happen.” His conclusion is that “(a)ccordingly they turn all vices into virtues, on the grounds that these serve the ordinances of God!”.<sup>30</sup>

Carter, writing as a black Reformed Christian and on God’s providence, insists that,

*The biblical understanding of God’s sovereignty demands accepting the kidnapping and subsequent enslavement of Africans in America was according to his eternal and sovereign will. This must never be lost to us as we seek to resolve areas of racial tension and animosity in the church. If God is sovereign...then we must acknowledge that it pleased God to bring Africans to the land of America. It pleased him to use the hands and wills of sinful men to do so...Yet even though God ordained that Africans be brought to America in the hollow of slave ships this in no way absolves the Euro-American establishment of their responsibility for those horrors and subsequent degrading atrocities.*<sup>31</sup>

He knows that some will ask, “Did this providence of God have to be worked out on the bruised and battered backs of African men and women? Did they have to bear the brunt of his bitter rod, that his purposes be revealed?”, and replies, “Who could know why God’s providence had to be so bitter? Who could venture to explain God’s ways of infinite knowledge, unsearchable wisdom, and unfathomable mercy?”<sup>32</sup>

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29 Calvin, *Institutes*, 503.

30 Calvin, *Institutes*, 503.

31 A. J. Carter, *Black and Reformed: Seeing God’s Sovereignty in the African-American Christian Experience* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2016), 103-4.

32 Carter, *Black and Reformed*, 110.

### III. National Sin and Judgement

John Coffey refers to “the intense providentialism of the early British abolitionists”.<sup>33</sup> When one turns to “abolitionist texts...here one finds an insistent testimony to human fear of divine wrath”.<sup>34</sup> He suggests we should understand this as a *judicial* providentialism - the belief that God rewarded or punished nations according to their moral character and actions. He says that this was held by a very wide range of theological positions, yet “Evangelicals held these common biblical convictions with a peculiar intensity”.<sup>35</sup>

A profoundly significant aspect of the Christian response to slavery and the slave trade was the way in which they applied the Bible to make sense of how slavery had been present and often unchallenged by the church for many years. Paul’s sermon to the Greeks at Athens was a central passage. That God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17.26) was often quoted, and verse 30 – “the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” – was central to how they interpreted their times.

We have noticed how Edwards appealed to the same verse, as did John Newton, saying, “What I did, I did ignorantly.” We find the same appeal in George Bourne (1780–1845), an English-born American century abolitionist Presbyterian minister, in his 1816 work *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*.<sup>36</sup> However, the Particular Baptists applied it in a distinctive way, arguing that in effect God *had* “winked at” Christians

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33 J. Coffey, “‘Tremble, Britannia!’: Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807” *English Historical Review* Vol. 127. No. 527, 845.

34 Coffey, “‘Tremble, Britannia!’”, 845.

35 J. Coffey, *Difficult histories: Christian memory and historic injustice: Cambridge Papers*, 29 (4) (Cambridge: Jubilee centre, 2020), 108.

36 Bourne was known for his unyielding stance that may not have made easy allies. E.g. ‘Slavery is the Golden Calf...the Balaam, ...the Achan...the Delilah...the Bathsheba...the thirty pieces of silver...that *love of the present world*, for which Demas forsook the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship’, and ‘slavery must be the *acme of all impiety*; consequently, it is *impossible* that a *Slave-holder* can be a *sincere Christian*’ (G. Bourne, *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* (Philadelphia: J M Sanderson and Co 1816), 19, 53). He happily endorsed the saying that ‘a rough truth is better than a smooth falsehood’ (p. 7). The slavery debates in the successive General Assemblies of the Presbyterian church over this period and later are traced in A. D. Strange, *Empowered Witness: Politics, Culture, and the Spiritual Mission of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2024).



during the years of the Gospel age when they had not understood or appreciated the evils of slavery. They used this argument to give urgency to the challenge of slavery in their own immediate times.<sup>37</sup> Once accepting that they no longer lived in the times of ignorance the implications appeared clear. Slavery was a sin – a national sin – and to continue in such sin would incur God's judgement. Convinced as they were that Britain was at risk of so continuing, national repentance was called for and acts consistent with repentance.<sup>38</sup>

Wilberforce returned to the point year after year. In his celebrated 1789 speech, he began with a statement of collective guilt ("we are all guilty"). "In April 1791, he brought his three-hour speech to a climax by warning Parliament not to forget 'the bounty of Providence' or the 'day of retribution', and vowing 'Never, never will we desist till we have ... released ourselves from the load of guilt'".<sup>39</sup> Newton wrote to Wilberforce in 1804,

*Though I can scarcely see the paper before me, I must attempt to express my thankfulness to the Lord, and to offer my congratulations to you for the success which he has so far been pleased to give to your unwearied endeavours for the abolition of the slave trade, which I have considered as a millstone, of itself sufficient, to sink such an enlightened and highly favoured nation as ours to the bottom of the sea.*<sup>40</sup>

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37 Jonathan Edwards, Jun and others in America also applied the verse in this way, and it is probable that the Particular Baptists were aware of this.

38 John Wesley also warned of God's judgement, but of the individual. He addresses slave owners, 'Is there a GOD? You know there is. Is He a Just GOD? Then there must be a state of Retribution A state wherein the Just GOD will reward every man according to his works. Then what reward will he render to You? O think betimes! Before you drop into eternity!' (J. Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (Dublin, 1775).)

39 Coffey, "Tremble, Britannia!", 862.

40 Newton's position on this matter was not entirely constant. Ten years before he wrote this letter, and speaking in the context of an expected invasion of Britain by France, he preached a sermon on 'The Imminent Danger and the Only Sure Resource of this Nation', February 28, 1794, the day appointed for the national fast, in which he said of the African slave-trade, 'I do not rank this among our national sins, because I hope, and believe, a very great majority of the nation earnestly long for its suppression.'

McLeod, writing in America around the same time, linked the matter to God's judgement:

*O America, what hast thou to account for on the head of slavery!... Thou hast made provision for increasing the number and continuing the bondage of thy slaves. Thy judgments may tarry, but they will assuredly come... Even real Christians, the guilt of whose sins is removed through the atonement of Jesus, but who have learned the way of the heathen so far as to confirm to the wicked practice of buying, selling and retaining slaves, have a right to expect severe corrections.<sup>41</sup>*

Perhaps we find the clearest account of national sins and national judgement in the sermons of Charles Spurgeon.<sup>42</sup> To give but two examples from 1866 and 1859:

*I am not among those, as you know, who believe that every affliction is a judgment upon the particular person to whom it occurs... but we do nevertheless very firmly believe that there are national judgments, and that national sins provoke national chastisements. As to individuals, their punishment or reward is reserved for the next state; but nations will not exist in the next world: there is no such thing as a judgment of nations, as such, at the last great day; that will be the judgment of individuals one by one. The trial and punishment of nations takes place in this state, and it is here that we are to look for the judgment of God upon national sin.<sup>43</sup>*

*There is a weighing time for kings and emperors... For nations there is a weighing time. National sins demand national punishments... The guilt they incur must receive its awful recompense in this present time state... So likewise, shall it be with the nations that now abide on the face of the earth. There is no God in heaven if the iniquity of slavery go unpunished. There is no God existing in heaven above if the cry of the negro do not bring down a red hail of blood upon the nation that still holds the black man in slavery.<sup>44</sup>*

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41 A. McLeod, *Slavery Unjustifiable: a Discourse* (New York: T & J Swords, 1802), 19-20.

42 For just three examples see his sermons on 'The Voice of Cholera' in August 1866 (<https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-voice-of-the-cholera>), 'The Scales of Judgement' in June 1859 (<https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-scales-of-judgment>) and in March 1881 on 'Jesus at a Stand' (<https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/jesus-at-a-stand-2>). These sermons can be accessed online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/> (Accessed 13th January 2025).

43 Spurgeon, 'The Voice of Cholera'.

44 Spurgeon, 'The Scales of Judgement'.

Warning again of such judgement in a sermon in March 1881 on “Jesus at a Stand” (Mark 10.49), he says:

*I have feared and trembled for my country of late lest the Lord Jesus should depart from it and take away the candlestick out of its place. More than two hundred years ago George Herbert said, when he looked upon the declining state of godliness in England, Religion stands a-tiptoe in our land... Ready to pass to the American strand...<sup>45</sup>*

*At times our Lord, as judge among the nations, arises to visit the sins of a people upon them. Patience makes room for justice, and Providence determines that guilty nations shall be scourged... No man can read our history without perceiving that among guilty nations we hold a sorrowful place; for we have had more light than any other people and have sinned against it full often.<sup>46</sup>*

Spurgeon was taking an argument that the Particular Baptists had used. For example, John Beatson believed that nations and empires have presence only in this world, and hence “such collective bodies of men must, in their national capacity, either be punished in this world or not at all”.<sup>47</sup> Robinson likewise said, “The sins of individuals are not punished here, for this to them is only a state of trial: but collective bodies submit here in a state of rewards and punishments, and if there be such a thing as national sin, that is it, assuredly, which the legislature makes its own. I fear, I fear, the African slave trade is of this kind”.<sup>48</sup> Dore also said that they would “learn that national crimes are productive of national judgement”.<sup>49</sup> Beatson felt this perhaps more strongly than any of his contemporaries. He asked, what if “instead of making any reparation...the nation that was guilty reduced the whole to system, and regulated it by law”, they should have every reason to expect God’s punishment. Quoting from

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45 Spurgeon is quoting from the poem ‘Religion Westwards Bent’, by George Herbert (1593-1633).

46 Spurgeon, ‘Jesus at a Stand’.

47 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 124-5.

48 Robert Robinson, ‘Slavery inconsistent with the spirit of Christianity.’ A sermon preached at Cambridge, On Sunday, Feb. 10, 1788 (Cambridge: Printed by J. Archdeacon Printer to the University, 1788), 20.

49 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 77.

Jeremiah (50.33), that Babylon “took them captives, held them fast; they refused to let them go”,<sup>50</sup> he asks if Britain has not acted very much like Babylon.

#### *IV. Slavery and Gospel Prosperity*

A further theme in the theological position of some who spoke and acted against slavery and the slave trade was to counter the arguments of those who saw slavery as a means of bringing people under the sound and influence of the gospel. Samuel Sewall had resisted it in the following way, taking the selling of Joseph by his brothers as his text: “Evil must not be done, that good may come of it. The extraordinary and comprehensive Benefit accruing to the Church of God, and to Joseph personally, did not rectify his brethren’s Sale of him.”<sup>51</sup> Baxter, referring to the way slaves were treated, asked, “Doth not the very example of such cruelty... directly tend to teach them to hate Christianity, as if it taught men to be so much worse than dogs, or tigers?”<sup>52</sup> We saw how John Eliot also was forceful, when saying, “It seemeth to me that to sell them away for slaves is to hinder the enlargement of his kingdom.”<sup>53</sup>

But it was among the Particular Baptists that the strongest case would be made.<sup>54</sup> Carey recorded how the freeing of slaves “may prove the happy means of introducing amongst them the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”.<sup>55</sup> Yet in so doing, those who take the gospel “must be very careful not to resent injuries which may be offered to them,

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50 He suggests Jeremiah 50 and 51 ‘merit perusal.’

51 Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* (Boston: printed by Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1700), 3.

52 Richard Baxter, *Baxter’s directions to slave-holders, revived; first printed in London, in the year 1673* (Philadelphia: Printed by Francis Bailey, at Yorick’s Head, in Market-Street, 1785), 5.

53 John Eliot, “Letter from John Eliot Protesting against Selling Indians as Slaves,” n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://nativenewenglandportal.com/node/18119>.

54 In this connection, Coffey quotes Drescher saying, ‘the take-off of British abolitionism coincided almost exactly with the revival of the British missionary movement’ (Coffey, *Difficult histories*, 105).

55 Carey, *An Enquiry*, 79-80.

nor to think highly of themselves, so as to despise the poor heathens, and by those means lay a foundation for their resentment, or rejection of the gospel".<sup>56</sup>

John Dore insisted, that "the slave trade works against the fulfilment of gospel promises... Is it probable that the poor Negro will cordially embrace Christianity while they view it in such a horrid light in the lives of professed Christians? ... What ideas must the Negroes form of that system of religion which, they naturally suppose, tolerates barbarity?".<sup>57</sup> Beatson, in closing his message, linked it to the prosperity of the Gospel:

*Can the Gospel be recommended to the attention of men, while you are thus buying and selling them as though they were brutes? To be depriving a people of their natural liberty, and at the same time preaching to them of spiritual liberty, would appear such gross hypocrisy... If ever then you mean to spread the Gospel of peace, wipe off this stain of infamy from the Christian name.*<sup>58</sup>

John Liddon spoke of how the trade "prevents the introduction of Christianity into Africa, and naturally must excite strong prejudices against it amongst a people who have no idea of that strange distinction we are often obliged to make between the principles of Christianity, and the conduct of those who call themselves Christians".<sup>59</sup> He later says, "if they judge the Christian religion by the conduct of those who call themselves Christians, and who are their oppressors, they must suppose it to be of all others the worst religion, to justify such enormities".<sup>60</sup> Even if the Christian faith is

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56 Carey, *An Enquiry*, 75.

57 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 90. I have not addressed the question of whether preaching about slavery was, as some suggested, bringing 'politics' into the pulpit. The Particular Baptists offered a defence of their approach, though others were careful to deal with slavery on days other than Sunday. Roe discusses their approach in the preface to his book (Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*). Barnes expresses a position that may be thought helpful. Slavery 'should be introduced into the pulpit, not in its political aspect, but in its bearings on religion, as one of the causes which hinder the progress and triumph of Christianity in the world; and in the same way it should be approached in our religious literature... (I)n this respect it should have a place, just as anything else has that hinders the progress of the gospel of Christ' (A. Barnes, *The Church and Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1857), 156).

58 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 134-5.

59 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 189.

60 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 197. The behaviour of slave holders who professed a Christian faith acutely embittered Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most famous freed slave of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He

taught by consistent Christians, and yet rejected, that does not justify action against such people. “The only arms (Christ) ever authorised his disciples to use were wisdom and innocence”.<sup>61</sup> “(N)either the missionary societies nor their individual agents set out with the intention of challenging the structures of colonial society”.<sup>62</sup> Most took the at least initial position that “the gospel would so ameliorate the condition of the slaves that slavery would ultimately wither away”.<sup>63</sup> But the realities of the field forced many to take more or less explicitly political stances. This was increasingly illustrated in the life of William Knibb, the Baptist missionary in Jamaica. Addressing the committee of the Baptist mission in 1832, he said “I daily and hourly feel ... that the questions of colonial slavery and of missions are now inseparably connected; that British Christians must either join with me in an attempt to break the chain with which the African is bound, or leave the work of mercy and the triumphs of the Redeemer unfinished”

He insists on the connection and takes an immediatist position:

*Feeling... as I do, that the African and the creole slave will never again enjoy the blessings of religious instruction, or hear of the benefits of that gospel which Christ has commanded to be preached among all nations, and which he has so eminently blessed in Jamaica, unless slavery be overthrown, I now stand forward as the unflinching and undaunted advocate of immediate emancipation.*<sup>64</sup>

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wrote ‘Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others.’ (F. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself* (London: H.G. Collins, 1851), 71).

61 Roe, ed., *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives*, 197.

62 B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 90.

63 Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 90.

64 J. H. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb: Missionary in Jamaica* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1849; repr., Forgotten Books, 2018), 147.



The hopefulness of the Particular Baptists was captured in John Rippon's composition "A Song in Prospect of the Abolition of the Slave Trade," written for a sermon on Psalm 68:31 on March 27, 1807. It included one stanza:

*The day has dawned, Jehovah comes  
To crush oppression's rod;  
Now Ethiopia soon shall stretch  
Her hands to thee, O God!*<sup>65</sup>

#### *V. Present challenges*

The challenges this history of the theologies adopted by those who opposed, or sometimes supported, slavery lie outside this article. I have tried a preliminary consideration of the present challenges raised by this question in a presentation at Westminster Seminary, UK.<sup>66</sup> They include:

1. Can we gain lessons from the history of slavery regarding the involvement of Christians/churches—as Christians and as churches—in political-level interventions?
2. How may Christians keep close to God while being publicly involved?
3. What position should Christians take on questions of reparations - Christians and restorative justice?
4. How and what should Christians take care to remember?
5. What lessons should we learn when Christians disagree?
6. How should we understand and respond to instances in history when Christians fall short?

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<sup>65</sup> The stance taken in the 18<sup>th</sup> century often was linked to apparently millennial hopes for the future of the Gospel. I have not explored this beyond the implications within the material quoted. Carey, in his characteristically contemporary way, links this to technological progress in his day, such as the invention of the mariners' compass (Carey, *An Enquiry*, 67), though he emphasises that even 'the longest intercourse with Europeans' by itself would never achieve 'happy effects' for the gospel (Carey, *An Enquiry*, 68).

<sup>66</sup> Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FEwjhgSGj4> [Cited 13th January 2025].

7. How should we approach and apply the bible's teaching on slavery? I mentioned in the first article that I have not addressed the exegetical questions, except insofar as they were understood and spoken to by those who figure in the articles. The endeavours of writers such as John Murray (1957) on the ordinance of labour and his Appendix D, "The Presbyterian Church in the USA and Slavery"; the commentaries of George Knight III on the Pastoral Epistles; and the discussions by Douglas Kelly (1985), are helpful, yet also illustrate the difficulties sometimes encountered in this area.<sup>67</sup> One of the most significant efforts to understand the teaching of Scripture was made more than 200 years ago, by Alexander McLeod (1802).<sup>68</sup> An important recent contribution to how Scripture was understood by the Presbyterian church in 19<sup>th</sup> century America has been made by Alan Strange (Strange, 2024).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); G. W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Douglas Kelly, "Robert Louis Dabney" in David Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America*.

<sup>68</sup> McLeod, *Slavery Unjustifiable*.

<sup>69</sup> Strange, *Empowered Witness*.

# GARNISHING THE SEPULCHRES OF THE RIGHTEOUS

## TEXTUAL CRITICISM IN THE FREE CHURCH FATHERS

*Stephen Steele*

### *I. ABSTRACT*

The continued publication of the “Textus Receptus,” for example, a new edition by Grange Press, the publishing arm of the US Presbytery of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), provides the incentive to investigate the text-critical principles of the Free Church fathers. How did they view the Textus Receptus? Did they defend it in the face of new manuscript discoveries in their own century? The clear evidence is that they did not hold to a “Received Text” that was “fixed”, indeed, the leading figures among the Free Church Fathers explicitly disowned such a view.

Advocates of the so-called “Textus Receptus” have a track record of claiming support from figures in church history who were far from claiming its perfection. Famously, the Anglican Dean John Burgon (1813-1888) would not be admitted to the Dean Burgon Society (founded in 1978). The society named after him exists “To Defend the Traditional Received Greek Text of the New Testament which underlies the King James Version”.<sup>1</sup> Yet while believing the TR to be “quite good enough for all ordinary purposes”, Burgon was “far from pinning my faith to it”. “In not a few particulars”, he wrote “the ‘Textus receptus’ does call for Revision”.<sup>2</sup>

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1 [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<https://deanburgonsociety.blog/statement-of-faith>>

2 John William Burgon, *The revision revised: three articles reprinted from the ‘Quarterly Review’* (London: John Murray, 1883), 108.

## II. Background: Scrivener and the Missing Preface

The only Textus Receptus (TR) editions in print today are republications of the 1881/1894 TR produced by another Anglican, F. H. A. Scrivener.<sup>3</sup> The most well-known is published by the Trinitarian Bible Society (TBS), but with Scrivener's original preface (and appendix) removed. In its place, the TBS add their own preface which claims:

*In the nineteenth century, numerous scholars set out to produce Greek texts which would reflect new principles of textual criticism...and resulted in a new English Version, the English Revised Version of 1881. Late in the century, F. H. A. Scrivener went against this trend.*<sup>4</sup>

What they fail to note, however, is that Scrivener himself was on the Revision Committee, that his work was a companion volume to the Revised Version, and that he agreed with his fellow Revisers over against the TR in many places. The TBS preface implies that Scrivener published the TR because he agreed with it or wanted to promote it. The real reason is quite different. Rather, he compiled it because the revisers had been charged to note alterations from the Authorised Version. It was decided, however, that rather than “crowd and obscure the margin of the Revised Version”, it would be best to note changes in a separate volume. To do so, Scrivener tells us in the omitted preface,

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3 Cambridge University Press publish a facsimile of Scrivener's TR: F. H. A. Scrivener, ed., *The New Testament in Greek: According to the Text Followed in the Authorised Version Together with the Variations Adopted in the Revised Version*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4 *H KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ: New Testament in Koiné Greek* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 2002), ii. For a detailed examination of the various misstatements in the TBS preface, see Timothy Berg, 'The Preface To The Greek TR Of F.H.A. Scrivener'. [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<https://kjbhistory.com/the-preface-to-the-greek-tr-of-f-h-a-scrivener>>

the Greek text “presumed to underlie the Authorised Version” had to be produced for the first time. This was necessary as:

*The Authorised Version was not a translation of any one Greek text then in existence, and no Greek text intended to reproduce in any way the original of the Authorised Version has ever been printed.*<sup>5</sup>

His TR, therefore, is a reverse-engineered Greek text, based on the text critical choices of an English translation, the KJV. Places where the Revisers disagreed with it were marked in the text and with footnotes, though these are removed in the TBS edition. While differing in some respects from his fellow Revisers, Scrivener’s aim had not changed since 1845. He “hope[d] to purge the received text of its grosser corruptions, and to approach more nearly to the Apostolic autographs.”<sup>6</sup> Examples of those grosser corruptions include the “Johannine Comma”, which the TBS spends much energy trying to defend, but of which Scrivener said was “probably no longer regarded as genuine by any one who is capable of forming an independent judgment on the state of the evidence.”<sup>7</sup>

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5 *The New Testament in Greek: according to the text followed in the authorised version together with the variations adopted in the Revised Version*, ed. F. H. A. Scrivener (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881), v-vii.

6 F. H. A. Scrivener, *A supplement to the authorised English version of the New Testament: being a critical illustration of its more difficult passages from the Syriac, Latin, and earlier English versions* (London: William Pickering, 1845), i, 32.

7 *The Cambridge Paragraph Bible of the Authorized English Version, with the text revised by a collation of its early and other principal editions, the use of the italic type made uniform, the marginal references remodelled, and a critical introduction prefix*, ed. F. H. A. Scrivener (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1873), xxxvi.

### III. Grange's Graveyard

Another edition of the Textus Receptus was issued in 2022 by the publishing arm of the US Presbytery of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Grange Press:

*The name, Grange Press, is taken from the burial ground where many of the Free Church of Scotland Disruption fathers have been laid to rest, located south of Edinburgh's city center.*<sup>8</sup>

Its title page says: "As Prepared by F. H. A. Scrivener."<sup>9</sup> However, just like the TBS edition, the reader is not told who Scrivener is, and his preface and textual apparatus are removed. In place of the 1881 preface, they translate the Latin of a TR edition published 250 years earlier – and which differs from Scrivener's text, as we'll see below.

The Free Church fathers would surely have been bemused (at best) by such a development. Even before the formation of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843, the "received text" had largely been discredited. John Dick (1764-1833), the Scottish Seceder pastor and professor, said in his famous *Lectures on Theology* (rated as the best systematic theology available in English by Archibald Alexander of Princeton): "It is evidently ignorance and prejudice which would lead any person to consider the received text as so sacred that no alteration ought to be made in it".<sup>10</sup> This was also the attitude of the Free Church Fathers, as will be demonstrated below.

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8 [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<https://www.grangepress.com/about-grange>>. The 'Disruption' describes the departure of over 400 ministers, and many hundreds of thousands of people, from the Church of Scotland, to form the Free Church of Scotland in 1843.

9 H KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ: The Greek New Testament, Textus Receptus, Reader's Edition (Taylors, SC: Grange Press, 2022).

10 John R. McIntosh, 'Dick, John (1764–1833)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn.; Andrew Coventry Dick (ed.), *Lectures on Theology by the late Rev. John Dick, D. D.*, (4 vols, Edinburgh: William Oliphant & Son, 1834), i, 218.



*IV. Thomas Chalmers*

Thomas Chalmers died four years after the Disruption and was buried at the Grange Cemetery with “kingly honours”. An estimated 100,000 turned out either to witness the procession or attend the graveside service. Humanly speaking, he was the Free Church’s founder. He was its first moderator, and his reputation helped bring it international support.<sup>11</sup>

Chalmers’ posthumously published seminary lectures reveal his perspective on the Bible’s text. He dealt with textual criticism under the broader subject of ‘Scripture Criticism’. Its two main objects were:

*The integrity of the text, and the interpretation of it. The first question is, “what did the authors of Scripture really write?” The second, “what is the sense or meaning of it?” The former has been termed corrective or emendatory criticism, its object being to substitute the true in place of the false readings.<sup>12</sup>*

Textual criticism, then, is not an attempt to “criticise” the Bible, but to replace “false readings” with true ones. Chalmers gives the following illustration of where the Bible interpreter must begin:

*He should do with the Bible what he would do with some antiquated seal, which he wanted to preserve in the very condition in which it was when originally struck by the hand of him who fashioned it...The corrosion of many ages may have somewhat obliterated, or even somewhat transformed the device and inscription. His labors to ascertain its primitive state, are precisely analogous to the labors of him who brings his erudite criticism to bear on the readings and the renderings of Scripture.<sup>13</sup>*

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11 Stewart J. Brown, ‘Chalmers, Thomas (1780–1847)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Oct 2007.

