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EDITORIAL

THE ROYAL HONOR OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

COMMENTARY

Theological academic research is not merely a school requirement; it is “kingly” glory comparable to divine glory. “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out” (Prov. 25:2, ESV).

Text¹: כבד אלהים הסתר דבר וכבד מלכים חקר דבר
 Transliteration: *kbd 'lhym hstr dbr wkbd mlkym hqr dbr*
 Translation: [it is] the glory of God to hide a matter and the glory of kings [is] to search out a matter.

In this first of a collection of proverbs by the men of Hezekiah, the glory of God is mirrored by the glory of kings in synonymous parallelism. This is seen in the use of identical cola (plural of colon, a structural unit in Hebrew poetry), syntax, word repetition, grammatical form, and the conjunctive waw.

There are two balanced cola as follows.

Colon A: כבד אלהים הסתר דבר
 Transliteration: *kbd 'lhym hstr dbr*
 Colon B: וכבד מלכים חקר דבר
 Transliteration: *wkbd mlkym hqr dbr*

The meaning of the words is antithetical (hiding vs. searching), yet the syntax is identical (same word for word relationship) as shown below:

Colon A: *kbd* [noun] *'lhym* [subject] *hstr* [infinitive] *dbr* [object]
 Colon B: *wkbd* [noun] *mlkym* [subject] *hqr* [infinitive] *dbr* [object]

There is also lexical repetition with the use of the same first and last words in cola A and B—*kbd* (glory, honor, reputation, BDB) and *dbr* (matter, the thing about which one speaks, BDB). It makes the reader see that the two lines have equivalent weight. Hence, the synonymity is not in the acts (hiding vs. searching) but in the equal significance of the glory of kings to the glory of God.

Moreover, there is the use of matching grammatical forms (infinitive constructs) in both cola: *hstr* (to hide) and *hqr* (to search for). The infinitive absolute (to hide, to search

¹ The Hebrew text is taken from “Unicode/XML Leningrad Codex Version UXLC 2.5,” accessed July 4, 2026, <https://tanach.us/>.

for) functions as a predicate nominative that describes the subject (the glory of God; the glory of kings). The glory of God is described by the act of hiding the matter; and the glory of kings, as the act of searching out the matter.

Finally, there is the use of the conjunctive waw ׀ (w) in colon B, which is better translated as “and” (synonymous) rather than “but” (antithetical). Given the balanced cola, identical syntax, lexical repetition giving both cola equal weight, matching infinitive constructs, and in the absence of any negative markers (no, not), the structure suggests a “this *and* that” synonymous parallelism rather than a “this vs. that” antithetical parallelism. Thus, the preferred translation is: “The glory of God is to conceal a matter, *and* the glory of kings is to search out a matter” (BLB, emphasis added); “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter *and* the glory of kings to investigate a matter” (HCSB, emphasis added); or “The honour of God is to hide a thing, *And* the honour of kings to search out a matter” (YLT, emphasis added). The writer intends to show that the king’s work is just as glorious and honorable as God’s work.

The glory of God is his infinite wisdom which is vastly hidden (unfathomable) by finite mortals (Rom. 11:33). Yet God invites investigation. The glory of kings is in honoring God by searching for his wisdom in righteous governance (Prov. 25:5; 1 Ki. 3:9). The men of Hezekiah who wrote this proverb were transcribers of the wisdom of Solomon (Prov. 25-29). The kings’ glory and honor then are defined by their diligence in searching for God’s wisdom given to Solomon to rightly rule his people.

The implication is tremendous. The glory of scholars is akin to the glory of kings. When scholars decode divine wisdom, they are participating in the exact same honor that Prov. 25:2 gives to kings. Just as God’s glory and honor are seen in the unfathomable depths of his wisdom, the scholar’s glory is in the diligent search of those depths. Beyond the weariness of the flesh in much study (Eccl. 12:12) is the kingly honor of mining the wisdom of God.

CURRENTS

The royal honor of research is evident in this journal issue once again. Going against traditional English translations, Iver Larsen contends that the phrase “this generation” (τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην, *tēn genean tautēn*) is better translated “this kind of people” rather than “this generation” or “the people of his day,” since in most contexts, the demonstrative οὗτος (*houtos*) is usually anaphoric and γενεὰ (*genea*) refers to people sharing a common trait. Bin Kang explains the critical motif of shame and honor in the selection or rejection of kings in Samuel as seen in the Eli/Samuel and Saul/David leadership models. In light of the attempt of many evangelicals to marry faith with works in justification, which Paul has long divorced in Romans and Galatians, Fred Chay separates works from faith by removing all critical and theological assumptions about John 5:24-29 and exegeting the text in context. Analyzing the narrative structure of Gen. 22, Tsuneki Toyoda demonstrates how the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (the Akedah) is

designed to show a model of covenant faithfulness to Yahweh using narrative criticism. Finally, I argue that the preterist reading of Matt. 24:34—which identifies “this generation” as Jesus’ first-century contemporaries who witnessed Jerusalem’s fall in 70 CE—lacks warrant from the grammar, discourse structure, and contextual meaning of *genea*.

Book reviews are equally a kingly honor. If *Reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture* by Mark S. Gignilliat and Heath A. Thomas is a must-read, then Spencer Robinson’s insightful review of it here is likewise essential reading. I offer a retrospective critique of *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays.

Serving in the Editorial Board of *Word Biblical Journal* is also a regal honor no less. We invite applications for three vacancies on our Editorial Board: an OT specialist, an NT specialist, and a Theology scholar. If the Lord is leading you to work with us *pro bono* for a term of three years, you may contact the Editor at wordbiblical@gmail.com. I’d like to express my heartfelt gratitude to MBLY for serving as Guest Editor and facilitating the double-blind review of the article, “‘This Generation’ in Matthew 24:34: A Syntactic-Discursive-Contextual Problem of Preterism.”

Finally, if you’d like your seminary, faculty, and students to subscribe to *Word Biblical Journal*, you may click the “Subscribe” link in wordbiblical.com, fill up the boxes there, and then click “Send.”

CALL FOR PAPERS

Word Biblical Journal is seeking essay submissions for its December 2026 issue. We invite essays exploring the theme, “The Harlot and the City: Determining the Nature of the Fall of Babylon in Revelation 17-18.” Other biblical studies topics are also welcome. Additionally, we are accepting book reviews on any scholarly theological work.

Contributors should hold or be pursuing a master’s degree in biblical studies, theology, or divinity. Submissions are subject to peer review and may be accepted, rejected, or slated for future publication. For Submission Guidelines, click “Submission” in wordbiblical.com.

Address all submissions to the Editor at wordbiblical@gmail.com.

The deadline for submission is 10/30/2026.

HENRY TROCINO, JR.

GENERATION IS A WRONG TRANSLATION CHOICE FOR GREEK GENE*

IVER A. LARSEN**

Abstract: *This article argues against the traditional translation of genea (γενεὰ) as “generation,” suggesting it does not simply mean “generation” or “people of this day” in biblical contexts. Instead, the more accurate meaning of genea is “this kind of people” or “this type of people” since it refers to a certain class of people cited in the linguistic context. The analysis is explained in two parts—the meaning of the demonstrative adjective or determiner “this” (οὗτος, houtos) and the meaning of genea, “type of people.”*

Keywords: *genea, houtos, generation, kind of people, class, type, such people*

INTRODUCTION

Many modern English translations of the Bible are using expressions like “people of this day” for the Greek phrase *tēn genean tautēn* (τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην). In the following, I shall explain why I think such a translation is not correct. The meaning is rather “this kind of people,” and it refers back to the people mentioned in the previous context. Since the phrase has two constituents, I shall divide the discussion into two sections. The first deals with the meaning of the referential word *houtos* (οὗτος, traditionally called “demonstrative”). The second deals with the meaning of *genea*, which in most English translations is usually rendered “generation.”

1. THE MEANING OF *HOUTOS*

This word has no exact equivalent in English. The nearest equivalent is the word “this,” but there are several differences in meaning between *houtos* and “this.” One difference is that “this” in English is often cataphoric, referring to something coming later

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in the context, while *houtos* is normally anaphoric, referring to something mentioned in the preceding context. To illustrate, it is easy to cite examples of the word “this” in GNB (Good News Bible) which does not translate any Greek word, and in particular not the word *houtos* (for example, Matt. 1:1, Mark 1:1). Another difference is that *houtos* might as well be translated “that” in most contexts, simply because the use of demonstratives as reference pointers vary [sic] from one language to another.

As I was studying the usages of *houtos* in the NT, I found it convenient to separate them into three categories with the following labels: anaphoric, deictic, and contrastive. In addition, there are a few instances of cataphoric references, but these are specially marked cases.

1.1 Anaphoric Reference

This kind of reference is the most common usage of *houtos*. The English word “this” can be used in the same sense.

The pronoun may occur on its own, but it is not common; for example, Matthew 3:3: “This is he who was spoken of” (*houtos gar estin*). Here *houtos* refers back to John the Baptist from v. 1.

More often, *houtos* occurs with a noun in Greek. In most cases, the phrase refers back to something mentioned in the context immediately preceding, for example:

John 11:4: “This sickness will not end in death” (*hautē hē astheneia*). “This sickness” refers back to the cognate verb “be sick” in verses 1, 2, and 3.

Matthew 5:19: “one of these commandments” (*mian tōn entolōn toutōn*). “These commandments” refer back to “the Law” in verses 17 and 18.

Notice that in John 11:4 quoted above, the referential word precedes the noun, while in Matthew 5:19 it follows. The difference is a difference in focus (see Word order and relative prominence in New Testament Greek).¹ The normal, unmarked order is for the demonstrative to follow the noun. If it precedes the noun, then there is focus on that part of the total meaning which is carried by *houtos*. This particular sickness will not end in death. I shall show whether the noun or pronoun is in focus by highlighting it in the English gloss in the following examples.

In some cases of anaphoric reference, the reference may go further back than the immediately preceding context; for example, 2 Corinthians 4:1: “having this *ministry*” (*tēn diakonian tautēn*) refers back to chapter 3:7-11, where the ministry under the old covenant is compared to the new ministry under the Spirit. In this case, the word “ministry” helps us to make the right connection back several verses.

In some cases, there is no noun which is repeated, and one has to guess from context what is referred to, for example:

¹ Iver Larsen, “Word Order and Relative Prominence in Greek,” *Notes on Translation* 15, no. 2 (April 2001): 18.

2 Corinthians 12:13: “Forgive me this *wrong*” (*tēn adikian tautēn*) refers back to the fact that “Paul was not a burden to them” (irony).

Ephesians 5:32: “This *mystery* is great” (*to mustērion touto*) refers back to the previous vv. 21-30, but the exact reference is not specified.

Matthew 17:20: “you can say to this *mountain*” (*tō orei toutō*). There is no mountain being talked about, and the word is used as an idiom referring to something very hard to tackle. It refers to the failure of the disciples to drive out an evil spirit.

1 Timothy 1:18: “I give you *this* instruction” (*tautēn tēn parangelian*) refers all the way back to vv. 3-5. This particular instruction is to command certain men not to teach false doctrines.

1.2 Deictic Reference

This usage is much less common, although it is the “basic” demonstrative sense of the word. A deictic reference means that the pronoun points out from the linguistic context to the physical context. It points to a person or an object present in that particular situation. This sense is only found in quotes. When the pronoun occurs alone, a noun is often supplied in English, for example:

Matthew 3:17: “This/that is my son” (*houtos estin ho huios mou*), *Houtos* here means “that person standing there.”

Matthew 9:3: “That (fellow) is blaspheming” (*houtos blasphēmei*). The scribes “point” to Jesus by using this demonstrative pronoun.

Luke 2:34: “This (child). . .” (*houtos*). Simeon stood with Jesus in his arms, saying, “This one.”

As before, the pronoun may also occur with a noun, in which case it functions more as an adjective:

Acts 1:11: “*this* (same) Jesus” (*houtos ho Iēsous*). *Houtos* is pointing to that particular person who, until just a moment ago was still standing in the midst of the disciples. Here the demonstrative comes before the noun to indicate that it is this same Jesus who will come back, not another Jesus. The fronting of *houtos* is correctly rendered by “same” in KJV, JB, and NIV (“very” in Phillips) to show the emphasis.

Acts 19:26: “that (fellow) Paul” (*ho Paulos houtos*). When Demetrius was talking to his colleagues about Paul, they probably could not see Paul at that particular moment. But they had recently seen him, and he was the topic of discussion. This is a slightly extended usage of the deictic reference as a middle position between deixis proper and anaphoric reference. Here, the demonstrative comes after the noun, putting the emphasis on Paul. It is not a contrast between this Paul and another Paul, but it is this fellow Paul and what he stands for.

1.3 Contrastive Reference

It is difficult to find clear examples of *houtos* on its own under this heading. A possible example is: Acts 4:10 “in the name of Jesus Christ...in this (name) this (man) stands healed before you. This (Jesus) is the stone . . .” (*en tō onomati Iēsou Christou . . . en toutō houtos parestēken . . . Houtos . . .*). The first instance of the demonstrative (*en toutō*) refers back to “in the name of Jesus” and, therefore, is anaphoric. However, because of the repetition, it does seem quite emphatic and contrastive: only this name of Jesus has the power to heal.

There are more examples of a contrastive *houtos* in combination with a noun:

Matthew 12:32: “in *this* age or in the coming age” (*en toutō tō aiōni*). Here, the word “this” does not refer back to something mentioned previously or to something in the extralinguistic context (one cannot point to an age). However, there is a clear contrast between “this one present” and “that one coming.” The word *aiōn* commonly refers to one of two periods. “This age” is the period before the coming of the Messiah (for the Jews) and before the second coming of Jesus (for the Christians). “The coming age” is after Jesus’ second coming.

1 Corinthians 1:20: “the philosopher of this *age*” (*tou aiōnos toutou*). While the previous example with “age” had the demonstrative coming first, this example has the noun first. The emphasis is on age rather than this. A better English translation than the one quoted here from NIV would be “this world,” as for instance GNB and others have. The contrast is between the human way of thinking without revelation from God and the Christian thinking inspired by God. A similar example is 1 Corinthians 2:6: “not the wisdom of this age.”

1.4 Cataphoric References

These are very few and in restricted contexts. They seem to occur in a situation where the content of a kind of performative act is given, and the word *houtos* can then refer to this content. The following are examples of this.

1 John 1:5: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light...” (*estin hautē hē angelia . . . hoti . . .*)

John 15:12: “This is my commandment: Love each other . . .” (*hautē estin hē entolē . . . hina . . .*).

2 Timothy 2:19: “God’s firm foundation stands having this *seal*: The Lord knows those who are his” (*echōn tēn sphragida tautēn*).

Mark 12:31: “The second command is this: Love your neighbour as yourself” (*deutera hautē*).

Matthew 10:2: “The names of the twelve apostles are these . . .” (*to onomata estin tauta . . .*)

2. THE MEANING OF GENEĀ

As I shall discuss the meaning of *genea* in the following, I am well aware that I go against a tradition, which is especially strong in the English-speaking world.

Who is this generation? Briefly stated, the tradition more or less equates the word *genea* with the English “generation.” This may work in a few places, especially when the word occurs in the plural form, but in the phrase “this *genea*,” it is misleading to use “generation.” It does not seem to agree with the meaning of the Greek phrase or the Hebrew behind it, and it does not make good sense in most places where the word occurs in the New Testament. Rather, *genea* means “*a class of people bound together through a common origin or with a common bond.*” In certain contexts, *genea* does have the very restricted sense of the English “generation,” but in most contexts it does not have this narrow sense. The English word “generation” has undergone a semantic shift so that the meaning today is very much narrowed down as compared to the Greek *genea*, the Latin *generatio*, and “generation” in the English language as spoken when the King James translation was first made.

Even the Vulgate translation used four different Latin words to translate *genea*, one of which is *generatio*. But the word *generatio* is used to translate other Greek words as well; for example, Matthew 1:1 *genesis* (GNB: family record) and Luke 22:18 *genēma* (fruit). In Danish, we have the word “generation” as a modern adopted word. It has the same area of meaning as the corresponding English word, but it is never used to translate *genea* in the New Testament. In English, there is evidence that the area of meaning of “generation” has narrowed down considerably since the time of the KJV translation. The evidence is that the word *gennēma*, “brood” in Matthew 3:7 is translated by “generation” in KJV, as well as the word *genos* “race, people” in 1 Peter 2:9. The Oxford Universal Dictionary gives the following, now obsolete (latest attested use 1727) sense of “generation”: “class, kind or set of persons.”²

The purpose of the above remarks was to show that the meaning of the Greek word *genea* is not at all equivalent to the modern English word “generation.” We shall now proceed to discuss what *genea* actually means.

2.1 The primary sense is “descendants, family, clan, that is, a group of people with a common ancestor” (see, for instance, New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 2.35).³

This primary sense occurs rarely in the New Testament. With the word in the singular, it occurs in Acts 8:33: “Who can describe his *genea*? For his life is taken up from the earth.” Both GNB, JB (Jerusalem Bible), and NIV translate *genea* here by “descendants.” The word occurs in plural in Matthew 1:17 with a closely related sense of

² William Little et al., eds., *The Oxford Universal Dictionary Illustrated* (London, UK: Caxton, 1964), 1:450.

³ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 2:35.

“succeeding sets of descendants, stages in a genealogy” and is probably best translated “generations”: Matthew 1:17, “So all the *geneai* from Abraham to David were fourteen *geneai*.”

2.2 The secondary sense is a natural extension of the first sense and can be stated thus: “a group of people with a common bond or characteristic; a certain class or type of people.” This sense is common in the New Testament. The GNB often translates it simply as “people.” The characteristic feature of the people referred to is, in all cases, drawn out from the context. I shall go through all New Testament occurrences of *genea* below (references in parentheses are to parallel passages).

Luke 16:8: “The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own *genea* than the sons of light.” The important contextual clue to the characteristic of the group of people referred to is the word “own” which qualifies *genea*. Therefore, NIV, NEB (New English Bible), and JB have translated it as “dealing with [people of] their own kind.” The sense is “people like themselves in their worldliness” and not, as J. B. Phillips puts it: “contemporaries.”

Acts 2:40: “For he [Peter] testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked *genea*.” Here the contextual clue is “crooked.” GNB translates it reasonably well as “save yourselves from this wicked people.” The demonstrative “this” is anaphoric, referring back to the preceding context about the people who rejected the Messiah and nailed him to the cross (v. 36). A more meaning-based (idiomatic) translation of this verse might be: “Disassociate yourselves from those wicked people” or “Turn away from that kind of people, and be saved.”

Philippians 2:15: “that you may be...without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse *genea*.” The contextual clue to the characteristic feature of the group of people referred to is “crooked and perverse.” GNB translates: “in a world of corrupt and sinful people.” NLT (New Living Translation) has “a dark world full of crooked and perverse people.”

Matthew 17:17: (Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41) “O, faithless and perverse *genea* how long shall I stay with you?” Again, the characteristic feature of the people referred to is shown by the qualifiers: faithless and perverse. Many commentators claim that the word *genea* has a pejorative character. This is reading the meaning of the context into the meaning of the word. This is what James Barr called “illegitimate totality transfer” (1961:218).⁴ Rather, the word *genea* in itself is neutral. The pejorative part of the overall meaning is supplied solely by the connotations of the context.

GNB translates this verse as “How unbelieving and wrong you people are.” J. B. Phillips has: “You really are an unbelieving and difficult people.” NLT has “You stubborn, faithless people!” The actual reference is mainly to the disciples.

⁴ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218.

Matthew 12:39: (Mark 8:12; Matt 16:4; Luke 11:29) “Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them [scribes and Pharisees], ‘An evil and adulterous *genea* seeks for a sign . . .’” As usual, the characteristics of the people referred to are shown by the qualifiers: “evil and (spiritually) adulterous.” The actual reference is to those scribes and Pharisees who demanded signs but did not want to accept Jesus.

In translating this passage, the GNB deviates from the pattern set by the examples quoted above. It says: “How evil and godless are the people of this day.” Nothing in the Greek text can justify the addition of the words “of this day.” Maybe the GNB translators had not realised at this point that *genea* is not the same as “generation”? Or maybe they were influenced by Matt. 23:36 discussed below? CEV (Contemporary English Version) is better: “You want a sign because you are evil and won’t believe!”

Matthew 23:36 (Luke 11:50): “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! (See vv. 23, 25, 27, 29) Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this *genea*.” Having seen the pattern from the examples above, where *genea* in itself refers to a class or type of people and the qualifying word(s) and the context describe the characteristic feature of the people, it is natural to expect the qualifying word “this” to point to the characteristics of the group of people referred to. The first instance of “this” refers back to the punishment mentioned in verses 33 and 35 (judgment of hell and the blood of all the righteous). It seems most likely that the phrase “this *genea*” refers back to the group of people he has just been speaking about. Since this is probably a new thought to many people, I shall spell out some of the arguments in more detail.

There are basically two possible interpretations of the meaning of the demonstrative in the phrase “this *genea*.” (1) Either it refers to the “people living now” in contrast to people living at another time in history, or (2) it refers to something mentioned in the preceding linguistic context. Interpretation (1) is very difficult to reconcile with the basic meaning of the phrase *tēn genean tautēn*, and it also does not fit well with the context. First, there is nothing in the context that supports an idea of temporal contrast. Second, nowhere else can the word “this” possibly be understood as meaning “living now.” Third, and most important, in *all* instances of the phrase “this *genea*,” the demonstrative follows the noun. As mentioned in section 1 above, this means that the focus is on *genea*, not on “this.” If the expression had included a contrast between the generation of that time and any other generation, the word *houtos* should have preceded *genea* instead of following it. The second interpretation makes much better sense and is in accordance with the meaning attested to the words “this” and *genea* elsewhere, that is, “this” is a reference to something in the preceding linguistic context, and *genea* is a certain type of people.

Now, let us look at the context of Matthew 23:36. The relevant context is 23:1-39. The whole chapter is one long description and denunciation of the practices of certain hypocritical “scribes and Pharisees” and their like. In v. 35, the reference is broadened to similar people in the past who killed the righteous people (with an obvious sting to the self-

righteous Pharisees who would soon kill the righteous Jesus). In v. 37, it is broadened to the people of Jerusalem as representing those people who kill the prophets. Upon *such people* (“this *genea*”) will come a great punishment (“all these things”). A possible, more faithful translation of *tēn genean tautēn* in v. 36 might be, “you and people like you.”

Luke 17:25: “But first he [Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by this *genea*.” Again, “this *genea*” refers to the kind of people that are being talked about in the context of this verse. The relevant context starts at v. 20, talking about the Pharisees as rejecting that the Kingdom of God had indeed come with Jesus. The reference for “this *genea*” in the immediate context is “those Pharisees who rejected Jesus as Messiah,” and in a broader context all the Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew 11:16: (Luke 7:31) “But to what shall I compare this *genea*?” The most relevant context is 11:2-30. First, John the Baptist had doubts about whether Jesus really was the Messiah (2-6). Second, both John and Jesus had a message to the people, but many rejected it. Jesus often used the phrase “this *genea*” to refer to that group of people who rejected him as Messiah. The best translation is probably “such people” or “that kind of people,” leaving the rest to the context.

Hebrews 3:8-10: “On the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test. . . Therefore I was provoked with this *genea*.” The exact same Greek phrase is rendered as “this generation” by only one English translation that I know of, that is, J. B. Phillips’ translation. Several follow the KJV in saying “that generation” (RSV, NEB, JB, NIV). In this verse, GNB felt free to simply say “those people,” and NLT has “them.” It is a simple anaphoric reference to the people mentioned in the previous verse. No time element is present in the phrase itself, but, of course, it is present in the broader context. It would be tempting - and definitely more correct - to translate *all* instances of “this *genea*” in the New Testament by “those people” or “such people.”

Matthew 24:34: (Mark 13:30, Luke 21:32) “Truly, I say to you [disciples], this *genea* will not pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” This is one of the most difficult verses to interpret. Some have argued that the phrase “passing away” suggests that a temporal element is present in the sense of *genea* here. This does not sound convincing. The next verse says that “heaven and earth” will pass away, while “my words” will not pass away, but no one would suggest that “heaven,” “earth,” and “my words” thereby acquire a temporal sense. The word “pass away” does not mean “to die” as GNB suggests. The meaning is much broader, and there is no restriction that the subject must be animate, as there is in the word “to die.” It simply means “come to an end, cease to exist.” The most obvious meaning of the verse is that certain “things” will continue to exist, while other “things” will cease to exist. Heaven and earth will cease to exist (at least in the present form), but both “my words” and “this class of people” will continue to exist in spite of opposition and tribulation.

It has been suggested that the phrase might refer to the Jewish people as a whole. This, too, I find rather unconvincing. Although the other instances of “this *genea*” do seem

to refer to a group of the Jews, namely those who rejected Jesus as Messiah, this does not necessarily mean that “this *genea*” always has to refer to Jews. One important difference is that where it refers to the Jews who rejected Jesus, the context has very negative and judgmental connotations. But in this context, the connotations are positive. Whatever the reference is, that class of people will endure through tribulations. By parallelism, the phrase is closely connected to “my words,” which is also positive and has endurance. Who would ensure that the words of Jesus were kept in existence through difficult times? It seems to me that “this *genea*” in this verse most naturally refers to the class of Christians keeping the word of God throughout the ages until the end of heaven and earth. This ties in well with the whole discourse of Matt. 24 being directed to the disciples in private (v. 3) and the frequent use of the word “elect” to signify an important thematic participant in the discourse (vv. 22, 24, 31).

My point is not to be dogmatic on any particular interpretation of this prophecy. Rather, I am objecting to the use of the English word “generation” and, in particular, to the GNB rendering “before all the people now living have all died.” Such a translation chooses one interpretation (and in all likelihood the wrong one) to the exclusion of others. I believe it means “people like you,” but if this is felt to favour too explicitly another interpretation, then a translation like “those people” is neutral and accurate. The readers will then have to find their own reference points for who those people are. This works as long as the word used for “those” has the sense of anaphoric reference as the Greek word *houtos* has.

Hebrew background: The phrase “this *genea*” is not common in the Greek language and is, as far as I know, not found outside the Greek NT and the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX). The background is Hebrew and the OT, so it is worthwhile to see how and where it occurs in the LXX. There are three cases:

Genesis 7:1 – “I have found you righteous in this generation” (NIV).

“I have found that you are the only one in all the world who does what is right” (GNB).

The point here is not so much a time reference, but a comparison between the kind of person Noah was (righteous) and the kind of people everybody else was (evil).

Psalms 12:8 (LXX 11:8) – “You, O LORD, will keep them; You will preserve him from this generation forever” (NASB).

“Keep us always safe, O LORD, and preserve us from such people” (GNB).