12 Thomas Chalmers, ‘Institutes of Theology’ in William Hanna (ed.), *Posthumous works of the Rev. Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D. Volume 7* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 304.

13 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works, Volume 7*, 307.

Chalmers thus deals with both text and translation. Over time, false readings may have gotten mixed in with the true – and even true readings may have been translated wrongly. There is no place, therefore, for blind adherence to any printed Greek text or English translation – what counts is the “primitive state” of the Bible as God first gave it.

If any edition of the “Textus Receptus” presented Scripture in all its pure and primitive integrity, there would have been no reason for Chalmers to advocate ongoing work in this area. Indeed, he tells us that variations had “been soundly established between the original Scriptures and our present editions of the Greek New Testament” – but that people had nothing to fear from them.<sup>14</sup>

Chalmers was well aware of the potential for fear. John Mill had published an edition of the TR in 1707 which included an estimated 30,000 variant readings in the notes. “Many excellent Christians”, Chalmers tells us, “had the feeling that all was now fearfully unsettled, and that they were to be left without a Bible.”<sup>15</sup> There had been a similar reaction half a century earlier with the publication of Bishop Brian Walton’s *London Polyglot* in 1657.<sup>16</sup> The Puritan John Owen had praised “the usefulness of the work” and held it in “much esteem”.<sup>17</sup> He was concerned, however, that the number of various readings “nakedly exhibited, seem[ed] sufficient to beget scruples and doubts.”<sup>18</sup> As Chalmers summarises the debate, Owen “rashly and under a false alarm ventured himself into combat.” The Free Church founder goes as far as to say that it was “illiterate in Owen to apprehend that the integrity of the Scripture would be unsettled by the exposure, in all their magnitude and multitude, of its various readings.” Walton,

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14 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, Volume 7, 329.

15 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, Volume 7, 315.

16 Walton was assisted in this endeavour by Westminster Divine John Lightfoot, Archbishop James Ussher, and others.

17 Cited in Russel T. Fuller, ‘John Owen and the traditional Protestant view of the Hebrew Old Testament,’ *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 20.4 (2016), 83.

18 John Owen, ‘Of the integrity and purity of the Hebrew and Greek text of the Scripture’ in *The Works of John Owen Volume 16*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 352.

for his part, “retorted contemptuously”. The whole incident was particularly tragic in Chalmers’ view, because if it had been possible to combine the philology, research and antiquarian attainments of Walton, with the faith, ardour and profound intelligence of Owen, the result would have “made up a perfect theologian”.<sup>19</sup>

What was the basis for Chalmers’ textual confidence?<sup>20</sup> He quoted Walton’s assertion that the various readings found in Greek manuscripts are: “only in lesser matters, not in things of any moment or concernment; they are such whereby our faith and salvation are noway endangered.” Indeed: “not any one article of faith, any doctrine or duty, any promise or threatening, has been affected thereby, or rendered precarious by any various reading or corruption.” Chalmers pointed out that the loss of a proof text for a particular doctrine did not mean that “the doctrine itself should be expunged”. For an example, he cites Johann David Michaelis: “We are certain, for instance, that 1 John v. 7, is a spurious passage, but the doctrine contained in it [the deity of Christ] is not therefore changed, since it is delivered in other parts of the New Testament.” Indeed, as Michaelis argued, the lack of variant readings on two key passages (John 1:1; Rom 9:5) meant that “this very doctrine, instead of being shaken by the collections of Mill and Wetstein, has been rendered more certain than ever.”<sup>21</sup>

Chalmers approvingly quoted John Newton’s description of “Bible philologists and collectors” as “the Gibeonites of the Christian Church, the hewers of wood and drawers of water to the children of Israel”. Textual criticism, after all, must “be conducted on the same principles and by the same methods with the criticism of all other ancient authorship.” The task of determining “the genuine readings of any book in the New Testament” is conducted by the same process as trying to find “the genuine

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19 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works, Volume 7*, 309.

20 For an introduction to the categories of textual scepticism, textual absolutism, and textual confidence see my article ‘Textual Confidence’, [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<https://gentlereformation.com/2022/08/27/textual-confidence>>.

21 Cited in Chalmers, *Posthumous Works, Volume 7*, 316-7.

readings of Horace or Cicero.”<sup>22</sup> It is surely strange that the publication of critical texts of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* or *Larger Catechism* is uncontroversial (after all, we want to make sure that we have what the authors originally wrote) – while the publication of critical texts of Scripture is so opposed.

Does Chalmers ignore the role of the Holy Spirit? Not at all. Rather, it is because he believes that the Spirit works *through* Scripture that he cannot understand the “neglect and indifference of Christians towards the scholarship of the Bible.” “Far from superseding criticism”, the doctrine of the Spirit “gives an impulse to its labors”.<sup>23</sup>

Something else that should give ministers the impulse to labour in textual criticism was the need to be able to defend against heresy:

*How inexcusable not to be in possession of this evidence at first hand – not to be qualified for arguing the Arian, and the Socinian, and the Pelagian controversies, in Greek... Take the divinity of Christ for an example. You should be masters of all the emendatory criticism which relates to the integrity of the various passages where this doctrine is attested; and you should be masters of all the interpretative criticism that applies to the sense of these passages.*

Chalmers did not exaggerate the issues. His “oft-repeated principle” was that “the most precious articles of our creed” do not need arduous text-critical efforts in their defence:

*Yet how infinitely better that you should see this for yourselves than that you should be told of it by others – that you should meet the champions of heresy on any ground which they might fix upon for their arena...to contend intelligently, as well as earnestly, for the faith once delivered to the saints.*

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22 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, Volume 7, 312.

23 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, Volume 7, 325.

Far from demeaning scholarship, for Chalmers: “a Scripture criticism, and that too of the most refined and scholar-like description, is indispensable to the maintenance of orthodoxy”.<sup>24</sup>

### V. William Cunningham

How did the views of Thomas Chalmers and the other Free Church Fathers square with Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8?<sup>25</sup> One who addressed that question directly was William Cunningham.

In the years leading up to the Disruption, Chalmers had been “goaded on, some thought, by a group of zealous young evangelical clergymen led by R. S. Candlish (1806–1873) and William Cunningham (1805–1861)”.<sup>26</sup> Cunningham “was at the heart of the controversy” which led to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland, with his “intellectual power, skill in debate, and apparent relish of conflict mark[ing] him as a principal combatant”.<sup>27</sup> He received a DD from Princeton in 1842 and succeeded Chalmers as principal of New College, the church’s Edinburgh seminary, in 1847. Cunningham was Moderator of the denomination’s General Assembly in 1859. He died, two years later, at the age of 56 and was buried next to his mother in the Grange cemetery. “After his death his church lacked a commanding figure who combined orthodoxy with authority”.<sup>28</sup>

Cunningham addressed the question of the text of the New Testament in a posthumously published lecture on chapter 1, section 8 of the Westminster Confession. In it, he warned about “*a priori* speculations about the divine procedure” – arguments based on what we think God *should have* done. An example of this was the argument

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24 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, Volume 7, 339.

25 The says that “The Old Testament in... and the New Testament in... being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical.”

26 Brown, ‘Chalmers, Thomas (1780–1847)’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn.

27 Lionel Alexander Ritchie, ‘Cunningham, William (1805–1861)’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn.

28 Ritchie, ‘Cunningham, William’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn.

by opponents of the verbal inspiration of Scripture that “if God inspired the words, he would also have exercised a minute superintendence over the transcription of every copy, so as to preserve accurately and certainly the precise words originally employed”. Cunningham is clear that such a thing did not take place: “This indeed would have involved a constant miracle, and it is contradicted by actual experience”. After all, the Confession speaks not of miraculous preservation but of providential. Cunningham echoes its language as he explains:

*The singular care and providence of God in watching over his word to preserve it from corruption is not then to be regarded as miraculous, but as exercised in the ordinary course of his providential government of the church and the world.*<sup>29</sup>

In the face of Pagan and Papal opposition, “we are fully warranted in ascribing it to the singular, though not miraculous, care and providence of God that his word has not only been preserved, but preserved in purity and integrity”.

Cunningham then references the most-quoted words of WCF 1:8 in contemporary debates:

*When we say that the word of God in the original languages has been kept pure in all ages, it is not meant that all the words contained in the Bible as we have it can be proved to be or are precisely those which proceeded from the inspired writers.*<sup>30</sup>

Cunningham was neither a textual sceptic (saying that we can have no idea about the original text of the Bible) nor a textual absolutist (advocating one form of the text as beyond any doubt whatsoever). There were words, phrases, and some small passages “where it is doubtful, and the doubt cannot be fully and certainly resolved, whether one word or phrase or a different one proceeded from the original authors.”

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<sup>29</sup> William Cunningham, *Theological lectures on subjects connected with Natural Theology, Evidences of Christianity, the Canon and Inspiration of Scripture, by the late William Cunningham, D. D.*, (ed. Thomas Smith and W. H. Goold; New York: Robert Carter, 1878), 526-7.

<sup>30</sup> Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 527.

The Free Church Divine then adds: “This is certain, and in regard to the Greek New Testament has been always known and conceded.”<sup>31</sup>

This is significant because the twenty-first-century “Confessional Bibliology” movement allows no doubt whatsoever. Their rallying cry is that if there is uncertainty anywhere, there is uncertainty everywhere. The TR is “certain”, “settled”, “completed”, “agreed upon”. “There’s not a single place”, one of its advocates says, “where I don’t know what the text says”.<sup>32</sup>

Based on the writings of John Owen, Cunningham surmises that the Westminster Divines (contemporaries of Owen) would have admitted various readings in the Greek of the New Testament – but not in the Hebrew of the Old. As evidence, he quotes Owen’s denial that such a distinction is ridiculous, since “we evidently find various lections in the Greek copies which we enjoy, and so grant that which ocular inspection evinces to be true.” He also quotes Owen’s denial that there were ever “any such various lections in the originals of the Old Testament.” The Divines, therefore:

*Would have ascribed, had they been called upon to express an opinion upon the subject, a greater degree of purity to the Hebrew of the Old than to the Greek of the New Testament.*<sup>33</sup>

Cunningham makes the important point, however, that such a belief was not based on *a priori* considerations. The reason Owen believed in variant readings in the New Testament was, as he tells us himself because he refused to deny what he could see with his eyes. Yet if Owen and others had been able to examine and compare Hebrew manuscripts, it would have “established *de facto* the existence of various readings”.<sup>34</sup> (Rather confusingly – and unmentioned by Cunningham – Owen himself admits this

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31 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 548.

32 Cited in Mark Ward, ‘Which *Textus Receptus*? A critique of Confessional Bibliology’ in *DBSJ* 25 (2020), 57, n. 28.

33 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 527.

34 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 528.



in the same work: “There is no doubt but that in the copies we now enjoy of the Old Testament there are some diverse readings, or various lections.”<sup>35</sup>)

Given that none denied the existence of variant readings in Greek manuscripts, Cunningham argues that the phrase “kept pure in all ages” applied “to their freedom from any material or substantial error”. Since the language of the Confession applies to Greek as well as Hebrew, “the purity here predicated of both could not have been intended to be a purity which was exclusive of various readings but merely such a purity as excluded any material or important corruption”.<sup>36</sup>

Was Cunningham reinterpreting the *Confession* by attributing only a “substantial” purity to the text of Scripture? Far from it. He was simply echoing the language of Westminster Divine John Ley who wrote in a contemporary Bible commentary: “Not one jot, or tittle of the Scriptures, in matter of substance, hath passed away.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Edward Leigh (a teller at the Westminster Assembly) wrote: “The Scripture hath no considerable corruption.”<sup>38</sup> Again, there is little difference between Leigh’s denial of “considerable” corruption and Cunningham’s of “important” corruption. Neither see “kept pure in all ages” as denying some level of corruption.

This all backs up Richard Muller’s contention that “The [Reformed] orthodox... assume that the text is free of substantive error and, typically, view textual problems as of scribal origin.”<sup>39</sup>

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35 John Owen, ‘Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures; with an answer to that inquiry, how we know the Scriptures to be the Word of God’ in *The Works of John Owen, Volume 16*, 301. See also John Owen, ‘Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture’ in *The Works of John Owen, Volume 16*, 358: ‘Notwithstanding what hath been spoken, we grant that there are and have been various lections in the Old Testament and the New’.

36 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 528.

37 Commenting on Luke 3:36 in [Westminster] *Annotations Upon all the Books of the Old and New Testament* (3rd edn, London: Evan Tyler, 1657).

38 Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity* (2nd edn, London: William Lee, 1662), 17.

39 Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy* (4 vols, 2nd edn, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:415.

For Cunningham, rather than undermining the purity of the Scriptures, textual criticism confirms it:

*That we have the text of the originals of the Old and New Testaments in a state of what may most justly be called purity and integrity cannot reasonably be doubted, nay, can be fully established, by the appropriate evidence applicable to the subject, the evidence of MSS., ancient versions, and statements and quotations in ancient authors.*<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, the attribution of the phrase “kept pure in all ages” to any one particular Greek edition soon becomes self-evidently ridiculous. Scrivener’s Greek text, which Grange Press and the TBS have republished, did not exist until 1881. Should it have the subtitle: “Kept pure in all ages since 1881”? Or should that epithet be applied to Erasmus’s first edition: “Kept pure in all ages since 1516”? Since that edition and the next “omits” a confessional proof text, it seems unlikely.

Cunningham is surely right to observe:

*The position that the word of God has been kept pure in all ages does not necessarily imply that it has existed in purity in any one particular MS., or that it now exists in purity in any one particular printed edition, but merely that God has preserved it in purity in his church, and has given to men sufficient materials, in due use of ordinary means, for obtaining a substantially accurate record of what he has revealed.*<sup>41</sup>

As Muller explains, the “so-called textus receptus” was merely part of the process of “establishing a normative or definitive text of the New Testament”. There was no claim in the era of Reformed orthodoxy [1520-1725] “of a sacrosanct text in this particular edition. Nor did it...provide some sort of *terminus ad quem* for the editing of the text of the Bible.”<sup>42</sup>

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40 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 528-9.

41 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 533.

42 Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:399.

*VI. Cunningham Continued: Specific Examples*

While allegations had occasionally been made that the original texts of Scripture had “been to some extent depraved or corrupted”, in reality “neither Papists nor infidels have ever been able to produce anything plausible in support of their denial of the integrity and purity of the original texts”. Nothing could be shown “which in the least affects the truth or certainty of any one of the doctrines or precepts of Christianity, or the greatly superior purity of the originals to any existing translation” (such as the Septuagint or Vulgate, both of which Cunningham discusses).<sup>43</sup>

Cunningham addresses several verse-length (or longer) passages that are “found in most editions of the Greek Testament” as being “at least very doubtful.” What is our responsibility in such a situation? It is not simply to go with the TR/KJV tradition. Rather, we are “under the necessity of estimating on which side the greatest amount of evidence lies”.

His first examples of passages whose genuineness had been questioned – chiefly by Socinians – were the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. The Free Church professor’s response could be given to a TR defender today who suggests that at some point in the future John 3:16 could disappear from our Bibles:

*There is...no rational ground for denying or doubting the genuineness of these four chapters, for they are found in all ancient MSS. and versions, and there is no more reason for omitting them than for omitting any other portion of the New Testament, which some men may not like.*<sup>44</sup>

Cunningham proceeds to discuss the longer ending of Mark (16:9-20) and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11).<sup>45</sup> Given that some manuscripts and ancient

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43 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 529-530.

44 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 531.

45 Incidentally, Mark 16:20 contains an example of a difference between the Received Text published by Grange Press (Scrivener, 1881), and the Received Text they borrow the preface from (Elzevir, 1633). Scrivener includes an ‘Amen’ at the end of the verse. ‘The text received by all’ omits it. The presence or absence of an ‘Amen’ may not seem like a big deal – even to people claiming jot and tittle certainty – but FCC minister Brent C. Evans manages to devote a whole chapter of *Why I preach from the Received Text* to his claim that ‘The modern critical text omits

versions omit both these paragraphs “we must weigh the evidence on both sides and endeavour to ascertain which preponderates”. Those who omitted either passage were trying to weigh the evidence, not remove part of the Bible – “competent judges” had come to different opinions. Cunningham himself leans towards including both, though rightly notes that the evidence in favour of the former is stronger than for the latter. He expected his students to examine the matter for themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Cunningham’s verdict on those passages might leave some ready to declare him a Byzantine/Majority text prioritist. (Particularly since he goes on to reject the genuineness of 1 John 5:7).<sup>47</sup> The next three passages he discusses (Luke 22:43-44; Matt 6:13b; John 5:3b-4) will not allow that conclusion, however. Cunningham again demonstrates that he is not a textual absolutist: “It cannot be settled with any very great certainty whether they ought to stand as part of the sacred text or not.” Nor was questioning these passages due to lack of reverence: “Men equally competent to judge of, and to estimate the critical evidence, and equally disposed to reverence the word of God, and to maintain the integrity and purity of the sacred text, have taken opposite sides upon the question of their genuineness.” Cunningham himself came to the same conclusion as the editors of the most recent critical text (*The Tyndale House Greek New Testament*) and the English Standard Version – namely, that there is more evidence for the first of these passages than the other two. Indeed, in questioning the inspiration of the Lord’s Prayer doxology, Cunningham was agreeing with the TR’s foremost editor,

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the word “Amen” in many places in the New Testament where the Received Text retains it’. There are in fact a number of examples where TR editions differ from each other in the presence or absence of ‘Amens’.

46 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 531-2.

47 On the Johannine Comma, he says: ‘Its genuineness has been abandoned by the great majority of those who have examined the subject with care, even though believing in the truth and divine authority of the doctrine which it teaches... There can be no reasonable doubt that there is a decided preponderance of critical evidence from MSS., ancient versions, and the testimonies of the Fathers, against the genuineness of this verse, and that therefore it is more than probable that it did not form a part of the sacred text, as it proceeded from the hand of the inspired apostle’. Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 533.

Erasmus, who condemned those who “to so heavenly a prayer did sew patches of their own”.<sup>48</sup> The doxology is also absent from William Tyndale’s first two editions.<sup>49</sup>

Like Chalmers, Cunningham was not alarmed by variant readings. After all, as Richard Bentley had pointed out, having more variant readings is simply the result of having more manuscripts – and the more manuscripts we have, the more certain we can be with regards to an ancient author that “what we have [is] in the main what he really wrote”. Furthermore, whatever plausible variant readings are chosen: “There is not one point of faith or practice, not one doctrine or precept of Scripture, that would be materially affected.”<sup>50</sup>

What about the divinity of Christ? It is the constant claim of TR advocates that the critical text undermines it, and, to quote from the preface to the Grange edition, “view(s) as suspect readings supportive of piety and orthodoxy”.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, on the question of whether 1 Timothy 3:16 should read “God was manifest in the flesh”, or “He was manifest in the flesh”, Grange Press director Robert McCurley says: “the modern critical texts, drawing on corrupt manuscripts from a region rife with Arian heresy, delete the word “God,” thus undermining the divine glory of Christ”.<sup>52</sup> For Cunningham, however, the divinity of Christ was not so shaky that it could be undermined by a textual variant:

*Even if the reading Θεος should be rejected, and if it should farther be admitted that the rejection of Θεος deprives this passage of all force as a proof of our Lord’s divinity, that great doctrine would still stand untouched, fully established by many passages of Scripture where there is no various reading which has any*

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48 Cited in Edward Leigh, *Annotations upon all the the New Testament philologicall and theologicall* (London: William Lee, 1650), 16.

49 Daniel B. Wallace, David Flood, Elijah Hixson, and Denis Salgado (eds), *Pen, Print & Pixels: Advances in Textual Criticism in the Digital Era* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2023), 300.

50 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 541.

51 Η ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ [Grange Press], 7.

52 Robert McCurley, ‘Scripture Identified Scripture’ in Jeffrey T. Riddle and Christian M. McShaffrey (eds.), *Why I Preach from the Received Text* (Winter Springs, FL: 2022), 128.

*plausible evidence to support it, and where there can be but one interpretation fairly put upon the words’.*<sup>53</sup>

As John Newton once put it:

*A doctrine so important, the very pillar and ground of truth...does not depend upon texts which require a nice skill in criticism, or a collation of ancient manuscripts, to settle their sense; but, like the blood in the animal economy, it pervades and enlivens the whole system of revelation.*<sup>54</sup>

Like Chalmers, Cunningham does not overplay the importance of textual criticism. He told his students that it was incumbent on them to be familiar with “the materials for determining upon what is the true and real text of Scripture”: manuscripts, ancient versions, quotations from Scripture in ancient writers, and declarations or indications by those writers as to what existed in the manuscripts then in use. In other words, the true and real text of Scripture was determined by examining the evidence, not checking Scrivener’s TR (which did not exist until twenty years after Cunningham’s death). For Cunningham, the Textus Receptus was simply “that text of the Greek Testament which has been in most general use since the invention of printing”. The correctness of some of its readings “had been doubted and questioned” long before the publication of [Johann Jakob] Griesbach’s New Testament in 1796.<sup>55</sup>

Given that Griesbach is criticised in the introduction to the Grange Press TR, Cunningham’s verdict on his Greek New Testament is worth quoting in full:

*Griesbach laboured to shew that the textus receptus had been derived from a very small number of MSS., and these of no great antiquity or value, and that now there were materials for producing a decidedly purer and more correct text. Most of the editions of the Greek Testament which have since been published in this country or upon the Continent have been based mainly upon Griesbach’s, or at least have in some form or other exhibited the principal of his various readings.*

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53 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 543.

54 John Newton, *Works*, (ed. Richard Cecil; 6 vols.; London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co.), 4:305.

55 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 548.

*Most of those who have examined this subject with attention have been of opinion that, upon the whole, Griesbach's text is more pure and correct, [and] approaches nearer to the original text of the inspired authors than the textus receptus, and I am disposed to think that this opinion is correct.*<sup>56</sup>

This did not mean, however, that preferring a critical text over the TR need make his students slaves to the decisions of its editors: “While it may be admitted that upon the whole and in general Griesbach’s text is preferable to the textus receptus, this does not hold in the case of each particular reading with respect to which they differ”.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, Cunningham refused to exaggerate the differences between the TR and the CT, which are around a 94% match, despite the fact that “Confessional Bibliology’s” leading figure has said they represent “a completely different underlying text”.<sup>58</sup> If Free Church divinity students wanted a dose of textual confidence, all they had to do was:

*Run the eye over the inner margin of Griesbach's New Testament. There you have at one view all the words and phrases which he has removed from the textus receptus to make room for his own emendations, and you cannot fail to be struck with their utter insignificance, both in number and importance. And you will thus be very decidedly confirmed in your convictions of the purity and integrity of the text of the New Testament.*<sup>59</sup>

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56 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 549 (emphasis added).

57 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 549.

58 Jeffrey T. Riddle, *Bible League Quarterly*, no, 479 (Oct-Dec 2019), ‘Book Reviews: Authorized – The Use & Misuse of the King James Bible’, 30. The 94% figure comes from Maurice Robinson as a comparison between the Byzantine and ‘Alexandrian-priority’ texts. [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2022/10/erasmus-letter-to-maarten-van-dorp-1515.html>>.

59 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 549.



*VII. Patrick Fairbairn*

Patrick Fairbairn began his ministry in Orkney, 10 miles off the north coast of mainland Scotland. He was credited with the transformation of his congregation, whose bad habits were said to include shipwrecking. By the time of the Disruption, he was ministering in Glasgow, and took most of his congregation into the new denomination. As the Free Church considered the expansion of its theological training “it became clear that Fairbairn would be at the centre of those plans”. He was professor in Aberdeen from 1853, and when the Glasgow seminary was established in 1856, he became the first professor there. He was Free Church Moderator in 1864 and is buried against the north wall of the Grange Cemetery.<sup>60</sup>

Fairbairn’s class lectures on the Pastoral Epistles became the basis for a commentary published in 1874. It was aimed particularly at students for the ministry and ministers not long ordained.<sup>61</sup> He sought to pay particular respect “to the objections which have been urged—latterly, indeed, with great boldness and persistency—against the apostolic authorship and divine inspiration of these portions of New Testament Scripture”. Fairbairn’s method began with an assessment of the correct text. As he did this, he found himself to be in almost total agreement with the critical text of Constantin von Tischendorf, whose eighth edition: “so nearly coincides with what I take to be the correct one, that I have simply adopted it—twice with a measure of hesitation, and once only with a formal dissent”.<sup>62</sup>

Fairbairn apparently saw his approach as utterly uncontroversial. In the preface to his first edition of *Prophecy* (13 years after the Disruption) he says that while he will generally note departures from the received text, there were a few cases “where the

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60 Lionel Alexander Ritchie, ‘Fairbairn, Patrick (1805–1874)’ in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online edn.

61 Patrick Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles: The Translation with Introduction, Expository Notes, and Dissertations* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1874), vi.

62 Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles*, viii.

correct text or rendering is generally known”, so he thought it “unnecessary to take any particular notice of the diversity”. One example he gives of this is the TR’s “kingdoms [plural] of this world” at Rev. 11:15, which has very little Greek manuscript support.<sup>63</sup>

Fairbairn’s assessment of Greek manuscripts can be seen in frequent comments such as:

*The received text has ἐν Χριστῷ, but it is wanting in the best mss., A, D, F, G’ (on 2 Tim. 2:7). “The καὶ of the received text between ἀρχαῖς and ἐξουσίας is wanting in 8, A, C, D, F, G, and should therefore be omitted” (on Titus 3:1). “The received text...inserts, on equally poor authority, οὗν ἐγώ after διαμαρτ.; but the best mss. omit them, 8, A, C, D, F, L, also the Latin and Syriac versions” (on 2 Tim. 4:1). “The μὴ αἰσχροκερδῆ, which follows in the received text, has no support, but from some of the later, the cursive mss” (on 1 Tim. 3:3).<sup>64</sup>*

This approach is starkly different from that of one modern promoter of the TR, who claims that for an NIV footnote to inform its readers that: “the earliest manuscripts do not have...” is “sleight of hand” that “many were fooled by”.<sup>65</sup>

In his earlier book on *Prophecy*, Fairbairn describes the Alexandrian manuscripts, Alexandrinus and Vaticanus, as “the two best MSS”.<sup>66</sup> That was in 1856 – six years before the publication of Codex Sinaiticus. In Fairbairn’s later publications, Sinaiticus is often listed first, though he was not prepared to accept a reading based on it alone:

*Tischendorf [who having discovered Sinaiticus was perhaps inclined to give it undue weight], in his eighth, follows the single authority of the Sinaitic in adopting here the easier reading προσέχεται, instead of προσέρχεται, which has the support of A, D, F, G, K, L, P, the Goth., Syr., Sah., Cop., Ethiop. versions. The*

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63 Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy viewed in respect to its distinctive nature, its special function, and proper interpretation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1856), vi.

64 Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 119, 288, 382, 141.

65 Trevor Kirkland, ‘Why I read and preach from the TR and the AV’, in *Why I preach from the received text*, 108

66 Fairbairn, *Prophecy*, 510.

*received text seems clearly entitled to the preference.*<sup>67</sup>

*(On 1 Timothy 6:3 – critical texts today agree with Fairbairn and match the TR).*

Sometimes Fairbairn gives us his best guess as to how TR readings originated. For example, Paul begins his first two pastoral letters with “grace, mercy and peace” (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). The TR, along with the majority of manuscripts, also includes “mercy” in the introduction to Titus. Fairbairn first weighed (rather than simply counted) the manuscript evidence:

*Grace and peace, the same that is found in all the other epistles of St. Paul, except the two to Timothy, has the support of  $\aleph$ , C, D, F, Ital., Vulg., Syr., Pesh., Copt., Chrysos., etc. The latter must therefore be regarded as the preferable reading, and is now generally followed.*<sup>68</sup>

He then explained the likely origin of the TR reading: “The other was probably adopted to assimilate the text to the other two Pastoral epistles.”

The difference today between the KJV’s “If any man or woman that believeth” and the ESV’s “If any believing woman” at 1 Timothy 5:16 is due to a textual variant. The TR reading, explains Fairbairn, “was doubtless introduced as a correction because it seemed strange that a charge of the kind given here should be connected with believing females only”. In 1 Timothy 6.7, an extra word in the TR “was in all probability inserted to soften the apparent hardness or difficulty of the connection between the two clauses.”

From Fairbairn’s perspective, the TR often added extra words to the inspired text – but sometimes it removed them. On 2 Timothy 2:13 he says: “The received text omits  $\gamma\alpha\rho$ , but it is found in the best copies,  $\aleph$ , A, C, D, F, L, and is admitted by all the best critics”. Similarly, he points out in *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* that the word “peace” in Ephesians 2:17 should be repeated, being found in “all the better

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<sup>67</sup> Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 233.

<sup>68</sup> Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 260.

MSS., and most of the ancient versions.”<sup>69</sup> Likewise, in Colossians 2:13, “The better authorities (⋈ A C K L) have here a second *ὕμᾱς*, repeated for the sake of emphasis, ‘you who were dead . . . He quickened you.’”<sup>70</sup>

Invariably for Fairbairn, the “best manuscripts” trump the majority. An extra nine-word clause may have made it into the majority of manuscripts at Romans 14:6, but Fairbairn was sure the Apostle Paul never said it:

*These authorities [Lachmann, Mill, Griesbach, Meyer] omit the clause in ver. 6, καὶ ὁ μὴ φρονῶν τὴν ἡμέραν, κυρίῳ οὐ φρονεῖ, with all the best MSS., ⋈ A B C D E F G, the Italic, Vulgate, Aeth. Copt, versions, Jer., Aug., and other authorities. To admit a text with such evidence against it, and only one uncial MS. L. of no great antiquity for it, were to violate all the established canons of criticism; besides that, it makes no proper sense; at least not without some considerable straining.*<sup>71</sup>

The TR reading is not always the majority one however, and at times it lacks any support at all. A significant example of this is found in Romans 7:6 where a conjectural emendation by Theodore Beza “become a stock example of the questionable quality of the Textus Receptus”.<sup>72</sup> Beza mistakenly thought he had support from Chrysostom: “It altogether appears that this reading was then without disagreement the received one.” He then explains how he “did not hesitate to restore it” [i.e. change the TR to include it]. As Jan Krans explains, “The change is small, only one letter, but the grammatical and exegetical consequences are great.” The result changes the meaning from: “we were freed from the law, having died [to that] in which we were held” to “we were freed from the law—bringing death—in which were held”.

69 Patrick Fairbairn, *The revelation of law in Scripture: Considered with respect both to its own nature, and to its relative place in successive dispensations* (Edinburgh; T. & T. Clark, 1869), 461.

70 Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, 462, n. 2.

71 Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, 452, n. 1.

72 Jan Krans, *Beyond what is written: Erasmus and Beza as conjectural critics of the New Testament* (Leiden and Boston, 2006), p. 274.

As Fairbairn notes, not only is the external evidence against the reading which “on the authority of Beza” was adopted by the received text, but “The apostle never speaks of the law as undergoing change or dying.”<sup>73</sup>

Another important variant Fairbairn comments upon is 1 Timothy 3:16. Significantly, Fairbairn did not conclude that Arians had deleted “God”:

*The controversy so long waged about the correct text in this passage, whether after the mystery of godliness we should read Θεός, or ὄς, or ὄ may now be regarded as virtually settled in favour of ὄς’. Yet this “by no means destroys the bearing of the passage on the divinity of Christ; for this is clearly implied in what follows—is, indeed, the ground-element of the whole series of declarations”<sup>74</sup>*

Did Fairbairn not believe that the text of the New Testament had been kept pure in all ages? “The possession of a pure text”, he told students, “is an indispensable preliminary to a thoroughly correct and trustworthy exposition”.<sup>75</sup> That pure text was to be found by examining all extant Greek manuscripts however, not simply pulling an edition of the TR off the shelf.

Far from opposing new English translations, Fairbairn was one of two Free Church professors who served on the Old Testament Company charged with producing the *Revised Version* of 1881-85. Three others worked on the New Testament.<sup>76</sup>

### VIII. Robert Candlish

What of Robert Candlish, the other young, evangelical churchman who “goaded on” Chalmers?

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73 Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law*, 427.

74 Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 162.

75 Patrick Fairbairn, *Hermeneutical manual: or, introduction to the exegetical study of the Scriptures of the New Testament* (Philadelphia; English & Co., 1859), 13.

76 Samuel Newth, *Lectures on Bible revision: with an appendix containing the prefaces to the chief historical editions of the English Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), 109-113.

Readers of his commentary on First John will look in vain for his exposition of 1 John 5:7. They will find only a note:

*I acquiesce of course in the rejection of the 7th verse, and of the words “in earth” in the 8th verse, as not in the original. I need not argue the point, for it is now all but universally admitted by intelligent critics.<sup>77</sup>*

A better awareness of manuscripts had not simply “removed” text, however. At 1 John 2:23, Candlish notes that the last part of the verse “although considered doubtful by our translators [because it was only in some TR editions], and therefore put by them in italics and within brackets, is now admitted to be genuine”.<sup>78</sup> This longer reading is not in the majority of manuscripts, and so Candlish was no Byzantine priorist. Candlish also disagrees with the Majority Text in Ephesians 5:9 – concluding that it should read “the fruit of light” – “not ‘of the Spirit,’ as in the received text”.<sup>79</sup>

Like Fairbairn, Candlish also suggests reasons why certain TR readings originated. For example, on “hades” replacing “death” in 1 Corinthians 15:55, he says:

*Two things may account for this reading having early crept into some copies of the text. The one is the association of these two;—death and hades, in the book of the Revelation...The other explanation is the notion that the apostle is quoting or referring to a prophecy of Hosea.*

The TR reading here “brings in a new and somewhat distracting element”. Yet while errors in the received text needed pointing out, Candlish did so with a pastor’s heart:

*The meaning, however, when this new turn is given to the verse, is essentially and identically the same as when the old form of it is retained. And therefore, being satisfied on that point, we may continue freely to use the language that has so*

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Smith Candlish, *The First Epistle of John, expounded in a series of lectures* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black), 459.

<sup>78</sup> Candlish, *The First Epistle of John*, 178.

<sup>79</sup> Robert S. Candlish, *Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians: expounded in a series of discourses* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1875), 211.

*often thrilled and stirred our hearts: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”*<sup>80</sup>

In his book on *The Two Great Commandments*, based on Romans 12, Candlish remarks:

*Of the various readings, two only are noticeable, not for any force of external evidence in their favour;—the weight of manuscript authority, both in quantity and in quality, being decidedly against them;—but because they illustrate the way in which alterations of the text have sometimes crept in, through the prejudice or erroneous judgment of transcribers.*<sup>81</sup>

One (*μνείαις*, memories, for *χρείαις*, necessities in Romans 12:13) he attributes to “that undue reverence for the departed which early began to prevail in the Church, and ultimately became worship”. He attributes the second (serving the Lord vs. serving the time, *καίρω* for *Κυρίω*, in Romans 12:11) to a scenario where “the copyist apparently thought that the idea of ‘serving the Lord’ was too general”. The 21st-century textual commentary by Philip Comfort agrees that Candlish’s reasons are possible in both cases.<sup>82</sup> Incidentally, the second of these variants (on which TR editions differ) was discussed in the 1640s by KJV translator and Westminster Divine Daniel Featley, who wrote: “In the most ancient Copie of Tecla [ie Codex Alexandrinus], and generally in the most correct Editions, the word is not *καίρω*, but *κυρίω*, not the time, but the Lord.”<sup>83</sup>

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80 Robert S. Candlish, *Life in a Risen Saviour* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1858), 267-9.

81 Robert S. Candlish, *The Two Great Commandments: “Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy Neighbour as Thyself,” illustrated in a series of Discourses on the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Epistle to the Romans* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1860), x.

82 Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary: Commentary on the variant readings of the ancient New Testament manuscripts and how they relate to the major English translations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House), 463-4.

83 Cited in Steele, ‘The Westminster Divines and the Alexandrian Codex’ in *Foundations*, no. 85 (Winter 2023). [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<https://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-85-winter-2023/the-westminster-divines-and-the-alexandrian-codex>>.



*IX. George Smeaton*

George Smeaton has been described as “the most eminent scholar of the set of young men who with M’Cheyne and the Bonars sat at the feet of Chalmers”. During his time at the University of Edinburgh, he memorised every word in a great folio Greek lexicon. When asked many years later whether this was true, he replied to a friend: “Well, there was some truth in it. I suppose you did foolish things yourself in those days.” In the late 1830s he was part of an “Exegetical Society” where he and other young ministers (including Robert Murray M’Cheyne and Andrew Bonar) committed themselves to read either Isaiah or Jeremiah in Hebrew, and a New Testament book in Greek.<sup>84</sup> He attached himself to the Free Church at its formation, became a professor at Aberdeen in 1854, and moved to New College in 1857. He died on Sabbath morning, 14 April 1889, and a few days later his earthly remains were laid to rest in the Grange Cemetery.

In an otherwise helpful biography, John Keddie says:

*He lived in the era of the Revised Version translation and the theories of B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, which every bit as much as the higher critical theories constituted a sharp departure from the previously held consensus in the Reformed churches in these areas.*<sup>85</sup>

Presumably by “the previously held consensus in the Reformed churches”, Keddie is suggesting a consensus that the *Textus Receptus* was jot and tittle perfect and could not be improved upon. Presumably, this is also what he means when he says that Smeaton appears to have taken “a conservative line on matters of textual criticism”. If Keddie is suggesting that a commitment to the TR is necessary to be “conservative” then by implication Chalmers, Cunningham, and Candlish have departing from the Reformed consensus in regard to the text of Scripture.

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<sup>84</sup> John W. Keddie, *George Smeaton: learned theologian and biblical scholar* (Brighton: Ettrick Press, 2023), 31-2.

<sup>85</sup> Keddie, *George Smeaton*, 148-9.

But what of Smeaton? Keddie cautiously says: “Though only suggestive of his attitude, it is perhaps significant that in a comment on Luke 1:35 in his work on the Holy Spirit, he challenges the Revised Version translation.”<sup>86</sup> Smeaton’s own words are worth quoting:

*The words of thee (ἐκ σοῦ) deleted by many in the phrase, should probably be retained in the text, for they are found in such a number of Fathers—(Justin, Irenæus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Epiphanius, Jerome)—that the balance of authority from this source alone goes far to counterbalance the evidence of faulty manuscripts against them.*<sup>87</sup>

It is true that the KJV contains those words and the Revised Version does not, but the story is more complex. If Smeaton “challenges the Revised Version translation”, he also challenges those of William Tyndale and many others. The words that Smeaton sees as deleted are not in the majority of manuscripts – and not even in the majority of TR editions. Erasmus included them only in his first edition, and then thought better of it his second, commenting: “It seems added by some explainer.”<sup>88</sup> The words are not included in any of the TR editions of Stephanus but made it into the KJV via Beza. Their presence in the KJV means they are included in Scrivener’s text, but not in Elzevir’s. In other words, they are not in the “text received by all” – the TR edition which gives the “textus receptus” its name, and whose preface the Grange Press edition affixes to Scrivener.

Smeaton himself took an evidence-based approach to textual criticism. In his book on *The Holy Spirit*, he says of the Johannine Comma: “All text-critics and exegetes now let go 1 John 5:7 as no longer tenable. It was probably a mere note on the margin inserted in the text by a subsequent transcriber.”<sup>89</sup>

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86 Keddie, *George Smeaton*, 149.

87 George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), 122, n. 1.

88 Cited in Krans, *Beyond What is Written*, 36, n. 31.

89 Smeaton, *Holy Spirit*, 92, n. 1.

In Acts 20:28, where some manuscripts describe Jesus as “God” and some as “Lord”, Smeaton says that either reading would support Christ’s divinity. He calmly discusses the options without managing to demonise manuscripts or suspect Arians:

*The reading τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ Κυρίου is supported by A, C<sup>1</sup>, D, E, and preferred by Griesb., Lach., Tisch. The common reading is supported by B, x, and favourably regarded by Scholtz and Alford... It seems almost impossible to decide, if the decision is to turn solely on external grounds. Hence Paul’s phraseology elsewhere, the church of God, is thought by some to incline the balance in favour of the receptus.*

Elsewhere he criticises the “faulty” translation of the KJV at Isaiah 48:16 and its insertion of a “the” in John 17:19 (against the TR tradition, though he seems to assume that the KJV translators have inserted it on the evidence of “some single MSS. and a Greek father”).<sup>90</sup> On Revelation 22:14 (“blessed are they that do his commandments” in the KJV), Smeaton says:

*If the reading which modern editors prefer is adopted in that verse, which describes the right to the tree of life (22:14), “Blessed are they that have washed their robes,” an important doctrine is stated.<sup>91</sup>*

Finally, on Psalm 22:16 he praises the KJV for following the LXX rather than the Masoretic, pointing to the verse “They pierced my hands and feet”. (The Hebrew – as translated, for example, in the Jewish Publication Society’s 1917 version – says “like a lion they are at my hands and feet”).

*Our authorised English Version has here done well in so rendering the verse, in deference to the Septuagint and authorities much older than the Masoretic punctuation, which has, either from mistake or by design, introduced a reading which cannot be vindicated.<sup>92</sup>*

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<sup>90</sup> Smeaton, *Holy Spirit*, 32-3; George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement, as taught by Christ himself* (2nd edn, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 250, n. 1.

<sup>91</sup> George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement, as taught by the apostles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870), 475.

<sup>92</sup> Smeaton, *Doctrine of the Atonement as taught by Christ*, p. 85.

For Smeaton, unlike “Confessional Bibliologists” today, the Hebrew vowel points were not inspired and were a relatively recent addition to the text. (The only difference between Smeaton’s position and that of John Calvin was that Calvin was certain the Masoretic rendering was a deliberate change: the verse had “been fraudulently corrupted by the Jews”).<sup>93</sup>

*X. James Bannerman*

James Bannerman “played a leading part in the events leading up to the Disruption in 1843”.<sup>94</sup> In 1849 he was appointed professor of apologetics and pastoral theology at New College. His posthumously published *The Church of Christ* remains the classic statement of the Presbyterian view of the church. Bannerman’s textual confidence provides a good note on which to begin drawing this survey to a close.

Bannerman’s 1865 book on *Inspiration* is quoted positively in a TBS booklet.<sup>95</sup> His defence of inspiration, however, is not one that a TR-defender could make. Bannerman was responding to the Anglican Dean of Canterbury, Henry Alford who, as Nicholas Needham summarises, “entertained somewhat liberal views of on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture”.<sup>96</sup> Other than his conclusion, Alford’s argument was essentially that of “Confessional Bibliology”:

*Another objection to the theory [of plenary verbal inspiration] is, that if it be so, the Christian world is left in uncertainty what her Scriptures are, as long as the sacred text is full of various readings. Some one manuscript must be pointed out to us, which carries the weight of verbal inspiration, or some text whose authority shall be undoubted, must be promulgated.*

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93 In reaching this conclusion, Calvin was going against all Hebrew manuscripts he knew of: ‘all the Hebrew Bibles at this day, without exception, have this reading’. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* trans. James Anderson, (5 vols, Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845) 1:373.

94 Rosemary Mitchell, ‘James Bannerman (1807–1868)’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn.

95 Malcolm H. Watts, *The Lord gave the word: a study in the history of the biblical text* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1998), 2.

96 Nicholas R. Needham, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture in the Free Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1991), 22.

TR defenders would agree – and say that the text whose authority shall be undoubted is the Textus Receptus (though they are less clear on which of the varying TR editions must be chosen). For Alford, however: “neither of these things [picking one manuscript or one text and calling it perfect] can ever happen”. Indeed, as the Puritan Richard Baxter had pointed out long before, even if we had a perfect manuscript, we would not know it: “For how should we be sure of that one above all the rest?”<sup>97</sup>

Bannerman, like Cunningham, did not respond to such objections by claiming miraculous preservation. That would be to go beyond what God had promised: “There was no miraculous interposition afterwards vouchsafed to protect the inspired manuscript from the unintentional errors of copyists.” As with all other ancient books, a “multitude of various readings” had been introduced, “always differing from and occasionally contradicting each other”. Bannerman goes so far as to say that “the friends of the doctrine [of plenary inspiration] do not pretend to have in their possession the immaculate text which came from the inspired author”.

The advocates of inspiration denied that that they must hold to “the perpetual miracle of the preservation of the original text...as if it were impossible for God to work a miracle for man’s benefit once for all, unless He renewed it continually for the preservation of the benefit conferred”. Such a doctrine was “destitute of all Scripture warrant, and contradicted by actual fact”.<sup>98</sup>

At the same time, however, variant readings were confined “within very narrow limits indeed, not detracting beyond an indefinitely small amount from the integrity of the original”. Consequently:

*The various readings, and the minute although appreciable differences in which they diverge from each other, have no effect at all upon the grand fact, that through means of the supernatural intervention of God his own eternal wisdom*

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97 Richard Baxter, *The practical works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, ed. William Orne (23 vols, London: James Duncan, 1830) 15:64.

98 James Bannerman, *Inspiration: the infallible truth and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1865), 514-6.

*speaks to us from the page of Scripture with a truth that is infallible and an authority that is divine.*<sup>99</sup>

Unlike magic spells, infallible truth and divine authority “are not tied to certain forms of language, and do not exclusively reside in a mysterious selection of charmed words”. In a very significant sentence, he says that the difference between viable alternative readings:

*Is not a difference which makes the Bible in the one case to be the word of God, and in the other not: in either case it is to all intents and purposes the message of God to our souls; and it is the voice of the Spirit speaking to us still with infallible truth and divine authority.*

James Bannerman lived at a time when various critical texts were being published, yet he did not mistake them for different Bibles: “God has put into the hands of men one Bible, and no more than one”.<sup>100</sup>

Are we left with hopeless uncertainty? Not at all:

*By the help of the ordinary methods of historical evidence applicable to other cases, which guide us in judging of the integrity and the purity of other ancient books, a man may come to have a moral certainty that the copy or translation of the Bible in his hands, is to all practical intents and purposes an undoubted transcript and exhibition of the original text as it came from the hands of its authors.*<sup>101</sup>

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99 Bannerman, *Inspiration*, 517-8.

100 Bannerman, *Inspiration*, 521.

101 Bannerman, *Inspiration*, 521-2.

*XI. Conclusion*

Based on the evidence above, the great Free Church Fathers, Chalmers, Cunningham, Candlish, Smeaton and Bannerman all had an evidence-based approach to the text of Scripture. None of them held a Majority/Byzantine text position, never mind a TR-only one. The Grange-published TR attacks Griesbach; Cunningham thought his text was the best, and Chalmers, the Free Church's founder father, said that it would be one of the proudest literary honours of his classroom if there came "from its walls some future Griesbach of Scotland".<sup>102</sup> Someone who has recently written in defence of the TR warns people that if their minister uses a "modern Bible based upon an eclectic text", then that preacher does not believe he has "the pure, true, authentic preserved Word of God". If such claims are to be believed, (and if we pretend for a moment that the KJV was never modern and that the TR is not an eclectic text), the Free Church fathers stand condemned along with the vast majority of Reformed ministers today. Not only did they use texts which departed from the TR, but five Free Church professors helped produce the only official revision to the KJV.

The defence of the TR as jot and tittle perfect is a more modern phenomenon than many realise. It was not the position of Scrivener and Burgon in the nineteenth century, no matter how many times their names are invoked. Indeed, the TBS, in existence since 1831, has only "since 1958 vigorously supported the TR".<sup>103</sup> The ongoing effort to promote this position seems to require an attempt to mask what the TR actually is. This includes printing editions of Scrivener's text, with his preface and textual apparatus removed. The Grange Press edition includes the introduction to a much-earlier TR, which contains a different text from Scrivener's. Those differences may be small – but not too small to stop a Disruption father arguing against one of them.

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102 Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, Volume 7, 337.

103 Daniel B. Wallace, 'The Majority-Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique' in *JETS*, 37/2 (1994), 185, n. 5.



Would those Free Church fathers considered in this article use the TR today? Given that some didn't even use it in their own day, and none commented on it uncritically, we can confidently answer "no". In examining the meaning of any portion of the Word of God, Cunningham told his students, "The first thing to be done is to ascertain as exactly as possible what is the true text or reading, what were the actual words that proceeded from the original author."<sup>104</sup> More manuscript discoveries meant more certainty, not less. It is inconceivable that any of them would have argued for readings found in no Greek manuscripts. They uniformly reject readings with such weak attestation as the Johannine Comma.

A truly conservative position on the text of the New Testament involves sticking to the manuscript evidence God has preserved. The Majority/Byzantine Text position does this by counting manuscripts, and the Critical Text position by weighing them. The TR-only position, on the other hand, ties its adherents to readings in no Greek manuscript, and even to the passage that its first editor, a Catholic priest, admitted to back-translating from the Latin Vulgate.<sup>105</sup>

For the TR-only position, what matters is not the Greek manuscripts, but an English translation, the KJV, and the reverse-engineered Greek text based on the text-critical choices of its translators. In this respect, the Free Church fathers are more conservative – and more confessional – than those who most loudly invoke their names today.

Why does this matter? Firstly, accurate reading of history is important. Those who claim the support of figures from church history for their views should have no complaints when such claims are examined. At the 2024 Free Church (Continuing)

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104 Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 357.