“You will continually shelter each one from these evil people” (NET).

The kind of people referred to here is clear from the context of the whole psalm. Let me here only quote the first two verses: “Help, LORD, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men. Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception” (NIV).

This was a famous psalm, and we can assume that the Jewish audience (especially Pharisees and teachers of the law) were familiar with this psalm and the expression *haddor*

zu in Hebrew and *tēs geneas tautēs* in Greek. It is from this psalm that “this *genea*” gets a negative connotation in a negative context.

Psalms 24:6 – “Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob” (NIV).

“Such are the people who come to God, who come into the presence of the God of Jacob” (GNB).

This psalm would also be very well-known by Jesus’ audience, but here the context is very positive as seen again from the whole psalm, and especially vv. 3-4: “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart . . .”

This psalm is the positive background for “this *genea*” in Matthew 24:34, where Jesus is telling his disciples about future hardships that believers will have to endure before the Son of Man finally comes in his glory as king. They were also sitting opposite the Temple (God’s holy place) on the hill of the Lord.

2.3 The third sense of *genea* is closely related to “generation.” It occurs in contexts that supply a time aspect to the basic meaning of *genea*. I shall divide this sense into two, where, although time and people are included in both, the first has the time reference in focus, and the second has the people reference in focus.

2.3.1 “An age, a generation” - time in focus

Luke 1:5: “those who fear him *eis geneas kai geneas*.” The plural form and the double use of *geneas* supply the time aspect of the word: those people in succeeding generations.

Acts 14:1: “He who in the past *geneais* allowed.” Again, the plural form and the qualifier “past” supply the time aspect. The time is so much in focus here that even the KJV translated *geneais* as “times.” NEB has “ages” while JB, GNB, and NIV omit the word altogether, simply saying “in the past.”

Acts 15:21 “For Moses has from ancient *geneōn*.” Again, the plural form and the words “from” and “ancient” supply the temporal aspect of the word. KJV translates “of old time;” NEB uses “never lacked;” JB has “always;” NIV has “from the earliest times;” and GNB has “a very long time.” Other translations use “generations.”

Ephesians 3:5: “which was not made known to men in *other geneais*” (*heterais geneais*).

Again, the plural form and the dative case (translated “in”) supply the time aspect. Here KJV has “other ages;” GNB has “past times;” while most other translations keep the word “generations.” Note that *heterais* comes before *geneais* to show the contrast to prophets and apostles living “now.”

Ephesians 3:21: “throughout all the *geneas* of the age of the ages.” As before, the plural form and the context supply the time aspect. KJV has “all ages;” GNB has “all time;” while most others have “generations.”

Colossians 1:26: “which has been hidden from the ages and from the *geneōn*.”

Again, the plural form and context supply the time aspect.

Acts 13:36: “after having served God’s purpose in his own *genea*.” Here, of course, the plural is inappropriate, but the context is sufficient to supply the temporal aspect. It might also have an aspect of “contemporaries” (among his own generation). GNB has “in his own time,” while others have “generation.”

2.3.2 “A generation of people living at a certain time” - people in focus

Luke 1:48 “From now all the *geneai* will count me blessed.” This instance has both a time and a people reference in it. “From now” and the plural form indicate a temporal aspect, but since the word is subject to a verb which requires a human agent, the aspect of people reference takes priority over the time aspect. The word “generation” is then a convenient translation since it, too, contains both aspects of time and people. However, it is also possible to use “all people” as GNB has done, since the people aspect is in focus, and the time aspect may be inferred from the words “from now on.” All other translations use “generations.”

This concludes all usages of the word *genea* in the New Testament. I started this study because I felt that the traditional understanding of *genea* does not make sense in many contexts. In addition, I come from a tradition which does not equate *genea* with “generation.” It seems to me that both linguistic and contextual considerations call for a reappraisal of the very common notion that “this generation” refers to the contemporaries of Jesus.

A COMPARISON OF SELF-HONORING AND GOD-HONORING KINGS IN THE BOOK OF SAMUEL

BIN KANG*

Abstract: *The paper posits that the ideological concept of honor and shame has an important role to play in understanding the election and rejection of kingship in the book of Samuel. The Eli/Samuel leadership contrast can be seen as a model to forecast the later Saul/David episodes, where the one who shames the Lord is judged with humiliation and torn away from leadership, while the one who honors the Lord is set up as the succeeding leader. Thus, Saul is rejected by the Lord for promoting his self-honor, but David is established as the new king for honoring God's name.*

Keywords: *honor, shame, kings, leadership, Samuel*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the important themes of the book of Samuel is kingship,¹ or, more precisely, the election and rejection of kingship.² But on what ground does God choose David and reject Saul? A number of scholars have expressed their sympathy for Saul, charging that God was too harsh on him and too favorable to David.³ The following comment by Walter

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¹ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 163; David M. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1993), 158–65; Bill T. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 35–37; David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 43–45.

² Walter Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century B.C.E.*, trans. Joachim Vette (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007), 326; J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament: From Its Origins to the Closing of the Alexandrian Canon*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 219. Both consider one of the fundamental theological problems in the book of Samuel to be that of the election and the rejection of leaders.

³ David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, JSOTSup 14 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1980); J. Cheryl. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000); Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Cephas T. A. Tushima, *The Fate of Saul's Progeny in*

Dietrich is a typical example of such views:

This sharp contrast between election and rejection that determines the commonly held evaluation of David and Saul does not match the texts of the first book of Samuel... The one is covered in good fortune, whereas the other is burdened with misfortune. The rise of the one seems as unstoppable as the fall of the other. Why does David exude such assurance and Saul such resignation? Is Saul truly so much worse than David? Why does God discriminate against Saul and favor David? Does he reject without reason; is he arbitrary, even cynical?⁴

Though not agreeing with Dietrich's statements, one can still affirm that he indeed asks a relevant question: What is the basis for God's election and rejection? This is not an easy question to answer. However, in my opinion, one valid criterion is whether or not the kings honor YHWH. This criterion provides an ideological point of view that can be employed by the narrator to serve as a standard of judgment and a basis for the divine election of kingship in the Saul/David episodes.

Before the establishment of kingship among the Israelites, the rise and abolition of leaders already took place in 1 Sam. 1–7. From an honor/shame perspective, I suggest that what happens to the Eli/Samuel leadership can be seen as a precursor to forecasting the later Saul/David episodes.⁵ In both places, there are two leaders, one humiliates the Lord and the other honors the Lord. The one who shames the Lord is judged with humiliation and is torn away from the leadership position, while the one who honors the Lord is set up as leader. The one who dishonors the Lord is replaced by the one who honors the Lord (see the chart below). The paradigm established by the Eli/Samuel narrative is indicative of the later Saul/David narrative. For this reason, it may be necessary to take some time to look at the Eli/Samuel paradigm before further exploring the Saul/David narrative.

	Priests (1 Sam. 1–7)	Kings (1 Sam. 9–2 Sam 7)
Leaders who shame YHWH	Eli	Saul
Leaders who honor YHWH	Samuel	David
Reversal of the situation	Eli was replaced by Samuel	Saul was replaced by David

2. THE HOUSE OF ELI AND SAMUEL: LEADERS HONORING THEMSELVES VS. HONORING YHWH

The house of Eli and Samuel represent completely different patterns of spiritual character: leaders honoring themselves versus those honoring YHWH. Their contrasting

the Reign of David (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2012); Rachele Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2011), 110.

⁴ Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel*, 328–29.

⁵ For a detailed comparison between the house of Eli and Samuel, see Bin Kang, *Honor and Shame in 1 Samuel 1–7* (Cumbria, UK: Langham Publishing, 2022), 135–76.

attitudes also resulted in completely different consequences for their lives, for good or bad.

2.1. Eli: A Leader Honoring Himself

The narrator's portrayal of Eli in the book of Samuel seems to be negative from the outset; he simply sits in his seat (1:9; 4:13). As a priest, he even misjudges Hannah who comes to the sanctuary to pour out her heart in prayer as a drunken and immodest (בליעל) woman (1:12–18). Eli's more serious problem was that he tolerated the sin of his sons, desecrating God's honor. He respected his sons more than he respected the Lord (2:29).

2.1.1 Eli honored his sons above the Lord. Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord (1:3), though it is shocking that the narrator calls them “wicked” (בליעל, 2:12) men, which is how Eli had previously addressed Hannah (1:16). It is a great irony that Eli's humiliation of others ultimately falls on his own family.

The first accusation against the house of Eli was that his two sons robbed worshippers' sacrificial meat (2:12–17). As priests, it is another great irony that they did not know the Lord (2:12). When the Israelites came to Shiloh to offer sacrifices, the servants of the priests would come over and use a three-pronged fork to snatch the sacrificial meat that the offerers had brought. They claimed that the priests did not want the meat boiled, but roasted. Even when the worshipper pleaded to offer the fat to the Lord first (cf. Lev. 1:9), they turned away their request. What they insisted on was a clear “now and here” gratification. In fact, the law of Moses had already decreed a good portion of sacrificial meat for the priests (Lev. 7:28–36; Deut. 18:3) for their enjoyment, but here the priests seemed to be madly snatching at the sacrifice as if they were starving. Sacrifice in their eyes was but a means of meeting their ends, and they had no regard for the offerer or the Lord.⁶ They even threatened to take it by force if the offerer did not agree. Instead of bringing the people closer to God, the sons of Eli became a hindrance to their coming to God.

What is most horrifying is that such wickedness was actually the “custom” (משפט) in their treatment of the sacrificers. Such an atrocity was a blasphemy against the Lord. This was not an accidental event, but an evil that continued to occur over and over again. This view is supported by the description in 2:14, “And this is what they often did (יעשו) to all Israelites who went up to Shiloh.” The imperfect tense verb here clearly expresses a habitual action, and a similar imperfect tense verb occurs again later in 2:22: “Eli heard his two sons often did this (יעשו) to all Israel.” The sacrificers had to endure the atrocities of Eli's two sons day in and day out, and so the narrator says that their sin was extremely serious in the sight of the Lord. The root of the problem was their contempt (נאץ, 2:17) of the Lord's offerings, which reflected their slighting attitude toward the Lord. Eli's two sons dishonored YHWH, but Eli did nothing to discipline them. Although Eli's two sons seem

⁶ Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12*, BLS 10 (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1985), 118.

to have reached adulthood, the narrator still refers to them as “young men” (נער, 2:17), which seems to hint at Eli’s failure in his responsibility to discipline his sons. Of course, the text also serves to highlight the fact that Samuel was a child (נער, 2:12, 18, 26; 3:1) of completely different qualities.

The second offense of which Eli’s two sons were accused was their adulterous activity (2:22–25); such wickedness brought shame on the name of the Lord once again. Eli heard that his sons had slept with the women who served at the door of the tabernacle (ישכבון), and this imperfect tense reminds the reader once again that this was not an accidental fall, but that they were repeat offenders. These were probably some of the women involved in the service of the tabernacle, and it is highly likely that Eli’s sons violated them by abusing the power in their hands. The tabernacle was a sanctuary where God and his people met, but it became an opportunity for Eli’s sons to satisfy their lust, a blatant blasphemy against the Lord. The irony is that Eli, as a father, had to hear about the news from the mouths of others. Eli’s response also seems extremely weak; his seemingly lengthy words in 2:23–25 can be condensed to, “Why have you done such a thing? O my sons, do not do this!” What is surprising is Eli’s negligence, giving others the impression that the consequences of such a great sin could be easily set aside. Eli does not even directly rebuke his sons but merely raises questions and expresses his disappointment.⁷ The fact that Eli does not seem to have the will to discipline his sons immediately also shows his failure in supervision. Eli is at least partially responsible for the depravity of his children, and his indulgence of them led to a loss of control over their actions. Eventually, their wickedness would bring about their downfall.

So how did the Lord view the sin of the house of Eli? The answer can be seen in God’s judgment against the house of Eli through a man of God, and Samuel. The first time God sent a man of God to rebuke Eli, “Why do you covet (גבט) the sacrifices and offerings that I commanded to be offered in my dwelling place? Why do you honor (ותכבד) your sons more than me, and take all the good offerings of my people Israel to fatten yourselves?” (2:29) From an ideological standpoint, God is judging the sins of Eli’s house on the scale of honor and shame. Eli honored his children more than God. The appearance of the word “honor” (כבד), which has an otherwise positive meaning, is here given a negative connotation, and v. 30, which immediately follows, states outright that Eli’s family is of the type that defies (בזה) the Lord. The wickedness of the house of Eli is a disgrace against God’s honor and led to their judgment.

The second time God sent a message through Samuel, and Eli’s biggest problem was that he knew his sons were sinning and blaspheming (מקללים, 3:13) the Lord,⁸ but did not forbid them. This is another indication that the Elides’ coveting of God’s offerings and

⁷ Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 69.

⁸ The translation “brought a curse on themselves” (NASB) may not be proper, for there is a high probability of “emendations of the scribes” in order to avoid dishonoring the name of God, i.e., a modification from מקללים אלהים to מקללים להם. See, for example, Samuel R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1913), 44.

their immorality were seen as a disgrace to God, and the presence of קלל in the *Piel* participial form also reveals their extreme contempt for the Lord, even to the point of blasphemy. The Lord's judgment on the house of Eli is based by their contempt of God's name.

2.1.2 The Elides are judged in humiliation. Because of the Elides' slighting of God's name, God will also judge them by the same standard and put them to shame. 1 Sam. 2:30 points to this ideological standard through the lens of honor and shame: "For he who honors (כבד) Me, I will honor (כבד) him; and he who despises Me, he will become contemptible (קלל)." The house of Eli certainly falls into the latter category, and thus, they will become trivial in the eyes of others. Whether one honors or despises the Lord becomes the criterion for how God views and chooses a leader. God will honor those who honor Him, and those who despise Him will be put to shame. The importance of this principle is strengthened by the fact that it guided the life trajectories of Eli and Samuel, as well as Saul and David, whom we will explore later. On this level, one can consider 1 Sam. 2:30 as the key verse of the entire book of Samuel.

The disgrace of Eli's family is manifested in three main ways (2:31–36): 1. There will be no older person in Eli's family; they will die in middle age. A short lifespan was unusual, and the people likely interpreted it as a family cursed by God.⁹ According to the Deuteronomic covenant, a short lifespan was usually seen as a consequence of a person's disobedience (Deut. 28:20–24), and such a curse was clearly a sign of shame.¹⁰ Related to this was the fact that both of Eli's sons would die on the same day, which would also serve as a sign that the Lord's judgment was indeed complete. 2. The Lord will raise up a faithful priest to replace Eli. Unlike the depravity of Eli's house, this priest will be faithful to God.¹¹ The replacement of the Elides from the priesthood due to their failure was another sign of their disgrace, and their social status and power among the Israelites would plummet accordingly. 3. The descendants of the Elides would be judged by an extreme lack of food, as opposed to their previous entitlement. Whereas in the past the house of Eli had fattened themselves with robbed sacrifices, in the future they would have to plead for crumbs of bread in order to survive. This lack of provision exposed their impotence and vulnerability, thus triggering shame, and their status would be seriously undermined.

2.2. Samuel: A Leader Honoring YHWH

In contrast to the Elides who dishonored the Lord, Samuel had a completely different spiritual character; he is a leader who did his best to honor the Lord throughout

⁹ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, OTL (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1964), 38.

¹⁰ James N. Jumper, "Honor and Shame in the Deuteronomic Covenant and the Deuteronomic Presentation of the Davidic Covenant" (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2013), 141–44.

¹¹ While some scholars have suggested that Zadok the priest was the faithful priest, the situation may be more in favor of Samuel being the most direct successor, though of course Samuel was in fact a multi-dimensional figure, as he was a prophet, priest, and judge; see Kang, *Honor and Shame in 1 Samuel 1–7*, 150–53.

his life. The narrator deliberately contrasts these two figures in his narrative (2:11, 18, 21, 26; 3:1 vs. 2: 12–17, 22–25, 27–36), in order to bring out their differences in characterization. While the sin of Elides continued to grow, Samuel was a breath of fresh air in his day, serving the Lord faithfully throughout his life. This contrast naturally leads the audience to the conclusion that the Lord would reject the Elides and choose Samuel.

2.2.1 Samuel honored the Lord with his faithful service. Samuel lived in a time of spiritual darkness, when the word of the Lord was scarce, and indeed it is hard to imagine that God would have revealed His word to the corrupt Elides in such circumstances. The fact that the lamp of God was not yet extinguished in the house of the Lord seemed to suggest that the Lord’s presence was still there, and that the Lord had not yet completely severed His relationship with the people of Israel. While Eli slept in his own place, Samuel slept in the tabernacle where the ark of the covenant was located, in order to be ready for his service at all times. Since Eli was already dim-eyed, it is conceivable that the responsibility of caring for the lamp oil would naturally fall to Samuel. Although only a child (נער, 3:1), Samuel was already learning to serve the Lord diligently in the tabernacle, which was a far cry from Eli’s two depraved children (נער, 2:17).

1 Sam 3:1–10 is often referred to as “a prophetic call narrative,”¹² in which the narrator outlines Samuel’s call experience through a zoom-in technique, the following chart summarizes the details about God’s call to Samuel:¹³

<i>The First Call</i> (vv. 4–5)	<i>The Second Call</i> (vv. 6–7)	<i>The Third Call</i> (vv. 8–9)	<i>The Fourth Call</i> (vv. 10–14)
The Lord called Samuel.	The Lord called Samuel.	The Lord called Samuel.	The Lord called Samuel.
Samuel ran to Eli and responded, “Here I am” (<i>hinneni</i>)	Samuel arose and went to Eli and responded, “Here I am” (<i>hinneni</i>)	Samuel arose and went to Eli and responded, “Here I am” (<i>hinneni</i>)	Samuel responded, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”
Eli denied the call	Eli denied the call	Eli realized it was God calling Samuel.	God revealed to Samuel the words concerning the fate of Eli’s family.
Samuel went back and lay down	A comment from the narrator about Samuel (v. 7)	Eli instructed Samuel to respond properly if God called again. Samuel went back and lay down.	

¹² David T. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 172.

¹³ See Kang, *Honor and Shame in 1 Samuel 1–7*, 158.

The first time the Lord called Samuel, Samuel did not know it. He thought it was Eli calling him, so he ran to him. Notice that the time of the incident was late at night, and Samuel actually “ran” to Eli; such a small detail reflects his attentiveness and prudence in his regular service. Samuel did not complain about being disturbed in the midst of his sleep, but instead responded very respectfully, “Here I am” (הִנְנִי, *hinneni*). Even though Eli later repeatedly refused to acknowledge that he called Samuel, Samuel’s response was still so polite that it demonstrates his consistent humility in service. הִנְנִי is clearly the key word of this narrative, and it appears as many as three times in this passage (vv. 5, 6, 8). Samuel puts himself at all times at the beck and call of his master without any discouragement.¹⁴ The word הִנְנִי in Scripture often indicates the willingness and availability of the servant of God (cf. Gen 22:1; Exod. 3:4; Isa 6:8), and this adds credibility to Samuel’s service, as one who is indeed ready to receive the call from the Lord.

Samuel lived in a time of spiritual darkness. Even though the house of Eli was corrupt, Samuel did not follow that pattern, but served the Lord faithfully and became a great testimony in that dark period. Unlike the house of Eli, which humiliated the Lord, Samuel honors the Lord with his faithful, humble, and vigilant service.

2.2.2 Samuel honored the Lord by setting up a stone monument. Samuel had just led Israel through a covenant renewal. After the return of the Ark of the Covenant, Israel had fallen into idolatry for twenty years, and now they were beginning to turn to the Lord (7:2–4). Samuel apparently led this spiritual revival, and the people got rid of the Baals and Ashtaroth and served the Lord alone. Along with this spiritual revival, Samuel led Israel to Mizpah, where he presided over a centralized national repentance, and the people fasted and repented of their sins.

At that moment, the Philistines came over to attack the Israelites. Samuel led the Israelites to offer sacrifices and ask for God’s power to save them. The Lord listened to Samuel’s prayer and surprised the Philistines with a great thunder. The Israelites then took the opportunity to pursue and kill them and won a great victory. This was the highlight of Samuel’s life, as he led the Israelites to experience the Lord’s mighty salvation personally. After his victory, Samuel set up a stone in the midst of Mizpah and Shen, naming it “Ebenezer” (אֶבֶן הָעֶזֶר), “the stone of help” (7:12). The irony is that Israel had also previously fought the Philistines at a place called “Ebenezer” (4:1) and failed to receive help from God. It is likely that these were two different places, and that Samuel’s name, “Stone of Help,” was intended to be a witness to the people of Israel that the Lord had turned them around from the misfortunes of the previous disaster.

The stones erected were, of course, to remember the Lord’s help to Israel in this war against the Philistines and to serve as a constant reminder of God’s mighty intervention in Israel’s history.¹⁵ Samuel also explained more clearly, “Until now the Lord has helped us.” Israel had been living in rebellion and away from the Lord in the past, and the help

¹⁴ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 81.

¹⁵ Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 238.

Israel received was not what they deserved. This was the grace that the Lord gave to Israel when they turned back from their sins. Samuel publicly recognized the Lord's help after the victory and gave glory to the Lord. He intentionally set up this stone because it would serve as a lasting reminder to Israel of YHWH's mighty works. Even when the next generation of Israel saw the stone, they would be reminded of God's work. Samuel's desire was that Israel would remember this history and always learn to give glory to the Lord. He was truly a servant who was dedicated to honoring the Lord.

2.2.3 God honored Samuel and made him a prophet. Along with the failure of Eli's family, God promised that a faithful priest would be raised up in their place (2:35), and Samuel was undoubtedly such a faithful priest. Samuel's priesthood was especially evident after Eli's death (7:9; 13:8–15; 16:2), and his right to offer sacrifices could not be replaced even by King Saul. Certainly, being a priest was a privilege in itself, and it was not for ordinary men, but for God's own choice (2:27–28).

But Samuel is better known for his prophetic role than for his priestly office in the Scripture, perhaps because prophets enjoy greater honor than the priesthood. Priests were inherited among the Levites, but prophets were called directly from God and established by God himself. Prophets often stood up to accuse the people of their sins, even kings and priests included. Israel had always had their priests, but not in every age had a prophet of God served among them. Samuel, of course, was that divinely ordained prophet, and the "call" (קרא) of the Lord occurs as many as four times in chapter three (vv. 4, 6, 8, 10). All Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, knew that the Lord had established Samuel as a prophet. Samuel even told Eli himself about the message of judgment (v. 18). Samuel's fame as a prophet spread so widely that even Saul's servants knew him as a man of God respected by all (נכבד, 9:6), and that whatever he said was fulfilled.

Another factor that is easily overlooked is the identity of Samuel as a popular judge who traveled throughout Israel to judge and settle disputes (7:15–16). The people's testimony to Samuel's innocence is also a true reflection of his role as a faithful judge (12:3–4).

Samuel was a priest, a prophet, and a judge all in one, but his function as a prophet was more prominent. Being a prophet of God was the greatest honor that God gave to his faithful servant, and thus he was called "Samuel the prophet" (1 Chron. 29:29; Acts 3:24), paying him the homage.

3. SAUL AND DAVID: KING HONORING HIMSELF VERSUS HONORING YHWH

The above comparison between Samuel and the Elides is an important preparation, which allows the reader to see how the narrator uses the ideological perspective of honor and shame to shape the spiritual characterization of the protagonists. My suggestion is that the leadership pattern brought out from the Elides/Samuel will also carry over to that of the next two kings of Israel. Here too are two leaders, one of whom slights the Lord and

the other who honors Him. Saul, as the one who shames the Lord, is stripped of his kingship, while David, as the one who honors the Lord, is set up as the new king.

3.1 Saul: A King Honoring Himself

The book of Samuel is a turning point in how Israel transitioned from the age of the judges to the age of kings. Saul, as the first king in Israel's history, fulfilled many of the people's expectations. Saul was physically taller than the crowd by more than a head, which implies that he was uniquely advantaged in his appearance (1 Sam. 10:23). He also seems to have had a good start as a new king, as he led Israel to defeat the Ammonites (11:1–11), proving that he was worthy of the title of king by his superior leadership and military prowess. Yet how can this paradox be explained, that Saul was chosen to be king, yet later rejected by the Lord? What was the deeper reason for this? In my opinion, Saul was by nature a king who honored himself, and the focus of his life was never to put the Lord first in his life. This also determined that he could not obey the word of the Lord at some critical moments, and his self-centered life led to his failure.

3.1.1 Saul valued personal gain more than his obedience to God. When Saul was anointed king of Israel, he was informed by Samuel to wait seven days at Gilgal, where the prophet would offer sacrifices and then instruct him about future events (1 Sam. 10:8). Saul did follow the prophet's instructions and led some of the Israelites to gather at Gilgal. The Philistines, however, gathered close to Gilgal at this critical time to fight against the Israelites, probably in retaliation for the previous Israelite attack on the Philistine defense camp at Geba (13:3), led by Jonathan. It is interesting to note that it was Jonathan who defeated the Philistines, but the news went out to Israel that it was Saul who accomplished the military success. The report pictures Saul's greed for military success from the outset, and the fact that he even trumpeted his accomplishments throughout Israel gives the impression of self-focused pride.

The victory boosted Israel's morale, but at the same time triggered the anger and revenge of the Philistines. The Israelites trembled in fear because of the absolute military superiority of their enemies, who had 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and countless infantry. Some of the Israelites hid themselves, while others simply fled to the east bank of the Jordan River to escape the danger. When the situation became critical, Saul saw that Samuel had not yet come within the seven-day period, and so he decided to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings on his own (13:9).

As soon as Saul had finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel arrived. When he found out what Saul had done, he rebuked him for this unauthorized act. Saul does not seem to take Samuel's accusations too well and retorts with euphemisms. He had been waiting for Samuel for seven days and had not seen him; the people were fleeing from him, and if this trend continued, Israel would surely be defeated by the Philistines. In other words, Saul claimed that he was unable to wait for Samuel to make the sacrifice because the situation was so critical that he had no choice but to do it instead, as he needed the

Lord's help to stabilize his army. Saul's explanation seems to be right; he had done what Samuel had asked him to do, and as the leader, he could not just sit back and watch his army lose strength. This gives the impression that it was not Saul who was at fault, but Samuel.

Saul's explanation may sound plausible, but it can hardly stand up to careful scrutiny. First of all, God had already instructed Saul in advance through the prophet Samuel that all he needed to do was to wait, and that the sacrifice would be done by Samuel. Sacrifices were the right of the priests, and the kings of Israel could not act in the place of the priests; to do so was to usurp authority (2 Chr 26:16). Secondly, Saul was seeking to manipulate the Lord's power. He felt that if he sought the Lord's face through sacrifice, then God would bless and help them out of their predicament, which the Ark narrative had shown to be an inappropriate theological perception.¹⁶

The real reason for Saul's unauthorized sacrifice was his inability to control his depleting army and his fear that the people would turn away from him; his sacrifice was a desperate risk that he was willing to take if there was any hope of turning the tide around. Saul's dilemma reflected his faulty relationship with the Lord, a lack of patience to wait and obey, and a lack of faith in the Lord, allowing circumstances instead to become the all-important factor to dominate his decision.¹⁷ Saul should have known that Samuel had previously led Israel to victory over the Philistines at Mizpah (1 Sam 7:5–11), and that victory on the battlefield is not just a matter of military strength, but of the Lord's presence. Saul's decision to sacrifice was triggered entirely by his self-centeredness; he was too concerned with his personal success. He did not choose to believe in God and wait for the prophet to give him guidance for the battlefield.

It is no wonder that the prophet Samuel directly rebuked Saul for his "foolishness" (13:13). Saul's problem was not only in the sacrifice itself, but also in his failure to obey the word of the Lord. The Lord had intended to establish Saul's throne for eternity, but now his kingdom would not last, for God had found a man after his own heart to take his place. The prophet's declaration does not mean that Saul has been completely rejected by the Lord; he is still on his throne, but his descendants will not be able to continue on the throne, and his dynasty will not last forever.¹⁸ God's choice or rejection of Saul was not a rash decision. He was not an arbitrary God, but valued the obedience of Israel's leaders. This also reflects an important characteristic of Israel's kingdom: behind the kings were the prophets, and behind the prophets was the authority of God. The kings of Israel needed to consult their prophets first when they faced a critical decision. The kings were accountable to a higher authority. The Lord is the true king of Israel.

Another indication of Saul's concern for his personal interest was the rashness with which he made the people swear in 1 Sam. 14, which provided an opportunity to see more

¹⁶ Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 155.

¹⁷ Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 106.

¹⁸ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 198.

clearly his foolishness and cruelty. Saul's selfishness proved he was a man of great spiritual defects, and this incident certainly exposed his weakness.

The story begins with Jonathan, Saul's son, boldly attacking the Philistine encampment at Michmash (13:23), and with great courage, he and his armor carrier dared to challenge the Philistines who far outnumbered them. Jonathan showed a great confidence in YHWH, disdainfully calling the Philistines "these uncircumcised." In spite of the disparity of military strength, he was convinced that the victory was due to the Lord, and that God was able to grant victory even with a small number of men (14:6). The secret operation of these two courageous men was a great success, destroying twenty of the enemy in a small area and causing great confusion in the Philistine camp. Jonathan was indeed a good leader, but because of his father's failure, he could not succeed to the throne as the future king of Israel (13:14).

In contrast to the courageous Jonathan, Saul was inactive, and it is noteworthy that Ahijah became his priest. The narrator details his father Ahitub's identity: "Ahitub was the brother of Ichabod, the son of Phinehas, and the grandson of Eli" (14:3). Ahitub was a descendant of Eli who was rejected by the Lord, and was the brother of Ichabod (אִיכָבֹד, i.e., no/where is the glory, cf. 4:21). The description of the rejected Elide descendant alludes to the rejected Saul, reminding the reader that Glory has left his dynasty. Saul had lost Samuel as his spiritual mentor and had to turn to the descendants of Eli, who had been rejected by the Lord.¹⁹

Jonathan took the initiative to attack, but Saul could only respond passively. When Saul realized that the Philistine camp was in disarray, he initially tried to seek God's will through his priest Ahijah (14:18), but halfway through he gave up because of the constant clamor from the other side and joined the battle directly. This is another reflection of Saul's impulsiveness and unreliability, a man who was immature in character and mind. Before Saul came to the battlefield, the defeat of the Philistines seemed to be irreversible, and the people avail themselves of the situation to come out and pursue the Philistines. Yet Saul made the people swear not to eat any food at this critical moment (14:24), which was clearly an ill-timed decision that once again revealed his inadequacy.

It is basic common sense that not eating or drinking would impede the progress of an army. Gideon the judge even sought food during the war (Judg 8:5); so Saul acted "foolishly" (cf. 14:24, the LXX). It is possible that Saul's motive was to transform the battle into a "holy war" scenario in order to maximize the effect of hurting the enemy.²⁰ Although God intervened and helped, Jonathan did not inquire from God before the battle, and Saul did not receive God's clear guidance, making it unlikely that the battle would be viewed as a holy war.²¹ Jonathan saw the victory as a matter of the Lord, but Saul saw it as a personal matter, aimed at "avenging myself on my enemies" (וְנִקְמְתִי מֵאֹיְבָי, 14:24). There

¹⁹ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 209.

²⁰ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 210.

²¹ Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin, DE: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 190–91.

is a suspicion of his manipulation of the Lord in order to accomplish his own plans, which is reminiscent of Jephthah's earlier fatal vow (Judg 11:30).²² The people later suffered greatly because of this oath, even eating raw flesh with blood on it when they were extremely tired and hungry (14:32).

Jonathan, unaware of the prohibition of his father's oath, replenished his strength with honey, and his eyes grew brighter (14:27, 29), which also reveals that he understood God's will better than Saul. Jonathan even accused Saul of being a troublemaker who cost Israel an even greater victory. Saul's subsequent inquiry of God about the plan for the night attack and not receiving any response indicated that he had lost God's favor. Saul investigated and found that Jonathan was the oath breaker and vowed to kill him. Saul showed no mercy, even to his own son. He was really just trying to establish his personal authority so that he could be known as a man of "word and faith." Jonathan was the most important person to bring about this victory. How could the people tolerate Saul putting Jonathan to death because of his foolish oath? So, they rebelled against Saul and vowed to protect Jonathan's life at any cost. Saul lost the respect of the people because of his willfulness, and eventually, he could not withstand the voice of the people, and so he had to give up the plan.

Saul's impulsive vow was certainly a failure, and it was because of his recklessness that the Philistines became a lasting threat to Israel (14:52). Step by step, Saul revealed his inadequacy as a king, since he valued his personal gain more than obedience to God. His weaknesses reflected a deeper spiritual character defect, as he preferred to establish his own rule apart from the Lord, and God's word did not serve as a guide for him in making critical decisions and governing the nation. While Saul shames God with his disobedience, his son Jonathan honored God with his faith and courage in battles; there is a great contrast in their relationship with the Lord.²³ Saul was not the ideal king that the Israelites desired, and in many ways was far inferior to his son Jonathan, which sets the stage for the rise of David.

3.1.2 Saul exalted himself over YHWH. Ever since Samuel proclaimed the message of judgment in 1 Sam. 13:13–14, Saul was in a downward and irreversible spiral. In chapter 13, Saul loses his future eternal dynasty; in chapter 14, Saul loses the opportunity to destroy the Philistines and the respect of the people; and in chapter 15, Saul loses his throne for disobeying the Lord's command to destroy the Amalekites, which better explains why he was the king whom the Lord rejected. The Amalekites had treated the Israelites badly when they came out of Egypt (Exod. 17:8–13). They were the first people to attack Israel, and their willingness to take advantage of the situation provoked the Lord's wrath (Deut. 25:17–18), and so he swore a promise that he would "blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens" (Exod. 17:14). God also instructed Israel not to forget this history. This also explains why the Lord commanded Saul, through the prophet Samuel, to kill (הָרַם, 1

²² Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 164–65.

²³ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 212.

Sam. 15:3) all the Amalekites and their cattle, and not to spare any of their lives. This is a typical characteristic of a holy war. The Amalekites provoked the anger of the Lord, and that is why he commanded Saul to destroy them all.²⁴

The nature of holy war was familiar to the Israelites when they first entered the land of Canaan (Deut. 20:17), and was typified by the destruction of the city of Jericho (Josh 6:17), where the Israelites killed all the men, women, children, and all the livestock in the city. Again, in a holy war against the city of Ai, Achan's taking of what was to be destroyed led to Israel's defeat before their enemies. This was a very profound lesson that reminded them of the consequences of not carrying out God's commands in full. The Hebrew word חָרַם ("destroy") occurs eight times in this chapter, emphasizing that it is a very important concept. God's command to Saul regarding the Amalekites was clear; there was no room for ambiguity. Unfortunately, Saul was selective in following God's commands; he led Israel to strike down all the people of Amalek, but left Agag, the king of Amalek, alive, and kept the finest oxen, sheep, calves, and lambs. Saul may have left King Agag alive as a means of promoting his honor before the people, for the captive was extremely noble,²⁵ and good livestock is certainly a great treasure.

Partial obedience is really disobedience, yet Saul felt good about himself. He felt that he had fulfilled the Lord's demands (15:13). The Lord, however, had already regretted making Saul king because of his disobedience and sent Samuel to rebuke him. Samuel went in search of Saul the next morning and learned from someone passing by that he had gone from Carmel to Gilead. They even told Samuel of an important thing that Saul had done at Carmel: "Behold (הִנֵּה), he has set up a monument for himself" (15:12). The passerby would have been so impressed with the monument that he even used an exclamation mark הִנֵּה ("behold!") to express a sense of surprise. Saul's monument was such a prominent presence that it apparently made headlines in the area. Saul set up the monument to remember the victory over the Amalekites, but he took all the credit for himself. He set up the monument (מִצֵּיב לִי יָד)²⁶ for himself so that his name would be remembered. It is hard to imagine that Saul would ascribe the victory to YHWH on the monument, for he wanted to have this exclusive honor.²⁷

According to ancient Near Eastern tradition, monuments were often erected to record details of specific military achievements and to proclaim the king's sovereignty over the region. For example, in the time of King Solomon/Jeroboam, Sheshonq I, King of Egypt, erected a monument proclaiming his sovereignty after the conquest of Megiddo, the

²⁴ Holy war involves God's participation, and he also controls the ultimate fate of his enemies, cf. Barna Magyarosi, *Holy War and Cosmic Conflict in the Old Testament: From the Exodus to the Exile*, ATSDS (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 2010), 20.

²⁵ Carl Friedrich Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1866), 153.

²⁶ Here, the preposition *lamed* (ל) should be regarded as *dativus commodi*, cf. Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Subsidia Biblica 27 (Rome, IT: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), §133d.

²⁷ Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament*, 191.

remains of which have been partially discovered by archaeologists. In another place, in the second half of the ninth century B.C.E., King Benhadad of Aram, at the request of King Asa, king of Judah, captured a number of cities in Northern Israel in order to relieve the military pressure on Northern Israel (cf. 1 Kings 15:18–20). These captured cities included Dan, and archaeologists later found an Aramaic monument in Dan to commemorate that victory.²⁸ Thus, it seems that Saul’s erecting a monument was also in line with the social and cultural traditions of his time.²⁹ Unfortunately, what Saul wanted to promote was not the name of YHWH, but his own name. Saul was a self-centered person.

The ostentatious Saul contrasts sharply with the quiet Samuel, who, in the face of the Philistine wars not long ago, erected a stone pillar after his victory, which he named the “Stone of Help” (1 Sam. 7:12, אֶבֶן הַעֲזָרָה), in order to remember the Lord’s help. It is clear that the stone erected by Samuel was to give glory to the Lord in remembrance of His saving grace. It does not appear that Saul learned any lesson about humility from Samuel by giving honor to the Lord.

Also in the war against the Amalekites, Moses, after his victory, built an altar to announce that it was based on the power of “the hand upon the banner of Yhwh” (יָד עַל כֶּסֶּן, Exod. 17:15) that the Israelites were able to achieve the victory.³⁰ In that battle, Moses’ hand was lifted up to the point of exhaustion, but he still did not dare to steal God’s glory and take the credit to himself. The difference is obvious; Moses gave glory to the Lord, and Saul was dwarfed by the contrast—he stole God’s glory.

After meeting Samuel, Saul actually claimed that he had obeyed the Lord’s command. Of course, Samuel knew of Saul’s problem, for the Lord had revealed Saul’s failure to him. The bleating of the sheep and the cries of the oxen were clear evidence that Saul had not carried out all of the Lord’s commands to “destroy” (חָרַם) the Amalekites. Saul argued instead that only a portion of the finest sheep and oxen had been retained for the purpose of sacrificing to the Lord (15:15). Saul was careful to respond. First, he claimed that it was the people’s love of good cattle that they chose to preserve it. But verse 9 makes it clear that it was both Saul and the people who spared (וַיַּחַמְלֻ) these fine cattle. Although the subject here is plural, the narrator still uses the verb in the third person singular in order to emphasize that Saul was the one who was most interested in the fine livestock.

Of course, the people may have played an important role in keeping these animals, but it would not have been the deciding factor. The fact remains that Saul disobeyed God’s command because he was more interested in listening to the people. The approval of the people was more important to Saul than God’s authority over him.³¹ Secondly, by claiming

²⁸ Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel*, 146–154.

²⁹ David’s son Absalom did a similarly foolish thing afterward by erecting a pillar for his own name (2 Sam 18:18).

³⁰ Some simply translate it as “the Lord is my banner” (e.g., ESV, NET). There is a textual criticism problem, as the Samaritan Pentateuch reads כִּסֵּא (throne) in place of כֶּסֶן (banner), but this reading is not very plausible.

³¹ Yisca Zimran, “Divine vs. Human Authority in the Books of Samuel,” in *The Books of Samuel: Stories-History-Reception History*, ed. Walter Dietrich (Leuven, BE: Peeters, 2016): 404.

that the animals were to be sacrificed to “the Lord *your* God,” Saul was perfectly distancing himself from the Lord’s control.³² This approach also served the purpose of pleasing Samuel.

But Saul’s defense did not convince Samuel. He rebuked Saul for his hypocrisy and disobedience. Saul was a nobody (15:17), and his background from the tribe of Benjamin, which was almost exterminated in the days of the judges because of the wickedness of the Gibeonites (Judg. 21:1–24), was a cause for criticism. Saul’s anointing as king of Israel was a great honor from the Lord, but unfortunately, he coveted more. Saul’s response to Samuel’s accusation was not one of repentance, but of defense. He insisted that it was the people who were to blame (15:21), that they had taken the best of the sheep and cattle, and that they did it out of goodwill to offer sacrifices for the Lord. He himself, on the other hand, fulfilled the requirements of the holy war by “destroying” the Amalekites, only to bring back the king of Agag. Saul’s words were self-contradictory and unrepentant. For Saul, as long as he had enough excuses, it was not considered disobedience to the Lord’s command. Saul’s disobedience revealed that he wanted to break away from God’s rule and redefine His clear commands. He was a king who was not willing to submit to the Lord’s authority.

Samuel’s response is categorical: “to obey is better than sacrifice” (15:22), and one cannot disobey God’s commands by any “spiritual” excuses. Because Saul rejected (מָאַס) the word of the Lord, the Lord also rejected (מָאַס) him as king of Israel (15:23). The king of Israel needed to submit to a higher authority, and when he refused to listen, he was disqualified from being king. Saul was building up the wrath of the Lord step by step.

In the face of Samuel’s condemnation, Saul changed his tactics by saying humbly, “I have sinned!” (15:24). He was pressured to do so because of the people, since apparently Saul’s real intention was to get Samuel to go back with him so that he could save face in front of the people. Worshipping the Lord was just an excuse he used. Saul’s “confession” lacked sincerity; he only admitted some of his faults rather than repenting of his sins, and even his change of attitude was motivated by selfishness.³³ Samuel refused to go back with Saul; he did not want to be a stepping-stone for the promotion of his reputation. Samuel then declared once again that the Lord had rejected Saul as the king of Israel because of his disobedience (15:26), and Saul, in his panic, forcibly tore (קָרַע) the skirt of his robe, a detail that emphasizes once again how strong Saul’s desire for power and self-importance was. In response, Samuel took the opportunity to proclaim that the Lord had also torn away (קָרַע) his throne and given it to someone more worthy.

Seeing that the situation was irreversible, Saul once again showed concession, “I have sinned!” (15:30), but he insisted that Samuel return with him in order to exalt him (מָגִדְנִי) before the elders and the people. Samuel was a highly honored prophet among the

³² Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 112.

³³ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 222.

Israelites (9:6), and with his endorsement on the stage, Saul's position would undoubtedly be strengthened before the Israelites. He was trying to take advantage of Samuel's status. The irony is that Saul was actually concerned about his reputation among the people when the Lord rejected him. He valued the glory of man more than that of God. But without God's approval, what is the significance of gaining people's respect? Saul consistently showed his hypocrisy, and his lack of spiritual character clearly demonstrated his unworthiness to be the king of Israel. Samuel later reluctantly went back to the people with Saul, but it was only in consideration of his weakness. While Saul enjoyed being exalted before the people, the glory of God had long since left him, and this was the tragedy of his life.

3.2. David: A King Who Values the Honor of YHWH

Saul was still on the throne, but he was no longer the Lord's anointed king. With Saul's rejection, the Lord had chosen a king after His own heart. David, as the youngest and most humble son of the family, an insignificant boy, was anointed king by the Lord. This exceeded all expectations, and even the prophet Samuel almost misjudged. The fact that there were henceforth two kings in Israel, Saul, the king who actually held power but was rejected by the Lord, and David, the king anointed by the Lord (1 Sam. 16:13) but who did not actually hold power, predetermined that conflict between the two would be inevitable. Did David really have an overpowering advantage over Saul? Later, David even snatched Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and had him killed. So, what was the reason for the Lord's favor on David? In my opinion, David's life, for the most part, was focused on the glory of the Lord, which was the fundamental difference between him and Saul. Although David would fall at times, he knew how to turn back to the Lord immediately in the midst of his sins.

3.2.1 David fought for the glory of the Lord. David valued the glory of the Lord, a characteristic reflected in his courage, even as a young man, to challenge the giant Goliath. David's willingness to risk his life to challenge an opponent of different strength lay in his strong faith and determination to defend the glory of the Lord.

Once again, the Israelites faced their enemy, the Philistines, and the two armies lined up facing each other in battle array. The Philistines sent Goliath, an armed giant, and his equipment, from helmet to armor to bronze greaves on the leg to bronze javelin to spear to shields, far exceeded that of any other soldier. He challenged Israel that if they could not overcome him, they would have to be slaves of the Philistines (17:9). When Saul and Israel saw this scene, and heard his words insulting (הָרַף, 17:10) the armies of Israel, they were overwhelmed with fear and dared not send men to answer him. Humiliating one's opponent before the official start of a battle is obviously an important psychological tactic, and the victorious side can deal a great blow to the morale of the other side; for example, the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* contains the classic passage in which Zhu GeLiang insults

Wang Lang during one of the Northern Expeditions.³⁴ Goliath's words of insult to the Israelites apparently worked, so much so that the Israelites were so demoralized that no one dared to respond to the challenge, even when Saul offered a great amount of wealth, his daughter, and exemption from taxes as rewards.

David's appearance on the battlefield may seem like a coincidence, but it was actually preordained by the Lord Himself. The young David was sent by his own father to visit his brothers, and he saw the Israelites being humiliated. Battle brings honor or disgrace, and the losing side is bound to be humiliated. The root *חרף* occurs in different forms as many as six times in this chapter (17:10, 25, 26^{x2}, 36, 45). When Goliath came out morning and evening for forty days to provoke the armies of Israel, and no one among the Israelites was able to come out to meet him in battle, they suffered humiliation (*חרפה*, 17:26). As time continued to unfold, the more demoralized Israel became, and the more urgent the problem became. When David heard Goliath insulting Israel's army, he understood that the enemy's abusive words were not only humiliating to Israel's army, but also to Israel's God. David's concern for the glory of the Lord is seen repeatedly:

17:26 "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine? How dare he *insult* (*חרף*) the army of **the living God**?"

17:36 "Your servant also slew the lion and the bear, so shall this uncircumcised Philistine be like one of them, because he has *insulted* (*חרף*) the armies of **the living God**."

17:45 "You came against me by the sword, the spear and the javelin, but I come against you by the name of **the Lord of hosts**, the **God of** the armies of Israel, whom you *insulted* (*חרף*)."

David's spiritual character and desire to honor the Lord predetermined his distinctive vision. The battle was not only about Israel's gains or losses, but also about whether the God of Israel would be dishonored by Israel's failures on the battlefield. These important theological claims come from the mouth of David alone, and it is no wonder that the Scripture calls him a man after God's own heart (13:14). It was also because David valued the honor of the Lord so highly that he stepped forward to challenge Goliath. David did not simply look at the wealth and social status he might gain by defeating Goliath (17:25), but rather whether the name of the Lord would be dishonored (17:26). David's eyes were not focused on his opponent's unusual size or his sword, trusting that victory in battle depended on the Lord (17:47).

The source of David's courage was his faith in the Lord, and when he faced Goliath, not only did he have no fear, but he even contemptuously called him "this uncircumcised Philistine" (17:26, 36). It is typical of humiliating speech not to call the other person by his

³⁴ Here is one of the insulting paragraphs: "You rebellious thieves! You have lived seventy-six years in vain, and you have never accomplished a single thing in your life. All you do is wag your lips and dance your tongue, helping Cao to do his dirty work! A dog with a broken spine, you still dare to snarl and bark in front of our army! I have never seen such a shameless person!" It is said that Wang Lang was so enraged by the insults that he vomited blood and died.

name, but to substitute some derogatory name.³⁵ Whereas Israel saw a terrifying and invincible warrior, David saw an uncircumcised Philistine who dared to insult the Lord.³⁶ David vowed to behead Goliath and give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth for food, showing that there is a God in Israel (17:46). David's battle was not only to save Israel, but to glorify the Lord before the world.³⁷ David's purpose in risking his own life was that God's name might be proclaimed among the nations. David could not stand by and see God's name dishonored, whereas Saul, on the same battlefield had to passively endure the humiliation, so the contrast between the two is obvious.

Because David valued the glory of the Lord, God rewarded him greatly. David did not use the equipment that Saul had provided, but killed the giant Goliath with a sling and a stone. David's victory was not built on equipment similar to Goliath's, so that no one could steal the credit. With Goliath's fall, the Israelites also seize the opportunity to pursue and defeat the already panicked Philistines. God gave Israel victory through David, so that when Israel returned in triumph, the women sang with joy, "Saul slew a thousand, but David ten thousand" (1 Sam. 18:7). David received honor far higher than even King Saul. It is important to note that even after David became Saul's son-in-law, he did not boast the "ascribed honor" of being "the king's son-in-law," but rather earned the respect of Saul's soldiers through his valor and courage in battle. David earned the "acquired honor" through his own efforts and God's help (1 Sam. 18:14–30).³⁸

3.2.2 David honored the authority established by God. Another way David honored the Lord was by respecting the authority he had established in Israel. Even as King Saul strived to put David to death, David dared not to harm his master. Though David had two perfect opportunities to take Saul's life, he did not do so, but twice he forgave him (1 Sam 24:6; 26:11), as he put his life in God's hands.

Since Saul was determined to put him to death, David had to flee from his face. Saul pursued him relentlessly, and David suffered like a wandering dog. Sometimes he fled to the wilderness of Ziph, where the people betrayed him (1 Sam. 23:19), and then he fled to the wilderness of Maon. One time, David fled into the wilderness of Engedi, and again Saul and his best men pursued him to seek his life. Saul happened to go into a cave by the side of the road in order to relieve himself. He did not know that David and those who

³⁵ Cf. 1 Sam 14:6, 2 Sam 1:20, Isa 52:1. Israel regarded the uncircumcised as unclean, and Saul later even committed suicide (1 Sam 31:4) in order to avoid being humiliated by the uncircumcised Philistines. Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:10–14), and it was through this that the Israelites distinguished themselves from other peoples. Although some other peoples of the ancient Near East also had a tradition of keeping circumcision, it was not given a unique significance like Israel's as God's chosen people. Over time, the Israelites may have later viewed circumcision as a "cultural superiority," see Daniel I. Block, "Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel's Vision of Death and Afterlife," *BBR* 2 (1992): 124.

³⁶ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 255.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 132.

³⁸ For discussion of "ascribed honor" and "acquired honor," see Zeba Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," *JBL* 128 (2009): 610.

followed him were hiding in the depths of the cave, David's men thought it was a perfect opportunity to kill Saul. So, David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe, but he began to reproach himself in his heart, and said, "My lord is the Lord's anointed, and I would never dare to stretch out my hand before the Lord to harm him, for he is the Lord's anointed" (24:6). David prevented his men from rising up against Saul because he valued Saul as the Lord's anointed one. Although the Lord had rejected Saul as the king of Israel, as long as he sat on the throne, he still had this unique status. For David, killing the Lord's anointed was to usurp the authority and order that God had established among the Israelites. David was not without impulse; the cutting off the corner of Saul's robe was a sign of it. In God's plan, Saul would one day be pulled down from his throne, but David hoped to accomplish this not by his own hand, but by waiting quietly for God's will and time.

Since David honored God, he also honored the authority that God had established among the Israelites, even if it meant loss and risk for him. David's respect for Saul can be seen in these titles rendered to him: "the Lord's anointed" (vv. 6^{x2}, 10), "my lord" (vv. 6, 8^{x2}, 10). David humbled himself in Saul's presence, trivially addressing himself as "a dead dog" and "a flea" (v. 14). David spoke of himself in derogatory terms, and when he met Saul he "fell on his face to the ground and bowed down to him" (v. 8). These gestures of deference were hard, for David was the true anointed of the Lord (16:13). David's kindness in not killing Saul moved Saul to acknowledge that David was more righteous than him, and that he had returned good for evil (24:16).

On another occasion, when Saul learned that David was hiding in Mount Hachilah in the wilderness of Ziph, he went down there with 3,000 of his best men to seek David's life. Saul's army camped by the road. When David heard of Saul's coming, he brought Abishai, Joab's brother, and went by night to Saul's camp. Soon they found him sleeping in the camp surrounded by Abner and the people, and his spear resting beside his head. Abishai urged David to take advantage of the opportunity to kill Saul, for such a chance was rare. Abishai volunteered to pierce Saul with a single hit (26:8), and the suggestion was very tempting because David did not need to use his hand to kill Saul while still maintaining his innocence.³⁹ If David had any selfish desire, he could have just let his men do it.

But again, David told Abishai that Saul was "the Lord's anointed" (vv. 9, 11), and that he should not harm him. Saul could have died in various ways, either by God's striking or on a battlefield (v. 10), but this had to be done God's way, not any human intervention. David's trust in the Lord was real, and in the end, he only took the spear and the jar of water from Saul without harming him. David honored the authority that God had established in Israel, and Saul's status as "the Lord's anointed" is also emphasized later in the narrative (vv. 16, 23). David even rebuked Abner, Saul's general, for not being vigilant during the night in protecting his master.

³⁹ Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 277.