105 'To avoid leaving a lacuna in my text, I supplied the Greek out of our Latin version. I did not want to conceal this from the reader, however, and admitted in the annotations what I had done...And yet I would not have dared to do in the Gospels or even in the Epistles what I have done here'. Erasmus' admission is cited by Jan Krans, 'Erasmus and the Text of Revelation: A Critique of Thomas Holland's *Crowned with Glory*', in *TC: A Journal of Textual Criticism*, xvi (2011), p. 5.

General Assembly, one of its ministers claimed that an article in a previous edition of this journal “went on to refute if not attack the Received Text”.<sup>106</sup> Based on the evidence above, it is impossible to conceive of a similar complaint being made in 1843 or the decades that followed. Secondly, and more importantly, the refusal of TR defenders to admit any uncertainty as to the correct text of Scripture is surely in danger of undermining trust in the Bible. If “uncertainty anywhere is uncertainty everywhere”, what will those influenced by such teaching conclude when they read great Reformed figures of the past admitting uncertainty – or saying that the TR is certainly wrong? Finally, great damage is done to Reformed unity when adherence to the TR (or to be more accurate, certain editions of it) is made a marker of faithfulness. If TR defenders really believe their own rhetoric – that the differences between themselves and mainstream Reformed evangelicals are such that we have “different Bibles” – then they will neither want nor pursue unity with us.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, in a recent book by “Confessional Bibliologists”, after condemning modern versions as “based on Satan’s Bible”, an appendix gives a step-by-step guide as to how to leave a church which doesn’t hold to the TR.<sup>108</sup> In the interests of the unity of the church, such a movement must be held up to the bar of Scripture and history. Certainly, when compared to the views of the Free Church Fathers, it is a radical departure.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Stephen Steele is minister of Stranraer RP Church in Scotland. He has an MA from Queen’s University Belfast where his focus was on nineteenth-century Presbyterianism.*

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106 [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/live/xl6Mb5SI7tc>, 1 hr 59 mins. The reader can judge for themselves whether this is an accurate summary of my ‘The Westminster Divines and the Alexandrian Codex’ in *Foundations*, no. 85 (2023). [cited 18 January 2025]. Online: <<https://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-85-winter-2023/the-westminster-divines-and-the-alexandrian-codex>>.

107 Poul de Gier, ‘The Text of the Church’ in *Why I Preach from the Received Text*, 50.

108 Christopher Myers, ‘The Invincible Word’ in *Why I preach from the Received Text*, 163; ‘If there is no openness to change...you should begin considering your ability to remain in your church as a faithful member while holding a different opinion on this particular issue’. Jeffery T. Riddle and Christian M. McShaffrey, ‘Appendix’ in *Why I preach from the Received Text*.

## REVIEW ARTICLE: SHE NEEDS

*Alison Umpleby*

Nay Dawson, *She Needs: Women Flourishing in the Church* (IVP, 2024)

### *I. Introduction*

Nay Dawson understands the power of stories. As a Christian woman passionate about evangelism, she is gifted at taking the gospel story, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, and presenting it creatively to her hearers to provoke their minds and hearts to consider who Jesus is and the call he makes on their lives. Not only that, but Dawson is a gifted leader, a woman who encourages and trains other women in practical ways to take the gospel message to their own contexts and communities. In many ways, Dawson's book *She Needs: Women Flourishing in the Church* is Dawson's own story, framed as a journey from her own flourishing as a young Christian, through a period of discouragement and disillusionment about her place in Christ's church, to a renewed vision of how precious women are to the Lord and of their significant role within God's redemptive plan. Throughout the book, which originated as a series of blog posts (also titled 'She Needs'), Dawson interweaves the stories of other Christian women – friends and others whom she has reached through her blogs and social media posts. Although Dawson acknowledges that many women who contacted her didn't identify with the struggles she herself faced in finding her role in the church, this book overwhelmingly highlights the stories of women who are also discouraged and disillusioned in the church to varying degrees.

These stories shouldn't be dismissed lightly. In my own conversations with friends – both peers and older women – as I have prepared to review this book, I have heard more than one story about women being poorly treated in churches and parachurch organisations. As Mark Meynell points out in his foreword to the book,

it is “a matter of Christian love and service” to listen to those in our churches who have been hurt or confused by the behaviour of others, to work out how and why the pain has occurred, and to seek resolution. I have also listened to the stories of those who expressed their own sense of flourishing in the church, of the ways in which they see themselves valued, see their gifts being used, and see other women, in previous generations as well as our own, contributing dedicated and valued service to Christ’s kingdom. It is – I think, inevitably – a mixed picture, and for each woman herself, no doubt her experience will be a mixed one, depending on her own context, personality and circumstances.

How do we make sense of these stories? I think that is the overarching question which Dawson’s book ultimately fails to answer. Nobody would deny that these stories are real and truly represent the experiences of many Christian women. But the frame in which we place these stories also matters. Where I think Dawson’s book falls short is in giving us the big picture of who God is, his purpose in creating us male and female, and how individual men and women are called to live out our gifts and callings within that bigger vision. That’s what I was left longing for by the end of the book. I suspect that in her desire to speak in both complementarian and egalitarian church contexts, Dawson has made it difficult for herself to lay the necessary foundations for this big picture. In this review, I aim to summarise the helpful aspects of *She Needs*, while showing how a bigger picture is necessary to help us evaluate the book’s underlying assumptions.

## *II. The Positives*

So first, some positives. Dawson’s desire to share Christ with others is evident throughout her writing and is clearly something that deeply shapes her life and work. She gives her time to writing and speaking evangelistically and in training other women to do the same. She knows that in Christ and his word we have something precious,

and her passion is to spread the knowledge and love of Jesus. This also affects the way she thinks about women in the church, as she is concerned that for generations who are growing up in a “feminist world”, restrictions for women in church life will be off-putting for those who may otherwise be receptive to the gospel (see pp. 92-93). This is something I’ll return to.

Secondly, Dawson’s use of social science research and statistics (with different research presented in every chapter) is helpful to the extent that it pinpoints some of the things which may make women reticent to serve in their church contexts. For example, if we know as women that we should be serving the body of Christ, but that perfectionism (chapter 1), or the fear of failure (chapter 2), or a reluctance to speak up in certain situations (chapter 3) are holding us back, then we need to address those things so that we can obey Christ’s call to serve his people, build up the body, and together reach a lost world. It may also be helpful for church leaders and other church members to be aware of particular difficulties that certain groups in their congregations face so that they can encourage – and challenge! – those who may struggle with these things.

As already noted, although it may be painful to hear, it is also right and good that we listen carefully to those who have been hurt or left confused by some of their experiences of church life so that we may know best how to help. Related to this point, it should be an opportunity for congregations, and especially church leaders, to compare their own attitudes toward women and their gifts to the attitudes and practices of Christ and his apostles. When someone brings a criticism, a challenge, or a suggestion, it is always fitting for a Christian to examine himself or herself and repent of any attitude or behaviour that is less than Christlike.

The two passages in the book which stood out to me as inspiring and encouraging were lists of Scripture references – one list of some of the ways in which Jesus treated women (p. 4) and another on pages 45-46 of occasions in Scripture where women’s

voices were particularly important and used by God in significant ways. The second list in particular paints a beautiful picture of some of the ways God has woven women's words and testimonies into the very fabric of redemption history, including the stories of Hagar, Hannah, Mary, Elizabeth, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the women who had the privilege of announcing the news of Jesus' resurrection to the rest of his disciples. So many more could have been mentioned, but this list certainly whetted my appetite to get back to Scripture with my mind and heart alert to the many ways God has elevated women to play a glorious part in his magnificent plan and purpose.

### *III. Challenging Undergirding Assumptions*

Unfortunately, the way the book is framed, and some of its underlying assumptions, detract somewhat from these helpful and positive points. Let's take Dawson's concern about evangelism as an example. I couldn't agree more that as a church, we need to be able to answer the question "Is Christianity good for women?". We also need to be able to answer it with a resounding "Yes!". Given our belief in a loving and good creator God, who created men and women to know and love him, and to serve together in his creation, we can be confident that knowing and loving this God, living in right relationship with him and with one another, will allow us to flourish as best as we can in this fallen world. We can also be fully confident that whatever our compassionate and loving creator tells us about ourselves as men and women is true, and furthermore, that anything he requires of us that appears to us to be merely restrictive and limiting – even unfair – is, in fact, the best thing for us and is specifically designed for our good. God's restrictions around human sexuality are a case in point – to the unbeliever, it may seem restrictive, unfair, and even cruel of God speaking through his word to deny two people of the same sex the opportunity to act upon their sexual desires as they wish. But as Christians, we know and trust that this denial is for the good of both the individuals in question and the community at large.

Living according to the sexual ethics of the Bible, although perhaps difficult, will bring blessing.

Similarly, God has set out in his word certain duties in his church to which he calls men, and not women, and vice versa. The watching world might cry “unfair!”, but as Christians, we do not operate under the same assumptions as the world. Liberal individualism, which views the human person as a wholly free and autonomous being and whose end in life is self-realisation unrestricted by their own context, relationships, and even their own body, is not the vision of humanity that we find in the Bible. Instead, God created humanity in two parts – male and female – different, interdependent, and stronger and more fruitful together than we are apart. Some contemporary feminists have begun to note how this non-gendered liberal individual vision of humanity has not been beneficial for women, as it ignores (among other things) the reality of women’s bodies, the relational obligations of our lives, and thus ultimately the true best interests of women.<sup>1</sup> God’s word does not do this – on the contrary, it affirms the differences between men and women, as part of God’s purpose for humanity, and makes allowance for the different callings of men and women within God’s family. Thus, a woman in the church has a calling and duty to use her gifts to the fullest extent that she is able, but without needing to suppress or downplay the fact that she is a woman and all that this entails in her body, mind and relationships.

In terms of evangelism, this is a beautiful vision to offer our friends and neighbours. The God who made us and loves us is not restrictive because he is mean or because he has made women to be lesser than men. Rather, the beautiful picture in Scripture is of our good Creator using men and women to depict great and glorious spiritual realities, as each fulfils their own part in his plan. It is not men’s part primarily

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary Harrington, *Feminism Against Progress* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2023) and Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022) - both fascinating and insightful critiques of progressive feminism, which each in their own way advocate for a ‘reactionary feminism’ which takes into account the differences between men and women.



to be a mother to others in the church (although aspects of mothering are part of a pastor's role – see 1 Thessalonians 2:7!). Neither is it women's part primarily to shepherd the flock, defending the sheep from wolves and other dangers, or to be a father to others in the church (although again, aspects of stereotypical manhood are the duty of all Christians – see for example 1 Corinthians 16:13 and Ephesians 6:12-20). We each have a distinct and glorious role to play – and neither manifests its true glory without the help and contrasting role of the other. This is infinitely better than anything the world has to offer!

Of course this all comes with one major caveat – that we must make sure that as fallible and sinful people, we are not adding rules upon rules or being more restrictive than Scripture itself, but are instead allowing both men and women to fully lean into their different callings. This is where I can identify with some of Dawson's concerns, while differing from the underlying assumption that men and women must be allowed, and even encouraged, to play identical parts in a church context. Herein lies the crux: women will have valid concerns and challenges about where and how they can serve the church, but there is also a danger of accepting cultural assumptions of gender equality and liberal individualism over the Bible's more beautiful and glorious vision. Individual testimonies of women who feel frustrated, undervalued and restricted must be set in the context of the big picture of Scripture rather than the narrative of the cultural waters we swim in.

In a similar way, I believe that the way that social science research is used in the book to frame the issues women face is ultimately unhelpful. I'm not against social science research itself – far from it! Statistics and observations of trends can be very useful – for example, as previously noted, to shed light on some of the different ways men and women typically behave and relate at the population level. We find that good research coincides with the testimony of Scripture at every point. However, using these observations to frame the stories of women in the church risks once again taking on the

assumptions and categories of the prevailing culture, such as the assumption that men and women should be (and want to be!) doing the same thing in the same way, and that if this isn't happening, there is necessarily oppression and injustice at play. Dawson does make use of Scripture throughout the book, pointing to Paul's image of the body in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, for example, to demonstrate that men and women need each other and need to work together so that the church functions properly. To be clear, I don't think that Dawson is saying that men and women are exactly alike, or that they don't have unique perspectives and gifts to offer the church; rather, that some of the solutions she proposes to elevate women (for example, creating more paid roles for women in churches – see page 83) don't take these differences far enough into account, and rely on faulty cultural understandings of women's needs. At several points the equation of the church with the secular workplace rather than envisioned as the family of God, and of ministry as a career path rather than a calling from God, confirmed by his people, is also jarring (see especially chapter 6 titled "She needs you to fix the leaky pipe"). When we begin with a faulty paradigm, we'll end up with wrong expectations, and an inadequate church life for everyone involved – men and women both.

I've given a lot of space in this review to critique what I believe are some of the undergirding assumptions of the book. I haven't spent so much time engaging with the individual concerns that Dawson and other women raise, or Dawson's proposed solutions. That's because I genuinely think that when we have a solid underlying paradigm, many of the presenting problems and issues which are floating on the surface can be dealt with and discussed more easily. It becomes more obvious where women are truly being mistreated and not allowed to fulfil their God-given calling. This comes to the fore in chapter 5 – "She needs you to stop fudging the issue" – where one woman writes, "There is so much uncertainty and difficulty in the way of women figuring out their calling and their role in God's kingdom. It isn't clear, and nobody seems to want to give any definitive answers." (p. 70) In this chapter, Dawson also references a book

called “Developing Female Leaders” by Kadi Cole, who makes the point that, “the most important thing you can do as a leader is to get clear on what you believe” (p. 71). I couldn’t agree more! However, this clarity needs to start at the foundations, not begin with a conversation about what men and women can and can’t do. This means that two churches with the same foundational convictions about the Bible’s vision for men and women may work these things out in practice in different ways. In that sense, there isn’t always a “definitive answer” to give. Similarly, in two churches with different underlying visions about the purpose of men and women, but in which men and women appear to be performing more or less the same tasks, attitudes towards women and the tone of relationships between the sexes may be affected more by those underlying assumptions than by who is and isn’t doing what. For example, it is not much help to women if they are encouraged into certain roles but still living with the suspicion that, at the base, they are a “child”, “usurper”, or “temptress”, as Jen Wilkin’s categories have it (see chapter 4 – “She needs brothers”). That is why we do need to re-examine the bigger picture of God’s purpose for men and women according to Scripture, making this vision clearer in our conversations and teaching with one another.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

I’m grateful to have read Dawson’s book. It has pushed me back to Scripture to dig deeper and seek to understand more fully the purpose of God in creating us male and female. It has challenged me to think about my own evangelism and how to explain in more attractive and beautiful ways the good purposes of our good Creator and how we can seek to point people to him. It has inspired me to meditate on Jesus’ treatment of women and the beautiful ways throughout Scripture that God uses women in the story of redemption. It has also led to interesting conversations! For those who do read this book, I pray that we would be forced back to Scripture – together – to

frame our stories, whether those are stories of pain and confusion or fulfilled service and flourishing. May we increasingly flourish together in the service of our glorious God.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# RESURRECTION

## APOLOGETICS AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

*Nick Meader*

### *I. Introduction*

Most of us have heard the retort, “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”. Yet many atheists leave the word “extraordinary” undefined. Philosopher Philip Goff argues, “without bringing in Bayesian notions, this is just a rhetorical slogan...”.<sup>1</sup> I will explore the use of Bayesian approaches to define extraordinary evidence.

On one level, Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection is simple. The Bible says he was crucified, but God raised him from the dead. There is no higher authority than God’s word, so we are certain of his resurrection. Yet non-Christians are unlikely to share that view. How we perceive the world influences our perception of “extraordinary”. Discussions on the resurrection lead us to questions about the nature of reality, spanning topics including history, statistics, psychology, philosophy, and theology. I aim to bring some of my perspective as a Christian, a psychologist, and a statistician to these questions.

But is there a simpler way? Can we sidestep Sagan’s slogan? The most influential method was developed by Gary Habermas, who recently published volume one of his “magnum opus”.<sup>2</sup> He has refined the “minimal facts” approach over several decades. The premise is to focus on “shared facts” (for example, Jesus’ death on a cross, and disciples’ experience of post-mortem appearances) that most scholars agree upon.

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1 Goff, Philip. *Can You Prove a Miracle?* Conscience and Consciousness, 2022. [accessed 24/02/2024] Online: <https://conscienceandconsciousness.com/2022/04/20/can-you-prove-a-miracle/>

2 Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection* (Brentwood, Tennessee: B&H Publishing, 2024).

These facts become the foundation of an argument for the resurrection. Facts are facts, no matter how extraordinary.

However, for many atheists, the plausibility of miracles is an important determinant of whether they consider them facts. Carl Sagan, following David Hume, argued the low prior probability<sup>3</sup> (the likelihood before examining the evidence) of miracles renders existing evidence inadequate.<sup>4</sup> Their conclusions depend on assumptions that the laws of nature and miracles are competing explanations. In other words, “Did Jesus stay dead like everyone else?” versus “Did Jesus spontaneously come back to life for some anomalous reason?”

But as Cornelius Van Til points out “Christians cannot allow the legitimacy of the assumptions that underlie the non-Christian methodology”.<sup>5</sup> Christians believe Jesus was raised from the dead by the will of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. If the Father wills to raise Jesus from the dead, it is certain to happen.

Naturalists start with the assumption that nothing other than impersonal energy can influence the laws of nature. In contrast, Christians begin with the Hebrew Bible and follow Israel’s story through to the life of Jesus. The prior probability of Jesus’ resurrection looks very different from this vantage point.

Figure 1<sup>6</sup> illustrates the model used throughout the article, it is made up of nodes and lines. The rectangle boxes are nodes predicted by the model (e.g., if God raised Jesus from the dead), oval shaped nodes (e.g., evidence for Jesus’ resurrection) are the main evidence informing these predictions. Lines are arrows indicating relationships between nodes.

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3 Hume and Sagan do not use this precise term, it comes from Bayesian statistics (see below for further details) but is a more mathematically precise way of expressing their claim, applied by atheist philosopher JH Sobel.

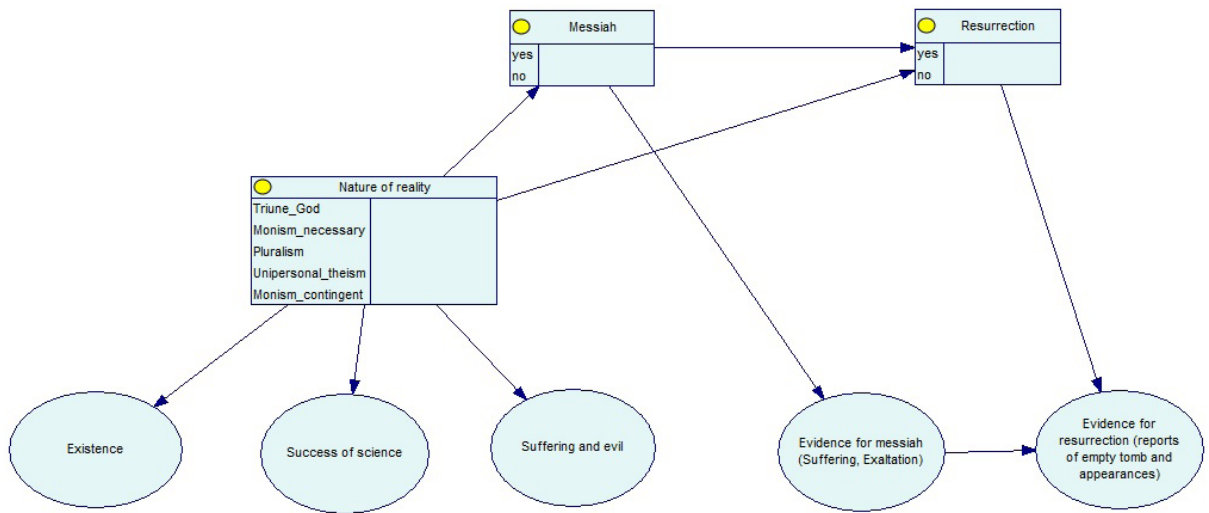
4 Carl Sagan, *Broca’s Brain* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1777). [accessed 11/03/2024] Online: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm>

5 Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1969), 18.

6 The models described in this paper were created using the GeNIe Modeler, available free of charge for academic research and teaching use from BayesFusion, LLC, <https://www.bayesfusion.com/>.

Let's take the nature of the reality node as an example: there are five worldviews: necessary monism, contingent monism, unipersonal theism, Christianity, and pluralism. For each node, probabilities for the categories must add up to one. The probability for each worldview is based on:

- The prior probability, the likelihood for each category before we've looked at the evidence (see figure 2).
- How likely the universe would exist, science is successful, and there would be suffering and evil, if that worldview were true.



**Figure 1.** The structure of the model on the evidence for Jesus' resurrection

## II. A way forward

There are three foundational inputs to a Bayesian approach:

- Prior probability: the probability of a model being true before looking at the evidence.
- Likelihood function: the probability of observing the data if the model is true.
- Posterior probability: prior probability multiplied by likelihood function.



Arif Ahmed, professor of philosophy, provided an example I will use to illustrate Bayes' rule.<sup>7</sup> Imagine you are measuring the temperature of water in a bucket:

- You have five thermometers.
- Each states the temperature is 10°C.
- The water feels a little cold to the touch.

You estimate the temperature within a range of 4-20°C (the prior probability). Five thermometers provide readings of 10°C (the likelihood function). Because the prior and likelihood are similar, there is a high posterior probability the water is 10°C.

Another of Ahmed's scenarios is useful for understanding how naturalists think about miracles. There is a vast difference between your perception of the water (again a range of 4-20°C) and five thermometer readings of 600°C. The prior probability that water feels cool is in a liquid non-boiling state and 600°C, which is virtually zero. Though there are five consistent thermometer readings (likelihood), this is not enough. We do not believe the evidence from the thermometers (posterior probability). The likelihood is insufficient to overcome the prior. Brian Blais, professor of science and technology, applies similar reasoning:

*A very rough, maximum level for the prior for the Resurrection of Jesus can be obtained using the following logic. There are 8 billion people on the planet, perhaps twice that much in all of history, and (at least for the Christians) only one supported Resurrection. So that would mean, whether or not one believes in the Resurrection, the prior should be no larger than 1 in 10 billion. This I think is the maximum possible value of a prior I'd consider.<sup>8</sup>*

This again reframes explanations of Jesus' resurrection into two mutually exclusive categories: the laws of nature (Jesus stayed dead) vs something anomalous

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<sup>7</sup> Arif Ahmed, and Gary Habermas, *Did Jesus Rise Bodily From the Dead?* (University of Cambridge, 2008). [accessed 24/02/2024] Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg7rYJxHA4Y>

<sup>8</sup> Brian Blais, *Probability and the Independence of Testimony*, (2023). [accessed 08/02/2024] Online: <https://bblais.github.io/posts/2023/Feb/23/probability-and-the-independence-of-testimony/>

(he came back to life for some unknown reason). This ensures any evidence for Jesus' resurrection must overcome an insurmountable prior.<sup>9</sup> I have shown elsewhere this Humean approach is unamenable to evidence.<sup>10</sup>

Christians often advocate for setting aside these differences. However, this strategy is unhelpful. First, it ducks our atheist friends' question. Second, if naturalism is true, atheists are right to dismiss Jesus' resurrection as close to impossible. Of course, if Christianity is true, atheists are mistaken to start with a prior that Jesus' resurrection is "virtually impossible". Is there a way around this stalemate? We need to see the world through each other's eyes:

*But they [Christians] can place themselves upon the position of those whom they are seeking to win to a belief in Christianity for the sake of the argument. And the non-Christian, though not granting the presuppositions from which the Christian works, can nevertheless place himself upon the position of the Christian for the sake of the argument.<sup>11</sup>*

### 1. Defining "extraordinary"

Bayesian approaches provide rigorous methods to quantify sufficient evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Atheist philosopher JH Sobel provided a mathematical definition for Hume's approach to miracles.<sup>12</sup> He argued sufficient evidence (or in Sagan's terms "extraordinary evidence") is when the prior probability for an event is higher than the probability of people reporting this event happening if there was no miracle.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the prior probability of Jesus' resurrection (before assessing the evidence)

<sup>9</sup> For Blais the prior probability of Jesus' resurrection is at best 10,000 times less likely than the figure he gives for 'virtually impossible' (only 1 in a million, see table 1).

<sup>10</sup> Meader, Nick. *Why a Methodological Naturalism Approach to the Resurrection is (Usually) Circular* (2023). [accessed 09/02/2024] Online: <https://medium.com/p/6a9858ee08ff>.

<sup>11</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "Hume's Theorem on Testimony Sufficient to Establish a Miracle", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 41 (1991), 229-237.

<sup>13</sup>  $p(A) > p(a \& \sim A)$ , where A=a miracle, a=testimony about a miracle,  $\sim A$ =when a miracle didn't happen.

must be higher than the chances of hearing about an empty tomb and disciples seeing Jesus in bodily form if the resurrection did not occur.