Once again David honored Saul as “my lord” (vv. 17, 18, 19), and before Saul he reduced himself to a “servant” (vv. 18, 19), “a flea” and “a partridge” (v. 20). David’s comparison of his trivial existence to unassuming animals, was meant to persuade the king to give up pursuing his life. Saul eventually “confessed” once more in David’s presence (v. 21). Then David returned Saul’s spear, trusting in the Lord’s deliverance and protection. Actually, God had intervened to protect him, and it was a miracle that He caused the people to fall into a deep sleep (v. 12), lest David be discovered by Saul’s soldiers when he entered the camp.

David did not take advantage of the opportunity to harm Saul twice, not because he did not know how to seize the opportunity, but because he respected the authority God had established. The title “the Lord’s anointed” appeared 7 times in these two episodes, showing David’s respect for Saul. David’s respect for Saul was genuine, as can be seen in his execution of a messenger who claimed to have killed Saul, “the Lord’s anointed” (2 Sam 1:16).⁴⁰ Following Saul’s death, David even composed a lament for him, another way of honoring him.⁴¹ Although Saul was the nominal king of Israel, the “anointed one” whom God had rejected, he was still on his throne. David patiently waited for God’s plan and spared Saul’s life twice due to his royal status. David was truly a king after God’s own heart. He valued the authority that God had established, and this is another reason why the Lord chose David and rejected Saul to be the king of Israel.

3.2.3 David intended to honor the Lord by building a temple for His name. David’s act of honoring the Lord by building the temple is obvious, but before discussing these details, I want to discuss briefly David’s act of welcoming the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, which is relevant to our topic here.

After David became king and settled in Jerusalem, he longed for the presence of the Lord (Ps. 132:3–5); thus, he intended to bring the Ark of the Lord to Jerusalem. Saul, by way of contrast, did not do anything with the ark during his reign. This shows a difference between Saul and David. But David failed in the first attempt when Uzzah, the priest, was struck down for touching the Ark.⁴² The Ark of the Covenant was then temporarily laid up in the house of Obed-Edom, the Gittite. After the Ark had been there for three months, God blessed the family. Thus, David began planning to bring the Ark to Jerusalem.

Having learned from his last failure, David was extremely careful to do it the right way this time. For every six steps the bearers of the Ark went, David offered a sacrifice of an ox and a fattened animal to show his awe and respect to the Lord. He also danced passionately before the Lord, accompanied by the cheering of the crowd and the blowing

⁴⁰ Another similar occasion was David’s execution of the man who claimed to have killed Saul’s son, Ish-Bosheth (2 Sam 4:1–12). David did not gloat over the demise of Saul’s house.

⁴¹ In this lament, David honored Saul as “the honorable one” (2 Sam 1:19) and “the hero” (2 Sam 1:19, 21, 22, 25, 27).

⁴² According to the law, the Ark of the Covenant was to be covered, while the sons of Kohath were to carry it on their shoulders (Num 4:1–16), not to move it around in a cart.

of horns, bringing the liturgy of that day to a climax. David's purpose was, of course, to honor the Lord in the highest way and to welcome the return of the Ark with all his might. But David's welcome was indeed extraordinary, for even the king participated in the dancing ritual. Such a humble gesture was clearly unfitting to a king's status and power.

When Saul's daughter saw David dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her hearts (בזָה, 2 Sam. 7:16). The narrator intentionally addresses Michal several times as "Saul's daughter" (2 Sam 6:16, 20, 23) rather than as "David's wife" (1 Sam. 19:11; 2 Sam 3:14), demonstrating that she had accepted Saul's influence in her view of power and honor.⁴³ On that occasion, Michal was more like a member of Saul's family than someone who followed David. Michal's contempt for David could not be restrained. Even before David returned to the house, Michal came out to meet him and said in a sarcastic tone, "How glorious (נִכְבֵּד) is the king of Israel today! He has exposed himself this day before the eyes of the handmaidens of his servants, as a vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself" (v. 20).

Michal accused David of failing to cover his body and dressing in a manner unbefitting of a king, though David was not completely naked, as he wore an ephod of fine linen (v. 14). Michal read David's wild behavior as that of a servant's handmaiden, or even as that of a scoundrel. Michal may have viewed his nakedness not only as a dishonor to the king, but also as a dishonor to her noble status as the king's wife.⁴⁴ It was perhaps for this reason that she fiercely criticized David in public, noting that she did not say these words in private, but before he was on the way to the house.

Nakedness indeed brings humiliation. In the ancient Near East, it was often a way to punish prisoners of war by stripping them naked and making them feel humiliated (cf. Isa 20:1–4).⁴⁵ Hanun, king of Ammon, sent David's messengers back to him with their lower bodies exposed to humiliate them (2 Sam. 10:5). David's situation here, however, was different. First of all, he was not completely nude, for he was still wearing his ephod. Secondly, David's nakedness was a proactive move to welcome the Ark's return and to honor God's name.

David's response to Michal shows that he had a completely different perspective on honor and shame: "It is in the presence of the Lord who chose me above your father and his whole household, and who chose me to rule over his people Israel, that I dance." David's dancing with great joy and might was not done for men, but was "in the presence of the LORD" (v. 21^{x2}).⁴⁶ What Michal saw as humiliation, David saw as honor. David does not think highly of himself before the Lord, in fact he feels that he deserves to be even

⁴³ Ryan Cole Hanley, "The Use of Nakedness Imagery as Theological Language in the Old Testament" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 148.

⁴⁴ Hanley, "The Use of Nakedness," 147.

⁴⁵ Hanley, "The Use of Nakedness," 73–76; Lyn M. Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming," *JSOT* 16 (1991): 63–67.

⁴⁶ The emphasis on "the presence of the Lord" can also be seen in the form of the sentence, as Brueggemann notes that David's words begin and end with "the presence of the LORD," see Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 252.

more humble than he is today (קלל, v. 22), for he sees himself as lowly (שפל, v. 22). David humbled himself in the presence of the Lord, and did not actively seek men's applause and recognition, demonstrating a fundamental difference between himself and Saul. David was convinced that when he honored the Lord in such a humble way, he would not only not be viewed as lowly in the eyes of men but would be honored in the presence of the handmaidens (כבד, v. 22). This is also the paradox of understanding honor and shame, that he who honors the Lord will also be honored by God and men, while he who honors himself will be made lowly.

Michal wanted to humiliate David, but ended up humiliating herself in return. The text explains that Michal was childless until the day she died (v. 23), implying that it was a punishment from God for humiliating David. The Lord put an end to another royal line of Saul's family, since even Saul's daughter was abandoned by the Lord.⁴⁷

Now we shall proceed to our discussion of David's desire to build a temple in 2 Samuel 7. After the Ark of the Covenant was welcomed into Jerusalem, David began to think about building a temple (בית) for the Lord's Ark. The key word in this chapter is בית, which occurs a total of fifteen times, and which, depending on the situation, may be translated as "house, home, palace, or dynasty."⁴⁸ The narrative skillfully employs the nuanced meanings of this word by using double/triple entendre to achieve his purpose.

The main message of chapter 7 may be captured in the following key verses concerning בית:

7:2 "And the king said unto Nathan the prophet, 'Behold, I dwell in a palace (בית) of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.'"

7:5–6 "Go and say to my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Will you build me a temple (בית) for me to dwell in? Since the day that I led sons of Israel up out of Egypt, until this day I have not dwelt in a temple (בית), but I have been moving about in a tent for dwelling.

7:11 "I will give you rest from all your enemies, and the Lord declares to you that the Lord will establish a dynasty (בית) for you."

7:13 "He shall build a temple (בית) for my name, and I shall establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

7:16 "Your dynasty (בית) and your kingdom shall be firm before you forever, and your throne shall be firm forever."

The message of chapter 7 can be outlined from the perspective of honor and shame in the following:

7:1–7 David intended to build a temple (בית) for the Lord to honor Him.

7:8–17 The Lord exalted David by establishing an everlasting dynasty (בית) for his house (בית).

⁴⁷ Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 461.

⁴⁸ "בית," *HALOT*, 124–25.

7:18–29 David praised the Lord for establishing an everlasting dynasty (בֵּית) for his house (בֵּית).

The story begins with David's peaceful and comfortable days when the Lord made him king over all Israel, and his kingdom grew stronger and stronger (2 Sam. 5:10). David was not disturbed by his enemies from all sides, and he even had time to build himself a grand palace, made of magnificent cedar. Cedar wood, usually from Mt. Lebanon, was hard and straight, up to 30 meters high, and was a rare building material that the Israelites usually had to import from Tyre (1 Kings 5:10). Therefore, it was very expensive, and its luxury was not affordable for common people.⁴⁹ It is conceivable that the palace (בֵּית, 7:2) built by David must have been of great splendor and beauty, far superior to ordinary buildings. But David seems to be troubled in his conscience that God's ark was still residing in a humble tent. How could a king live in an abode of greater glory and beauty than his God? David's heart to love and honor the Lord is thus evident. When David informed Nathan of his desire, the prophet immediately commended his intention of building a temple for the Lord, and he did not hesitate to grant him permission to do so.⁵⁰

Yet that night the Lord appeared to Nathan and clarified that he did not need such a temple (בֵּית, 7:6), and that since he led Israel out of Egypt, he had always dwelt in the tabernacle. Nor did he ever make such a request to the leaders of Israel, which seems to give the impression that the God of Israel did not care about such a temple. Or that such a permanent abode restricted his freedom to walk around as He pleased.⁵¹ Indeed, it is difficult to measure the heart of the Lord with limited human wisdom. He is the Lord of heaven and earth, so why would he need to live in a temple made by human hands? The Lord does not need the splendor considered by any man to honor him. Eventually, the Lord approved David's desire to build a temple for him, and God's heart was so satisfied by David's love for Him that He promised David an everlasting dynasty (בֵּית, 7:11, 16).

David's desire to honor the Lord is reflected in his desire to build a magnificent temple (בֵּית) for the Lord, at least one like his palace of cedar. Verse 13 makes it clear that David's son will actually build the temple for God's name. A person's name was certainly closely tied to his honor.⁵² The temple of God that Solomon later built was truly magnificent (זָבַל, 1 Kings 8:13) and elevated (עֲלִיּוֹן, 1 Kings 9:8), in which a great deal of cedar, gold and silver was used (1 Kings 7:1–51). The temple would exalt the name of God in Israel, and even the nations would pay tribute to YHWH, as when the Queen of Sheba marveled at the glory of Solomon's temple during her visit (1 Kings 9:5).

⁴⁹ Allen C. Myers, ed., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 197.

⁵⁰ Haggai 1:4 records a very different scene, where Israel dwells in splendid houses (בֵּית), while the temple (בֵּית) of God is desolate, and the people have no heart to rebuild the house of the Lord.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 254.

⁵² J. Gordon McConville, "God's 'Name' and God's 'Glory,'" *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979): 153. In Ezekiel, God also cares for his holy name and often saves Israel for his name's sake (Ezek 20:9, 14, 22; 23:21, 23; 39:7).

David's intention to build a temple for the Lord can be understood as a desire to honor the Lord by building Him a glorious dwelling place, and the gifts offered should be seen as intended to enhance His honor.⁵³ David's desire made perfect sense in the ancient Near East background, for one of the king's important missions was to build or repair the temple of his god, and a god who lacked a suitable temple dwelling seemed to be ritually inferior.⁵⁴ Yet the Lord refused to use David, choosing rather his son Solomon (שלמה, which means "peace") to build his temple. This may have had something to do with the hostile environment and constant warfare of David's time (1 Kings 5:17); David himself explains that God preferred to use a man of peace to build his dwelling place because he had shed too much human blood (1 Chron. 22:8).

The Lord is a self-glorifying God, and this is revealed by His deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. With a mighty arm, YHWH did great and fearful things before the Egyptians, and thus the Lord demonstrated His great and fearful name (v. 23). He revealed His honor in the works of history. God did not need David to do anything extra for Him to enhance His honor. In fact, David's opportunity of doing anything for YHWH was because He had already been first gracious to him, having first lifted David from the position of a humble shepherd to that of a national king (v. 8). Therefore, David had nothing to boast of, for all that he could possibly achieve, whether in the past or future, was the Lord's doing (2 Sam 5:10–12).⁵⁵

Though the Lord rejected David's offer to build a temple, He valued his simple love for Him and the intention of honoring Him. David wanted to build a temple (בית, 7:7) for the Lord, and in return God promised that He would bless David's house (בית, 7:18, 19, 25, 26, 29^{x2}), and establish an everlasting dynasty (בית, 7:11, 16, 27) for him. The meaning of "dynasty" (בית) is also suggested by other synonyms; for example, "kingdom" (ממלכה) and "dynasty" (בית) are used interchangeably in verse 16, and verses 13 and 14 also make it clear that it is David's kingdom (ממלכה) that God would establish.

David's desire to honor YHWH through building a temple for Him was rewarded by YHWH promising him an everlasting dynasty and kingdom, with his descendants sitting on the throne of Israel forever. David knew that such a blessing was undeserved, and that God had not only promised him an everlasting kingdom, but that even his descendants would be called sons of God, and that God's covenantal lovingkindness would never leave him (7:14–15). The temple built by David's son would be God's dwelling place, manifesting His presence on earth. At the same time, God would establish David's descendants as God's representatives on earth, reigning on His behalf and leading people in righteousness.⁵⁶ When David honored the Lord, God also honored His servant by making an everlasting covenant with him, and making David's name great (שם גדול, 7:9) among

⁵³ Jumper, "Shame and Honor in Deuteronomy," 215.

⁵⁴ Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 236.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 255.

⁵⁶ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 203–4.

the nations. David's desire was to build a temple to honor YHWH's name (vv. 13, 26); consequently, God also gave him a great name, which was known by the whole world. David's subsequent military victories should also be understood as a specific manifestation of God's blessing (2 Sam 8:6, 14). The one who honors the Lord, God also honors.

This everlasting covenant is a key to understanding the book of Samuel. David soon sinned against the Lord in his affair with Bathsheba, resulting in his family and kingdom crises, such as the rebellion of his son Absalom (2 Sam. 15), the cursing of Shechem (2 Sam. 16:5–14), the rebellion of Sheba (2 Sam. 20) and that of his son Adonijah (1 Kings 1). Yet in the midst of all these crises, David's kingdom was still able to stand firm, and this was closely related to the everlasting covenant that God had established with David in 2 Samuel 7. God had promised to establish David, and his dynasty would be firm forever, and God would not forsake him as He had done with Saul (v. 15). The Lord valued David's intention of honoring him, and so he treated him with kindness in return. No matter what trials or challenges David went through in his later years, or what discipline he received from the Lord, God's lovingkindness did not turn away from him (2 Sam. 23:5).

3.3. Different Endings for Saul and David

The life trajectory of Saul and David was obviously different, but the deciding factor was whether or not they honored the Lord in their lives. A person's attitude toward the Lord determines the consequences of their life, including the leaders of Israel.

Saul was always interested in his self-exaltation, selectively observing God's commands. His condition deteriorated as the Spirit of God left him, and an evil spirit repeatedly tormented him (1 Sam. 16:14; 19:9). Eventually God forsook him and gave him no spiritual guidance, so that he was even reduced to looking for guidance from a medium (1 Sam 28).

The death of Saul and his sons was also tragic and humiliating. Saul was fatally wounded and struck by an arrow in a decisive battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. Fearing that he would be humiliated by being captured alive by the uncircumcised Philistines, he commanded the man who carried his weapon to kill him, but the man refused out of fear. In order to avoid a humiliating death, Saul chose to commit suicide. But the Philistines did not spare him, but humiliated the dead king. They beheaded Saul and his three sons, stripped him of his armor, and nailed their bodies to the walls of Beth-shan (1 Sam. 31:8–10). The king's armor was also placed in the temple of Ashtaroath, and the Philistines sent messengers throughout their country to report the good news of victory in war (v. 9). Not only did the king of Israel die in battle, but he died in disgrace. Saul and his house were humiliated; the former hero had fallen (2 Sam 1:19). Although the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead courageously snatched Saul and his sons' bodies from the walls of Beth-Shan and gave them a befitting burial. The ending for Saul and his house was surely humiliating.

However, Saul's life was not left without anything to commend. There were still some high moments, at least in the early days of his reign. For instance, when Saul was first made king, a group of scoundrels defied his authority, refused to send him gifts, and mocked him by saying, "How can this man save us?" (1 Sam. 10:27). Saul did not become angry but remained silent. Later, when Saul returned victorious after defeating the Ammonites, he saved the lives of those who had mocked him previously by forgiving them. Saul also demonstrated his outstanding military skill and bravery in the war against the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11). The enemy came up to Jabesh-Gilead and asked all of the people to gouge out their right eyes as a sign of submission. This was, in fact, an attempt to humiliate all Israelites, and when the people heard this news, they cried out with a loud voice. Upon hearing the cry, Saul gathered all the tribes of Israel and used tactics to defeat the enemy, saving the people from humiliation. It is a regret that Saul did not maintain his initial virtue, but lost himself in power and fame, resulting in a tragic ending.

In contrast to Saul's spiral decline, David's rise to power was a steady one. Ever since the Lord abandoned Saul and anointed David as the new king of Israel, David rose in prominence step by step, although this rise was shadowed by Saul's pursuits and persecutions. In the battle against Goliath, David became so famous that the women of Israel even ascribed him honor higher than Saul's (18:7), and David's fame even reached the Philistines (1 Sam. 21:11; 29:5). David was also appreciated by Saul's servants for his faithfulness and valor (18:5), and his name was highly esteemed among the people (18:30). Through Jonathan and Michal's protection, David was able to escape from Saul (1 Sam. 19). Later, David was blessed with a wise woman, Abigail (1 Sam. 25), and the elders of Judah befriended him (1 Sam. 30:26–31).

After the death of Saul, the house of David grew strong and the house of Saul declined (2 Sam 3:1). The defection of Abner, the general of the northern kingdom (2 Sam. 3), and the death of Saul's son, Ish-Bosheth (2 Sam. 4) were a surprising gift, and there was no one left in Israel who could prevent David from becoming king over all Israel (2 Sam. 5:1–5). David's success did not happen by chance; it was not based on human tactics or clever politics but on God's presence and blessing. His spiritual character in honoring the Lord certainly contributed to his success.

Nevertheless, David, though viewed in general as a great king who honored the Lord, had a number of weaknesses in his life. David's violation of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, was the greatest stain on his life; David's sin was of an example of open defiance (בזיה, 2 Sam. 12:9, 10) against the Lord and His word. David's utter contempt (נִקְלָהּ וְנִאֲצָה, 2 Sam. 12:14) of the Lord in his affair with Bathsheba brought dishonor to God's name, and as a punishment, God also brought disgrace upon him and his house. The death of his child by Bathsheba, Tamar being raped by Amnon, the murder of Amnon by Absalom, and Absalom's sleeping with David's concubines on the roof of the palace can all be understood as manifestations of God to bring disgrace upon David's house (2 Sam. 12:11–12). What makes David different from Saul lays in his timely repentance to the Lord;

he truly repented after being rebuked by Nathan (cf. Ps. 51). But David's failure did not overshadow his overall positive image as someone who follows after God's heart and honors his name.

Thus, it seems that the world of honor and shame is not static, and it is fair to say that both Saul and David did things to honor or dishonor the Lord at different junctures of their lives. But still, on the whole, one can see Saul and David as representatives of future kings of Israel who honor themselves or who honor the Lord.

4. SUMMARY

In this article, I suggest that the ideological concept of honor and shame plays an important role in understanding the trajectory of the lives of Israel's kings in the book of Samuel. One finds a strikingly similar pattern of leadership in the book of Samuel: Eli and Saul bring shame to the Lord, but Samuel and David honor the Lord. The leaders who shame the Lord are replaced by leaders who honor the Lord, i.e., Samuel replaces Eli and David replaces Saul. God rejected Saul but chose David, because he knows who honors Him as opposed to who honors worldly esteem. Leaders who dishonor the Lord are ultimately judged by the Lord as lowly and disgraceful. Saul was slighted by both God and man as he tried to exalt himself, while David gained the respect of both God and man for honoring the Lord.

The words of the man of God to the house of Eli still echo in the ears of the reader: "For he who honors me, I will honor him; and he who despises me shall become contemptible" (1 Sam 2:30). Every word of God is refined and purified, and is true and trustworthy.

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JUSTIFICATION BY “NON-MERITORIOUS WORKS”? AN EVANGELICAL TRAIN WRECK*

FRED CHAY**

Abstract. *The history of integrating works and faith has a long history in the Roman Catholic Church, having been validated by the Council of Trent. However, many evangelicals today have wandered out onto thin ice seeking a theory and a theology that weds together these two concepts that the Apostle Paul divorced forever from each other regarding the terms of justification. This paper will seek to both explain and explore, as well as to excise, the role of works that evangelicals are seeking through a precarious exegetical and theological explanation of John 5:28-29.¹*

Keywords. *Justification, faith, non-meritorious works, gift, eternal life, assumptions, ingression, judgment*

INTRODUCTION

The Reformers who revolutionized the church during the sixteenth century called for a long-overdue return to the inspired text of the Bible and for an adherence to the principles of reason that had come to the fore during the Enlightenment. Through commitment to Holy Writ and logic, Reformation principles helped the church regain its moorings in the infallible Scriptures and counteract myriad elements of ecclesiastical corruption. The Reformation gave birth to the Reformed tradition, a rich heritage that has edified the church for years. As the tradition has developed, it has had tremendously positive effects, not only on theological studies, but on all manner of pastoral care.

However, it would be imprudent, if not an error of the first class, to assume the Reformers and their theological descendants were incapable of introducing error as they strove to interpret the Scriptures. Certain modern Reformed theologians have demonstrated

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¹ I am deeply grateful to my former teaching assistants, Tim Helman and Beau Stanley.

this fact. A number of their recent writings have propounded a soteriological model that arises from questionable logic and apparent inconsistency with the Bible. Though this model is in many ways consistent with Reformed orthodoxy, it has the potential to be theologically and pastorally destructive. The church at large must ever be aware (and beware) of adopting such models wholesale on the basis of their intellectual provenance. For as Aristotle said, “The least initial deviation from the truth is later multiplied a thousandfold.”

A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Theological Evidence of the Problem

The current justification controversy has its modern genesis in the work of Norman Shepherd. Shepherd, a widely respected theologian, succeeded John Murray as head of the systematic theology department at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) in 1963. His soteriology came under scrutiny when certain of his students, during examinations by church bodies, reputedly claimed that justification was by faith and works.² Westminster Seminary responded by launching an investigation to determine whether or not Shepherd’s views on justification truly fit within the bounds of Protestantism and the tenets of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Official charges were filed against Shepherd in 1975. However, he was not removed from his post until January 1, 1982.

Shepherd asserts that the promise of salvation is only realized when the obligations of the covenant are met. These obligations are fourfold: faith, repentance, good works, and perseverance, without which no one will see the Lord (salvation).³ Nonetheless, he affirms that these obligations are done out of faith (in obedience to the fourfold obligations). He insists that the role of baptism is to mark one’s entry into the covenant of grace and its benefits. Covenantal obedience to the conditions of the covenant is required in order to realize final justification.⁴ Thus, salvation can be lost if the conditions of the covenant are not kept in obedience.⁵

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003), 14.

³ Sinclair Ferguson, “Sinclair Ferguson’s Critique of Norman Shepherd’s *The Covenant Context for Evangelism*,” *Banner of Truth* (July/August 1977): 3.

⁴ Norman Shepherd, “Works: The Covenant Context for Evangelism,” in John H. Skilton, ed., *The New Testament Student and Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 56-58.

⁵ This sounds similar to the concept of E. P. Sanders under the rubric of Covenantal Nomism. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1977) which draws much from George Foot Moore’s *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–1930). Also see the good response in D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001–2004) and see Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

For Shepherd then, faith, repentance, and good works are all part of one package. He sees them as “indissolubly intertwined with one another.”⁶ In Shepherd’s theology, faith is “living, active, and abiding.”⁷ Shepherd does not affirm that the justification of the sinner is the definitive, once-for-all act of God, the permanent possession of those saved by faith. In defense of this stance, Shepherd contends that obedience to divine law is never meritorious of the Father’s love and favor. At the same time, Shepherd argues that the reward is a matter of promise and obligation: gratuitous promise on the part of God who showers favor and mercy on creatures of dust, and obligation on the part of the sons and daughters of God, those who are called to be the keepers of God’s covenant. According to Shepherd, the way of salvation, that is, justification, is the way of faith and non-meritorious works.⁸ The Christian’s salvation is directly connected and finally realized only in covenant keeping. “In Jesus we are enabled to become [the] covenant keepers that God intended us to be from the beginning.”⁹

Shepherd elucidates these doctrines extensively in his theological theses. Of the thirty-four theses that he presents, the most contentious are numbers twenty-one through twenty-three:

21. The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, *but his obedience . . . is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification . . .*
22. The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the exclusive ground of the believer’s justification, *but the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification* in the judgment of the last day . . .
23. Because faith which is not obedient faith is dead faith, and because *repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification . . . good works . . .*, being the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer . . . , though not the ground for his justification, *are nevertheless necessary for salvation* from eternal condemnation *and therefore for justification . . .*”¹⁰

While Shepherd maintains that works are not the grounds of justification,¹¹ in this Document, he fails to explain their role as a necessary part of the salvation equation.

⁶ Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 47.

⁷ Shepherd, 50.

⁸ This line of thinking is similar and is found later in Daniel P. Fuller’s book, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

⁹ Shepherd, 57.

¹⁰ Norman Shepherd, “Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works” (paper presented to the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, November 18, 1978). When Shepherd speaks of justification, he is referring to ultimate justification at the last day.

¹¹ Note also thesis 2: “There is nothing that any man can do to save himself from condemnation or to contribute to his salvation in any sense or at any point, so that any attempt on the part of man to save himself not only fails but even serves to compound his guilt.”

“Shepherd does not see good works as an inevitable fruit of justification but rather as a corresponding truth of justifying faith.”¹² He desires to give full credence to the many Scripture passages that seem emphatic in presenting obedience as a determiner of salvation, so in thesis four, he holds justification to incorporate the moment of conversion, the state of conversion, and the final pronouncement of innocence. Essentially, his premise requires that justification also include sanctification and glorification.

By claiming a “justification . . . of the last day”¹³ he denies the believer assurance and makes the final determination of salvation somehow hinge on the believer’s obedience. He does not clarify exactly how works function as a necessary part, yet not the grounds for justification. As a result, it is difficult not to interpret these teachings in light of his earlier formulations which posited works as a co-instrument of justification alongside faith.¹⁴

Shepherd’s referring to “the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit . . . necessary for . . . justification” caused the Westminster faculty and Board to conclude that thesis twenty-three “seems to many readers to affirm the causal priority of new obedience to justification, which is to reverse the order affirmed in the Seminary statement.”¹⁵ As Philip E. Hughes noted in his dissent from the Westminster majority report of April 21, 1978, “The attempt is being made to connect these good works with faith in such a way that though defined as non-meritorious they are regarded as necessary to our future (or final or eschatological) justification: no good works, no Heaven!”¹⁶

A Current Trend of this Theological Position

There seem to have been many other evangelicals from all theological stripes who have built upon this concept of the need for non-meritorious works. Although worded slightly differently, the result is the same. A recent dissertation by Alan Stanley published as a monograph¹⁷ enters this discussion.