## 2. Probabilistic graphical models

*“The chances [probability] that a patient with disease  $D$  will develop symptom  $S$  is  $p$ ,” the thrust of the assertion is not the precise magnitude of  $p$  so much as the specific reason for the physician’s belief, the context or assumptions under which the belief should be firmly held, and the sources of information that would cause this belief to change. We will also stress that probability theory is unique in its ability to process context-sensitive beliefs, and what makes the processing computationally feasible is that the information needed for specifying context dependencies can be represented by graphs.<sup>14</sup>*

In other words, “probability is not really about numbers; it is about the structure of reasoning.”<sup>15</sup> These models:

- Allow us to set out the reasoning process and our assumptions in a rigorous way.
- Harness computing power to perform complex calculations beyond what our minds can do alone.
- Help us to make complex judgments that are more consistent, coherent, and less biased.<sup>16</sup>

## 3. Judgments and probabilities

We cannot attach hard numbers to most judgements about Jesus’ resurrection. However, the use of probabilities helps communicate these estimates with greater

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<sup>14</sup> Judea Pearl, *Probabilistic Reasoning in Intelligent Systems* (San Francisco, California: Morgan Kaufmann, 1988), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Pearl, *Probabilistic Reasoning in Intelligent Systems*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> With the caveat that probabilistic models are built by humans and therefore will always to some extent reflect our underlying biases. Which is why the first bullet point is important, when we are transparent about assumptions others can help identify the biases we miss.

precision and consistency. Richard Swinburne, a professor of philosophy, expresses this well:

*I have assumed that “natural theology makes it as probable as not that there is a God”, and there is evidence which “it would not be too improbable to find” ... Let us see if we can give a sharper, more nearly numerical form to the argument. The tool for doing so is the traditional probability calculus, developed since the seventeenth century and given axiomatic form by Kolmogorov in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>*

I will use Brian Blais’ rule of thumb (see table 1) for representing judgments with probabilities.<sup>18</sup> An advantage of probability theory is its “ability to express useful qualitative relationships among beliefs and to process these relationships in a way that yields intuitively plausible conclusions.”<sup>19</sup> These benefits apply as well to our qualitative judgments as they do to formal or empirical approaches. Biblical scholar and mathematician, Vern Poythress, argues these benefits of probability theory reflect the plurality and unity of reality.<sup>20</sup>

Probability in words	Probability in numbers
Virtually impossible	0.000001 (1/1,000,000)
Extremely unlikely	0.01 (1/100)
Very unlikely	0.05 (1/20)
Unlikely	0.2 (1/5)
Slightly unlikely	0.4 (2/5)

17 Richard Swinburne, *Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 204.

18 Brian Blais, *Statistical inference for everyone* (Save the Broccoli Publishing, 2020), 51.

19 Pearl, *Probabilistic Reasoning in Intelligent Systems*, 15.

20 Vern Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

Probability in words	Probability in numbers
Even odds	0.5 (50-50)
Slightly likely	0.6 (3/5)
Likely	0.8 (4/5)
Very likely	0.95 (19/20)
Extremely likely	0.99 (99/100)
Virtually certain	0.999999 (999,999/1,000,000)

**Table 1.** Blais' (2020) rule of thumb for mapping probability values to qualitative judgments

You may feel uncomfortable with judgments about Jesus' resurrection expressed in probabilities. Some Bible scholars, like Dale Allison, share these concerns:

*Maybe attending to the flux that is history with Bayes' theorem is like measuring beauty with a thermometer, or like evaluating education with quantified outcomes assessment: it is a futile attempt to calculate what cannot be calculated.*<sup>21</sup>

However, use of Bayesian and other probabilistic approaches are not limited to the "hard sciences". Amazon, Netflix, and Google use Bayesian approaches to help understand our viewing preferences, identify spam emails, and recognise our speech.<sup>22</sup> Researchers are increasingly using probabilistic modelling to develop devices that aid physician decision-making in stroke, heart failure, and many other conditions.<sup>23</sup> So

21 Dale Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 351.

22 Janet Slifka, *Tools for generating synthetic data helped bootstrap Alexa's new-language releases* (October, 2019). [accessed 27/02/2024] Online: <https://www.amazon.science/blog/tools-for-generating-synthetic-data-helped-bootstrap-alexa-s-new-language-releases>, Ehtsham Elahi, et al. *Variational Low Rank Multinomials for Collaborative Filtering with Side-information*. RecSys'19, September 16–20, 2019, Copenhagen, Denmark. [accessed 27/02/2024] Online: <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3298689.3347036>, Judea Pearl, and Dana Mackenzie, *The Book of Why: The New Science of Cause and Effect* (London: Penguin, 2018).

23 Anirudha S. Chandrabhatla, et al. "Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in the Diagnosis and Management of Stroke: A Narrative Review of United States Food and Drug Administration-Approved Technologies" *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 12 (2023) 3755, Alexander G. Hajduczuk, et al. "Remote monitoring

why not apply these techniques to complex judgments in Biblical studies, as a newer generation of scholars are beginning to argue?<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. *Comparing models*

Thinking about Jesus' resurrection begins with our understanding of reality. Christian views of the universe centre on the Triune creator God. Though naturalism and Christianity remain dominant options in the West, there are thousands of alternative worldviews.<sup>25</sup> Are we going to consider them all? Of course not! But we cannot dismiss them all either.

The first challenge is to propose a manageable number of categories that are also relatively comprehensive. One way is to use traditional categories such as naturalism, pantheism, and monotheism. However, people use these terms in many ways, their “semantic ranges are overlapping and blurry”.<sup>26</sup> I have proposed five categories (see Table 2) based on the following factors discussed below.

First, is reality personal or impersonal? For Christians, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been in eternal relationship since before creation. Therefore, our world is also personal. In contrast, impersonal energy is foundational for naturalists. All of life reduces to, or emerges from, impersonal energy.

Animists instead place relationship at the heart of reality. Descartes' famous phrase, “I think therefore I am”, feels self-evident to Westerners. In contrast, animism can be summed up as, “I relate, therefore I am... the cognitive and subjective... self, bounded at the skin and isolated from others, constitutes a psychology that indigenous

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for heart failure using implantable devices: a systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-regression of randomized controlled trials” *Heart Fail Reviews* 27 (2022), 1281–1300.

24 For example., Heilig Christoph. *What Bayesian Reasoning Can and Can't Do for Biblical Research* (2019). [accessed 09/02/2024] Online: <https://www.uzh.ch/blog/theologie-nt/2019/03/27/what-bayesian-reasoning-can-and-cant-do-for-biblical-research/>.

25 For example, David Barrett, et al. *The World Christian Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Survey of Church and Religions in the Modern World (Second edition), Volume 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

26 Joshua Rasmussen, Professor of Philosophy (Baylor University), personal communication 26th January 2024.

people [of North America] do not share”.<sup>27</sup> A similar understanding of personhood is found among the animist Yukaghirs of Siberia.<sup>28</sup>

Second, is reality one (monism) or many (pluralism)? Naturalists are monists as all reality finds its source in the physical. Animists posit reality is pluralistic. For example, Shintoism traditionally teaches there are eight million gods (*kami*) yet no absolute creator. These *kami* include trees, mountains, ancestors, and people after they die.<sup>29</sup> The key to reality is to pursue harmony (*wa*) amidst the plurality. The Triune God of Christianity, in contrast, is both one and many. Therefore unity and plurality are co-ultimate.<sup>30</sup>

Third, is there an objective foundation to truth and morality? By this I mean, “These objective truths [and morals] are true for everyone, everywhere, because they’re based on objective facts about reality that are independent of human ideas, desires, and feelings”.<sup>31</sup> Most theists, although not all, who believe in a rational creator answer this question in the affirmative. Of course, with the caveat that our limited minds are often only able to grasp a fraction of that truth. We often get things wrong, but that does not rule out the possibility of genuine knowledge.

In contrast, monistic and pluralistic views tend to emphasise the bottomless nature (i.e. no foundation) of truth and morality. For example, a central aspect of Buddhist epistemology (the study of knowledge) is that the ultimate and conventional converge: “since all phenomena, even ultimate truth, exist only conventionally,

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27 Kenneth M Morrison, “Animism and a proposal for a post-Cartesian anthropology” in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (ed. Graham Harvey; London: Routledge, 2015).

28 Rane Willerslev, *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

29 Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: the Kami way* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1983).

30 Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

31 James Anderson, *What’s your worldview?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 21.



conventional truth is all the truth there is, and that is an ultimate, and therefore, a conventional, truth.”<sup>32</sup>

Atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel points out a similar challenge for naturalists (who are monists). The scientific method assumes the objectivity of our reasoning process, yet “in light of the remarkable character of reason, it is hard to imagine what a naturalistic explanation of it, either constitutive or historical, could look like.”<sup>33</sup> Naturalists face the same challenge with morality.<sup>34</sup>

	Necessary Monism (One)	Contingent Monism (One)	Pluralism (Many)	Unipersonal theism	Triune God
Unity and/or plurality of reality	Unity (e.g., Matter or Mind)	Unity (e.g., Matter)	Plurality (e.g., multiple finite gods)	Unity (a single person creator God)	Unity and plurality: (i.e., Triune Creator God)
Worldview examples	Naturalism (e.g. eternal universe)  Hinduism (e.g. Advaita Vedanta school)	Naturalism (e.g. uncaused contingent universe)	Animism (e.g. Shintoism)  Most of the various schools of Buddhism  Hinduism (e.g. Dvaita Vedanta school)	Islam  Judaism	Christianity

**Table 2.** Summarising five worldview categories considered in the evidence for resurrection model

32 Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: why it matters to philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 240.

33 Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 86.

34 Alvin Plantinga, “A Christian life partly lived” in *Philosophers Who Believe* (ed. Kelly James Clark; Downer’s Grover, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 45-81.

### III. Background knowledge: the nature of reality

Sections three to six map out this model on the evidence for Jesus' resurrection (see Figure 1). Following Swinburne, I have assumed metaphysical worldviews “purport to explain so much that there are no ‘neighbouring fields’ outside their scope.”<sup>35</sup> Since they claim to account for all of reality, there is no prior background information to account for other than the evidence considered.<sup>36</sup> However, simpler models, all things being equal, are favoured over complex ones. One way to apply this principle is to assign higher prior probabilities to simpler models (i.e., they have greater intrinsic plausibility).<sup>37</sup>

Figure 2 summarises the prior probabilities for each of the five categories. To be conservative, I have judged monism (e.g., naturalism, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism) to be simplest and therefore the most intrinsically probable (likelihood before we assess the evidence).<sup>38</sup> According to Oppy a necessary monist universe is simpler ( $p=0.47$ ) and therefore more intrinsically probable than a contingent monist universe ( $p=0.28$ ).<sup>39</sup> This is debatable, but again, to steel-man this approach I will accept his assumption. The next simplest model is unipersonal theism ( $p=0.14$ ), which describes the belief in a single individual God, for example, Islam and Judaism.

For Christians, reality is personal and relational, unity and plurality are co-ultimate.<sup>40</sup> The greater complexity of this model means it has lower intrinsic probability ( $p=0.07$ ) than the three previous categories. Finally, the view that plurality is foundational, examples include most schools of Buddhism, and animist religions

35 Swinburne, *Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 207.

36 Richard Swinburne, *Existence of God: Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

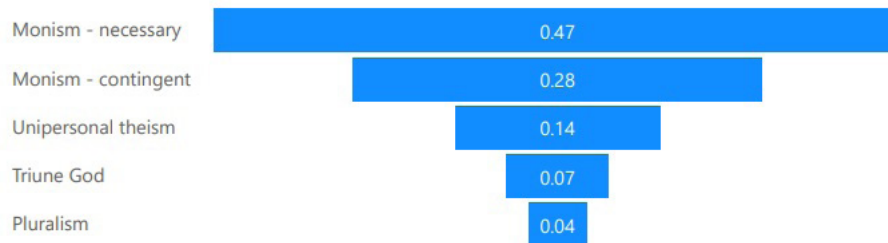
37 See Swinburne, *Existence of God*.

38 Swinburne makes a strong argument that naturalism (his points are applicable to all other forms of monism) is more complex than theist worldviews. (Swinburne, *Existence of God*, passim). However, to not overstate the case for the resurrection I will concede this initial boost to monism for the prior.

39 Graham Oppy, *Ultimate Naturalistic Causal Explanations* (2013). [accessed 18/02/2024] Online: <https://philarchive.org/rec/OPPUNC>.

40 James Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Plantinga and Van Til” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40:1 (2005).

(e.g., Shintoism). This is the most complex model ( $p=0.04$ ) and therefore assigned the lowest intrinsic probability (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Prior probabilities for the nature of reality

### 1. Evidence: Existence of our universe

The first assumption is that our universe exists. There are two key questions to consider when comparing these models of reality:

- Is our universe likely to be necessary or contingent?
- Is there a creator external to our universe?

My judgments for each category are summarised below and in Table 3:

- Monism (necessary): The Borde-Guth-Vilenkin Theorem suggests the universe had a beginning, “if the universe is, on average, expanding, then its history cannot be indefinitely continued into the past”.<sup>41</sup> Evidence for a beginning to the universe is **unlikely**, given necessary monism, because it potentially contradicts our universe’s necessity. I have argued elsewhere,<sup>42</sup> attempts to either remove the singularity (e.g. Hartle-Hawking model) or propose a universe from nothing (e.g. Vilenkin’s quantum gravity model) are currently unsuccessful.<sup>43</sup>

41 Alexander Vilenkin, *The Beginning of the Universe*, *Inference 1* (2015). [accessed 18/02/2024] Online: <https://inference-review.com/article/the-beginning-of-the-universe>.

42 Nick Meader, *An Eternal Universe, or a Universe From Nothing?* (2022). [accessed 09/02/2024] Online: <https://medium.com/p/16a3400e24d4>.

43 For further details, see David Hutchings, and David Wilkinson, *God, Stephen Hawking and the Multiverse: What Hawking said and why it matters* (London: SPCK, 2020).

- Monism (contingent): the probability of our universe's existence given contingent monism is **extremely unlikely**. The probability the universe would meet the narrow physical constants necessary for life (fine tuning) is extremely unlikely if naturalism is true (Barnes, 2019-2020).<sup>44</sup>
- Unipersonal theism: the probability of our universe, if unipersonal theism is true, is **slightly likely**. If it was God's will to create the universe and relational beings like us, he had the power to do it. Yet it is not likely, since relationship is not foundational. "Such a God might be immense, supreme and powerful. But this God cannot be loving. Love worthy of the name requires more than one person... If such a God wants to love, he will have to make others. Once he has created the world, the possibility for love emerges, but it is only a possibility. He might choose to love us. But equally he might not."<sup>45</sup>
- Christianity: the probability our universe, if the Triune God exists, is **likely** given that personality and relationship are foundational, and God has the power and love to make it happen.
- Pluralism: the probability of our universe, if plurality is foundational, is **unlikely** given the finite nature of many gods and uncertainty about why (or how) they would cooperate to ensure the ordered nature of our universe.<sup>46</sup>

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44 It's far more unlikely than that, Barnes' (2019-2020) Bayesian model estimates the likelihood of a life permitting universe given naturalism to be 10-136.

45 Glen Scrivener, *3 2 1: The Story of God, The World, and You* (Leyland: 10 Publishing, 2014), 59-60.

46 Swinburne, *Existence of God*.

	Pluralism	Necessary monism	Contingent monism	Unipersonal theism	Christianity
Necessary or Contingent?	Necessary and eternal.	1) Necessary and eternal or 2) Eternal initial states that necessarily lead to our universe.	Contingent	Contingent	Contingent
Is there a creator?	Cooperation between the gods.	1) The universe is one substance (matter or mind). 2) The universe emerged from one substance (matter-first or mind-first).	The universe emerged from nothing uncaused.	A single person God is the creator (e.g., Judaism, Islam).	The Triune God is the creator.

**Table 3.** Comparing the five models on accounting for existence

*2. Evidence: intelligibility and the success of science*

I assume the intelligibility of the universe and the success of science. The likelihood of this type of universe for each worldview is summarised below (and in Table 4):

- Monism (necessary): **unlikely** since there is no reason to think impersonal reality would be intelligible, there would be objective truths, and uncertainty whether our cognitive faculties would generate valid inferences.<sup>47</sup>
- Monism (contingent): as above.
- Unipersonal theism: God is rational and ordered; therefore, it is likely that creation is also ordered and rational. Therefore, intelligibility is **likely**.
- Christianity: God is rational, ordered, and relational therefore an intelligible universe is **likely**.<sup>48</sup> In addition, since we are made in the image of God, “if God exists, then presumably he is able to so arrange things that the noetic faculties of human beings function in such a way as to implicitly take into account all that God alone knows”.<sup>49</sup>
- Pluralism: given the existence of multiple finite gods the likelihood of an intelligible universe is **very unlikely** since there is no obvious foundation for the order necessary for knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

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47 Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God”; Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*; Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

48 Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*.

49 Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God”, 20.

50 Swinburne, *Existence of God*.

	Christianity	Pluralism	Necessary monism	Contingent monism	Unipersonal theism
Mind-independent truth?	Yes	No	Extremely unlikely	Extremely unlikely	Yes
Validity of our reasoning?	Foundational	Bottomless or Conventional	Bottomless or Conventional	Bottomless or Conventional	Foundational
Comprehensible universe?	Yes	Ambivalent	Uncertain	Uncertain	Probable
Laws of nature and God (or gods)	Complementary	Potentially contradictory	Mutually exclusive	Mutually exclusive	Complementary

**Table 4.** Comparing the five models on accounting for the intelligibility of the universe

### 3. *Evidence: suffering and evil*

Naturalists, like Hume or Sagan, consider the nature of reality a key factor determining plausibility of the resurrection (prior probability). Suffering and evil is an important aspect of our reality. Draper has argued suffering and evil are strong evidence for the “hypothesis of indifference” (that there is no benevolent creator God looking out for us).<sup>51</sup> If that’s the case, then the likelihood of God sending his Son to die and rise again for us, is close to impossible. I will assume there is evil and suffering in our universe. The likelihood of these data for each worldview is:

<sup>51</sup> Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, (ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

- Monism (necessary): in an indifferent universe we expect suffering.<sup>52</sup> However the presence of evil is more difficult to account for in this worldview.<sup>53</sup> Therefore I judge suffering and evil **likely**, but not certain.
- Monism (contingent): **likely**, for the reasons above.
- Unipersonal theism: given a loving God, the likelihood of suffering and evil is unexpected. Yet it is difficult to see how finite beings could judge whether a loving omniscient being could have an “acceptable” reason for allowing suffering (Stump, 2001).<sup>54</sup> Therefore suffering and evil are only **slightly unlikely**.
- Christianity: suffering and evil are unexpected if there is a loving God.<sup>55</sup> Yet the doctrine of the fall only makes this **slightly unlikely**.<sup>56</sup> As with unipersonal theism, finite beings have insufficient information to judge whether an omniscient being is justified in allowing suffering.
- Pluralism: Given the existence of multiple finite gods, the presence of suffering and evil was judged **likely**.

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52 Graham Oppy, “Problems of Evil” in *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* edited by NN Trakakis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

53 Plantinga, “A Christian life partly lived” in *Philosophers Who Believe*.

54 Eleonore Stump, “The problem of evil” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (eds. William Lane Craig, Kevin Meeker, JP Moreland, Michael Murray, and Timothy O’Connor; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

55 Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists”.

56 Stump, “The problem of evil”.



	Christianity	Pluralism	Necessary monism	Contingent monism	Unipersonal theism
Suffering expected?	Slightly unlikely	Likely	Likely	Likely	Slightly unlikely
Reasons for suffering?	Fall	1)Unpredictability of the gods 2)Failure to understand emptiness	Indifference	Indifference	Unclear
Suffering gratuitous?	No, but difficult for humans to discern.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, but difficult for humans to discern.
Good and evil: foundational or conventional?	Foundational	Conventional/ bottom-less	Conventional/ bottom-less	Conventional	Foundational
Moral obligations?	Yes, a personal universe.	Yes, multiple gods.	No, impersonal universe.	No, impersonal universe.	Yes, a semi-personal God.

**Table 5.** Comparing the five models on accounting for the intelligibility of the universe

#### *IV. Background knowledge: the probability of a Messiah*

##### *1. The nature of reality*

The nature of reality affects the prior probability that God will send a Messiah. For Christians, our universe began at the heights of Eden. People made for relationship with God in a good world. Genesis places the origin of suffering and evil in human rebellion.

The tabernacle/temple presents a visual aid for how humanity may again dwell with God. The day of atonement reflects the promise of “a reversal of Eden’s expulsion”.<sup>57</sup> Atonement is central to the Hebrew Bible because it allows sinful humans to live with God again. Someone must die in our place, to atone for our sins and turn away the wrath of God. Only then we may enter God’s presence. Therefore, if the Triune God of Christianity exists, it is not unlikely he will send a Messiah to provide a sacrifice for our sins, cleansing us and the cosmos, and make a way back to the Father. I will assume conservatively if Christianity is true, the probability of the Triune God sending the Messiah is **50-50**.<sup>58</sup>

If our reality is monistic (contingent or necessary), there is nothing external to our universe that can impact it – no creator distinct from the universe and no rescuer outside of our universe. Therefore, it is close to **impossible** that Jesus is the divine Messiah.

Unipersonal theism is a little more complicated. Muslims consider Jesus to be *al-Masih* (the Messiah). However, if Islam is true, it is impossible that Jesus is the Messiah as described in the New Testament. The Qur’an denies Jesus’ crucifixion (Surah 4:157) because their prophets cannot suffer shameful death. Most modern followers of Rabbinic Judaism, in common with Islam, reject the New Testament understanding of a divine and suffering Messiah as idolatrous. Therefore, if unipersonal theism is true, Jesus cannot be the type of Messiah taught in the New Testament. If pluralism is true, it is **unlikely** Jesus is the Messiah since this implies a unique authority that undermines the fundamental plurality of our universe.

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57 Michael L. Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Hill of the Lord?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 177.

58 Of course, this is an extremely conservative estimate, for Christians this is certain.

2. *Evidence: no one else has come close*

The Hebrew Bible tells us what we should expect of the Messiah. For example, Brown points out no one else has come close to meeting these criteria including<sup>59</sup>:

- He was born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)
- Followers claimed he was a healer (e.g. Isaiah 35:5-7; 49:6-7)
- He was rejected by his own people (Isaiah 49:4)
- He suffered before his exaltation (Psalm 22; Zechariah 9:9)

Of course, there is a huge amount of literature on Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, there is insufficient space to cover this debate in any detail. For an in-depth discussion of how Jews and Christians have interpreted passages about the Messiah.<sup>60</sup>

3. *Evidence: The promise of a worldwide church*

Many sceptics have argued Jesus' followers made up these messianic claims or reinterpreted the Hebrew Bible to fit his life. However, there is an additional promise that can be observed in the present. Several passages in the Hebrew Bible predict that people from many nations will follow the Messiah (e.g., Isaiah 40, 49; Psalms 87; Zechariah 8:23). In addition, most Jewish people will reject him. In New Testament times, this was a very high bar to meet because the early church was small with little influence. No other religion has matched the worldwide spread of Christianity, with the potential exception of Islam.

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Volume 3: Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> See Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*.

#### *4. Probability if Jesus is the Messiah*

The model then considers the likelihood of observing this evidence in two scenarios: if Jesus is the Messiah or not. If Jesus is the Messiah, it is **likely** he would meet by far the most Messianic criteria compared to anyone in history and have a worldwide following. The probability of this evidence if Jesus is not the Messiah is considered in the next section.

#### *5. Probability if Jesus is not the Messiah*

1. If Jesus is not the Messiah, I judged it **unlikely** he would meet by far the most criteria compared to anyone in history.
2. Worldwide following: if Jesus is not the Messiah, I have judged the likelihood of a worldwide following **extremely unlikely**, although not impossible, as argued above.

### *V. Jesus' resurrection*

The probability of Jesus' resurrection depends on the nature of reality – if he is the Messiah, evidence that he met the Messianic criteria from the Hebrew Bible, and evidence for his resurrection (testimony about the empty tomb and postmortem appearances of Jesus).

#### *1. Burial in Joseph's tomb*

All four Gospels (dated from approximately 65-110AD) state Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:42-47; Matthew 27:57-61; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42). There are some minor differences in details, but they agree on the main points.<sup>61</sup> First Corinthians 15:3-5 (dated from a

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<sup>61</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003).

few months after Jesus' death to at most five years later) states that Jesus was buried. But makes no mention of Joseph of Arimathea nor do any of Paul's letters. Yet, as NT scholar Dale Allison points out, the brevity of First Corinthians 15 means many other details are omitted. Therefore there is no obvious contradiction.<sup>62</sup>

## 2. *Empty tomb*

Jesus' empty tomb is also reported in all four Gospels (Mark 16: 1-8; Matt 28:1-12; Luke 24:1-8; John 20: 1-10). 1 Corinthians 15 does not mention the empty tomb, only that Jesus was buried and that he was raised from the dead (15:4). Ehrman argues on this basis that Paul was unaware of testimony about the empty tomb.<sup>63</sup> However, an obvious explanation for the omission is that Jesus' empty tomb is assumed since he was buried and rose again, which in a Jewish context required an empty tomb.<sup>64</sup>

## 3. *Postmortem appearances*

1 Corinthians 15 is consistent with the later Gospel accounts, including appearances to Peter and "the twelve". More detailed narratives of appearances to "the twelve" or "the eleven" are reported in the Gospels (e.g. Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:36-49). The Gospels also include appearances to Jesus' female disciples (Matt 28:9-10; John 20:11-18). The female disciples are likely included in the 1 Corinthians 15 appearances but are not named, possibly due to scepticism about female testimony in the first century.<sup>65</sup>

Jesus' appearances to Paul and James (1 Cor 15:7-11) were not recorded in the Gospels. In the case of Paul, this is expected as his testimony about Jesus is a few years

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62 Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

63 Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God* (London: Bravo Ltd, 2014).

64 Martin Hengel, & Anna Maria Schwemer, *Jesus and Judaism* (Trans. Wayne Coppins; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

65 Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

after the period covered in the Gospels. The appearance to James is more enigmatic, although he may have been present (but unnamed) in one of Jesus’ group appearances.

4. *Probability of this evidence if Jesus was raised*

If Jesus was raised from the dead, it is conservatively assumed this type of evidence (testimonies of an empty tomb and a wide range of people claiming to see him in bodily form after this death) is **slightly likely**.<sup>66</sup>

VI. *Naturalistic explanations*

There is no space to discuss all naturalistic explanations for Jesus’ resurrection (for a comprehensive critique).<sup>67</sup> Table 6 summarises my judgments on some key naturalistic hypotheses.

Explanation/Theory	Judgement and/or probability
<b>Reports of an empty tomb</b>	
Removal by tomb robbers	Unlikely (p=0.2)
<b>Reports of disciples seeing, speaking, and touching Jesus</b>	
Hallucinations/visions experienced by individuals	Median prevalence of bereavement multi-modal hallucination/ vision (visual and auditory):6.4% (p=0.064)
Hallucinations/visions experienced by the twelve (or eleven)	Prevalence of group visions: range from 0.7% to 4%. But most reports consist of groups of four or less. Claims of visions in groups of eleven or more are rare. To be conservative, I’ll assume 1/20 of group visions (approximately based on Allison, 2013 citations) are of at least eleven people (p=0.002)

66 Of course, as Christians we know this with certainty because the Word of God states Jesus was raised from the dead. Yet, since this is unlikely to be compelling for non-Christians, I have used a much more conservative estimate.

67 See Andrew Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Explanation/Theory	Judgement and/or probability
Hallucination/vision experienced by Paul	Incidence of hallucinations/delusions in non-clinical population: 2% (p=0.02)
Hallucination/vision experienced by the 500	Unlikely (p=0.2)
Mass hysteria/mass psychogenic illness	Extremely unlikely (p=0.0001): based on the incidence of functional neurological symptom disorder but likely to be a substantial overestimate.
<b>Allison's sceptical scenario: used in the model for the likelihood of a naturalistic explanation</b>	
Tomb robbers, individual appearances (Paul, Mary, Peter), appearance to twelve, appearance to female disciples, appearance to the 500.	0.00000000001 (less than 1 in 70 billion), for a breakdown of how I came to this figure see footnote below. <sup>68</sup> To be conservative, I have used a much higher figure of 0.00001 (1 in 100,000) in the model.

**Table 6.** Naturalistic explanations for evidence on Jesus' resurrection

### 1. Reports of an empty tomb

Tomb robbers stealing Jesus' body is a common naturalistic explanation. Bodies were known to be stolen from tombs in the first century.<sup>69</sup> However, testimony about the guards' presence at the tomb makes this unlikely (Matt 27:62-66). Although there was a period between Friday and Saturday when the tomb was unguarded, the "soldiers would naturally check the tomb and report back to Pilate if it were already

68 0.2 (tomb robbers), multiplied by (0.02x0.5x2 hallucination in a non-clinical population with potential insight it was not real (p=0.5) but also allowing the possibility of the empty tomb to trigger a hallucination (multiplied by 2), multiplied by (0.064x0.5x2 multimodal bereavement hallucination, potential insight it was not real, and allowing for possibility that the hallucinations/visions are dependent on each other), multiplied by (0.064x0.5x2 the same rationale for the previous bereavement hallucination), multiplied by (0.002x0.5x2 group vision, allowing for potential for insight, allowing for potential visions are dependent on previous experiences) x (0.002x0.5x2 same as previous group vision), and multiplied by 0.2 (reported appearance to 500).

69 Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

ransacked. Otherwise, they would be charged with dereliction of duty if it were found to be empty on their watch.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, it is more likely the Jewish authorities would have reported the theft right away, rather than wait a few days later and then claim the guards were sleeping.

## 2. *Reports of postmortem appearances*

### i. *Bereavement hallucinations/visions*

The most common naturalistic explanations for reports on postmortem appearances of Jesus are bereavement hallucinations or visions.<sup>71</sup> Several reviews of the psychological and parapsychological literature have been used to estimate the prevalence of these experiences.<sup>72</sup> From these reviews, 14 studies were judged relevant for these estimates (see figure 3 for median prevalence from these studies). Studies often assessed hallucinations or visions in a single modality. Hallucinations in multiple modalities appear to be less common (for example, visual and auditory, median=6.4%). Although tactile hallucinations were the least prevalent (median=4.2%). It is more common for people who are bereaved to feel a sense of presence of the dead (approximately 30-60%).<sup>73</sup>

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70 Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, 140.

71 For example, Ehrman argues that Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Paul likely experienced hallucinations or visions. (Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*).

72 Anna Castelnovo, et al., “Post-bereavement hallucinatory experiences: a critical overview of population and clinical studies” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 186 (2015), 266-274; Karina Stengaard Kamp, et al., “Sensory and quasi-sensory experiences of the deceased in bereavement: an interdisciplinary and integrative review” *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 46 (2020), 1367-1381; Jenny Streit-Horn, A systematic review of research on after-death communication PhD Diss. (University of North Texas, 2011).

73 Castelnovo, et al., “Post-bereavement hallucinatory experiences”.



### Prevalence of bereavement hallucinations

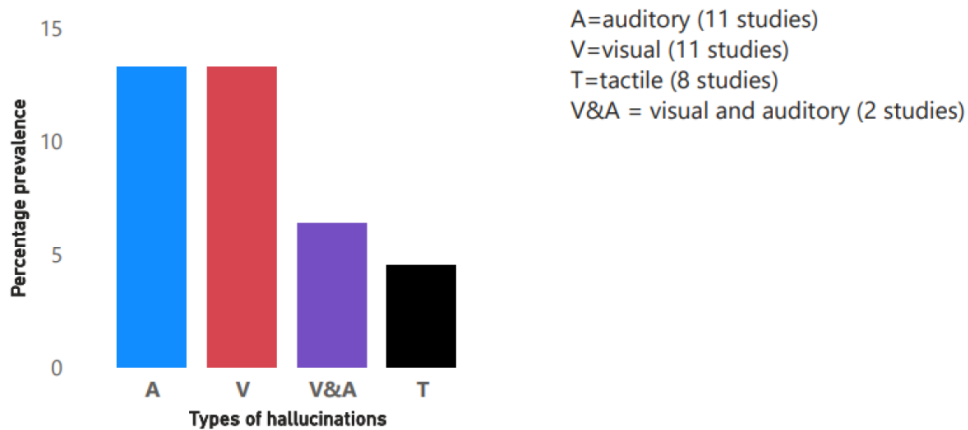


Figure 3. Prevalence of bereavement hallucinations

#### ii. *Hallucinations/visions in non-clinical populations*

The reported appearance to Paul is unlikely to be explained by bereavement hallucinations since he probably had not met Jesus.<sup>74</sup> Therefore the most applicable data are incidence rates (rate of new cases) of hallucinations in a non-clinical population. A recent systematic review (a comprehensive summary of relevant studies) and meta-analyses<sup>75</sup> (statistical combination of these data) of 13 studies estimated the annual incidence of hallucinations (and/or delusions) from 56,089 people. They found an annual incidence rate of 2% (Staines et al., 2023).

<sup>74</sup> Alternatively some have tried to ‘diagnose’ Paul with some psychotic condition, the incidence and prevalence of such conditions is even lower than non-clinical populations (approximately 1%) so this only succeeds in reducing the probability of the explanation.

<sup>75</sup> The meta-analyses included 17 studies with data on 56,089 people.

*iii. Insight into whether hallucinations are real*

Anna Castelnovo (a psychiatrist), in her review of bereavement hallucinations, points out that people are often aware these hallucinations (or visions) are not real.<sup>76</sup> Similar evidence of insight has been observed in broader non-clinical populations.<sup>77</sup> This raises uncertainties whether the disciples would have interpreted a hallucination/ vision of Jesus as evidence of his resurrection.

*iv. Group quasi-sensory experiences*

A further challenge for the hallucination hypothesis is the group nature of reported experiences. Standard psychiatric definitions assume hallucinations are an individual phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> However, Allison points to parapsychological literature where participants report group visions.<sup>79</sup>

Formal studies are sparse (I found only three studies), so it is difficult to confirm the validity of these reports. Studies found low lifetime prevalence rates (between 0.7% and 4.2%). Allison cited a wider literature of popular accounts on group apparitions.<sup>80</sup> The vast majority claimed that four or fewer people had a collective vision. Allison identified only one case in Russia in 1832 that claimed 11 or more people saw the same vision at the same time, although it was reported 60 years after the event.<sup>81</sup>

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76 Castelnovo, et al., “Post-bereavement hallucinatory experiences”.

77 For example, Jane Garrison, et al., “Testing continuum models of psychosis: No reduction in source monitoring ability in healthy individuals prone to auditory hallucinations” *Cortex* 91 (2017), 197-207; Amanda Anderson, et al., “A Systematic Review of the experimental induction of auditory perceptual experiences” *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 71 (2021) 101635.

78 Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

79 Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

80 Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

81 Camille Flammarion, *Death and its Mystery at the Moment of Death* (trans. Latrobe Carroll; New York: The Century Co., 1922), 349.

v. *Mass psychogenic illness (or “mass hysteria”)*

Several sceptical New Testament scholars posit “mass hysteria” or “mass psychogenic illness” (MPI) as a possible naturalistic explanation for group appearances.<sup>82</sup> This condition is not recognised in either DSM-5 or ICD-11 (standard diagnostic guides for the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization), and the validity of the term is contested.<sup>83</sup>

A further issue is a lack of evidence that hallucinations are a common symptom of MPI. Two of the most comprehensive reviews of the literature identified a total of 98 case studies in populations across the world in over three centuries. Of these, only two cases included reports of hallucinations.<sup>84</sup> In 1880-1886, several young people in Pitcairn Islands, famous for the “mutiny on the bounty”, reported individual hallucinations.<sup>85</sup> The other case occurred at a Malaysian college in 1978.<sup>86</sup> One student reportedly experienced a hypnogogic hallucination, an experience that happens when someone is drifting between being awake and asleep. No other student at the college reported hallucinations/visions, despite several judged to be experiencing MPI symptoms. No group visions or hallucinations were reported in either of these cases.<sup>87</sup>

MPI, if a genuine condition, is rare. It is therefore unsurprising that no population studies have tried to estimate their prevalence. However, it is likely that MPI is less common than functional neurological symptom disorder, which includes similar symptoms in individuals and is recognised in DSM-5 and ICD-11 (annual incidence

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82 See Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

83 For example, Robert Bartholomew, “Tarantism, dancing mania and demonopathy: the anthro-political aspects of ‘mass psychogenic illness’” *Psychological Medicine* 24 (1994), 281-306.

84 Simon Wessely, “Mass hysteria: two syndromes?” *Psychological Medicine* 17 (1987) 109-120; Bartholomew, “Tarantism, dancing mania and demonopathy”.

85 Rosalind Amelia Young, *Mutiny of the Bounty: Story of Pitcairn Island* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1894)

86 Raymond L. Lee, and S.E. Ackerman, “The sociocultural dynamics of mass hysteria” *Psychiatry* 43 (1980), 78-88.

87 Lee & Ackerman, “The sociocultural dynamics of mass hysteria”; Young, *Mutiny of the Bounty*.

between 4 and 12 per 100,000, 0.004% to 0.01%).<sup>88</sup> The likelihood that an event of MPI would include hallucinations or visions is much lower.

*vi. Visions of Mary*

But what about the visions of Mary seen by large crowds at Fatima in 1917 or at Zeitoun in 1968? Allison argues that the reported appearance to the 500 may have similarities to these visions.<sup>89</sup> In Fatima, many claimed to see a solar phenomenon where the Sun seemed to fall to the earth. There are several difficulties with classifying this as an example of group hallucination. First, there is no identified cause of this “vision”, so claiming it as a hallucination is jumping to conclusions. Second, Allison suggests the crowd may have seen a rare meteorological phenomenon. In other words, if there is a naturalistic explanation, it is more likely to be a perceptual error or illusion rather than a hallucination or vision.<sup>90</sup> Perceptual illusions or errors are unlikely explanations for the disciples’ group experiences.

In 1968, there were several sightings of a “shining apparition with a large halo” of the Virgin Mary at Zeitoun Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt.<sup>91</sup> After the second “appearance”, large crowds of up to 100,000 people gathered. As before, the most likely naturalistic explanation is a perceptual error or illusion rather than a hallucination or vision.

*vii. Allison’s sceptical scenario*

Most scholars agree that no single naturalistic explanation accounts for all the evidence. There have been many proposals that combine naturalistic explanations. Unfortunately, there is insufficient space to consider a comprehensive range of these

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<sup>88</sup> See, Anumeha Mishra, and Sanjay Pandey, “Functional Neurological Disorders: Clinical Spectrum, Diagnosis, and Treatment” *The Neurologist* 27 (2022), 276–289.

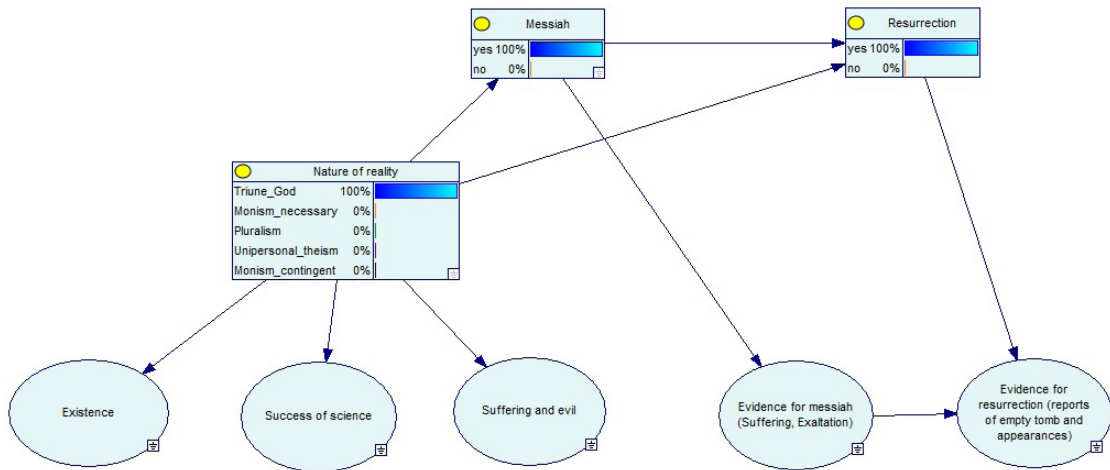
<sup>89</sup> Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

<sup>90</sup> Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

<sup>91</sup> Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

theories. Allison’s “sceptical scenario” will be the basis for the model’s naturalistic parameter.<sup>92</sup> His scenario begins with a tomb robber stealing Jesus’ body. Allison considers that visions can explain individual and group appearances. Finally, he argued that the appearance to the 500 could be analogous to the visions of Mary at Fatima and Zeitoun. Table 6 sets out my estimate of the probability of these events (1 in 100,000 or  $p=0.00001$ ).

### VII. Model results



**Figure 4.** Model of evidence for the resurrection

#### 1. Extraordinary evidence

Applying Sobel’s (1991) criteria for extraordinary or sufficient evidence, Jesus’ resurrection meets this stringent standard (see section 2.1 above).<sup>93</sup> The prior probability of his resurrection ( $p=0.02$ )<sup>94</sup> is greater than the probability of testimony about an empty tomb and testimony about postmortem appearances of Jesus if he was not resurrected ( $p=0.00001$ ).

<sup>92</sup> Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

<sup>93</sup> i.e.  $p(A) > p(a \& \sim A)$  where  $A$ =miracle,  $a$ =testimony about a miracle,  $\sim A$ =a miracle did not happen.

<sup>94</sup> Prior for the Triune God ( $p=0.07$ ), multiplied by the prior that the Triune God would send a Messiah ( $p=0.5$ ), multiplied by the prior that the Messiah would be raised from the dead ( $p=0.6$ )= $0.02$ .

## 2. Results

According to the model, the likelihood of Jesus' resurrection is significantly higher ( $p=0.99$ ) than Allison's ( $p=0.01$ ) sceptical scenario, which holds that he did not rise from the dead. Despite starting with a low prior ( $p=0.07$ ), the Triune God's existence is much more likely to account for our reality ( $p=0.99$ ) than contingent or necessary monism, unipersonal theism, or pluralism. Finally, the model suggests it is far more likely Jesus is the Messiah ( $p=0.99$ ) than if he is not ( $0.01$ ). Of course, these model results are generated under great uncertainty. The robustness of these estimates to different assumptions is examined below.

### *VIII. Exploring uncertainties*

#### *1. Varying priors*

Naturalists may expect a higher prior, particularly for necessary monism. However, varying this prior (sensitivity analyses) showed that model results were robust to a range of values. Sensitivity analyses found the prior for necessary monism needs to be at least  $p=0.99999999$  (virtually certain) to conclude Jesus' resurrection is less likely than not. In addition, all other worldview categories are required to have a maximum prior of 1 in 4 billion (virtually impossible) to overturn the result.<sup>95</sup> However, as atheist philosopher Oppy points out, simplicity should only be used as a criterion to decide between models which are equally well evidenced.<sup>96</sup> Yet, clearly, a prior of this kind weights simplicity far more than evidential parameters in the model.

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<sup>95</sup> In comparison with Allison's sceptical scenario that Jesus was not raised from the dead (Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*).

<sup>96</sup> Oppy, "Problems of Evil".

## 2. *Varying evidential judgments from natural theology*

The main model assumes a potential inconsistency between evidence that the universe had a beginning and a necessary universe. This makes necessary monism and pluralism unlikely. Necessary monists and pluralists may counter that their views entail that our universe is certain ( $p=1$ ). Yet applying this assumption makes no difference to the conclusions (see Table 7).

Another potential criticism is that I have underestimated the evidence for necessary monism. In response, I have run scenarios where evidence from natural theology indicates necessary monism is extremely likely ( $p=0.9$ ). This has a negligible impact on conclusions about Jesus' resurrection. Implausibly strong evidence, at least in my view, for necessary monism is required to overturn these conclusions (see Table 7).

Finally, some may think I have underestimated the impact of evil and suffering on the likelihood of Christianity. However, to overturn the conclusion about Jesus' resurrection, Christianity would have to be virtually impossible if evil and suffering exist (see Table 7). This effectively assumes the logical argument for evil (i.e., that the existence of a loving God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil and suffering). However, few atheist philosophers are now willing to express that level of certainty.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Oppy, "Problems of Evil".

Sensitivity analyses	Value needed to change conclusion*
Assume our universe is certain (p=1) if necessary monism is true.	Does not change conclusion.
Likelihood of necessary monism after considering all natural theology evidence <sup>98</sup>	Necessary monism: <b>p=0.999999</b> based on natural theology evidence. It is virtually certain necessary monism is true.
Suffering and evil extremely unlikely if Christianity true	Suffering and evil if Christianity true: <b>p=5e-08 (1 in 20 million)</b>

**Table 7.** Varying probabilities for evidence from natural theology in the model

\*Value needed to change probability of Jesus' resurrection to  $p \leq .50$  (at best no more likely than not)

### 3. *Varying evidential judgments for naturalist and theistic explanations*

There are two scenarios where conclusions about Jesus' resurrection could change. First, this kind of evidence (reports of an empty tomb and postmortem appearances of Jesus) would be virtually impossible if Jesus was resurrected. It seems obvious this is the type of evidence that would be expected. So this scenario is implausible.

Second, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah<sup>99</sup> would have to be **slightly unlikely** ( $p=0.4$ ) **and** the evidence for Jesus' resurrection<sup>100</sup> also **slightly unlikely** ( $p=0.4$ ). Neither of these assumptions alone are probable. Only two (Islam and Christianity) of thousands of religions in world history have achieved anything like a worldwide following. If this was the case, we would expect such a worldwide influence to be more common. Similarly, the probability of even one disciple experiencing a vision or hallucination is far lower than 0.4 (or 40%), see section 6.2 above. Therefore, this scenario is implausible.

98 This is tested by setting 'virtual evidence' for the nature of reality node to various values for necessary monism and reducing the likelihood of other views proportionally.

99 That he met the criteria better than anyone in history and had a worldwide following as predicted in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.

100 Reports of witnessing empty tomb, and post-mortem appearances.



Sensitivity analyses	Value needed to change conclusion*
Probability of evidence if Jesus is not Messiah	Does not impact conclusions.
Probability of evidence if Jesus is the Messiah	Probability of evidence if Jesus is the Messiah (p=0.00001).
Alternative naturalistic theories:  Bart Ehrman (Unburied + Experience of Mary + Experience of Peter + Experience of Paul + appearance to 500)  Gerd Ludemann (Remain buried + Experience of Peter + MPI + Experience of James+ Experience of Paul)	Ehrman's scenario has a higher probability than Allison's but does not explain all data. Ludemann's scenario is less likely than either Ehrman or Allison's scenarios:  Ehrman's scenario (p=0.000003, less than 1 in 300,000) <sup>101</sup>  Ludemann's scenario (p=0.000000006, 1 in 156 million), <sup>102</sup>  Allison's scenario (p=0.0000000001, see Table 6)  All three scenarios are less likely than the probability used in the main model confirming that it is likely to be a conservative estimate (p=0.00001).
Varying probability of evidence if Jesus is not Messiah and Jesus was not raised	Probability of Jesus meeting more Messianic criteria than any one in history and having a worldwide following as predicted of the Messiah is slightly unlikely (p=0.4) and probability of evidence for his resurrection is also slightly unlikely (p=0.4).
Probability of evidence if Jesus was raised	It is virtually impossible that there would be this lack of evidence if Jesus was raised from the dead (p=0.00001, 1 in 100,000).

**Table 8.** Varying estimates for evidence related to Messianic prophecies and Jesus' resurrection

\*Value needed to change probability of Jesus' resurrection to  $p \leq .50$  (at best no more likely than not)

101 Jesus was not buried (p=0.2), multiplied by Mary's hallucination (p=0.064x0.5x2), multiplied by Peter's hallucination (p=0.064x0.5x2), multiplied by Paul's hallucination (p=0.02x0.5x2), multiplied by appearance to 500 (p=0.5x0.2x2): p=0.000003 but does not account for group appearances.

102 Jesus remained buried (p=0.05), multiplied by Peter's hallucination (p=0.064x0.5x2), multiplied mass psychogenic illness among disciples (p=0.0001), multiplied by Paul's hallucination (p=0.02x0.5x2): p=0.000000006.

*IX. Conclusions*

Apologetics, systematic theology, and biblical theology can often operate in silos. Apologists focus on philosophical arguments that a God exists or historical arguments that Jesus was raised from the dead. Systematic theologians focus on inductive arguments from the Bible for why Jesus died and rose again. Biblical theologians instead set Jesus' death and resurrection within the context of the Bible's storyline, which finds its fulfilment in him. Yet Cornelius Van Til argued these disciplines cannot be separated. The resurrection cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of Scripture:

*The facts of Jesus and the resurrection are what they are only in the framework of the doctrines of creation, providence and the consummation of history in the final judgment... It takes the fact of the resurrection to see its proper framework and it takes the framework to see the fact of the resurrection.*<sup>103</sup>

Evidence for Jesus' resurrection meets formal criteria for "extraordinary" or "sufficient". Jesus' resurrection is a far better explanation of the evidence than Allison's sceptical scenario or the naturalistic theories of Bart Ehrman and Gerd Ludemann. The biblical framework that the Triune God exists and that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Bible is by far the best explanation of these data. All other options have a negligible likelihood in comparison. These estimates are robust to a wide range of scenarios and show God the Father "...has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:31 ESV)

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103 Cornelius Van Til, *Paul in Athens* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959), 11.

# THE “CHRISTIAN” MYSTICISM OF MEISTER ECKHART AND TERESA OF ÁVILA

*Mark Roques and Steve Bishop*

## *Abstract*

In this article, we probe the so-called “Christian” mysticism of Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Ávila. We scrutinise the Orphic creation myth and Neoplatonism’s roots. We unpack how these two mystics would answer the six worldview questions. What is God like? What is the universe like? What is a person? Why do we suffer? What is the remedy? What happens after death? We conclude with a critique of “Christian” mysticism and show how it is both world-denying and auto-salvific. Neither option is Christian.