In his book, Stanley at times is less than clear of the relationship of works to justification and when justification takes place. He states:

First, Jesus understands salvation to be more than just an historical entry point. Salvation is submission to God’s rule—His kingdom—now and entrance into His eschatological kingdom or eternal life in the future. Thus, where Paul is

¹² Robert M. Zins, “Professor Norman Shepherd on Justification: A Critique” (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981).

¹³ Thesis 23.

¹⁴ John W. Robbins, *A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy: Westminster Seminary and the New Perspective on Paul* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003), 135.

¹⁵ Robbins, 141.

¹⁶ Philip E. Hughes, “Some Reasons for Dissenting from the Majority,” in *A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy: Westminster Seminary and the New Perspective on Paul*, ed. John W. Robbins (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003), 106.

¹⁷ Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels*, Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series, vol. 4, ed. David W. Baker (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006).

primarily speaking out against *pre*-conversion works Jesus is endorsing *post*-conversion works. Therefore passages that appear to contradict Paul do not in fact contradict him at all.

Second, since the works that admit one into the kingdom are post-conversion works they are also necessarily produced or enabled by the power of God

Third, it follows that for Jesus, works are the evidence of one's relationship to God ([Matt] 7:15-23 par). . . . However, this does not mean that every so-called good work is worthy of eternal life (cf. [Matt] 7:22-23) lest anyone think they can deceive God. This is the reason why only Jesus will judge humanities' works (cf. [Matt] 7:1). People may deceive people but they will not deceive God (Gal 6:7-8).

Fourth, even though works are necessary for salvation Jesus and the Synoptic writers do not mean sinless—or even something similar—perfection. . . . righteousness is being viewed as a *pattern of life*. In other words momentary lapses into anger, impatience, un-forgiveness, etc. do not exclude one from the kingdom as if what was required was letter of the law type “perfection” in every sense of the word.¹⁸

Stanley seems to say that works are a condition for both entrance into the kingdom and evidence that one currently has a relationship with God. Hence works are the mark of assurance of salvation and it seems that they are almost a condition for salvation.

If this seems harsh, Stanley goes on to proclaim more openly and clearly.

There are, in my view, passages that appear to teach the eternal security of believers. . . . We might say that He knows who are His. However, there are also passages—especially John 15:1-6; 1 Corinthians 15:2; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 3:6, 14—that teach the possibility of forfeiting salvation through lack of endurance. These passages appear to teach anything but eternal security. However, in these instances the perspective in view is not God's but ours. The NT writers do not know for sure who are God's. Hence in a pastorally appropriate way they urge their readers on to endurance.¹⁹

However, when judgment day comes ([Matt] 7:22-23) it will not be sinners who enter into the kingdom but the *righteous*. [emphasis original] This distinction is important to make for it is only once anyone is in a relationship with Jesus that they are able to produce the kind of righteousness required to make it into the eschatological kingdom (i.e., post-conversion works). This does not mean that one is self-righteous but neither does it mean that one simply has righteousness as a gift from God.²⁰

Stanley clearly admits that all believers will utilize the ability that God provides and hence must produce personal righteousness if we are to enter into the kingdom.

His validation for this type of theological stance is grounded in no lesser theological light than John Calvin. Stanley states, “And similarly John Calvin, ‘while eternal life is the

¹⁸ Stanley, 335-336.

¹⁹ Stanley, 327.

²⁰ Stanley, 328.

recompense of works, it is bestowed by the *gratuitous gifts of God.*' [emphasis original] Thus according to Calvin, 'There is nothing to prevent the Lord from embracing works as inferior causes' and so making 'eternal life a consequence of works.'"²¹

The reason for this type of terminology from both Calvin and Stanley may be a lack of complete detachment from the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of soteriology. The historical blending, if not overlapping of, justification and sanctification can prove difficult for theological clarity. Stanley seems to admit to the blending of justification and sanctification as he states: "But overall, it is important that we treat salvation in the Gospels as a way of life rather than a one-time conversion experience."²² Hence, he can conclude that there is a direct relationship between works and one's eternal destiny.²³

Today many are describing salvation as a two-stage approach: initial and final salvation or initial and final justification. From the Wesleyan formation this is articulated under the doctrine of double justification. This is not to be confused with the view that there are in fact two justifications,²⁴ one before men and one before God, as is this writer's understanding of the notorious James 2:14-26 passage.²⁵ As Wesley states, "Initial justification refers to our 'present forgiveness...and consequently acceptance with God' while final justification refers to our 'acquittal at the last day'."²⁶ He bases this partly on Hebrews 12:14: "without holiness no one will see the Lord." His conclusion is that good works or holiness is the "ordinary, stated condition of final justification."²⁷ Also, Rom 2:13 is used, as many non-Wesleyans do as well, to appeal to the concept of a final justification. Hence, good works do not precede initial justification but they must precede final justification.²⁸ He states on the one hand, "I allow not only faith, but likewise holiness or

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 3.14.21, quoted in Stanley, 274.

²² Stanley, 321.

²³ Stanley, 321. See also David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁴ "When Paul says we are justified by faith, he means precisely that we have won a verdict of righteousness in the sight of God. James has quite another intention, that the man who professes himself to be faithful should demonstrate the truth of his fidelity by works. James did not mean to teach us where the confidence of our salvation should rest-which is the very point on which Paul does insist. So let us avoid the false reasoning which has trapped the sophists, by taking note of the double meaning: to Paul, the word denotes our free imputation of righteousness before the judgment seat of God, to James, the demonstration of righteousness from its effects, in the sight of men; which we may deduce from the preceding words, *Shew my thy faith, etc.* In this latter sense, we may admit without controversy that man is justified by works, just as you might say a man is enriched by the purchase of a large and costly estate, since his wealth, which beforehand he kept out of sight in a strong-box, has become well known." John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke; and James and Jude*, vol. 3 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 285-286.

²⁵ See Zane C. Hodges, "Light on James Two from Textual Criticism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120, no. 479 (1963): 341-342; R. T. Kendall, *Justification by Works* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2001).

²⁶ John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 8:46, 5:56-58.

²⁷ Wesley, 5:58

²⁸ Wesley, 83-104, 213

universal obedience to be the ordinary condition of final salvation.”²⁹ He adds, “If therefore works wrought through faith are the ground of the sentence passed upon us in that day, then are they a necessary condition of our justification; in other words, if they are a condition of our final they are a condition of our present justification.”³⁰ But he seems to equivocate by asserting, “I can not allow the consequence.” He attempts to walk a fine line between initial and final justification and salvation: Faith alone for the first and faith and works for the second.

Neither Wesley, the Arminian of the past, nor Shepherd the Calvinist of the past can claim exclusivity to this formula. The view seems to be alive and well in Reformed theology today.³¹ A recent ETS paper presented in 2008 and recently published in JETS on this topic is the fine work of Dane Ortlund, “Justified by Faith, Judged According to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox.”³² Ortlund provides an excellent overview of options and opinions concerning the “paradox of faith and works” for initial and final justification.

However, at the end of the day, it appears that the protest to Rome seems to be acquiescing as the tension between justification and sanctification, as well as its conditions, is becoming blurred.

This conference is addressing many aspects of the definition and description of justification. Many texts and theologies are being examined. One text that is often assumed to support a theology that includes the necessity of works for final justification, concerns John 5:28-29.

A TEXTUAL SOLUTION

This theological battle is usually fought in the theological trenches of Trent and in the powerful pages of Paul and his biblical theology of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. However, the words of Jesus, as they always do, provide significant insight into this most important topic.

The Text:

²⁹ Wesley, 8.68

³⁰ Wesley, 9:114

³¹ See Fuller’s book, *The Unity of the Bible*, and *Future Grace* (Larch Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995) by John Piper who attributes his theology of justification to Fuller. Much of Piper’s understanding has been anticipated by W. Nicol, “Faith and Works in the Letter of James,” in *Essays on the General Epistles of the New Testament*, Neotestamentica 9 (Pretoria, ZA: The New Testament Society of South Africa, 1975), 7–8. Also see Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005). The endorsement by Father Joseph Fitzmyer S.J. tells the tale, “A remarkable book indeed! A long overdue, yet comprehensive recognition of Paul’s teaching about the obedience of faith and the relation of good deeds to the full justification of the Christian who is saved.” From a non-evangelical base but with the same theological end game, see Chris VanLandingham, *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006).

³² Dane C. Ortlund, “Justified by Faith, Judged According to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 2 (June 2009): 323-340.

²⁴ “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

²⁵ “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live.

²⁶ “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself;

²⁷ and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is *the* Son of Man.

²⁸ “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice,

²⁹ and shall come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment. (John 5:24-29 NASB)

There have been a variety of exegetical options offered to explain this difficult text with the result/consequence of supporting vastly divergent theological positions.

Excoriate and Erase the Text through “Critical Assumptions”

It has become fashionable to evade a problem by erasing it from the text, thus removing both textual and theological difficulties. Discarding a troublesome text or dislodging it from its divine author is a method employed by Bultmann as he states in regard to John 5:28-29:

In any case vv.28f. have been added by the editor, in an attempt to reconcile the dangerous statements in vv. 24f with traditional eschatology. Both the source and the Evangelist see the eschatological event in the present proclamation of the word of Jesus. Yet the popular eschatology, which is so radically swept aside by such a view, is reinstated in vv. 28f. The editor corrects the Evangelist by this simple addition, so that it is difficult to say how he thought the statements in vv.24f could be reconciled with it.³³

This approach dissolves the tension of the text, utilizing both a textual approach and theological assumption. A tension is proposed to exist between what the author desired to declare and what the editor decided through redactional discretion and design. In this perspective, it is unacceptable for the present emphasis of resurrection in 5:24-25 to be in concert with the future aspect of 5:28-29. Hence, the editor must not only ameliorate but also create and construct a reorganization and restructuring of the message and meaning of the writer. However, there appears to be no textual debate of the manuscripts to conclude that the text is to be excluded, nor is there any evidence except an *a priori* commitment to

³³ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1971), 261.

the role of a redactor as the means to eliminate the tension of the text.³⁴ Even C. K. Barrett declares that “There is no reason what ever for regarding vv.28f. as a supplement to the original Johannine discourse unless it is held incredible that John should have thought of resurrection and judgment under both present and future aspects.”³⁵

Exploit the Text with “Theological Assumptions”

A second opinion is offered by those who, although maintaining the integrity of the text in the end, introduce and inject a theological assumption to develop an exegetical perspective that is foreign to John’s. In a word or two, it is called “Eternal Insecurity.” This is expressed by G.A. Turner: “The resurrection can be the prelude either to life, or to exclusion from life, that is, to a resurrection of judgment (:29). The Father and the Son together bestow life on those whom they will. Life is not something to which one is inherently entitled: It is a gift of God which disobedience can forfeit.”³⁶

It is interesting that the main body of “Insecurity Literature” in both the commentary and theological resources does not seem to comment on these vital verses, although they do address the general topic of the danger of Christians losing their eternal life quite candidly and uncompromisingly.³⁷ The main deficiency that destroys this view is that it is so completely and fundamentally in opposition to the foundational teaching of John himself. Texts such as John 4:14, 5:24, 6:35, 37-40, 10:27-29 appear on the face of their clear declaration to demand that the free gift of eternal life is in its nature eternal in whatever time designation and dimensionality that the interpreter employs. A theology that

³⁴ The only issue in the text has to do with the reading of the Byzantine and the Majority text (ἀκουσονται), a future middle indicative, third-person plural deponent; or P75 and B and the critical text (ἀκουσουσιν), a future active indicative third-person plural; or the reading in P66 and Aleph (ἀκουσῶσιν). The variants are not even listed in Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1971), 210. They give evidence to the fact that they do not play a major or even a minor role in the discussion. However, see Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts: A Corrected, Enlarged Edition of The Complete Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 406, 580.

³⁵ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Westminster Press, 1978), 219. It appears that D. A. Carson also realized some of the interplay of the dual aspect of the already not yet feature that is involved in the text. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 256–257.

³⁶ George Allen Turner and Julius R. Mantey, *The Gospel According to John*, Evangelical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.) cited by Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 6: Those Who Have Done Good—John 5:28–29,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136, no. 542 (April–June 1979): 159.

³⁷ See especially, Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1960), I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), and the ironically titled *Kept by the Power of God* by Marshall in I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (1974; repr., Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004). Also see C. Adrian Thomas, *A Case for Mixed Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008).

reasons a gift, which is free and unearned, can be forfeited through failure to do and continue doing good, which had nothing to do with its appropriation in the first place, is itself destined for failure. As Goya said, “The sleep of reason brings forth monsters.”³⁸

A third option that is prevalent in most evangelical Reformed circles, although not exuberantly evidenced from our text but a mainspring of its resultant theological system, understands that there is of necessity an inevitable and inseparable connection between faith and works. It is at this point that we reach the epicenter of the theological theme of our conference.

Eviscerate the Text with “Theological Assumption”

In the bastion of the Reformed view, it is postulated that those that truly, authentically, and genuinely believe will of necessity do and keep doing good works until they die. In fact, it is this activity that gives Christians, assurance that they are actually saved.³⁹ Calvin at times removed good works to secondary status of assurance as well as many of his followers. However, works must be seen to validate justification or at least final justification. Hence, at some level, works are required as a condition and not simply as a consequence for justification and salvation.⁴⁰ The bibliographic support for this view is enormous, ubiquitous, and legendary to those who are members of ETS. A recent recounting of the evidence was articulated two years ago at the ETS national conference by Dane Ortlund as he explained 15 different views of Romans 2 in order to understand the difficulty of the relationship of faith and works and the final vindication of the justified.⁴¹ Indeed, many have and are struggling with how to distill and articulate the necessity of works in conjunction with faith to validate one’s final salvation experience. The most articulate defense of this view comes from Leon Morris many years ago. He stated in 1971:

³⁸ This is Goya’s title for one of his *Caprichos* inscribed on the etching as cited by C. P. Snow, *The Sleep of Reason* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968).

³⁹ See Tom Schreiner and Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) for this theological perspective. Many have labored to undo this connection at both the biblical and historical theology level of validation. See R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism through 1649* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995) and M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh, UK: The Handsel Press, 1985).

⁴⁰ This is tied to the Reformed doctrine of the *ordo salutis* that regeneration precedes faith and hence the faith that is a gift of God is a working faith. In Reformed circles, if this is not true then a person is holding to a form of synergism and is theologically adhering to Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism. Of course, the Reformed disclaimer is that the *ordo salutis* is a “logical priority not a temporal priority.”

However, the problem with this is that it is contradictory and nonsensical. The term priority in this context is a word that speaks of time. It is a temporal word. Unless one switches the meaning of “priority” to “first in importance” which is not intended, then the idea of logical priority and not temporal priority is nonsensical. Most Reformed theologians would say election is a higher priority in importance and it also is first in temporal sequence from eternity past.

⁴¹ Ortlund, “Justified by Faith,” 323-340.

All the dead will rise. Judgment, as always in Scripture, is on the basis of works. It is those ‘who have done good’ who attain ‘the resurrection of life’ (cf.6:39f.), while those ‘who have done evil’ rise only to the resurrection of judgment” (or ‘condemnation’); (see on 3:17f.) This does not mean salvation is on the basis of good works, for this very Gospel makes it plain over and over again that men enter eternal life when they believe on Jesus Christ. *But the lives they live form the test of faith they profess.* [emphasis added] This is the uniform testimony of scripture. Salvation is by grace and it is received through faith. Judgment is based on men’s works.”⁴²

Thirty-nine years following Morris’s initial articulation, Andreas J. Köstenberger offers a similar perspective. He states concerning John 5:28-29: “Because believing often proves superficial (e.g., 2:23–25), a person is to be judged by what he or she does, not merely says (Borchert 1996: 241; contra Hodges 1979a). This does not amount to salvation by works; rather, *the life that one lives forms “the test of the faith they profess* (Morris 1995: 285).”⁴³ (emphasis added)

Köstenberger’s academic mentor D. A. Carson denies Bultmann and affirms Köstenberger. He states, commenting on John 5:28-29:

Some have assigned these two verses to the hand of a later ecclesiastical redactor, largely on the ground that the futurist eschatology reflected here is out of step with the main stream of realized eschatology in this Gospel. That assignation is severely mistaken: the interweaving of the two strands lies near the heart of all Christian eschatology, including this book. That believers who already experience eternal life must rise on the last day is not incoherent: their new, resurrection-life existence will be the ratification and confirmation of the life and freedom from condemnation they already enjoy. Others, Jesus insists, *will rise to be condemned* (lit. ‘to the resurrection of judgment’), for in fact they have been ‘condemned already’ (3:18).⁴⁴

A final supporter of the view is Gerald L. Borchert in the New American Bible Commentary. He states:

The importance of *human action as a litmus test of human commitment* is a frequent message of the New Testament (e.g., Eph 2:10; Phil 2:12–13; 3:17–19; 2 Tim 3:16–17; Jas 2:14–17; 1 John 3:18; 4:20–21). Moreover, it is made the significant test in the judgment scene of the sheep and goats by Jesus (e.g., Matt 25:31–46) and at the judgment seat of Revelation (20:11–15). But many Christians apply only the assurance texts to themselves and exempt themselves from these passages, firmly convinced that the passages have no application to them. We should remember that the New Testament books were written primarily to Christians not to point the finger at others but to take the warnings

⁴² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 321–322.

⁴³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 190.

⁴⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 258.

of the Bible very seriously.⁴⁵ The alternative of resurrection to life or resurrection to judgment in this passage is both an assurance and a warning to every reader. The message of this text is actually a call to integrity with God and humanity. The opponents of Jesus were the religious persons of his day. The point of the discussion, therefore, is that Christian readers are called to understand clearly that opposition to Jesus or affirmation of Jesus and his ways have immense eschatological consequences.⁴⁶

Without going into the whole lexical discussion of Saving Faith⁴⁷ and running in the vital theological marathon concerning faith and works, let us save that for another day. But let us hold focus on John 5:24-29 as we consider this definitive Reformed formulation.

First, this view asserts that the life a man leads “forms the test of their faith.” This is clearly the theological dogma of both Morris and Köstenberger. However, this is a theological construct found in certain theologies, but it is not stated in the text. It seems that this theological construct has what is called a high degree of “Ingression.”

Dave Anderson defines ingression as [follows]:

Ingression, means that some claims or hypotheses might be more deeply embedded or more crucially interconnected within a system than other assertions: Hence “Depth of *ingression*.” “Opinions that are not very deeply *ingressed* in a system may be relinquished or proven false without much change in the system. However, items that are more deeply *ingressed* are more dependent on the system, and the system is more dependent on them.

The testing of these matters is thus more crucial to the system and must be conducted more carefully with a great deal of evidence before any changes in a system would be justified—or, at least, probably before they will be accepted by those committed to that system.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ “The reason I wrote my book *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1987) is that I wanted Christians to take seriously both the assurances of God and the warnings of God. In the tension between the two lies the truth of salvation.”

⁴⁶ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), Logos Library System, chap. 3.

⁴⁷ See Fred Chay and John Correia, *The Faith That Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament* (Haysville, NC: Schoettle, 2008).

⁴⁸ David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2010), 220.

J. P. Moreland wrote, “Depth of ingression. A person’s noetic structure contains what Alvin Plantinga has called an index of depth of ingression. Plantinga argues: Some of my beliefs are, we might say, on the periphery of my noetic structure. I accept them, and may even accept them firmly, but I could give them up without much change elsewhere in my noetic structure. I believe there are some large boulders on the top of the Grand Teton. If I come to give up this belief (say by climbing it and not finding any), that change need not have extensive reverberations throughout the rest of my noetic structure; it could be accommodated with minimal alteration elsewhere. So its depth of ingression into my noetic is not great. One can think of a noetic structure as a web of beliefs. The more depth of ingression a belief has in one’s noetic structure, the more it exhibits two important features. First, it is more closely and complexly interrelated with other beliefs in my noetic structure. It is less independent than a belief on the periphery. Second, it is an epistemically important belief in my noetic structure. It provides mutual support for other important beliefs deeply ingressed, and it provides epistemic support for a number of beliefs closer to the periphery. The concept of such depth ingression has important consequences for a theory of rationality. The deeper a belief is ingressed, the greater the evidence required to justify giving up that belief. One *should* not give up a deeply

It appears that an *a priori* and highly ingressed concept is that faith must evidence works or it is not saving faith nor will it receive final salvation or be worthy of final justification.⁴⁹

Second, this view flies in the face of what is the clear teaching of the text. Dr. Morris declares to us that “judgment is based on men’s works.” The truth that John declares is that the Christian is in fact free from judgment. The decree of John 5:24 declares that we as believers are free from judgment because “we have passed from death to life and will never come into judgment.” Judgment is for those who do evil and come into the resurrection of judgment. But this is not for the believer who has passed from it. John’s point is that there are two resurrections. John makes it clear further in Revelation 20:4-15 that these two resurrections are separated by 1,000 years. (Please forgive my dispensational pre-millennialism if you would be so kind.) John describes the difference in both his gospel and the book of Revelation in just the same way: One to life and one to death - a resurrection reality for all.⁵⁰ But judgment is reserved for those who do not have life but death. The text of John 5:28-29 does not seem to state that the Lord is going to inspect or scrutinize a believer’s work to determine if he or she had/has faith and hence decide if a person has eternal life. However, as to the reality of the Bema seat, where all believers although eternally secure will in fact have their life scrutinized and thereby have their eternal significance determined, this truth as taught by the Apostle Paul in Rom 14:10, 2 Cor. 5:9-10, and implied in 1 Cor. 3-4 is not found in John 5.⁵¹ It is true that it can be deduced from 1 John 2:28 and 2 John 8, but works as the basis for validating one’s eternal life in the

ingressed belief without requiring a greater number and quality of defeaters than one would require of a less ingressed belief. The doctrine of inerrancy is unquestionably a belief that should be deeply ingressed in one’s noetic structure. If belief in inerrancy is given up, a number of other beliefs are weakened or need to be given up as well.” J. P. Moreland, “The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy,” *Trinity Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 75.

⁴⁹ See John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995); John Piper, *What Jesus Demands of the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006); John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988); John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993); and John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost of Christ’s Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003). Also see R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

For an opposing view of the nature of faith see Fred Lybrand, *Back to Faith* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009); Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response* (Burleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1997); Chay and Correia, *Saving Faith*; Joseph C. Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Haysville, NC: Schoettle, 1992); Gordon H. Clark, *The Faith That Saves* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 1983); and C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right: A Balanced View of Salvation Truth*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, MO: Global Gospel, 2005).

⁵⁰ For a detailed section on the intertestamental use of resurrection terminology and theology, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 383-385.

⁵¹ For the theology of the Bema seat see Dillow’s, *Reign of the Servant Kings* and Ruth Fuller, “A Pauline Understanding of Rewards: Its Background and Expression in First Corinthians” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991). Also see Eric Sauer, *In the Arena of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955).

Gospel of John seems to be clearly absent.⁵² The fact that the gift of eternal life is free is just as clearly present.

Exegete “The Text” in Context

In answering the dilemma that the text appears to present, it is important that we keep in mind three perspectives. First is the literary perspective. It has been well observed that John deals with dualities that contain absolutes.⁵³ The absolute divergence of the motifs of light and dark, true and false, love and hate are clearly evidenced in the fourth gospel. The context of our text reveals the absolute motif of life and death.

The second perspective is a temporal description of the eternal perspective by which we understand the view of the writer, and that people are being viewed from the vantage point of the eternal world to come.

The third is a theological perspective which contains the two prior perspectives by which we understand that the ultimate eschatological perspective of people is either seen in the absolute terms of life or death. Hence, the comment about these people is that they are seen and described as either good and therefore have life or bad and have been judged and are dead.

Taken in its totality, John is simply stating that humanity will be viewed by God either as existing in life or death. They will experience acceptance or judgment. The only appropriate description or designation of these two groups is to declare in absolute fashion that they either “do the good” or “do the evil.”⁵⁴ There is no designation or division of some good and some evil in anyone’s life. This is the summary proposition; a statement of the totality of their being in the world of the future. It is a designation of what they now are in the fullness and completion of eternal life. This is not to be seen as a description of their moral goodness on earth. How much moral goodness is necessary is always left unclear by theologians who seek to use the Ten Commandments as the guide for Christian conduct, a practice Louis Berkhof calls the “third use of the law” (*teritus usus legis*) as he understands that the law is to function as the rule of life for the believer.⁵⁵ It is usually left to a sliding scale of subjectivity as to which patterns and duration of behavior are deemed worthy of validation of one’s faith.⁵⁶ There is no assumption in the text of “human action as a litmus

⁵² However, for those of a more Arminian persuasion, John 15 and the burned branches provide evidence for works being needed to be eternally saved. The lack of such works results in the consequence of losing one’s eternal life and going to eternal damnation. See Marshall’s *New Testament Theology* and Keener’s *Power of God* and Shank’s *Life in the Son*.

⁵³ For a source of illustrations of the use of absolutes and dualism in the ancient world in both the rabbinical writings and the stock philosophical works of the day, see the massive two-volume work of Keener, *The Gospel of John*.

⁵⁴ The use of the direct article allows for a precise understanding of the good things or the evil things. The use of *πρασσω* is also used in John 5:29 in regards to doing evil.

⁵⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 614–15.

⁵⁶ Evidently, the Puritans would put new converts on probation to see if their life conformed enough to warrant validation of their salvation. But many lay on their death bed not knowing if they were saved

test of human commitment” as seen by Borchert. There is no dictum as Morris and Köstenberger claim that states, “the life that one lives forms the test of the faith they profess.”⁵⁷ John declares and describes that the designation of people who have eternal life as opposed to judgment are people who are good.

This assessment of Jesus is similar to the Apostle Paul, who is getting more signage at this conference. He states in Romans 8:33-34 that the viewpoint of redeemed people is that there is no one who can lay a charge against God’s elect. Paul also declares in Romans 4:8, “Blessed is the man whom the Lord does not impute sin.”⁵⁸ The redeemed person on earth and certainly viewed from heaven is a person who has passed from death to life and never comes into judgment. He or she is a person that has had a fundamental change in personhood (from Adam to Christ; cf. Romans 5:12f.). He or she has a new identity in Christ, the old person has been crucified, (Romans 6:6) and “it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Therefore, Jesus can say that those who have eternal life are viewed as those who are good, do good, and that there is no judgment now nor ever will be. They live.