## *I. Introduction*

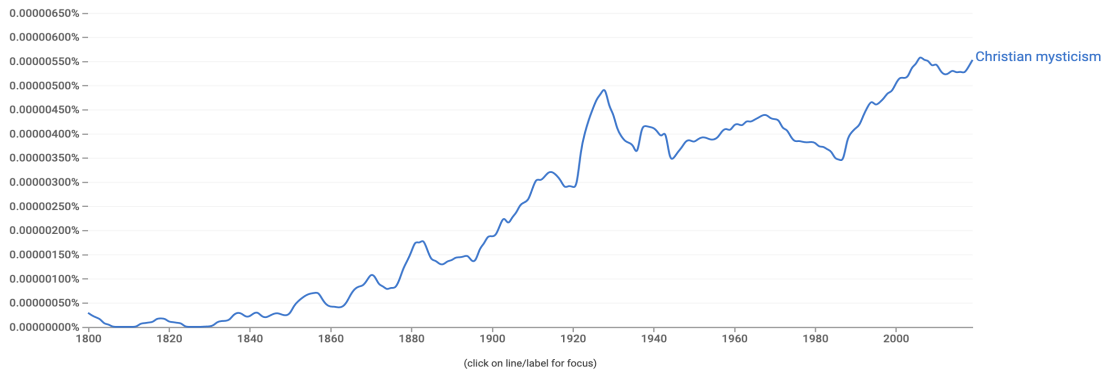
Recent years have seen a notable resurgence of interest in mysticism within Christian circles. Google’s Ngram<sup>1</sup> shows a slow and steady increase in the use of the term “mysticism”.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the term “*Christian* mysticism”, shows an even sharper increase. Although, before 1900, it was little used, unlike the more generic term “mysticism” (see figure 1).

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1 Google’s Ngram Viewer is a tool that allows users to search and analyse the frequency of words and phrases in books over time.

2 [cited 20 January 2025]. Online: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mysticism&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cmysticism%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mysticism&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmysticism%3B%2Cc0)

## The “Christian” Mysticism Of Meister Eckhart And Teresa Of Ávila



**Figure 1.** A Google Ngram of the term “Christian mysticism”. The proportion of the term’s use in books in the Google database is plotted against the date. Note the sharp peak after the Great War.

Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) claimed in her popular book *Mysticism* that the term is “One of the most abused words in the English language”.<sup>3</sup> Underhill defines it as:

*Broadly speaking, I understand it to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever the theological formula under which that is understood.*<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary mystics, such as Matthew Fox<sup>5</sup> and Richard Rohr<sup>6</sup> have a large following. Rohr has been endorsed by Bono, Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Shane Claiborne and Jim Wallis. Numerous books have been published by Christian publishing houses on the mystical Enneagram.<sup>7</sup>

3 Evelyn Underhill. *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Digireads.com, 2020), 7. The original was published in 1911 with a second edition in 1931. By 1931 it was in its 17th reprint and is still available today.

4 Underhill. *Mysticism*, 7.

5 On Fox see, Steve Bishop, “A Fox in Sheep’s Clothing”, *Third Way*, 14, no. 10 (Dec 1990 Jan 1991), 16–18.

6 On Rohr, see Mark Roques, “Richard Rohr, Mysticism and Neoplatonism”, *Koers*, 86, no.1 (2021), 1–10. [cited 20 January 2025]. Online: <https://dx.doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.86.1.2498>.

7 For example, Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

The “ Christian” Mysticism Of Meister Eckhart And Teresa Of Ávila

	Centuries	Person
Early period	3rd	Desert Fathers (eg Anthony the Great (252–356))
	4th/ 5th	Desert mothers (eg Amma Syncletica) John Cassian (c. 360–434)
Middle period	11th	Hugh St Victor (c. 1078–1141) Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)
	12th	Elizabeth of Schonau (1129–1164)
	13th	Rhineland mystics Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366) Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361).
	14th	Richard Rolle (c. 1300–1349) Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1416)w Cloud of Unknowing (c. 1375) Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471)
	15th	Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464)
	16th	Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) John of the Cross (1542–1591)
	17th	Brother Lawrence (1611–1691) Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648–1717)
Modern	19th	Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)
	20th	Caryll Houselander (1901–1954) Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) Thomas Merton (1915–1968) Thomas Keating (1923–2018) John Main (1926–1982) Anthony de Mello (1931–1987) Matthew Fox (1940– ) Richard Rohr (1943– ) James Findley (1943– )

**Table 1.** A chronological list of some who have been described as Christian mystics.

Famous mystics such as Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1327) and Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) have become mainstream in many Christian circles. What is not widely known is that, although they may be classified under the term *Christian* mystics, their roots are certainly not Christian. Their philosophical origins are to be found in Greek pagan philosophy. In this article we investigate these sources and show that Eckhart and Ávila do not deserve the modifier “Christian”. We will argue that the worldviews of Eckhart and Ávila do not comport well with the Christian worldview. In conclusion we critically appraise Christian mysticism with insights from both Scripture and the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd.<sup>8</sup>

## II. Meister Eckhart

The medieval mystic Eckhart von Hochheim was born around 1260 near Gotha located in present-day Germany and then part of the Holy Roman Empire. He studied philosophy and theology and later became the prior of the Dominican house of Erfurt. In 1302, he had a chair in theology in Paris. He returned to Erfurt in 1303 and became the provincial superior for Saxony. He returned to Paris in 1311 until 1313. There is some evidence that he then resided in Strasbourg. His renown for theological acumen and eloquent preaching earned him the title of Meister Eckhart.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1310s his teachings were scrutinised by the ecclesiastical authorities and in 1326 he faced a heresy trial initiated by the Inquisition. He was accused of promoting

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8 On Dooyeweerd see, for example, Steve Bishop, “Herman Dooyeweerd’s Christian Philosophy,” *Foundations* 82 (Spring 2022), 45–70. The best introduction to Dooyeweerd by Dooyeweerd is “Christian Philosophy: An Exploration”, in *The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd Series B Volume I* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); see also, H. Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979); L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd’s Thought* (Wedge: Toronto, 1975); Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 2005); and Steven R. Martins and Steve Bishop (ed.) *Bite-Sized Wisdom: Christian Philosophy: Key Insights From A Transformative Christian Thinker* (Jordan Station, Ont: Cántaro Publications, forthcoming).

9 On Eckhart see, for example, Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 2011); D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, “Eckehart”, in *Wijsgering Woordenboek* ed. K. A. Brill (Amsterdam: Amstelveen, 2005), 122–123 and Joel F. Harrington, *Dangerous Mystic: Meister Eckhart’s Path to the God Within* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

heterodox pantheist views. His death in around 1327 was before any outcome of his trial was decided. Despite being condemned by the papacy his views continued to be circulated, and his influence grew. He inspired, among others, the Dominican Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366) and Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361).<sup>10</sup>

The contemporary mystic Eckhart Tolle has sold millions of books and has been inspired by Meister Eckhart – even changing his name to honour his mystic hero. Entertainment mogul Oprah Winfrey is a huge admirer of Tolle.

One of the main influences on Meister Eckhart was Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius. Eckhart combines Neoplatonism with the Christian faith. We will argue that this is a dangerous syncretism of pagan Greek philosophy with biblical teachings.

### *III. The Pagan Background to Mysticism*

In order to understand mysticism, it is vital to understand a pagan creation myth that is traced to Orpheus, the Thracian poet. A. H. Armstrong summarised this Orphic myth in a wonderfully succinct way:

*The divine in us is an actual being, a daimon or spirit which has fallen as a result of some primeval sin and is entrapped in a series of earthly bodies, which may be animal and plant as well as human. It can escape from ‘the sorrowful weary wheel’, the cycle of reincarnation, by following the Orphic way of life, which involved, besides rituals and incantations, an absolute prohibition of eating flesh.<sup>11</sup>*

Plato (427–348 BC) and his many followers were soaked in this Orphic Myth. In his dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato asserted that this world is a prison for our immortal souls. We humans used to live comfortably and serenely in a world of spiritual, immaterial bliss. As immortal souls we engaged in logic, maths and philosophy without any bodily

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<sup>10</sup> These with Eckhart were known as the Rhineland Mystics.

<sup>11</sup> A. H. Armstrong, “The Ancient and Continuing Pieties of the Greek World”, in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 99. Cited in Horton, Michael. “The End is Not the Beginning...In Fact, Not Even the End”, *Foundations* 81 (Autumn 2021).

intrusions (such as going to the toilet) and other carnal distractions (for example, changing nappies). Tragically our immortal souls fell into this physical, decaying and temporal world. Platonists are convinced that this world is not our home.<sup>12</sup> They maintain that it is a dark and dangerous dungeon for the immortal soul. Plato derived these beliefs from the Orphic Myth.

For Plotinus (205–270 AD), the father of Mystical Neoplatonism, the ultimate divinity is the One who is silent and ineffable. From the One emanates the Divine Mind, which provides a home for the forms or ideas that Plato revered so highly. From the Divine Mind flows the World Soul, which animates and gives life to the universe. At the very bottom of this chain of being is Matter, which is the realm of darkness.

For Plotinus, humans are gods in disguise and in exile (Orphic Myth). Humans have forgotten who they are and revel in both matter and multiplicity. For Neoplatonists, salvation comes to those who long to return home to the Mystic One. Plotinus urges us to turn inward and upward (Orphic Myth). We must ascend the mystic ladder in three stages. The first stage is catharsis. This is the purifying of the soul from both bodiliness and sensation. To purify our souls we must meditate contemplatively. We need to strip the mind so it becomes naked.

The second stage is the purification of the mind through philosophy. We meditate on pure, abstract ideas like the “Divine Number One”. The third stage is ecstatic union with the One. In this union, Plotinus abandons reason, unlike his mentor Plato. There are no distinctions in the One, and hence, rational activity is impossible. Now there is no “You” and “God”. Just Oneness. This mindset is also referred to as Monism. To truly image the One, humans must be silent and solitary. We have withdrawn into a naked, empty realm of oneness.

For this is where we belong. Reincarnation in the bodies of suffering humans, beasts, and trees awaits those who refuse to return to the One (Orphic Myth). If you are

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<sup>12</sup> See *Timaeus* 90 where Plato writes about our home in heaven.



in prison or a slave, you deserve it. Every soul occupies its place on the ladder because of merit. This ascent of the mystic ladder requires considerable self-discipline and dogged hard spiritual work, stripping the soul of carnal, sensory, and ludic (playful) elements. We should notice the elitist theme in Plotinus. Only philosophers can be saved. Foolish, ignorant people are doomed to perpetual rebirth in sordid bodies.

Plotinus was a committed pagan who engaged in clairvoyance, magic, and séances. He even wrote about spirit guides (occult channelling) who help humans with hidden knowledge. He certainly despised the Christian faith. Despite this overt pagan thrust, Neoplatonism, as framed by Plotinus, has impacted the lives of many mystics.

#### *IV. The Influence of Pseudo-Dionysius*

Pseudo-Dionysius was a Christian theologian of the late 5th to the early 6th century. He crafted *The Mystical Theology* that replaced the Trinity with the One. He introduced the idea of negative theology to the Christian world. In this theology we begin by denying of God those things which are farthest removed from the Absolute, e.g. drunkenness or madness. Then we deny of God all other attributes e.g. goodness, beauty, etc. In Neoplatonic terms we must strip the Supreme Being down so that He becomes naked in his Oneness. Pseudo-Dionysius calls this deity, the “super-essential Darkness”.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Mystical Theology*, Jesus is sidelined and silenced. The Incarnation makes no sense in this Christian Neoplatonic worldview because bodiliness is inferior and evil. Pseudo-Dionysius was deeply soaked in Neoplatonism.<sup>14</sup> For him, the faithful disciple of Jesus should climb the ladder of ascent in order to return home (Orphic

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13 On Pseudo-Dionysius’s writings, see Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1993). See, also Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 2001); David Rodie “Meditative States Abhidharma and in Pseudo-Dionysius” in R. Baine Harris (ed.) *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1981; and C.E. Rolt *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (London: SPCK, 1920).

14 Theodore Sabo, Dan Liroy, Rikus Fick, “The Platonic Milieu Of Dionysius The Pseudo-Areopagite”, *Journal of Early Christian History*, 3 no. 1 (2013), 50–60.

Myth<sup>15</sup>) and achieve an ecstatic, mystical union with the One. Biblical themes of justification by faith and bodily resurrection are completely absent in *The Mystical Theology*.

#### V. Eckhart’s “Christian” Neoplatonism

Eckhart’s many sermons tell us about how the immortal soul of a human can find salvation. He writes as follows:

*In the second place, the soul is purified in the practice of virtues by which we climb to a life of unity. That is the way the soul is made pure—by being purged of much divided life and by entering upon a life that is focused on unity.*<sup>16</sup>

This theme of the soul’s journey from multiplicity to unity is profoundly Neoplatonic. Eckhart combines biblical with mystical themes. He asserts:

*Three things there are that hinder one from hearing the eternal Word. The first is corporeality, the second number, and the third time. If a person has overcome these three, he dwells in eternity, is alive spiritually and remains in the unity, the desert of solitude, and there he hears the eternal Word.*<sup>17</sup>

Here we encounter Eckhart’s Neoplatonic view of salvation. The spiritual person will ascend the mystic ladder in order to leave behind our bodies, time, and multiplicity. This is the essence of world flight. Salvation is to escape from the bondage of the earth and to merge mystically with the One. He writes as follows:

*When I return to the core, the soil, the river, the source which is the Godhead, no one will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one will have missed me—for even God passes away!*<sup>18</sup>

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15 On the Orphic myth see Dwayne A. Meisner, *Orphic Tradition and the Birth of the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

16 Meister Eckhart: *A Central Source And Inspiration Of Dominant Currents In Philosophy and Theology Since Aquinas*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper, 1941), 173.

17 Eckhart: *Dominant Currents In Philosophy and Theology Since Aquinas*, 203.

18 Eckhart: *Dominant Currents In Philosophy and Theology Since Aquinas*, 226.

When Eckhart talks about the Godhead, he is not talking about the Triune God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. He posits a Godhead (identical to the Neoplatonic One) who stands behind the Christian God. The Triune God of the New Testament is downgraded because threeness is inferior to oneness. We should notice that it is impossible to describe the Godhead because language cannot engage with Oneness.

We can now summarise Eckhart’s Christian Neoplatonic worldview by outlining how he would answer the six worldview questions:

- i. What is God like?
  - a. The Godhead is an impersonal, silent, and ineffable deity.
- ii. What is the universe like?
  - a. The universe has emanated out of the Godhead. This is a form of pantheism.
- iii. What is a person?
  - a. Humans are immortal souls stuffed in body bags.
- iv. Why do we suffer?
  - a. Bodiliness, time, and number create misery for humans and stop humans from ascending the mystic ladder and returning home.
- v. What is the remedy?
  - a. We must turn inward and upward as we seek union with the Godhead through catharsis, contemplation, and mystic silence. This involves climbing the mystical ladder of ascent.
- vi. What happens after death?
  - a. Spiritual people will die and merge with the Godhead. For Eckhart, the resurrection body, the new heaven, and the new earth have vanished.

We can see that Eckhart’s understanding of salvation is very different from Christianity. Many scholars have argued that his mindset is very similar to Zen

Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> Both Zen and Neoplatonism proclaim that silence is the best way to image the divine. The divine is empty, impersonal, a nothingness, a desert and totally silent. Zen scholars praise Eckhart when he writes:

*It is in the stillness, in the silence, that the Word of God is to be heard. There is no better avenue of approach to this Word than through stillness, through silence.*<sup>20</sup>

#### VI. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582)

Another “Christian” mystic is Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). She has much in common with Eckhart. She also owed much to the mystical worldview of Neoplatonism. We note that, unlike Eckhart, she retains a firm belief in the Trinity.

Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda Dávila y Ahumada was born in 1515 in a village in the Spanish Province of Ávila. She was educated in the Augustinian Convent of Santa Maria de Gracia in Ávila. Her mother’s death in 1535 deeply affected Teresa, she sought solace in prayer and then in 1537 became a Carmelite nun against her father’s wishes.

In 1555 she experienced, what she termed her “second conversion”. This led to a deeper life of devotion and mystical contemplation. She started to experience mystical visions, and she then embarked on a mission to restore Carmelite life to its original and much more austere state. Her reforms focused on withdrawal from worldly distractions so that the nuns could devote themselves to solitary meditation and a life of penance, prayer, and contemplation.

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19 For more on this see the paper by S. Morris, “Buddhism and Christianity: The Common Ground: A Study of the Radical Theologies of Meister Eckhart and Abe Masao”, *The Eastern Buddhist* 25, no. 2 (Autumn 1992), 89–118.

20 Morris, “Buddhism and Christianity: The Common Ground: A Study of the Radical Theologies of Meister Eckhart and Abe Masao”, 107. See, for example, D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider Pocket Edition, 1991); R. Baine Harris, *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1981); J. A. Joseph, “Comparing Eckhartian and Zen Mysticism”, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 35 (2015), 91-110.

With the permission of Pope Pius IV, she established St. Joseph’s, the first convent of Carmelite Reform. Her attempts at reform were opposed and criticised by civic and religious leaders, but she continued to stress her commitment to poverty and insisted that the convent rely solely on public alms. She went on to establish sixteen Carmelite monasteries throughout Spain.

She died, aged 67, in 1582. Pope Gregory XV canonised her as a saint in 1614 and in 1970 she was the first woman to be declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI.

In order to discern the way in which Christian Neoplatonism infused her understanding of the Christian faith, we will need to examine her writings. In her famous autobiography, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, she writes as follows:

*Oh, how it pains a soul which has been in this state to return to the business of the world, to look at the disorderly farce of this life, to waste time attending to such bodily needs as those of eating and sleeping! Everything wearies it; it cannot run away; it sees itself a prisoner in chains, and it is then that it feels most keenly the captivity in which our bodies hold us, and the wretchedness of this life.<sup>21</sup>*

Here we have a clear statement of Ávila’s commitment to Christian Neoplatonism. The immortal soul is deeply unhappy in its captivity to the daily demands of the body. This mindset is made very clear when Ávila describes her understanding of salvation:

*I longed to find some ways and means of doing penance for all my evil deeds, and of becoming in some degree worthy of winning this great blessing. I wanted to avoid human company, and finally to withdraw from the world.<sup>22</sup>*

Ávila believed passionately that the immortal soul of a person does not belong in this earthly prison, the body (Orphic Myth). The soul must return to God by ascending

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21 *The Life of Saint Teresa by Herself* (Penguin, London, 1957), 149.

22 *The Life of Saint Teresa by Herself*, 236.

the mystic ladder. We should notice the auto-salvific assumption here. Teresa informs us that we must become worthy of our salvation. How do we achieve this? By working hard on our souls in four distinct stages. Meditation is the first stage of the demanding mystical journey. This discipline creates an inner feeling of commitment and dedication to God. The second stage involves the prayer of Quiet, during which a mystical silence infuses the soul. In the third stage, the soul becomes drowsy, falling asleep as it merges with God. In the final, fourth stage, the soul no longer seems to inhabit the decaying body. All our abilities to feel, sense, and reflect fade away as the soul delights in its non-rational, ecstatic union with God. In the final, fourth stage, the soul no longer seems to live in the body. All our abilities to feel, sense, and think fade away as the soul delights in its non-rational, ecstatic union with God.

Ávila explains this ecstatic union with God with a liquid metaphor. She writes:

*But spiritual marriage is like rain falling from heaven into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and rain water cannot be divided; or it resembles a streamlet flowing into the ocean.*<sup>23</sup>

This understanding of salvation is almost identical to both Neoplatonism and the Upanishads.<sup>24</sup> Her mystical faith is best appreciated by considering the austere and self-torturing lifestyle of her spiritual advisor and role model, Peter of Alcantara (1499 – 1562). She writes:

*At the beginning the hardest part of his penance had been the conquering of sleep. For this reason he always remained standing or on his knees. Such sleep as he had, he took sitting down, with his head propped against a piece of wood, which he had fixed to the wall. He could not lie down to sleep even if he wished to, for his cell, as is well known, was only four and a half feet long.*<sup>25</sup>

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23 *Interior Castle or The Mansions* (London: Thomas Baker, 1921), 272. [cited 20 January 2025]. Online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/teresa/castle2/castle2.xi.ii.html>.

24 We do not have space to outline how monist themes pervade the Upanishads.

25 *The Life of Saint Teresa by Herself*, 194

Ávila praised this austere and self-torturing way of life in the spirit of Christian Neoplatonism.

So how would Ávila answer the six worldview questions? We note that Ávila is not as absorbed in Neoplatonism as Eckhart was. She certainly believed in the Trinity rather than the Godhead.

- i. What is God like?
  - a. God is a Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- ii. What is the universe like?
  - a. The world is God’s creation, but the earth is not our home. It is inferior to the heavenly realm.
- iii. What is a person?
  - a. We are immortal souls created to enjoy spiritual and heavenly bliss.
- iv. Why do we suffer?
  - a. We are in painful exile. Our bodies are evil, and they stop us from loving God.
- v. What is the remedy?
  - a. We must climb the mystic ladder of ascent by using the four stages of mystical contemplation.
- vi. What happens after death?
  - a. Those who do penance, contemplate and forsake the world will enjoy the Beatific Vision after death. Those who reject this path go to either purgatory or hell.

VII. *A Christian critique of “Christian” mysticism*

Now that we have understood both pagan Neoplatonism (Plotinus) and Christian Neoplatonism (Eckhart and Ávila) we will sketch a biblical and then a philosophical critique of this mystical worldview.

Christian Neoplatonism rejects the biblical assertion that God created humans to live on the earth rather than in a disembodied heaven (Rev 21:2–3). The Neoplatonic mindset urges us to find God by escaping from this prison of the body. We do not find this teaching in the Bible. Salvation is by grace, not by striving; by denying the creation, mysticism is an attempt at auto-salvation. This world, however broken and ruined by sin and evil, is still our home. Genesis 2:15 shows us that God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, which is located on the earth. We were not created to live in heaven as disembodied souls (Orphic Myth).

The missiologist J. H. Bavinck (1895–1964), while a missionary in Java, studied mysticism and completed a doctorate on psychology and mysticism in the work of Henry Suso, a follower of Eckhart. His views on mysticism are ably summarised in the recently translated *Personality and Worldview*, chapter 7.<sup>26</sup> As he observes, mysticism is difficult to define as it is not a single worldview. It is an emphasis on the being of God, and yet he is a formless and utterly other divinity. There is no comfort or salvation in such a god. It results in self-withdrawal from life and groping after eternity. He notes that Christian mysticism is differently focused and maintains the boundary between God and creation. As he writes, for mysticism, “Life’s only morality, then, is world flight, withdrawing yourself from every sphere of life.”

Mystical mindsets insist that if we love God we must shun his creation. In short, we must choose between God and his creation.<sup>27</sup> To probe this issue we will briefly

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26 See the review in *Foundations* 85 (Winter 2023), 84–85. Originally published in Dutch as *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing* by J. H. Kok in 1928.

27 I am grateful to Nik Ansell for pointing this out.



investigate a film that presents this false dilemma in an engaging and dramatic manner. *The Name of the Rose* is a 1986 film<sup>28</sup> which was inspired by the bestselling medieval ‘whodunnit’ crafted by the Italian novelist and scholar Umberto Eco.<sup>29</sup> In the film the monks are not allowed to laugh or even to talk as they are eating their meal. The message is clear. A monk should keep silent until he is questioned. One of the monks, named Jorge, exudes a mindset that is very similar to both Eckhart and Ávila. He puts his point like this: “A monk should not laugh, for it is the fool who lifts up his voice in laughter.” He then adds: “Laughter is a devilish wind,” and “Christ never laughed.”<sup>30</sup>

Here we see the false dilemma that Christian Neoplatonism foists upon us. If we love God, we will turn away from the ‘worldly amusements’ of laughter and witty, entertaining conversation. Those who love God will shun humour as intrinsically profane.

Tragically, there are and have been countless Christian believers who are unable to discern that the Bible does not teach this Neoplatonic rejection of God’s good creation. Humour can be godless and profane. It can be cruel, spiteful, and vulgar, but it doesn’t have to be. Humour can be loving, holy, and spiritual. Humour is a good gift from the Lord. We can tell jokes to the glory of God. Through humour we can show love, warmth, and kindness to our neighbours. The relentless austerity of Christian Neoplatonism does not honour the God who delights in his world (Proverbs 8:30). It nurtures humans to be otherworldly, pinched, cramped... less than fully human. Consider this verse in the book of Zechariah:

*Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there. (Zechariah 8:4-5)*

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28 *The Name of the Rose*, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1986).

29 Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

30 You can find this conversation in both the original book and the film starring Sean Connery and Christian Slater.

God’s purpose in the biblical narrative is to fill His beautiful but broken world with the shalom of His kingdom. This shalom is captured brilliantly in these verses from Zechariah. Children are playing in the streets of Jerusalem. This playful activity is delightful and pleasing to God. Ludic moments of fun and laughter can be holy and spiritual.<sup>31</sup> Eckhart, Ávila and Peter of Alcantara would be deeply offended to hear that fun and games can be holy and spiritual. In the words of Ávila these things are just “worldly amusements”.