I fear that in a sense we as evangelicals, in terms of the doctrine of justification, “do not know what is happening to us, and this is precisely what is happening to us, not to know what is happening to us.”⁵⁹

It seems that the recent past may not tell us what we ought to do, but it may tell us what to avoid. It is to the ancient past, to the sacred Scriptures themselves that we must find the truth and the basis for eternal life.

because of the evidence or lack of evidence to prove to themselves that they had received the gift of eternal life. Calvin seemed to perceive the danger of this even if his theological progeny did not. He states, “Besides, the sins themselves, on account of which believers every day subject themselves to condemnation, are not imputed to them. For without the pardon which God grants to those who believe in Him, there never was a man in the world of whom we can say that he has lived well: nor is there a single work that will be reckoned altogether good, unless God pardon the sins which belong to it, for all are imperfect and corrupted. Those persons therefore, are here called doers of good works whom Paul calls earnestly desirous or zealous of them (Tit. ii.14). But this estimate depends on the fatherly kindness of God, who by free grace approves what deserves to be rejected.” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:209-210.

However, the later edition makes a slight change in the translation of Calvin and substitutes “the kindness of God who ‘freely approves’” in place of the translation “free grace” see John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 1, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 133. Consult also the *Westminster Confession of Faith* for the idea of “Free Grace”. See “Of Effectual Calling,” chapter 10 section 1:7, section 2:1, “Of God’s Eternal Decree,” Chapter 3 section 5:1, “Of Repentance,” Chapter 15 section 3:2.

⁵⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 321-22.

⁵⁸ The translation of λογισται is “impute” in the NKJV. Other translations use the term “account” NAS or “never count” as in the NET Bible.

⁵⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis*, trans. Mildred Adams (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1962), quoted in David N. Gibbs, *Twilight of the American State* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 14.

**THE CRUCIBLE OF MORIAH:
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THE CHARACTERIZATION OF
ABRAHAM'S COVENANTAL FAITH IN GENESIS 22**

TSUNEKI TOYODA*

Abstract. *While Genesis 22 is extensively researched, the precise intersection between its micro-structural design and overarching covenantal theology warrants closer examination. This thesis argues that the narrative's meticulous architecture characterizes Abraham as the prototypical man of faith, demonstrating that the divine-human covenant is forged when absolute obedience supersedes preferential love. Employing narrative criticism, this study analyzes the text's scenic progression, lexical motifs, and Hebrew syntax. It illuminates how the Akedah's literary mechanics establish an enduring theological paradigm for covenantal loyalty, offering vital applicational principles for contemporary Christian faith.*

Keywords. *Genesis 22, akedah, narrative criticism, covenantal theology, Abrahamic faith, literary structure, divine test*

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 22:1–19 stands as a literary masterpiece, recognized by many scholars as the theological climax of the patriarchal narratives. While biblical scholars have extensively analyzed this passage through various critical lenses, uncovering a wealth of structural symmetries and theological insights, the profound intersection of its literary design and its ultimate message warrants precise exploration.¹ Employing the tools of narrative criticism, this study seeks to uncover the theology embedded within the text's very construction. Thus, through a narrative analysis of Genesis 22:1–19, this thesis argues that the author's meticulous narrative architecture—specifically the use of concentric

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¹ For a summary of the two principal interpretative approaches to Genesis 22, see Robert B. Crotty, "The Literary Structure of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22," *Australian Biblical Review* 53 (2005): 32–33.

frameworks, spatial ironies, and the lexical debut of foundational motifs—characterizes Abraham as the prototypical man of faith, demonstrating that the divine-human covenant is forged when Abraham prioritizes his obedience to God over his profound love for his son.

To achieve this objective, the research proceeds in four systematic stages. First, it explores the literary and theological context of Genesis 12–21, examining how the broader Abrahamic narrative prepares the reader for this climactic test. Second, it analyzes the literary structure and scene composition of Genesis 22:1–19, demonstrating how the narrator organizes the plot’s progression and escalating tension. Third, the investigation turns to micro-level narrative techniques—specifically Abraham’s speech, his methodical actions, and the text’s compound ironies—to determine how they function to characterize his absolute obedience. Finally, the study synthesizes these structural and characterological findings to affirm how the Akedah ultimately defines and secures the enduring divine-human covenantal relationship.

I. LITERARY CONTEXT, SCENIC PLOT, AND PARALLEL STRUCTURE IN GENESIS 22

To fully grasp how the author constructs this covenantal theology, it is first necessary to establish the foundational architecture of the narrative. Therefore, before examining the specific characterization of Abraham, this study must map the literary and theological context and scenic progression that precipitate the crisis on Mount Moriah.

Given the significance of literary context as a primary tool for decoding biblical narrative,² the present study first explores the literary and theological backdrop leading into Genesis 22. The chapter then explores the narrative plot, examining the progressive development of each scene in the episode. Lastly, it proposes a comprehensive literary parallel structure for Genesis 22, demonstrating how this deliberate textual symmetry supports and elevates the scenic structure.

A. The Literary and Theological Context toward Genesis 22

The narrative of Genesis 22 does not function in isolation; rather, it is deeply embedded within the broader literary and theological context of the Abrahamic narrative. First, in its immediate context, the narrator deliberately draws the reader’s attention back to the preceding episode of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:8–21), establishing profound thematic and structural parallels regarding the potential loss and divine rescue of a son.³

² John A. Beck, *God as Storyteller: Seeking Meaning in Biblical Narrative* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 22.

³ The structural and linguistic parallels between the rescue of Ishmael (Gen 21:8–21) and the test of Isaac (22:1–19) are remarkably consistent, as demonstrated by the following features: (1) Divine mandate to Abraham (21:12; 22:2) and his immediate, realized obedience (21:14; 22:3), marked by the repetitive formula, “And so Abraham rose early in the morning, and took...” (וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בֶּבֶקֶר וַיִּקָּח); (2) Angelic

Secondly, the divine command that initiates the trial (Gen 22:2) utilizes specific imperative verbs that powerfully echo God's initial call to Abraham (Gen 12:1), framing Abraham's entire journey within a macro-narrative of radical obedience.⁴ Finally, the culminating divine oath (22:16–18) serves to synthesize and ratify the various iterations of the covenantal promise that the reader has encountered and will throughout the patriarchal narrative.⁵

B. The Plot in Genesis 22:1–19

The plot of Genesis 22 unfolds not as a simple historical recounting, but as a meticulously paced narrative designed to maximize theological tension. The narrator immediately establishes the story's interpretive lens in the exposition: "God tested Abraham" (v. 1a).⁶ The plot is then propelled into motion by the divine command to sacrifice Isaac (vv. 1b–2; Scene 1). Abraham's resolute obedience is demonstrated on the second day through his silent, methodical preparations and departure from Beersheba (v. 3; Scene 2a). By the third day, as Moriah appears on the horizon (v. 4; Scene 2b), the narrative tension dramatically escalates. Abraham commands his servants to remain behind

intervention from heaven (21:17; 22:11), "the angel of God (the LORD) called to Hagar (him) from heaven" (ויקרא מלאך אלהים אל הגר מן השמים); (3) Visual transformation: from death to life; the transformation of visual perception (ראה/עיני); both parents witness the imminent threat (21:16; 22:4) and subsequently behold the divine provision for life—"a well of water" (21:19) and "a ram" (22:13); (4) Reaffirmation of the divine promise (21:13, 18; 22:16–18), ensuring the future of the son's progeny; (5) Narrative Conclusion and Settlement: the narrative resolution in which both Ishmael and Abraham "settle" (ישב) in their respective locations—the wilderness (21:21) and Beersheba (22:19). Thus Alter notes these two stories as "type-scene" that is "the recurrence of the same event." Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 225–26.

⁴ The narratives of Genesis 12 and 22 are inextricably linked by a profound macro-structural parallelism, anchored by three specific literary and theological features: (1) Both accounts are initiated by the distinctive Hebrew imperative *lekh-lekha*, "go forth" or "go for yourself" (לך-לך). Notably, this exact formulation appears only in Genesis 12:1 and 22:2 across the entire Hebrew Bible, acting as deliberate narrative bookends to Abraham's overarching journey of faith; (2) The divine geographic instructions parallel one another, demanding identical acts of blind obedience: in 12:1, God commands Abraham to go "to the land that I will show you" (אל הארץ אשר אראך), which is mirrored in 22:2 by the command to go "to the land of Moriah" (אל ארץ המריה), further specified as the mountain "which I shall tell you" (אשר אמר אליך; cf. 22:3, 'to the place of which God had told him' [אל המקום אשר אמר לו האלהים]); (3) Both narratives culminate in the exact same two-fold components of the covenantal promise: the direct divine blessing upon Abraham (12:2; 22:17, "I will bless you" [אברכך]), and the universal blessing extended to all the nations of the earth through Abraham and his offspring (12:3; 22:18). See also Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (London, UK/New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2004), 212–13; Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 49–50; Artur A. Stele, "Behold the Lamb," in *Don't Forget Your Dream*, ed. Artur A. Stele (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2022), 47–48.

⁵ "I will surely bless you" (12:2; 22:17); "I will surely multiply your offspring" (16:10; 17:2, 20; 22:17; 26:4a); "as the stars of heaven" (15:5; 22:17; 26:4b); "as the sand that is on the seashore" (22:17; 32:12) in parallel with "as the dust of the earth" (13:16; 28:14); "possess the gate of his enemies" (22:17; 24:60) in parallel with "possess the land" (15:7–8; 28:4); "in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (12:3; 18:18; 26:4).

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of biblical texts are my own.

(v. 5; Scene 2c) and takes up the wood, fire, and knife, initiating the solemn march where he and Isaac “walk together” (v. 6; Scene 2d). This march is punctuated by a single, agonizing dialogue wherein Isaac questions the absence of a lamb (v. 7; Scene 3a), prompting Abraham’s profound confession of divine provision (v. 8; Scene 3b). The narrative pacing slows to an agonizing crawl at the climax, detailing Abraham’s consecutive actions of preparing the altar, binding his son, and raising the knife (vv. 9–10; Scene 4a). This peak suspense is ultimately resolved by a sudden angelic intervention that halts the execution and validates Abraham’s fear of God (vv. 11–12; Scene 4b). Following the substitutionary sacrifice of the ram (v. 13; Scene 4c) and the culminating reaffirmation of the divine covenant (vv. 14–18; Scene 4d), the plot reaches its denouement as Abraham quietly returns to his servants and journeys back to Beersheba (v. 19; Scene 5).⁷

C. The Parallel Structure of Genesis 22:1–19

The narrator constructs a meticulous parallel literary structure built upon three distinct divine encounters (Gen 22:1–10, 11–14, 15–19).⁸ The architecture of the narrative can be mapped as follows:

Panel I. God’s Command and Abraham’s Obedience (vv. 1–10)

- A1. Abraham’s Dialogue with God (v. 1)
- A2. The Divine Statement: God’s Command for Sacrifice (v.2)
- A3. Abraham’s Obedient Actions: His Immediate Preparations for the Journey (v. 3)
 - B1. Abraham’s View of Moriah as the Place of the Death (v. 4)
 - B2. Abraham’s Return Promised: His Prophetic Dialogue with His Servants (v. 5)
 - B3. Abraham’s Obedient Actions: His Determined Preparations for Ascent to Moriah (v. 6)

⁷ The narrator deliberately closes this episode by employing a strict literary *inclusio* (or envelope structure) to bracket the events on Mount Moriah. In Genesis 22:19, the narrator states, “So Abraham returned (וַיָּשָׁב) to his young men, and they arose and went (וַיָּקֻמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ) together.” This perfectly mirrors the verbs of the initial departure in 22:3, where Abraham “arose and went” (וַיָּקֻם וַיֵּלֶךְ). Furthermore, this matching terminology acts as a profound narrative resolution. In 22:5, Abraham proleptically declares to the servants that “we will return (וְנָשׁוּבָה) to you.” By explicitly echoing this exact verb in the conclusion, the narrator resolves the agonizing tension of the narrative, proving the fulfillment of Abraham’s faithful foresight.

⁸ For a further discussion of parallel or symmetry structure and its interpretation in biblical narrative, see Walsh, *Style and Structure*, 7–11. Regarding the plot development through the thematic lens of the divine covenant within the parallel structure of Genesis 22:1–19, the narrative arc aligns precisely with the threefold division of divine speech. This tripartite structure drives the text from the initial crisis of the divine covenant with Abraham (vv. 1–10), through the climax of the divine intervention into Abraham’s absolute obedience (vv. 11–14), to the ultimate resolution of covenantal reaffirmation (vv. 15–19). In other words, God deliberately introduces this crisis into His own covenant with Abraham (vv. 1–10); the narrative then escalates to its absolute climax as the angel of the LORD intervenes to halt Abraham’s supreme act of sacrifice (vv. 11–14); finally, the plot resolves with God definitively reaffirming the covenantal promises (vv. 15–19).

C. Abraham's Prophetic Confession: "God Will Provide" in Dialogue (vv. 7–8)

D1. Abraham's Obedient Actions: His Final Preparations for Offering His Son (v. 9)

D2. Abraham's Obedient Final Actions: His Execution of the Divine Command (v. 10)

Panel II. God's Intervention and Provision (vv. 11–14)

A'1. Abraham's Dialogue with the Angel of the LORD (v. 11)

A'2. The Divine Statement: Angel's Command for Life and His Verdict of Abraham's Obedience (v. 12)

B'1. Abraham's View of Ram as the Source of Life (v. 13a)

B'2. Abraham's Worship with Offering the Ram for A Burnt Offering (v. 13b)

C'. Abraham's Monumental Confession: "The LORD Will Provide" as a Testimony (v. 14)

Panel III. God's Covenantal Oath (vv. 15–19)

A''1. Abraham's Dialogue with the Angel of the LORD (v. 15)

A''2. The Divine Statement: YHWH's Verdict of Abraham's Obedience and His Covenantal Oath (vv. 16–18)

B''. Abraham's Return Fulfilled: His Journey's End and Residence of Beersheba (v. 19)

Exposition of the structure. Each of the primary structural divisions is anchored by a divine statement (vv. 2, 12, 16–18), which is consistently initiated by a dialogue between Abraham and God or the Angel of the LORD (vv. 1, 11, 15). The narrator explicitly links the divine verdicts regarding Abraham's obedience—"you did not withhold your son, your only one" (וְלֹא חִשַּׁכְתָּ אֶת בְּנִךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ; vv. 12, 16)—directly back to the initial command to offer "your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac" (אֶת בְּנִךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר אֹהֶבְתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק; v. 2).⁹

Furthermore, the structural framework heavily relies on the strategic pairing of motifs. The narrator parallels Abraham's perception using the Hebrew idiom of elevated sight, "Abraham lifted his eyes and saw" (וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא; vv. 4, 13).¹⁰ Finally, the theological core of the structure is defined by Abraham's tandem confessions of divine provision: first embedded within his prophetic dialogue, "God will provide for himself"

⁹ Of course, Abraham's obedient action that he "did not withhold" his son (vv. 12, 16) means that he "offer(ed)" (v. 2). Note variations: the absence of "whom he loves, Isaac" (אֲשֶׁר אֹהֶבְתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק; v. 2) in verses 12 and 16; the addition of "from me" (מִמֶּנִּי; v. 12) and "you have done this thing" (עָשִׂיתָ אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה; v. 16).

¹⁰ Note a variation: the addition of "and behold" (וְהִינֵה; v. 13). See note 26.

(אלהים יראה לו; v.8), and ultimately as a lasting testimony in the memorialization of the altar, “the LORD will provide” (יהוה יראה; v. 14).¹¹

II. ABRAHAM’S CHARACTERIZATION IN GENESIS 22 (OBSERVATION)

Having established the overarching architectural framework of Genesis 22, the analysis now turns to how the author fills this framework. Specifically, the scenic plot serves as the literary crucible within which Abraham’s character is meticulously forged and revealed through observable narrative techniques.

Because biblical narrative rarely relies on internal psychological description, the author constructs Abraham’s characterization entirely through precise, observable literary techniques. To uncover the depth of the patriarch’s faith, this section analyzes four primary narrative devices. First, it examines the strategic deployment of foundational lexical motifs—specifically the progression from the divine “test” (נסה; v. 1) and preferential “love” (אהב; v. 2) to the ultimate “fear” (ירא) of God (v. 12). Second, it observes the profound narrative tension generated by Abraham’s silent, methodical, and consecutive actions as he executes the agonizing command (vv. 3, 6, 9, 10). Third, it investigates the theological climax of Abraham’s sparse dialogue, focusing specifically on his prophetic confession of divine provision (v. 8). Finally, it analyzes the culmination of this characterization within the final divine speech (22:16–18), juxtaposing Abraham’s empirical and ideological obedience (vv. 16, 18b).

A. Repetition of the Words: “Test” (נסה), “Love” (אהב), and “Fear” (ירא)

Genesis 22 marks the first canonical appearance of two critical Hebrew verbs: “to test” (נסה, *nsh*) and “to love” (אהב, *ahav*). While the narrator utilizes each word only once in this specific episode, their debut in the Abrahamic narrative is highly significant. Furthermore, they are inextricably joined by a third crucial term: the verbal adjective “fear” (ירא, *yārē*). Together, these three words establish a theological baseline for the Torah, ultimately becoming central motifs that are repeated extensively to describe the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

1. “Test” (נסה; 22:1). The narrator reveals the theme of this episode: “God tested Abraham” (והאלהים נסה את אברהם; v. 1).¹² This Hebrew verb נסה (*nāsāh*) is used fourteen

¹¹ Note variations: the absence of “for himself” (לו; v. 8) in verse 14, and the shift of the divine name, “God” (אלהים; v. 8) to “the LORD” (יהוה; v. 14).

¹² While the majority of scholarship analyzes the divine test retrospectively against the preceding Abrahamic narrative, the present study explores the use and meaning of נסה (*nāsāh*) across its subsequent canonical trajectory, given its inaugural appearance here in the Torah. From a comparative ancient Near Eastern perspective, Morschauser helpfully frames this test as “a symbolic ritual between the deity and patriarch.” He argues its purpose was to honor Abraham as a faithful vassal and to prove God as the most trustworthy of suzerains. This external approach corroborates the central argument of the present study: that the divine crucible fundamentally functions to forge and maintain the covenantal relationship. Scott

times in the Torah but only once in Genesis. We can observe two kinds of main uses of נִסָּה in the Torah: the divine test for the people of Israel, as in this episode, and the people's test of God.¹³ Both focus on the divine covenantal relationship with the people of Israel. Regarding the former specifically, the Torah's author defines the purpose of the divine test as knowing what is in the heart of the people, their obedience to His commandment (Deut. 8:2), and their love of God (13:3).¹⁴ Thus, the reader, who is familiar with the Torah, identifies Abraham as the first examinee of the divine test in the history of Israel and expects with suspense to know what is in Abraham's heart and whether he will obey and love God or not.

2. "Love" (אהב; 22:2). The reader also faces the new Hebrew verb אהב ('ahav) in 22:2, "Take your son, your only son whom you love (אשר אהבת), Isaac."¹⁵ The reader knows how much Abraham has loved his son, Isaac, since he is the seed that God had been promising to Abraham, and that is the crux of the story at this point. On the one hand, throughout the patriarchal narratives after this episode, the narrator strategically employs the Hebrew word אהב not merely to describe emotional affection,¹⁶ but as a critical narrative catalyst and Leitwort ("leading word")¹⁷ that drives the plot. In Genesis, preferential love consistently functions as a destabilizing force that generates familial fracture and sibling rivalry. This motif spans the generations: Isaac's preferential love for Esau (Gen 25:28), Jacob's unequal love for Rachel over Leah (29:30), and Israel's overt favoritism toward Joseph (37:3–4). All directly trigger the central conflicts of their respective narratives.¹⁸ On the other hand, for the diligent Torah reader, the predominant

Morschauser, "“Seeing You Have Not Withheld Your Son”: An Overlooked Motif in Genesis 22?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 3 (2021): 388–406.

¹³ See the divine test for the people of Israel (Gen 22:1; Exod 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut 8:2, 16; 13:3) and the people's test of God (Exod 17:2, 7; Num 14:22; Deut 6:16; 33:8) in the Torah. Conversely, Patterson argues that within its immediate context, the divine test is specifically designed to demonstrate Abraham's righteousness. Todd L. Patterson, *The Plot-Structure of Genesis: "Will the Righteous Seed Survive?" in the Muthos-Logical Movement from Complication to Dénouement*, Biblical Interpretation Series 160 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2018), 130–32.

¹⁴ Campbell, associating *nāsāh* with Deuteronomy 8:2–3, points out that many of contemporary interpreters of Genesis 22 do not take "relationship building nature of testing" into account. Stephen D. Campbell, "The Surety of God's Promises: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 22," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 49, no. 3 (2019): 127.

¹⁵ It is structurally significant that following the narrative climax (v. 10), the narrator deliberately omits the descriptive clause "whom you love" (אשר אהבת) from the subsequent divine declarations regarding Isaac (vv. 12, 16). This strategic lexical absence (or a variation of repetition) reinforces the theological resolution of the crisis: Abraham's preferential earthly affection has been successfully subordinated to his covenantal fear of the LORD through his absolute obedience.

¹⁶ For another critical discussion of the preferential love, see Scott F. Crider, "The Test: Narrating God, Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:1–19," *Literary Imagination* 19, no. 2 (2017): 11–12.

¹⁷ Alter argues *Leitwort* for a purposeful repetition of words, which makes contributions to play much roles to develop thematic argument and reveals a meaning of the text in the biblical narrative. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116–17.

¹⁸ Furthermore, human אהב ('ahav) is frequently portrayed as flawed or misdirected, such as Shechem's disastrous love for Dinah (34:3) or Isaac's appetite-driven love for savory food (27:4), which blinds him to the divine will. See also Middleton's argument. J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The*

use of אהב specifically in Deuteronomy designates the covenantal loyalty and exclusive obedience required of Israel toward Yahweh.¹⁹ Therefore, this makes the reader aware that the divine test of Abraham is fundamentally designed to refine and elevate Abraham's covenantal relationship through his love of God, represented in his obedience.

3. “Fear” (יִרָא; 22:12). The angelic verdict regarding Abraham's absolute obedience—“for now I know that you fear God” (כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֹתָהּ; 22:12)—is masterfully enclosed by two negative clauses that govern Abraham's physical actions toward Isaac.²⁰ Marking the canonical debut of “fear” as an active, proven state of covenantal reverence embodied by a patriarch,²¹ the diligent Torah reader must immediately recognize this verdict as the theological twin to the motif of “love” (אהב) introduced in verse 2.²² In the broader Deuteronomic framework, these two concepts are inextricably linked as the paramount requirements of Israel's relationship with Yahweh (e.g., Deut. 10:12).²³ Thus, by proving his “fear” through the ultimate “test,” Abraham is established as the archetypal covenantal partner—the first to perfectly embody the ideological faithfulness that God would ultimately demand of all Israel.

Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 172.

¹⁹ Exod. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; 6:5; 7:9; 11:1; 13, 22; 13:3; 19:9; 21:15–16; 30:6, 16, 20. In Gen. 22:2, God explicitly identifies Isaac as the object of Abraham's human affection (‘whom you love’ [אֲשֶׁר־אֶהְבֶּתָּ]). Yet, the narrator refrains from condemning this love as flawed preferentialism; rather, he uses it as the crucible for Abraham's faith. By silently subordinating his profound human affection to his absolute obedience—culminating in the terrifying, empirical act of taking the knife—Abraham perfectly embodies the ultimate Deuteronomic ideal: the love of God expressed through unyielding covenantal loyalty.

²⁰ The verdict (22:12) is bracketed first by the prohibitive command, “Do not reach out your hand to the boy and do not do anything to him” (אַל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנֶּעַר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה), and second by the explanatory confirmation, “for you did not withhold your son, your only son from me” (וְלֹא חִשַּׁכְתָּ אֶת בְּנִךְ אֶת) (יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי). Bar-Efrat remarks [that such] characterization [as] defined by God has total reliability. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 54.

²¹ See also Gen 42:18; Exod 14:31; Lev 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43; Deut. 4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6; 10:12, 20; 13:4; 14:23; 17:19; 28:58; 31:12–13.

²² While we can observe variations of the repeated phrase “your son, your only son” (אֶת בְּנִךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ) vv. 12, 16) in parallel to “your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac” (אֶת בְּנִךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק) (v. 2), this notable absence of “whom you love, Isaac” (אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק) drives the reader to associate fear with love within the broader context of the Torah. For another interpretation of this variation, see Crider, “Test,” 14.

²³ Block defines יִרָא as “awed trust” or “confident awe,” noting that Deuteronomy simultaneously highlights love (אהב) for Yahweh as a foundational disposition. Rather than treating these as contradictory impulses, Deuteronomy 10:12–13 presents both fear and love as complementary expressions of devotion (or obedience), with fear opening the sequence and love serving as the central pivot point in the structure of a proper relationship with God. Daniel I. Block, “Worship,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, EN: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 868; Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 9. On the other hand, Patterson argues that Abraham's demonstrated fear of God in Genesis 22 serves to resolve his earlier moral failure in Genesis 20. There, it was ironically Abimelech and the Philistines—rather than Abraham—who exhibited a genuine “fear of God.” Patterson, *The Plot-Structure of Genesis: “Will the Righteous Seed Survive?” in the Muthos-Logical Movement from Complication to Dénouement*, 132.

B. The Knife (את המאכלת) and Abraham's Hand (ידו) in His Obedient Actions (vv. 3, 6, 9, 10)

The narrator represents Abraham's obedience to God's command through his consecutive actions: his immediate preparations for the journey (v. 3); his determined preparations for ascent to Moriah (v. 6); his final preparations for offering his son (v. 9); and his execution of the divine command (v. 10).²⁴ Every action of Abraham portrayed in this episode is oriented toward the slaying of his son, thereby demonstrating his absolute obedience to God.²⁵

The narrator strategically manipulates the presence of the knife (את המאכלת) and Abraham's hand (ידו) to escalate narrative tension and control dramatic pacing. In the initial preparations (v. 3), the knife is conspicuously absent from the catalog of items, hiding the violent reality of the journey. It is only in verse 6 that the narrator places the knife directly into Abraham's hand ("and he took in his hand the fire and the knife"). This creates profound dramatic irony through focalization: the reader is hyper-aware of the weapon in the father's hand, while Isaac's subsequent question (v. 7) reveals his tragic ignorance of it.²⁶ The narrator then suppresses the knife again during the harrowing, silent preparations of the altar (v. 9), forcing the reader to anticipate its inevitable return. Finally, the tension breaks in the climax of verse 10. Rather than reporting the action swiftly, the narrator employs narrative retardation—slowing the text down to a microscopic, frame-by-frame pace by assigning distinct verbs to distinct anatomical movements: "Then Abraham

²⁴ We can think of Abraham's consecutive actions narrated as representing his inner belief. See Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 18–20.

²⁵ Alter observes that "parallels of situation and reiterations of motif" present "moral and psychological commentary on each other." Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 115. Thus, narrative analogy (Gen 21:8–21; 22:1–19) as a literary technique give another insight into Abraham's characterization (for a detailed analysis on Gen 21 and 22, see note 3, above). When analyzing the stark narrative reticence of Genesis 22, the reader must interpret Abraham's silence not as an absence of emotion, but through the analogical juxtaposition of the preceding chapter. Genesis 21 and 22 function as a narrative diptych, sharing structurally identical plots of the loss and miraculous restoration of a son. In Genesis 21, the text explicitly reveals Abraham's internal agony over the expulsion of Ishmael, noting that the demand was "very displeasing in his eyes on account of his son" (וירע הדבר מאד בעיני אברהם על אודת בנו; v. 11). God himself must address this emotional turmoil directly (v. 12). Furthermore, Hagar's vocalized despair—"Let me not look on the death of the child" (v. 16)—serves as a devastating emotional proxy. By placing these narratives back-to-back, the narrator trains the diligent reader to overlap Hagar's weeping and Abraham's prior grief onto the silent, agonizing ascent of Mount Moriah. The emotional transparency of Genesis 21 is textually designed to compensate for the emotional vacuum of Genesis 22, ensuring that the reader perceives the devastating psychological cost of Abraham's raised knife, even as the patriarch silently subordinates his love to his obedience. Alter acknowledges narrative analogy as "type scene" and claims the significance to thoroughly explore the multifaceted meanings of these two stories. For a further discussion of narrative analogy, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 225–26.

²⁶ Crider, "Test," 8. The narrator further compounds the reader's perception of Abraham's agony by introducing another irony using the verb שים ("to set/place"). Just as the reader is painfully aware of the knife in Abraham's hand while Isaac remains ignorant, the narrator deploys a dark spatial irony regarding the wood: initially, the wood is placed upon Isaac (v. 6), but ultimately, Isaac is placed upon the wood (v. 9). See also Kenneth. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, The New American Commentary 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 292.

sent his hand (יָדוֹ), and took the knife (יָקָה אֶת הַמַּאֲכֵלֶת) (v. 10). By separating the movement of the hand from the grasping of the weapon, the text forces the reader to experience the empirical horror of the raised knife in excruciating slow-motion.²⁷

C. Abraham's Speech: His Confession in the Concentric Structure (v. 8)

In accordance with biblical narrative convention, the narrator embeds Abraham's inner faith within his direct speech;²⁸ however, this confession of divine provision is further elevated through a distinct concentric narrative structure.

The narrator constructs a masterful, multi-tiered chiasmic structure (an A-B-C-X-C'-B'-A' pattern) to draw the reader's absolute focus toward the theological center of the narrative.²⁹ At the macro-level, the entire Moriah ordeal is bounded by an outer inclusio (A/A') using the exact syntactic idiom: "Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw" (וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא; vv. 4, 13).³⁰ This phrase marks Abraham's harrowing view of Mount Moriah as the place of death (v. 4). However, this outer frame is perfectly closed when Abraham lifts his eyes and, marked by the emphatic particle "behold" (וְהִנֵּה), sees the provided ram as the source of life instead of Isaac (v. 13).³¹ Moving from this broad structural boundary

²⁷ The use of repetition of two verbs in one action in this case or repetition of verbs represented in Abraham's consecutive actions effects the extension of the time when the character acts. Bar-Efrat claims "the actions depicted in a scene sometimes occur within a shorter space of time than it takes to read the narrated event." Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 150. See also Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 108–9; Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 54–55. For a further discussion of time, specifically duration, see Francois Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives: A Practical Guide* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 93–99.

²⁸ For a further discussion of speech or dialogue, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 84–87, 90–91, 226–28. For more on association of dialogue with time, see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 147–50.

²⁹ The complete chiasmic architecture of this scene (vv. 4–13) can be mapped as follows, demonstrating how the narrator nests these inclusios to funnel the reader's attention directly toward the theological pivot of divine provision:

- A. Abraham lifts his eyes and sees the place of death (v. 4)
 - B. "and the two of them walked together" (v. 6c)
 - C. "the lamb for a burnt offering" (Isaac's question; v. 7b)
 - X. The Pivot: "God will provide for himself" (v. 8a)
 - C'. "the lamb for a burnt offering" (Abraham's answer; v. 8a)
 - B'. "and the two of them walked together" (v. 8b)
- A'. Abraham lifts his eyes and sees the ram of life (v. 13)

For more on Abraham's lifting his eyes, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 110; Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 220–21; John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch, ed. Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 345.

³⁰ This formula is frequently used in the Hebrew Bible to emphasize significant junctures in narratives, especially in Genesis (in the Torah, Gen 13:10; 18:2; 24:63; 33:1, 5; 37:25; 43:29; Num 24:2; cf. See also its variations: Gen 21:19 and 13:14; 31:12).

³¹ For a further discussion of the use of "behold" (*hinnēh*), see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 35–36; Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative*, 49.

down to the micro-level, the narrator constructs a masterful concentric inclusio (a double envelope structure) to draw the reader's absolute focus to the sole dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. The outer frame is established by the haunting repetition of the phrase, "and the two of them walked together" (וילכו שניהם יחדו; vv. 6c, 8b). This outer bracket isolates the father and son, emphasizing the silent poignancy of their march. Within this boundary, the narrator deploys a second, tighter inner inclusio using the phrase "the lamb for a burnt offering" (השה לעלה; vv. 7b, 8a).³² This nested structure acts as a literary funnel, driving the reader's attention to the exact theological center of the dialogue: Abraham's prophetic declaration, "And Abraham said, God will provide for himself" (ויאמר אברהם) (אלהים יראה לו; v. 8a).³³ By enclosing this single sentence within multiple structural frames, the narrator elevates the motif of divine provision as the focal point of the ordeal.

D. The Syntactic and Covenantal Inclusio of Genesis 22:16–18

Furthermore, the text's structural brilliance extends to the final divine speech (22:16–18), which serves as a critical epilogue to Abraham's characterization. The LORD's oath serves as the ultimate divine verdict on Abraham's obedience and definitively reaffirms the covenantal promises in response to his devotion. In fact, Abraham's empirical and ideological obedience (vv. 16, 18b) structurally encloses the covenantal promises of the LORD (vv. 17–18a).

In the final declaration, the text draws a profound distinction between the physical mechanics of the test and its ultimate covenantal purpose. In Genesis 22:16, the divine declaration is fundamentally empirical: "because you have done this and have not withheld your son." God acknowledges the observable, terrifying physical proof of Abraham's devotion. However, in Genesis 22:18b, the narrative shifts from the empirical to the ideological (or theological) climax: "because you have obeyed my voice" (שמעת בקלי). The narrator deliberately moves from the external action of the raised knife (doing) to the internal, covenantal posture of the heart (listening/obeying). Thus, the empirical act of

³² The significance of this specific phrase extends beyond its function as an inner inclusio; it simultaneously serves as the climax of a broader lexical pattern. To further escalate the narrative tension, the narrator employs strategic variations in the repetition of the "burnt offering" (עלה) motif, mapping it perfectly onto a dramatic arc. The reader is first introduced to the narrative crisis when God commands Abraham to offer Isaac as "a burnt offering" (לעלה; v. 2). This tension is sustained through the narrative development as the characters agonizingly handle "the wood of the burnt offering" (עצי עלה; vv. 3, 6). The psychological suspense reaches its climax during the dialogue concerning the whereabouts of "the lamb for a burnt offering" (השה לעלה; vv. 7, 8), before finally achieving its resolution when Abraham offers the provided ram as "a burnt offering instead of his son" (לעלה תחת בנו; v. 13).

³³ Berlin argues that Isaac's initial "said" without any speech, followed by another "said" with speech, represents Isaac's nervousness (22:7). Thus, we can characterize Abraham's speech as with confidence (22:7–8). Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 45. According to Alter's ascending scale of narrative certainty, the theological hope of Abraham's direct speech (22:8), at the middle level of "the weighing of claims," is ultimately validated by the omniscient narrator (22:14), securing the reality of divine provision at the highest level of explicit certainty. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 146–47; Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 48–49.

sacrifice is ultimately subordinated to the ideological requirement of absolute obedience to the divine word.

The translation of the final divine speech in Genesis 22:16–18 highlights a critical intersection between syntax, literary structure, and theology. While some modern English translations, such as the NET, rearrange the clause order of verse 18 for stylistic fluidity, adhering strictly to the original Hebrew syntax reveals a masterful literary inclusio. Grammatically, the narrator brackets the divine promises with two causal subordinate clauses: opening with the empirical justification in verse 16 (“because [יען אשר] you have done this and you did not withhold your son, your only one”) and closing with the ideological justification in verse 18 (“because [עקב אשר] you have obeyed my voice”). By maintaining the original Hebrew clause order—where the causal clause perfectly concludes the speech—the text creates a deliberate envelope structure. Within this syntactic frame, the divine promises themselves (the blessing of Abraham, the multiplication and the victory of, and the universal blessing through the seed) are firmly enclosed and upheld by the dual realities of Abraham’s obedience.³⁴

III. ABRAHAM’S CHARACTERIZATION IN GENESIS 22 (THE MESSAGES)

The narrator reveals that God tested Abraham, the father of the nation, before the people of Israel experienced their own testing in the wilderness, establishing him as the first participant of the divine test. Thus, the Torah context creates the expectation for Abraham to overcome this divine trial for the explicit purpose of revealing his inner heart, obedience, and love, ultimately forging and maintaining his covenantal relationship with God. Because Genesis 22 marks the inaugural appearance of the Hebrew verb נסה (*nasah*), this episode establishes the definitive theological baseline for all subsequent divine testing. It demonstrates that the test is never punitive, but rather a profound mechanism designed to expose and refine the covenantal partner’s deepest allegiances.

On the one hand, the narrative constructs an impending crisis inherent in Abraham’s love for Isaac. As subsequent patriarchal narratives will repeatedly demonstrate, preferential human love (אהב) possesses a destructive potential, often generating familial fracture, sibling rivalry, and moral misdirection. On the other hand, the broader

³⁴ As Joüon and Muraoka observe regarding Hebrew syntax, “The order of the constituent members depends on the relative importance of each of the two.” In Genesis 22:16, the causal clause introduced by יען אשר (*ya’an asher*) precedes the apodosis (the divine promise in v. 17). Because יען אשר carries a strong semantic nuance, fronting this clause forcefully highlights Abraham’s empirical obedience. However, the divine promise within the apodosis is not overshadowed; rather, it is structurally anchored by the overarching syntactic inclusio formed by יען אשר (v. 16) and עקב אשר (*eqev asher*) (v. 18). Conversely, in verse 18, the causal clause (עקב אשר) is deliberately placed after the apodosis. This post-posed position elevates the preceding divine promises to primary importance. Yet, the causal clause itself retains profound emphasis, as עקב אשר specifically carries “the special nuance of ‘in recompense for the fact that.’” Thus, the grammatical arrangement perfectly balances the ideological weight of Abraham’s obedience with the theological certainty of God’s promise. Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome, IT: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), 600–601.

Pentateuchal trajectory anticipates that Abraham will transcend this purely earthly attachment—refining and elevating his affection into the ultimate covenantal love for God, manifested through his absolute obedience. By commanding Abraham to offer up his uniquely beloved son, the narrative forces a deliberate collision between his most profound earthly attachment and his overarching devotion to the suzerain of the covenant. This tension underscores the theological reality that even the greatest gifts of the covenant, Isaac, must never usurp the absolute authority of the LORD.

The profound depth of Abraham's obedience is conveyed through the narrative's escalating tension, a tension most masterfully symbolized by the knife. The narrator's deliberate handling of this weapon—its ominous presence in Abraham's hand and its glaring absence from Isaac's awareness—forges intense dramatic suspense. Beneath this suspense, however, the narrator uncovers the reality of Abraham's resolute and unwavering obedience, demonstrated by his methodical, consecutive actions as he moves steadily and thoroughly toward the climax. As Abraham's actions approach their culmination, the narrative forces a breathless anticipation of the agonizing scene where Abraham slowly grasps the knife to strike his son. The text deliberately slows the pacing to an excruciating rhythm by assigning distinct verbs to distinct anatomical movements: "Then Abraham sent his hand, and took the knife" (v. 10). This deliberate narrative retardation eliminates any possibility that Abraham was acting out of sudden, unthinking zeal. In this ultimate moment, it becomes evident that all of Abraham's preceding obedient actions were the true embodiment of his absolute obedience to God. Through the meticulous narration of Abraham's resolute actions, the text utilizes technical and stylistic precision to illuminate his inner mind and profound faith—the exact posture of devotion God seeks to forge and maintain within the covenantal relationship.

The narrator underscores the immense theological weight of Abraham's confession by situating it within the ultimate crucible of life and death. The agonizing reality is brought into acute focus: Abraham initially looked upon Mount Moriah, envisioning the impending death of his son. Yet, this intense narrative tension is masterfully resolved. Through divine intervention, the narrative delivers profound relief as Isaac's life is spared and the provided ram is offered in his stead. This profound transition is beautifully bookended by the spatial irony of Abraham "lifting his eyes" (vv. 4, 13). He initially looks up to see the harrowing destination of death, but ultimately beholds the ram of life, structurally confirming that unquestioning obedience leads to a miraculously transformed reality.

Furthermore, the text vividly captures Abraham's unwavering trust through the recurring motif of the father and son "walking together." Far from a merely sentimental portrait of parental bonding, this shared march is presented as a deliberate journey toward the divinely commanded place. In this light, their journey toward Moriah becomes the ultimate embodiment of covenantal obedience, perfectly mirroring the later Torah injunction "to walk in all his ways" (Deut 10:12–13; 26:17). The narrator magnifies this tension by enclosing the father and son within a masterful concentric narrative structure.

The repetition of their silent march frames their dialogue, acting as a literary funnel that drives the narrative focus down to the theological center: Abraham's declaration of divine provision. It is precisely within the agonizing tension of this march that the profound value of Abraham's faith in divine provision is unveiled.

Ultimately, Abraham's prophetic confession—God will provide—is shown to point to an absolute theological reality. It is a definitive testament to the God who brings life out of death. According to Robert Alter's scale of narrative explicitness,³⁵ the theological hope expressed in Abraham's direct speech (v. 8) is ultimately validated by the omniscient narrator (v. 14), securing the reality of divine provision at the highest level of absolute certainty.

The angelic verdict—"now I know that you fear God" (v. 12)—serves as the ultimate revelation of Abraham's internal hierarchy of love. By subordinating his profound affection for Isaac to his absolute submission to the divine command, Abraham demonstrates his true covenantal loyalty despite the agonizing ascent of Mount Moriah. Ultimately, the narrative establishes that in the biblical framework, to love God is to fear him, and true fear is manifested in unwavering obedience—a theology that Deuteronomy later crystallizes (10:12–13). Thus, Abraham emerges as the prototypical covenantal partner, proven faithful through the crucible of testing. This singular event establishes the paradigm for God's relationship with Israel throughout history. God utilizes such trials to forge and maintain the covenantal bond; consequently, the wilderness wanderings would later serve as a collective spiritual crucible where the faith of an entire nation was refined. These divine tests were essential in preparing Israel to inherit the Promised Land, ensuring that their relationship with Yahweh was founded not on mere convenience, but on an enduring, tested loyalty.

SUMMARY

The author of Genesis 22 intends to demonstrate that true covenantal loyalty to Yahweh demands the absolute subordination of all earthly attachments—even the deepest preferential love (*'ahav*)—to unwavering divine obedience.³⁶ By presenting Abraham as the inaugural participant in the divine test, the narrative establishes the foundational paradigm for God's relationship with Israel, anticipating their own spiritual crucible in the wilderness. The author masterfully employs recurrence of variations, chiasmic structure, and devastating spatial ironies to build the agonizing tension of the Moriah ascent, illuminating the resolute, silent nature of Abraham's faith. Ultimately, the narrator reveals that to genuinely love God is to fear him, and to fear him is to obey him unconditionally. Through Abraham's central, structurally magnified confession that "God will provide," the narrator

³⁵ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 146–47; Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 48–49.

³⁶ Ultimately, the narrative reconciles Abraham's obedience with the LORD's reaffirmation of the covenantal promises through the final divine oath (Gen 22:16–18).

conveys a profound theological reality: Yahweh is the God who brings life out of death and provision out of total surrender. Consequently, this passage serves as a theological blueprint, assuring the reader that divine tests are purposefully designed to maintain and forge the covenantal relationship with the LORD as a suzerain.

IV. APPLICATIONAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN

However, the profound theological paradigms established on Mount Moriah are not relegated strictly to Israel's ancient history; rather, they demand a dynamic response from the modern believer. Consequently, the empirical obedience and covenantal loyalty modeled by Abraham must be translated directly into applicational principles for the contemporary Christian.

The theological paradigm established on Mount Moriah—where the divine test (*nasah*) serves as a crucible to reveal and refine covenantal loyalty—remains a vital reality for the contemporary Christian. Just as God tested Abraham and his descendants in the wilderness, this paradigm finds its ultimate fulfilment in His only Son, Jesus Christ. Led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, Jesus underwent His own profound testing.³⁷ Where the Israelites failed the divine test in the wilderness, Jesus, the true and faithful Son, perfectly demonstrated absolute obedience to the word of Scripture against the devil. Furthermore, this crucible did not conclude in the desert but culminated on the cross, the ultimate antitype of the Akedah. In that agonizing climax, Jesus cried out, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (Matt 27:46).³⁸ The author of Hebrews explicitly connects this suffering to the Abrahamic descendants, noting that Christ helps “the offspring of Abraham” (Heb 2:16). Because Jesus “himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). Consequently, when contemporary Christians face the crucible of divine testing, they can have the confidence that Christ, functioning as a sympathetic High Priest, reaches out to them through the Holy Spirit. He is the one who “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15), transforming the terrifying nature of the test into an opportunity for covenantal solidarity with the Saviour.

Moreover, the New Testament explicitly utilizes Abraham's empirical actions on Moriah to define the necessary mechanics of contemporary Christian faith. The Epistle of James argues that Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac upon the altar, asserting that his “faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works” (Jas 2:21–22). James harmonizes the foundational moment Abraham was credited with righteousness (Gen 15:6) with the ultimate demonstration of that faith in Genesis 22. For the modern believer, this dictates that Christian obedience is never a mere intellectual assent, but an active, physical outworking of devotion. Following Abraham's agonizing, consecutive actions up the mountain, the contemporary Christian is called to demonstrate

³⁷ Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13.

³⁸ All translations of biblical texts of the New Testament are ESV.

a faith that overcomes the crucible. Even when obedience appears to be directed toward loss or death, the believer moves forward in absolute trust, knowing they will ultimately experience the theological reality of the God who brings life out of death.

Finally, the supreme lesson of the Akedah—that authentic, covenantal love for the LORD must supersede all preferential earthly attachments—translates directly into Johannine theology. Abraham proved his love for God through his radical subordination of his affection for Isaac to his obedience to the divine command. Similarly, the Apostle John repeatedly declares that a Christian’s love for Jesus is not a passive or purely sentimental emotion but is empirically demonstrated by keeping His commandments (John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 5:3). Christ graciously accompanies this demand for obedience with the promise of His abiding presence through the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). Furthermore, Jesus expands this covenantal loyalty into “a new commandment”: the imperative for Christians to love one another (John 13:34; 15:12; 1 John 3:23). John effectively synthesizes these concepts, concluding that a believer’s love for God is inextricably bound to their love for the brethren (1 John 4:21). Reflecting the silent, resolute march of Abraham and Isaac to Moriah, John encourages the contemporary church to “walk” in this commandment of love (2 John 6). Far from a march toward death, this deliberate, obedient walk under the New Covenant is the definitive path that leads to eternal life (John 12:50).

CONCLUSION

This study has explored Abraham’s characterization within the crucible of Mount Moriah, demonstrating how the author utilizes effective narrative techniques to reveal the profound theological weight of the episode. The text establishes the divine test as a foundational mechanism—not merely for the patriarch, but for all successive generations of Israel—designed to forge and maintain the covenantal relationship with the LORD. Furthermore, the narrative deliberately highlights Abraham’s preferential love for Isaac only to illustrate its necessary transformation into ultimate covenantal loyalty to and love for the LORD, an unwavering devotion actualized through empirical obedience and absolute faith in divine provision.

Ultimately, Genesis 22 functions as more than a historical account of patriarchal obedience; it provides the enduring paradigm for the contemporary Christian’s relationship with Jesus Christ. Within this New Covenant, believers are called to embody Christ’s teachings—specifically the foundational commandment to love God and one another—in a secular world that continually elevates preferential, earthly attachments above divine authority.³⁹ The narrative also offers profound hope. By subordinating earthly allegiances

³⁹ The researcher also believes that the Akedah sharply critiques modern ecclesial fractures, challenging a church that too often prioritizes ideological divisions, worldly conflicts, and exclusionary prejudices over absolute submission to the Savior, Jesus Christ.

to divine commands and by agonizingly yet resolutely resisting secular values, the contemporary church can faithfully fulfill its role as a true covenant partner, trusting entirely in the God who brings life out of death.

**“THIS GENERATION” IN MATTHEW 24:34:
A SYNTACTIC-DISCURSIVE-CONTEXTUAL PROBLEM OF PRETERISM***

HENRY TROCINO, JR.**

Abstract: *This article argues that the preterist interpretation of “this generation” in Matt. 24:34 as Jesus’ contemporaries who experienced the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, is unsubstantiated by the contextual sense of genea (generation), the grammar of verse 34, and the discourse and literary context of the passage. Through syntactic, discursive, and contextual analysis, the preterist view is shown to be inconsistent with the text’s eschatological framework. Instead, the study suggests that “this generation” refers to a future generation of believers who will witness the complete realization of the end-time signs, including the return of Christ.*

Keywords: *this generation, sense, reference, signs, all these things, deictic, discourse, future, end of the age*

INTRODUCTION

The preterist (Latin *praeter*, “past”) view of Matthew 24 holds that all the signs of the end of the age described there, including Jesus’ second coming, were completely fulfilled by the time of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (full preterist)¹ or mostly fulfilled by then (partial preterist).² The coming of Christ was a spiritual coming of

* This article originated as a reply to a pastor’s question concerning the “abomination of desolation” (Matt. 24:15), initially raised in the IBCP Theological Discussion Messenger group on May 16, 2025.

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¹ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming* (London, UK: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), 56-80; Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ: The Two Dimensions of One Age-Changing Eschaton* (Warren, OH: Writing and Research Services, 1987), 125-150, 420-445; Don K. Preston, *Who Is This Babylon?* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Management Inc., 2006), 105-125.

² Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 114.

A variant of the partial preterist view is that all the signs in 24:4-22 or 24:4-28 were fulfilled at the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, except the cosmic signs and Christ’s second coming in 24:29-31. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 364; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 507; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International

Christ to judge Israel rather than a literal second coming, using apocalyptic judgment language from the OT (Ps. 18:7-12; 97:2-5; Isa. 19:1; cf. 13:10-13; 34:4; Joel 2:30-31; 3:15).³ It construes the end of the age as the end of the old covenant with Israel. This view marks a shift in the prophecy from Jesus' coming judgment of Israel to his second coming to the earth in 24:36. It emphasizes the importance of Jesus' statement, "This generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matt. 24:34, ESV).⁴ Preterists interpret it as a time marker for the signs of Jesus' judgment, understanding the phrase "this generation" (ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, *hē genea hautē*) to refer to the generation living at the time of the temple's destruction.⁵ The referent of "this generation" in 24:34 is the evil generation in 23:36; otherwise, it would be "logically inconsistent" to interpret them differently.⁶

This essay demonstrates that the preterist interpretation of "this generation" in 24:34 as Jesus' contemporaries is exegetically untenable, as evinced by the text's Greek word order, anaphoric reference, grammatical construction, temporal markers, contextual phrasing, discourse dynamics, and literary context. Instead, they all suggest the phrase refers to a future generation at the end of the age. In addition, this study highlights the interpretive inconsistencies of the preterist view in relation to "this generation" in 24:3-34.

TEXT⁷ AND TRANSLATION

ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη ἕως ἂν πάντα ταῦτα γένηται.

Truly I say to you that this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things take place. (24:34, AT)⁸

NOT BY LEXICAL DEFINITION ALONE

In BDAG, the semantic range of "generation" (γενεὰ, *genea*) covers the following: (1) "those exhibiting common characteristics or interests, race, kind"; (2) "the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time and freq. defined in terms of specific characteristics, generation, contemporaries"; (3) "the time of a

Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), Matt. 24:34, Aquile Reader; Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 3rd ed. (Draper, VA: Apologetics Group Media, 2009), 162; Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 1-13, *Word Biblical Commentary* 33A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 715.

³ George Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 448-449.

⁴ All English translations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless it is noted as the author's translation (AT).

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 25.

⁶ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 162.

⁷ Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart, DE: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), Matthew 24:34.

⁸ Author's translation (AT).

generation, age”; and (4) “family history.”⁹ In Louw-Nida, it has “people living at the same time and belonging to the same reproductive age-class - ‘those of the same time, those of the same generation.’”¹⁰

Yet the sense and reference¹¹ of “generation” in 24:34 cannot be determined by the lexical meaning of the word alone. Words do not carry meaning independent of syntax, discourse, and context. A word alone lacks meaning unless it is related to another word in a larger context.¹² Conversely, the meaning of a word is more than its lexical meaning alone, but involves its relation to other words.¹³ The very function of the demonstrative adjective “this” (αὕτη, *hautē*) is referential rather than lexical—it points to something rather than defines it. Hence, the sense and reference of “this generation” requires an analysis of the syntax, discourse framework, and literary context. These will determine which of the options in the semantic domain is applicable in 24:34. It will show whether the phrase “this generation” refers to Jesus’ contemporaries, his present listeners, or a future generation.

An analysis of the syntax, discourse, and context of “this generation” in 24:34 will lead to an estimation of Matthew’s rhetorical aim and eschatological frame since the phrase “this generation” is used in the context of the prophecy of the signs of the end-times and Jesus’ return in Matthew 24. While the categories found in lexicons are invaluable in textual studies, the use of “this generation” in 24:34 relative to syntactical, discursive, and contextual factors must dictate its meaning with the latter as its ultimate arbiter.

SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF “THIS GENERATION” IN MATTHEW 24

There are six texts where the phrase “this generation” is found in Matthew. (1) 11:16: “But to what shall I compare this generation [τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην, *tēn genean tautēn*]? (2) 12:41: “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation [τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης, *tēs geneas tautēs*] and condemn it . . .” (3) 12:42: “The queen of the

⁹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), s.v. “γενεά.” [BDAG]

¹⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1988), s.v. “γενεά” (11.4).