It is vital that by rejecting Christian Neoplatonism we are not rejecting the biblical call to be holy and to live lives that please God. Many mystics are right to reject hedonism, consumerism, and materialism. They are right when they draw our attention to the spiritual disciplines of praying, fasting, and self-control. These spiritual disciplines are good, and Jesus mentions them in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:5–18). We contend that we should practice these disciplines in the context of a creation-affirming biblical worldview.

There is also an urgent need for a Christian philosophy that both rejects and replaces Christian Neoplatonic philosophy, which finds its origins in the Orphic Myth. The rich, creation-affirming philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) gives us a way to respond to the Neoplatonic obsession with oneness and the vilification of multiplicity.

This world belongs to Jesus Christ, who is Lord (John 1:1–3). This amazing creation is telling us about God’s glory and wisdom (Ps 19). God has created diamonds, gold, tulips, roses, ants, eagles, giraffes, dolphins, humans, and angels. All these creatures display a remarkable range of dimensions or aspects. Each of these creatures is stunningly crafted by a wise and loving God. We should be awestruck as we consider “the work of his hands” (Ps 104).

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31 Calvin Seerveld has written a great deal about playfulness and imagination, see for example, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980).

Dooyeweerd claims that each creature is subjected to all of God’s many wise laws and statutes (Ps 119). God’s Word governs these numerous aspects. In order from earlier to later, these aspects are numerical, spatial, kinematic, physical, biotic, sensitive, logical, cultural, linguistic, social, economic, aesthetic, legal, ethical, and pistic (see the Appendix). All of these dimensions are present in God’s vibrant, colourful world. None can be reduced to another. We call this irreducibility. Feelings cannot be reduced to chemical reactions. Imagination cannot be reduced to logical clarity. We cannot understand a child playing hide and seek if we only attend to the laws of physics.

Dooyeweerd’s creation-affirming Christian philosophy contrasts strikingly with the creation-denying Neoplatonic philosophy. Neoplatonism valorises oneness and vilifies multiplicity. This means that the Number One is being privileged and venerated. This is a form of pagan idolatry that Dooyeweerd’s philosophy equips us to discern with biblical insight. God created many kinds of creatures in the beginning. When God created the world, he flooded it with all kinds of stunning creatures. Scripture gives us a very positive view of multiplicity. There is no shame in there being many angels, many humans, vast numbers of trees, plants, fish, lions, etc. This fecund multiplicity makes God smile because He delights in the works of His hand (Prov 8:30).

We should also refuse to believe that God’s best language is silence. The Catholic mystic Thomas Keating OCSO (1923–2018), echoing John of the Cross, put it like this: “Silence is God’s first language; everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God.”<sup>32</sup>

In Dooyeweerdian terms, silence can be a very appropriate form of communication, but there are many others. What about singing, shouting, and laughing? If a child is about to fall off a cliff, it is advisable to shout! There is a time and a place to be silent, but self-torturing vows of silence are unspiritual and unbiblical. God’s good

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32 Thomas Keating, *The Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), 203.

creation is full of many noisy creatures who praise God in all kinds of ways. Walruses spring to mind. Neoplatonism denies this in its false, pagan adulation of both Silence and Oneness.

### *VIII. Conclusion*

In this paper, we have outlined the mystical mindsets of Plotinus, Dionysius, Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Ávila. We have alerted our readers to the Neoplatonic pagan worldview that privileges silence, stillness, solitude and presents salvation as escape from the creation and eventual merger or union with the One. We have explained how some Christians have combined Christian with Neoplatonic teachings. We have critically appraised this Neoplatonic mysticism with biblical teachings and philosophical insights that come from Dooyeweerd. Today many engage in various forms of meditation. We urge our readers to practice creation-affirming kinds of meditation that honour biblical teachings (Ps 119:15) rather than the deceitful and dangerous promptings of pagan philosophy (Col 2:8). The aim of meditation should not be the stripping bare of our minds in the hope of union or merger with the One. Rather our aim should be to draw closer to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as we look forward to the resurrection of our bodies in God’s new heaven and new earth.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

APPENDIX

*A Dooyeweerdian modal analysis of different aspects of mysticism*

	Modal aspect	
Earlier ↓	Numerical	There are numerous types of mysticism In Neoplatonism there is an emphasis on Oneness and a denial of multiplicity
	Spatial	A sense of transcending the spatial dimension
	Kinematic	An inner transformation is sought
	Physical	The attempt to transcend the physical Though some mystical experiences may physically effects on the body
	Biotic	Inner spiritual growth and development is desired
	Sensitive	Visions and ecstasy are embraced; an emphasis on feeling and intuition It may involve heightened sensory effects
	Analytical	Introspection and non-rationality are emphasised over and above rationality It may involve contemplation of mysteries
	Historical	Influenced by cultural milieu—as evidenced by its increased interest between the World Wars It may involve the formation of rituals and practice
	Linguistic	Words fail to describe the ineffable character of the mystics’ experience—and yet there are lots of writings produced!
	Social	It often involves a withdrawal from society and social interaction Though some mystical communities may provide a social context for shared experiences
	Economic	A cynic might suggest that the increase in books on mysticism is profit-driven Often an emphasis on frugality and denial of self
Later	Aesthetic	A search for awe and beauty—but often no awareness of the goodness/ beauty of creation
	Jurdical	Monism Moral guidelines for mystical practices—for example, no use of illegal drugs
	Ethical	Monism is a denial of the good/ bad distinction An emphasis on love and a down-playing of judgement
	Pistic/ certitudinal	A desire to connect/ become one with God—it is auto-salvific A pantheistic monism is embraced

## BOOK REVIEWS

### METAPHYSICS AND CHRISTOLOGY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

**Richard Cross, *Metaphysics and Christology in the Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 355pp.**

What do we mean when we say that God the Son assumed human nature? In evangelical circles we may be familiar with this kind of language, but we often seem to be unaware of the theological issues below the surface, let alone the deep historical disputes raised by them.

How did this hypostatic union come to be? Is Christ's humanity a particular or universal human nature – and how do we avoid Nestorianism if Christ's humanity consisted of a human body and a human soul? How is there not also then a human person? How are we to understand the hypostatic union? In what way was the human nature assumed? Was the human nature joined to the divine nature as one Lego brick is joined to another, or was a third thing required for the union as when two pieces of cloth are sewn together with thread?

These questions, particularly the mechanics of the hypostatic union, are the theological focus of the third instalment of Richard Cross' multi-volume project on the history of the metaphysics of Christology. The first was *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus*, and the second was *Communicatio Idiomatum: Reformation Christological Debates*. The historical focus of the project is the question of Lutheran departures from Catholic and Reformed Chalcedonian Christologies, and therefore, much of the work consists of surveying various key theologians from these traditions.

The book developed from Cross' desire to examine the thesis that later Lutheran theology employed a *homo assumptus* (assumed man) Christology in contrast to the Classical Chalcedonian position. The thesis is comprehensively confirmed by Cross

as he surveys a galaxy of Roman Catholic and Reformed theologians concerning their overlapping theological positions.

Cross argues that, according to the Creed of Chalcedon, the incarnation is the divine person of the Son assuming a human nature in such a way that it is united in his person – the Word – to his divine nature. Thus, we have one Lord Jesus Christ. One person in two natures. Therefore, the union of the Word or Logos – God the Son – with the human nature is the necessary and sufficient condition for the union of the human nature with the divine nature. Much of the book sets out and surveys the two dominant union theories in the Scholastic era. As I mentioned at the beginning of this review, Cross illustrates the two union theories with two possible ways of uniting different objects. Either as with Lego bricks, by some intrinsic property (the bumps on each brick), or, as with pieces of cloth, by a third thing that brings about the union (the thread used to sew them together). The Lego bricks illustrate what Cross calls the “communion theory” advanced by Thomas Aquinas. And the cloth and thread illustrate what Cross calls the ‘union theory’ advanced by John Duns Scotus. Many of the differences among Scholastic theologians can be traced to disagreements between Aquinas and Scotus.

Moving forward to the Reformation, Cross argues that many of the Lutheran theologians tended to follow Aquinas and the Dominican school in the ‘communion theory,’ whereas the Reformed theologians tended to follow Scotus.

It is useful to be aware of Cross’ qualified commitment to Classical Theism in which he slightly modifies the Classical doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility.<sup>1</sup> Cross’ theology proper inevitably influences his Christology.

One aspect of the book I found particularly helpful in my own work<sup>2</sup> was his deep analysis of the Trinitarianism and Christology of the Jesuit theologian

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 205. 317-318.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Brand, *Intimately Forsaken: A Trinitarian Christology of the Cross* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).

Francisco Suárez. Suárez' reverence towards Aquinas is clear, but he favours the Scotist doctrine of the analogy of human and divine being – univocity of being. Apart from this fundamental epistemological difference, Suárez attempts to retain Aquinas' metaphysical structure in his systematic theology. Many of the Reformers opposed Suárez alterations of Thomistic metaphysics, especially Suárez' Molinist view of God's sovereignty.

In my book, *Intimately Forsaken: A Trinitarian Christology of the Cross*, I interact extensively with Suárez's use of the formal and modal distinctions between persons and natures in Christology and the Trinity. He predominantly opposes the modal distinction in the Trinity on the grounds that the test for a modal distinction is non-mutual separability.<sup>3</sup> For example, Socrates may exist as sitting on a chair. The fact that he is sitting may be non-mutually separated from Socrates existence because he could also be running. In the Trinity. Cross helpfully draws attention to rather obscure passage in Suárez<sup>4</sup> in which he acknowledges the possibility of a modal distinction in the Trinity between persons and nature in a way that is more inline with Aquinas view that the Triune persons are permanent modes in which the Divine nature exists. That is, God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The work is rich in historical research and deep in theological insight. It is, therefore, a challenging read (especially the Scholastic semantics) – but hugely worthwhile. And as with the previous book I reviewed for *Foundations*, the price may be prohibitive, but I expect a cheaper paperback will be available soon.

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3 Thomas Marschler, *Die Spekulative Trinitätslehre des Francisco Suárez S.J. in ihrem philosophisch-theologischen Kontext* (Munster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2007), 719.

4 Francisco Suárez, In *ST I*, lib. 3, c. 5, n. 8 (Vives ed., I, 597).



## THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

***The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (4th edition)*, Andrew Louth (ed.)  
Oxford, 2022, 2 volumes, 2143pp, £170 (Amazon)**

*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* is something of an institution. First published in 1957 by Canon F.L. Cross, an Oxford patristic scholar in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, Cross died during the preparations for the second edition, which was brought to the press by Elizabeth A. Livingstone in 1974. Under Livingstone's guidance a third edition was published in 1997, with a revision of the third edition appearing in 2005. While the dictionary became a standard work of reference in both the academy and the ministry, it continued to be marked by the idiosyncrasies of its original editor, offering an authoritative, yet very Anglican, perspective on the Christian Church.

This fourth edition marks a significant change of direction. The new editor, Andrew Louth, shares with Cross an expertise in patristics and a connection to the Oxford divinity faculty, but Louth is ordained in the Russian Orthodox Church and has sought to move the dictionary in a more global and inclusive direction. To assist with the work, Louth appointed fifteen subject-area advisors, including Richard Cross on medieval philosophy, Euan Cameron on the Reformation, Catherine Pickstock on philosophy of religion and Peter Phan on Asia. In contrast to previous editions, in this edition, entries are signed where they have been revised but left unsigned where they have remained unchanged. Perusal of the volumes quickly reveals that the vast majority of the 6,500 entries have been revised for this edition. According to Louth, particular attention has been paid to updating the bibliographies. Although the dictionary now runs to two hefty volumes, this fourth edition has pruned material on biblical topics and other religions in order to provide a more comprehensive overview of the Christian Church in both its historical and global dimensions.

To give a flavour of the emphases of the dictionary, it should be noted that “Peter, Preaching of St” is about the apocryphal work and not about the speeches in Acts, minor orders receive twice as much attention as the Minor Prophets, there is nothing on nard but a helpful entry on the ‘narthex’, an antechamber in eastern churches occupied by catechumens and penitents. The article on “Pentecost” briefly discusses the biblical references to the harvest festival and pouring out of the Spirit but gives the majority of its attention to the various ways the feast has been celebrated in the Eastern and Western Churches. Coverage of Reformation traditions is often valuable too, but it can be spotty or repeat caricatures. Calvin receives a lucid three-column entry, for example, but it is asserted that “Calvinism” erased the sacred/secular distinction. The article on the Synod of Dort takes up less than half a column and was not written by a specialist, while the article on the Westminster Assembly has not been updated and makes no reference to Chad Van Dixhoorn’s critical edition of the minutes and papers of the Assembly. A range of figures from the Church of Scotland are included, but Samuel Rutherford’s learned and subtle *Exercitationes Apologeticae pro Divina Gratia* is “rigidly Calvinist”. “Purgatory” is a good representative of the sort of article readers of this journal might benefit from. The doctrine receives a two-and-a-half column article with a half column bibliography. A sentence defines the doctrine, a half column gives its pre-history in the East and West, a further half column looks at the developed state of the doctrine in the West and East, and a final column discusses the afterlife of the doctrine following its Reformation critique and provides a theological assessment. One will not turn to this dictionary for help with biblical topics, but anyone looking for reliable basic information about Christian tradition, especially bibliographical or liturgical, and especially in its more “catholic” forms, will find that the revised dictionary provides accessible and wide-ranging introductions to a vast array of topics, and the bibliographies provide promising entry-points to further study. I recently wanted to mention Pentecostalism in a sermon. Rather than go to

Google (which can take up a lot of time) or simply rely on my own experience, I turned to the dictionary article. From a two-column entry I gained a simple account of the movement's origins and emphases that I could be confident in, as well as some key dates in its development – including the beginnings of Pentecostalism in Ireland, where I minister.

In conclusion, every institutional theological library will certainly want to purchase this as a reference work for both students and teachers. However, while the broadening of interest is to be commended, the dictionary continues to feel less comprehensive and less surefooted in its handling of the branches of the Church that flowed from the Reformation, and the increase to two volumes has made the printed dictionary considerably more expensive. Individual buyers reading this journal may struggle to justify the cost, especially as the dictionary is not a one-stop shop. However, ministers and lay-people who want a reliable and up-to-date window onto the labyrinthine and daily expanding global Christian tradition will find these handsome volumes to be a worthwhile investment, which they will want to place beside their desks so that they turn to their learned pages before they turn to a search engine.

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## SERMONS ON JOB

**John Calvin, *Sermons on Job: 3 Volume Set*. Translated by Rob Roy McGregor. Banner of Truth Trust, 2022. 2120 pp. h/b. (60, [banneroftruth.org](http://banneroftruth.org)).**

This is a fresh translation by Rob Roy McGregor from the original French of John Calvin's 159 weekday sermons on the book of Job, from 1554-1555. For work on the recent *ESV Church History Study Bible* (Crossway) I used the original alongside a much older translation by Arthur Golding from 1574, which was helpful but badly needed updating. (There was also an early German translation, and Beza himself translated these sermons into Latin, indicating something of the high esteem in which they were held, and their perceived usefulness to a wider audience.) It is safe to say that this is a far superior and much easier to read edition of these edifying expositions which will feed, inspire, rebuke, and teach anyone with the courage to sit at the feet of Calvin with an open mind and a willing heart. He was a great preacher, with close attention to the text, clarity of thought and communication, penetrating insight into the human condition, and some tremendous turns of phrase in which he beautifully expounds the gospel of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew text that Calvin used is different in many places to that which is agreed upon today. So occasionally one will find insights in his sermons which bear little resemblance to the modern text of Job and so may not be reusable. McGregor (who has also translated some of Calvin's sermons on Acts and Genesis, so he knows what he is doing) has helpfully translated and presented what Calvin's biblical text said, so we can more easily compare and note any differences if we want to spend time doing so. He has also helpfully incorporated marginal biblical references, but this is not a critical edition, so don't expect footnotes to the commentators he's talking about when Calvin says "some people say this or that".

As he preaches these hour-long weekday sermons – delivered in a period of great opposition to his ministry and in the midst of personal, physical weakness – one can almost feel Calvin himself turning to the book of Job for spiritual help and comfort during these trials. As he says in the first sermon, in his spiritual warfare against us, the devil “finds men who are always ready to harass us and increase and exacerbate the pain. Thus we see how Job, apart from the pain he was suffering, was tormented, yes tormented, by his friends, his wife, and especially those who came to test him spiritually.” Calvin, who never doubts that Job is a true story, was allowed to experience similar torments himself so that he might better understand the book of Job and better unravel and apply it in the light of Christ for our benefit. So whereas Aquinas the academic (for example) saw Job’s friends as disputants in a scholastic debate, Calvin the pastor sees them as tormentors who try to undermine his Christian life and ministry. Many of the things Job’s comforters say are true, and Calvin unpacks what the Spirit teaches us through them; but he also notes how they twist the truth by misapplying it in Job’s case. He also sees Job’s main concern as a spiritual one rather than being primarily focused on his diverse physical and mental trials and personal tragedies. This enables him to open the book up as more than just a manual of how to cope with the bad things that happen to us in this life. It’s about a relationship with God, first and foremost. When he talks about the “fanciful imaginings” that come into our heads during times of trial, he seems to be confessing to what we might nowadays call “intrusive thoughts”, but he gives us gospel remedies for these to help us maintain that relationship (Sermon 55). At the same time, he has some sharp words (e.g. in Sermon 57) for unedifying theologies forged by ambitious men who wish to be thought well-versed and learned.

Every sermon has been given a title; a long one usually, more a sort of mini-description of the content than a title per se. They are not always reflective of everything in a sermon or even what I would have considered the main point, but having them

does mean that scanning the contents pages alone can be edifying and instructive. Some of the sermons are quite punchy, and many would offend polite sensibilities today, such as Sermon 16 (that's a salty one!) which is so positive about *sola scriptura* that he excoriates Roman Catholics, Muslims, and what we could call Pentecostals because of their "devil-driven curiosity which was not satisfied to be instructed by holy Scripture alone." Lunatics all, he says, like Servetus; though his main point is to inculcate in us a contentment with God's revelation of himself in holy scripture not a hatred of other people (still less is he encouraging us to burn all our opponents!). There were other moments of wincing too, as I read, even though I so often agreed with him in general theologically. Perhaps he would rephrase some things today. Yet this is not, by any means, all feisty polemics, but a serious attempt to take the text of Job seriously and preach it to ordinary people in lucid, profound, and richly-applied ways. Some of it just leapt off the page to me, as if applied directly to the 21st century (Sermons 20 and 26, for example, contain what you might say are prophecies of episcopal craftiness in today's Church of England).

He does not forget that we are Christians, not Old Testament believers, and so Christ and the Spirit (and the New Testament) are not absent from his expositions, yet there is no mechanical biblical-theology schema at work here as such, just an awareness that God has not changed and neither have we, and this book is in the Bible to teach *us*. His almost casual way of speaking of *the Spirit* teaching us and guiding us through Job (and through life) was particularly striking to me; is it a thoughtless verbal tick, or a deliberate strategy to inculcate into his hearers the Testament-unifying thought that the same Spirit is at work in us who was at work in Job and the author of the book of Job? It is noteworthy that he does not rely solely on references to the work of Christ to join the dots between Job and us but is more profoundly Trinitarian in his underlying homiletical approach than many might be today. In Sermon 38, he even notes at one point how Job's own intention in speaking is at odds with the Holy Spirit's intention

– which is a fascinating reflection for our hermeneutical theories of human and divine authorial intent to grapple with.

Calvin is also great at homely illustrations and using speech-in-character (*prosopoeia*) as a rhetorical device to get under our skins in application. He was clearly a master of various contemporary colloquial idioms too, which he scatters here and there in his sermons (sometimes to the modern reader’s amusement), all of which makes him eminently readable and helps us connect with the doctrine he has to teach us. The translator has taken some liberties here, of course. For example, in the original, Sermon 32 has the phrase “*les meschans s’esgayent, et qu’ils ayent le meilleur temps*” (the wicked must make merry and they must have the best time) which is here rendered as “the wicked have to be footloose and fancy-free and enjoy the best of times.” That is a loose translation of *s’esgayent*, and might give the wrong impression to some that Calvin used or invented the phrase “footloose and fancy-free” (which idiomatically is a nineteenth-century American coinage); but this is a dynamic-equivalence, NIV sort of translation not a woodenly literalistic ESV-style affair. And none the worse for that. To say the wicked must be gay (an old-fashioned literal translation of *s’esgayent* perhaps) would have misleading connotations today, and the 1574 translation has a more obscure “the wicked must ruffle it out, and have the better hande for the tyme”. Although, the same “footloose and fancy-free” phrase occurs later in this new translation of Sermon 60 too, without any underlying basis in the French at all: “*courir à travers champs comme bestes esgarees*” is simply running across fields like stray beasts; the beasts do not really *need* to be described as footloose and fancy-free.

On another point, for some reason it always tickles me that Calvin (in the standard edition of the French text that I have, at any rate) habitually referred to “Saint Paul” in his sermons (including here, in New Testament cross-references); whereas Banner of Truth translations always deny the apostle that title of sanctity which Calvin constantly ascribed to him. I often wonder why.

There is a huge amount of material here: three volumes running to 2,120 pages in total. These days, we probably would not preach such short sections of Job at a time (each sermon is usually about a handful of verses), as it can lead to a certain amount of repetition and a loss of the big picture. Who is going to read literally a million words of 16th century sermons on Job? I don't know, but whoever they are, they will be blessed in abundance and learn a great deal as their hearts are warmed and warned, comforted and corrected. Of course, people won't read this if, like some modern preachers, they talk a great deal about what the Spirit has revealed to them but care so little about what he has said to other people who came before them (on which see Sermon 31 for a great defence of the value of reading history). If you read one sermon a day – what a great devotional discipline and experience! – you get through these sermons in less than six months and will be disappointed by the more sugary diet which passes for daily spiritual reading elsewhere if you then turn to that. Plus; so many quotable quotes (many of them absolutely still true today), and some astounding mic-drop moments against his opponents – my favourite being this: “We have seen some pitiful dumb dumbheads, for although they become doctors in one field or another, they are still so blatantly ignorant that it is a shame, and it is clear stupidity is their companion” (Sermon 47).

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## GOD AND HUMANITY

**Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Humanity: Herman Bavinck and Theological Anthropology*. T&T Clark, 2024, 220pp, £85 h/b (wordery.com)**

Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, of the Reformed Theological Seminary in North America, has dealt with Bavinck's epistemology in his Edinburgh doctoral dissertation.<sup>5</sup> In this volume, he provides an in-depth examination of Bavinck's anthropology. In *God and Humanity*, part of the "T&T Clark Explorations in Reformed Theology" series, he seeks to show that Bavinck's anthropology offers a holistic vision, which transcends the "binaries" of affect/ reason, this-worldly/ other-worldly, body/ soul – Bavinck views the soul to be distinct from the body, but deeply intertwined with it.

This is not merely an exposition of Bavinck's anthropology; it is also an application of his insights to contemporary conversations such as phenomenology, affect theory, and the cognitive science of religion. As Sutanto put it, "this work is the first scholarly monograph on Bavinck's theological anthropology taken as a systematic whole and as applied to contemporary conversations." As such, this is a scholarly work aimed at academics rather than general readers or pastors.

Sutanto presents Bavinck's view of humanity as an organic unity of body, soul, and spirit, and he emphasises the interplay between these components.

He argues that Bavinck's view shows that human beings are intrinsically religious creatures, and as such, responsive to divine revelation in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Surprisingly, the heart receives little attention, especially as Bavinck regarded the heart as the "most hidden essence, the innermost core of the human being".<sup>6</sup> It would be churlish to suggest there are some lacunae in the book; suffice to say there

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5 N. G. Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2020).

6 Herman Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2024).

is nothing on identity and gender, but the important topic of race and racism is well covered in two chapters. Helpful is Sutanto's observation that Bavinck saw that racism emerged from relativism and historicism and from the grounding of morality in humanity and not in God. He argues that Bavinck's view of racism was more developed and consistent than that of Kuyper's.

The final two chapters explore the final consummation of all things and Bavinck's view of the beatific vision. He argues that Bavinck's view leads to a life of worship, faith, hope, and love.

Sutanto states that Bavinck's *Foundations of Psychology* is consistent with his later work, and yet Bavinck suggests otherwise. There is little discussion of Bavinck's later work on psychology, such as the recently translated *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, which some have suggested is less scholastic than Bavinck's previous work.

Nonetheless, Sutanto's work is a worthy contribution to Bavinck studies. He provides an analysis that is both fascinating and thought-provoking. Overall, *God and Humanity* is a valuable resource for those engaged in theological anthropology. It offers original insights and engages with Bavinck's thought in a way that contributes to ongoing theological discussions. It is a demanding read. I hope a more accessible presentation of these important ideas will emerge in the future.

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