¹¹ The sense is the internal conceptual meaning or way of presentation (“how”) of the word or phrase; while the reference is the external object or entity (“what”) that is pointed to by the word or phrase. Agus Wardhono, “Sense and Reference,” *Prosody: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa Dan Sastra* 2, 2 (June 2008): 92-99, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://journal.trunojoyo.ac.id/prosodi/article/view/340>; Genoveva Marti, “Sense and reference,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, DOI: 10.4324/9780415249126-X038-1.

¹² “For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 43)

¹³ “But the heart of the issue is that semantics, meaning, is more than the meaning of words. It involves phrases, sentences, discourse, genre, style.” D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 66.

South will rise up at the judgment with this generation [τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης, *tēs geneas tautēs*].” (4) 12:45: “So also will it be with this evil generation [τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ, *tē genea tautē*].” (5) 23:36: “All these things will come upon this generation [τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην, *tēn genean tautēn*].” (6) 24:34: “This generation [ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, *hē genea hautē*] will not pass away until all these things take place.”

Word Order of “This Generation”

In Greek, the word order is ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη (*hē genea hautē*), which literally reads, “generation this.” The definite article “the” (ἡ, *hē*) precedes the noun “generation” (γενεὰ, *genea*), which is followed by the demonstrative adjective “this” (αὕτη, *hautē*) in an article + noun + demonstrative adjective construction. This structure gives the *sense* of a distinct, identifiable group. Jesus is not talking about a general concept of generation but a specific, particular single one. Moreover, the demonstrative adjective “this” agrees with the nominative case, feminine gender, and singular number of the noun “generation” grammatically. This agreement limits the sense to a single entity rather than multiple ones. Since this generation is singular rather than plural, the sense is this single generation living at a single point in history—at the end of the age, rather than these generations throughout history.

Greek word order, while flexible, may signal emphasis depending on the author’s communicative intent.¹⁴ Applying K. J. Dover’s framework, there are two logical types in Greek word order, the “nucleus” (N, new and most significant information, “indispensable” to the meaning of the sentence, non-verifiable from the context) and the “concomitant” (C, “dispensable,” information given or implied by the context). The nucleus is the verb “pass away” preceded by the emphatic negative “certainly not.” The concomitant is “this generation” since it is dispensable to the sense of the sentence and verifiable from the context. It is described as “post-nuclear,” being placed after the nucleus. This suggests that the identity of “this generation” is already known to the disciples and implied by the context¹⁵ of the Olivet Discourse.¹⁶

The demonstrative “this” functions as an adjective, modifying the noun “generation.” It gives an attributive (qualifying) sense to the noun. As a modifier of the noun, it points to the noun “generation.”¹⁷ It identifies a specific generation that is already known to the audience and mentioned in the literary context. It signifies the attention that is given by the speaker to the identity of the generation. The noun is placed at the head of

¹⁴ K. J. Dover, *Greek Word Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 32-34.

¹⁵ Dover, *Greek Word Order*, 40, 45.

¹⁶ See the subheading, “Contextual clues of ‘This Generation,’” under the heading, “Contextual Analysis of ‘This Generation’ in Matthew 24.”

¹⁷ Iver Larsen, “Generation is a wrong translation choice for Greek *genea*,” Academia.edu, accessed May 16, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/37043228/Generation_is_a_wrong_translation_choice_for_Greek_genea

the phrase to establish its reference, grounding it in the discourse.¹⁸ Inasmuch as the attention is on the generation in context, the reference is not necessarily on “this” generation living at the time, which is an exegetical deduction rather than an explicit statement, but as will be argued, on “the generation—this” that is familiar to the audience already. As to the identity of this generation, it is verifiable by the syntax, discourse, and context.

K. L. Gentry, Jr. posited that when the demonstrative “this” modifies the noun “generation” in the NT, it usually signifies the contemporaries of the speaker.¹⁹ Yet the proximal demonstrative “this” points to the noun “generation” of 24:34 as the near object²⁰ rather than the “hypocritical” generation of 23:36. The near object is either the one physically and temporally nearest to the speaker (disciples) or the subject mentioned by Jesus recently in the Olivet Discourse (“this generation” that will see all the signs). In that the demonstrative “this” points to the nearest object, the *reference* of “this generation” must be limited to those near in space and time—the proximate disciples (“you”) who were listening to Jesus, those near in discourse—the people that Jesus was describing in 24:4-34, or both.²¹ It is maintained that Jesus is talking about both those near in space and time and those near in discourse rather than the same evil generation in 23:36.²²

Implicit Antecedent of “This Generation”

Because the identity of the specific generation is already contextually grounded, the phrase “this generation” functions as an anaphoric reference to the elements cited earlier in the immediate context of 24:4-34 that describe it.²³ It cannot be a cataphoric reference pointing forward to a “generation” later in the text, for there is no mention of it there. In a cataphoric reference, the demonstrative “this” is placed before the noun, which is not the case here. The demonstrative “this” cannot also be a contrastive reference comparing “this generation” with another generation, for it is placed after the noun “generation.” There is no apparent near-far object contrast between “this” generation and

¹⁸ Kevin Grasso, “Basic Syntax Concepts (Part 3 of Biblical Language Linguistics),” accessed April 23, 2026, <https://biblingo.com/blog/basic-syntax-concepts-part-3-of-biblical-language-linguistics/>

¹⁹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 162.

²⁰ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1992), 134.

²¹ “In the NT, demonstrative pronouns have demonstrative force, that is, they are used to indicate nearness and remoteness, whether in time, space (location) or even narrative proximity, from the perspective of the language user.” Porter, *Idioms*, 134.

²² Pace W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr.: “We favour interpretation (ii). γενεὰ plainly refers to Jesus’ contemporaries in 11.16; 12.39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; and 17.17 as well as in the close parallel in 23.36, and the placement of our verse after a prophecy of the *parousia* is suggestive.” W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary on the New Testament 3 (London, UK/New York, NY: T&T Clark, 1997), 367-368.)

Yet in terms of the characteristics of “this generation” of 24:34, 23:36 is not a close equivalent.

²³ “Usually they refer to something mentioned previously (anaphoric usage), although they may refer to something not yet mentioned (cataphoric usage).” Porter, *Idioms*, 134; Larsen, “Generation.”

“that” generation, but only “this” *same* generation and its characteristics. The focus is on “this generation” of people in the surrounding context, which is characterized by enduring faith in Christ “to the end” (24:13, ESV; cf. 24:22).

Given that the demonstrative “this” points to the noun “generation” of 24:34 as the near object, it most likely points to an *implicit* antecedent—the thing that is described in the immediate context of 24:34. Factoring the immediate context of “this generation” in 24:34, the demonstrative “this” in 24:34 may function as an anaphor pointing back the “kind” of generation that is portrayed in 24:3-34, though the word “generation” is unspecified there. This is known as a pronominal use of a demonstrative, where the referent or antecedent of “this generation” in 24:34 is implied in the text.²⁴ Specifically, it is called an abstract pronominal anaphora wherein antecedents refer to abstract entities such as “events, propositions, or facts.”²⁵ As such, the referent or antecedent of “this generation” in 24:34 are abstract entities such as all the characteristics of this generation in 24:4-34. Thus, the demonstrative “this” may refer to the implied “generation” that is being depicted by abstract pronominal anaphora in 24:4-33 rather than the evil generation in 23:36.

Qualitative Sense of “This Generation”

The idea that “this generation” refers to Jesus’ contemporaries would indicate a quantitative time element in the description of “this generation”—the lifespan of the then-present generation. Yet in Matthean usage, the phrase “this generation” is *qualitative* having specific characteristics. The qualitative syntax is evident in the use of pejorative adjectives for “generation” such as “evil and adulterous” (12:39) or “faithless and twisted” (17:17). This generation refers to people who condemned John the Baptist as demon-possessed and the Son of Man as a “glutton,” “drunkard,” and a “friend of sinners” (11:18-19). They are unrepentant seeking for a sign from Jesus; who will be condemned by the men of Nineveh and the queen of the South “at the judgment;” and who will go from bad to worse in their unbelief (12:39, 41-42). They are “hypocrites,” “serpents,” and a “brood of vipers” who kill, crucify, flog, and persecute the prophets (23:29-36). By contrast, they are also people who will believe in Christ, endure to the end, and see all the signs of Christ’s coming (24:4-34). In all these contexts, the phrase “this generation” is used to describe a characteristic behavior—a kind of people²⁶ categorized either by unbelief or faith in Christ.

²⁴ Graeme Hirst, “Anaphora in Natural Language Understanding: A Survey” (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1981), 4-7, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://www.cs.toronto.edu/pub/gh/Hirst-Anaphora-2.pdf>

²⁵ Dominique H. O’Donnell, “Abstract Pronominal Anaphora in Three Registers of English,” *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal* 13, 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.15760/mcnair.2019.13.1.2>

²⁶ Philip La Grange du Toit, “‘This generation’ in Matthew 24:34 as a timeless, spiritual generation akin to Genesis 3:15,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, 1 (August 2018), a1850, 1, 6, 9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1850>; Larsen, “Generation”; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), 953; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992),

It is used in a qualitative *sense* whether it is evil or good or unbelieving or believing.²⁷

In view of the qualitative sense of “this generation,” the *reference* of the demonstrative “this” (anaphoric or functional referent) must be the kind of people characterized by the behaviors described in the preceding context in 24:4-34. Significantly, unlike the pejorative portrayal in 23:36, “this generation” in 24:4-34 is depicted constructively with words of warning. They are to guard against false christs and false prophets, suffer persecution, hatred, and death, and endure to the end. They will preach the gospel worldwide, see the abomination and cosmic signs of Christ’s coming, know that he is near, and not pass away until all these things occur (24:4-34).

As for those who fall away (24:10-12), they may not be true believers; thus, they are not part of this faithful generation. The same Greek for “fall away” (σκανδαλίζω, *skandalizō*, “to cause to be brought to a downfall, cause to sin”²⁸ or “cause to stumble”) is used of the rocky soil where the word did not take root and the person falls away after tribulation (13:21). Alternatively, they may be believers who stumble due to persecution or false teachings, a possibility that is warned of by Matthew and Paul (Matt. 10:33; 16:21-23; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 2:12; 3:1-9). Jesus used the same word to describe his disciples at the last supper who would stumble on account of him (26:31, 33). They did fall away, but they returned to Jesus. In Matthew 24, the emphasis is on the necessity of enduring faith over resistant unbelief. This view is reinforced by Jesus’ preemptive warnings to the disciples and promise of deliverance for those who endure to the end (24:13). Accordingly, this generation refers to the eschatological generation of enduring and stumbling believers, which is antithetical to the unbelieving generation of 23:36. As the characteristics of the near object “generation” in 24:34 are divergent from the evil generation of 23:36, it cannot be assumed that “this generation” of 24:34 is the same as the first-century evil generation of 23:36.²⁹ It must be a different kind of generation.

At this point in 24:3-34, Jesus is no longer addressing the unbelieving Jews, scribes, and Pharisees whom he categorized as part of the evil generation. Rather, he was address-

Matt. 24:34, Aquile Reader; Neil D. Nelson, Jr., “‘This Generation’ in Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38, 3 (September 1996), 385.

²⁷ See Ryan E. Meyer’s comprehensive list of scholarly sources about the qualitative sense of γενεά, which refers to either believers or unbelievers. Ryan E. Meyer, “‘This Generation’ in Matthew 24:34,” accessed January 30, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/97411885/This_Generation_in_Matthew_24_34.

²⁸ BDAG, s. v. σκανδαλίζω.

²⁹ *Pace* Walter T. Wilson, “The language of 24:34 (introduced with a solemn amen formula) corresponds closely to that of 23:36, which is surrounded by references to the persecution of Jesus’s envoys (23:34-35), the destruction of the temple (23:37-38), and the parousia (23:39).” Walter T. Wilson, *The Gospel of Matthew 2, Matthew 14-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), Unit Two, Parts 1-2, Aquile reader)

However, the language of 23:36 concerns the generation of unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, while in 24:34, it concerns the generation of believing disciples, suggesting a *different* “generation.” While the judgment language of 23:36 covers the evil generation of unrepentant Jerusalem, that of 24:34 encompasses the whole world. If the phrase “all these things” in 23:36 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, “all these things” in 24:33-34 covers more than that—“birth pains,” great tribulation, celestial signs, and Jesus’ coming, which does not make 23:36 a close analog.

ing the believing disciples. All the signs are primarily related to them, making the signs pivotal to the identity of this generation. Given that the disciples have passed away, but the predicted signs are not yet, it is suggested that “this generation” of believers refers to those who will be alive when the signs occur. This generation of believers now serves as the referent for the phrase “this generation” in 24:3-34—the generation uniquely promised not to pass away until all the signs take place. “This generation” of 24:34, therefore, cannot be limited to the people alive at the time. Instead, it refers to the generation that will see the signs at the end of the age.

Subjunctive Mood in the Two Clauses

In 24:34, two aorist tenses modify and change the temporal direction of the demonstrative “this” in “this generation.” First, in the main independent clause, “this generation will certainly not pass away” (AT) the double negative “certainly not” (οὐ μὴ, *ou mē*, literally, “no not”) is used with the aorist subjunctive verb “pass away” (παρέλθῃ, *parelthē*) in a οὐ μὴ + παρέλθῃ (*ou mē + parelthē*) construction. The double negative strongly denies the possibility of the passing away of this generation. In combination with the aorist subjunctive, the construction “will certainly not pass away” (οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ, *ou mē parelthē*), being a mood of contingency, is an emphatic negative future contingency.³⁰ It projects the conditional certainty of the action “will certainly not pass away” of “this generation” into the future until the fulfillment of the condition, “all these things take place.”

Second, the dependent clause, “until all these things take place” (ἕως ἃν πάντα ταῦτα γένηται, *heōs an panta tauta genētai*), functions as an adverbial clause with the use of the subordinating conjunction “until” (ἕως, *heōs*). It modifies the verb of the main independent clause, “pass away.” Further, there is the use of the particle ἃν (*an*), translated “if,” in the dependent clause “until if all these things take place” (AT), which makes this form a conditional subjunctive. It indicates the condition under which the action of the main clause will happen. If the condition of the statement, “all these things take place,” will happen, then the action of the main clause, “this generation will certainly not pass away,” will become true. “Until all these things” occur, then “this generation will certainly not pass away.”

The temporal direction is now directed toward a future eventuality. It propels the existence of “this generation” in the future *until* the occurrence of all these signs. The manifestation of all these signs is the key to the eventual existence of this generation. Since the signs are projected to be at the end of the age, it is likely that “this generation” is the

³⁰ Corey Keating, “More Detailed Description of the Greek Subjunctive Mood: Subjunctive of Emphatic Negation,” Resources for Learning New Testament Greek, accessed January 8, 2026, https://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/subj-detail-frame.htm.

future generation at the end-time.³¹

The Conjunction “Until”

The keyword is the subordinating conjunction “until,” which connects the two clauses. The independent clause, “this generation will certainly not pass away,” is linked by the conjunction “until” with the dependent clause, “all these things take place.” The conjunction “until” is a temporal marker defining the limit of the action of the verb in the main clause. The passing away of this generation will happen *up to a point* when all the signs happen.

In a temporal clause, the main verb in the indicative mood used with the conjunction “until” refers to an event in the past. Yet in a temporal clause containing the main verb in the subjunctive mood, the conjunction “until” refers to a pending event in the future. The subjunctive mood of a verb by itself indicates the aspect and, in some cases, *Aktionsart* (kind of action in context), such as ingressive (inception) or culminative (consummation), rather than time. Yet when it is used with “until,” it indicates future contingency and eventuality—a pending event that will occur in the future. In this case, the pending events are “all these things,” all the signs that “take place” in the future before “this generation will certainly not pass away.” The main action (“this generation” not passing away) is contingent upon the happening of the events happening first (“all these things”). All these signs will take place before that specific generation passes away. At the same time, it implies a sense of imminence and urgency within that timeline between the main action (“will certainly not pass away”) and the set of events (“all these things”). Taken as a whole, the future contingency in 24:34 is the coming about of “all these things,” which in context includes all the end-time signs in their entirety from 24:4-31 rather than merely the destruction of the temple, thereby answering the disciples’ questions in 24:3.³²

Culminative Aorist in Context

The aorist tenses in the three clauses (“when you see all these things” [24:33], “this generation will certainly not pass away,” and “until all these things take place” [24:34] (AT) likely function as culminative aorists, emphasizing the completion of the actions

³¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), Lk. 21:32, Aquile Reader; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Yale Bible 28A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1353; Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), Matt. 24:32-35, Aquile Reader; Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 279-80.

³² “‘All these things’ embraces all the signs and events leading up to the parousia. . . ‘All these things’ refer to the eschatological scenario as outlined in vv. 4-31. . . Or perhaps vv. 4-26, since in v. 33 ‘all these things’ cannot include the parousia itself.” Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 366, 366 fn271.

rather than their beginning.³³ Both the grammar and the surrounding context support this focus on the culmination of events rather than their onset. Grammatically, in terms of aspect (the author's perspective³⁴ on how the action is pictured), the aorist indicates the perfective, complete whole action of "see," "pass away," and "take place," signaling the intended consummation of the action. In terms of mood, the aorist subjunctive used with the conjunctions "when" (ὅταν, *hotan*) and "until" marks the actions of "see" and "take place" as contingent upon the fulfillment of "all these things." "When" they see "all these things" and "until all these things" take place, they will know, and they will not pass away, suggesting the events as a finished whole rather than just a beginning. In terms of *Aktionsart* in 24:33, the aorist verb "see" is paired with the conjunction "when" and the object "all these things," indicating a constative (summary) *Aktionsart*. The disciples "see" all the signs described in 24:4-31 as a single whole event, a package of signs, rather than a process of events. When they see all these end-time signs in their entirety, they know that he is near (24:33). In 24:34, the aorist verb "take place" is used in the clause, "until all these things take place," indicating a culminative *Aktionsart*. This generation will not pass away until the entire set of signs is completed in full.

Contextually, the use of the plural "all" (πάντα, *panta*) within the phrase "all these things" and the double use of the same phrase "all these things" in 24:33-34 are significant. They signify that all the signs without exception, rather than only one event (destruction of the temple), are expected to occur at the end of the age. That believers ("you") will "see all these things" signifies that "all these things" will occur as a whole sequence of events rather than as a process spanning the age. The aorist verbs, "see" (24:33), "pass away," and "take place" (24:34) thus point to the consummation of all the signs at Christ's coming. They indicate the terminus of the action, the culmination of "all these things," suggesting a culminative aorist. It brings the chain of events in 24:3-31 to a conclusion in 24:33-34. Forasmuch as the occurrence of "all these things" is yet future, then the time of action of the passing away of this generation is also yet future.

The time of the passing away of this generation or the time of the occurrence of all these things is not indicated by the aorist subjunctive.³⁵ Lexical meaning, syntax, and

³³ C. E. B. Cranfield, "St. Mark 13," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7, 3 (September 1954), 291, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600001526>; Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 270.

³⁴ "'This generation' might be the generation that sees 'all these things'—from Matthew's perspective therefore perhaps some future generation." Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 367.

³⁵ This paper adopts a framework treating the aorist subjunctive as a "snapshot" summary of action from the speaker's perspective (aspect) rather than a temporal indicator, with the exceptions of the indicative mood and aorist participle. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 554-555.

However, Kevin Grasso, following general theoretical linguistics, argues that "tense and aspect are both temporal categories. More specifically, aspect is not spatial, and labelling it 'perspectival' is also very misleading. . . . This 'viewing' of the eventuality is not spatial or physical—it is not as if the speaker uses aspect to describe whether he or she physically witnessed the event or is a certain distance away from it. Rather, the language of viewing is used as a metaphor for temporality: the speaker's 'viewing' refers to which

context will determine the time of action. While time is not inherent in the aorist subjunctive, it can refer to future time or indefinite time based on its mood of contingency and the surrounding syntax (“until all these things” + “take place”). The passing away of this generation is dependent on the fulfillment of all the signs, which is beyond doubt in the future.

Considering all these, it is suggested that “this generation” will be a future generation that will see the fulfillment of these signs. It cannot be quickly assumed that “this” refers only to Jesus’ generation. The reference of the phrase “this generation” in 24:34 must be found within the discourse itself and its literary setting. The following discourse analysis suggests that it refers to the faithful disciples who live to see all the signs of the end times.

DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF “THIS GENERATION” IN MATTHEW 24

While semantics focuses on the literal meaning of words and syntax, on the structure of words, deixis (Ancient Greek *δείξις* [*deixis*], “pointing,” “indicating”) investigates the context of the words in pragmatics (the study of how context contributes to meaning).³⁶ Deixis is the pointing of words that indicate meaning based on context rather than a fixed reference. Several deixis concepts help to analyze the context of “this generation” in 24:34. There is the use of the demonstrative “this,” which is a deictic word (Ancient Greek *δεικτικός* [*deiktikós*], “capable of proof”) that is context-dependent, pointing to entities that are being discussed relative to the viewpoint of the speaker.³⁷

There is also the deictic center, which is the point of reference for deciphering deictic expressions. It is the anchor on which all deictic expressions related to it are to be understood.³⁸ Deictic expressions are words that reveal the entities discussed by the speaker at the time of speaking. There are five types of deictic expressions: personal (who, the person speaking, and the person listening), spatial (where, the location of the speaker or entity using demonstratives, adverbs, and prepositions), temporal (when, the moment of speaking using tenses and time adverbs),³⁹ social (what, the social relationship between speaker and listener and social status of people), and textual (which, the part of the

temporal part(s) of the eventuality are being referenced.” Kevin Grasso, “Tense, Aspect, and Aktionsart,” *biblingo* (blog), October 15, 2024, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://biblingo.com/blog/tense-aspect-and-aktionsart/#sdfootnote1sym>.

³⁶ Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 54.

³⁷ Holger Diessel, “Deixis and Demonstratives,” in *Semantics*, ed. Kirsten Maienborn, Klaus von Heusinger, and Paul Portner, HSK 33, 3 (Berlin, DE: De Gruyter, 2012), 1-25.

³⁸ Diessel, “Deixis and Demonstratives,” 3-6, 14-15.

Similarly, in Steven E. Runge’s functional discourse analysis, he speaks of the “center of attention” wherein participants are anchored to that center. Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010.), 257, 260-261, 270.

³⁹ Lily Hulatt and Gabriel Freitas, “Deictic expressions,” StudySmarter.co.uk, accessed January 23, 2026, <https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english/pragmatics/deictic-expressions/>

discourse itself).⁴⁰ In textual deictic expressions, the focus is on what is about to be said (cataphoric) and, for this paper, what has been said of “this generation” (anaphoric)—its characteristics that are being described in the discourse in 24:3-31.⁴¹

All deictic expressions that connect with one deictic center are called the deictic field. In 23:1-36 where “this generation” is the deictic center, the deictic field includes all the deictic expressions related to it, including personal (scribes and Pharisees), spatial (temple), temporal (judgment “will come”), social (“hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “they” vs. “you”), and textual (“these things,” “therefore”).

However, in 24:1-34, the deictic center has now moved from “this generation” of 23:36 to “this generation” of 24:34. The shift has occurred in the following: (1) personal: from Jesus and the hostile Pharisees to Jesus and the welcoming disciples; (2) spatial: from the temple complex to outside of the temple; (3) temporal: from a casual view of the temple to an active view of the signs (“when you see”); (4) social: from the public audience of the Jerusalem leaders to the private hearing of the disciples and from a passive audience function of the disciples to an active function as future observers of the signs; (5) textual: from Jesus’ word of judgment (sevenfold woes in 23:1-36) to his word of instruction and forewarning (signs of the end and his coming) and from an old reference to the temple’s destruction to a new reference to the signs and their fulfillment ; and (6) pronoun: from the accusatory pronoun “you” of the unbelieving Pharisees and scribes to the cautionary “you” of the disciples. The second person “you” (disciples) now dominates the discourse. This shift in the deictic center produces the result of a shift in focus:⁴² from this generation of unbelievers to this generation of believers.

The use of the demonstrative deixis “this” in “this generation” points to the current discourse center, which is “this generation” of 24:34. The use of the near demonstrative “this” (οὗτος, *houtos*) rather than “that” (ἐκεῖνος, *ekeinos*) marks thematic centrality (emphasis) or mental rather than spatial prominence in the discourse.⁴³ Jesus may be using “this” to signify that the generation he is describing is the one presently and thematically prominent in the mental vision of the disciples rather than the evil generation he left behind in the temple. Significantly, Matthew does not re-anchor the discourse back to the evil generation of 23:36. Nowhere is there a linguistic signal in the text that shifts the center from “this generation” of 24:34 to 23:36. Therefore, under discourse analysis, “this generation” of 24:34 points to the current active audience frame of “you” the disciples of 24:4-33 rather than “you” the Pharisees and scribes of 23:36.

As to the objection that readers assume continuity of understanding “this generation” from 23:36 to 24:34, the discourse response is that continuity of semantics

⁴⁰ Yan Huang, *Pragmatics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 216; Moussa Ouattara, “Discourse Deixis in English and Senar: A Contrastive Analysis” *Akofena* 3 3, 10 (2023): 391-398.

⁴¹ See above the subheadings, “Implicit Antecedent of ‘This Generation,’” and “Contextual Clues of ‘This Generation.’”

⁴² Hulatt and Freitas, “Deictic Center.”

⁴³ Runge, *Discourse Grammar*, 297-298, 301-303.

does not equal continuity of deixis. Semantics do not override deixis. The deictic use of the same phrase “this generation” in 24:34 signaled a *shift* in its referent in the discourse. The narrative itself *resets* the reference of “this generation” from the evil generation of 23:36 to the believing generation of 24:34, thereby refocusing the view of the readers. The discourse now addresses disciples, not Pharisees. The textual deixis flows from “you” as the viewers to “all these things” as the signs, to “this generation” as the defined group. The demonstrative “this” therefore refers to the “generation” that is now the focus and audience frame of the current discourse, that is, the generation of disciples. The deictic principle for the demonstrative “this” is that it points to the deictic center by default.⁴⁴ which in this case is the “generation” being described from 24:3-33. Therefore, it cannot be the generation of Jesus’ enemies in 23:36 but the generation that was being addressed by Jesus at the time of speaking, following deictic principles, and also, the generation that will see the eschatological signs in the future in terms of deictic projection to the future, since the signs are yet pending and anticipatory. Thus, the new deictic center is now “this generation” of *future* disciples of 24:34 rather than “this generation” of 23:36. This generation now refers to the deictic center of disciples who will witness the eschatological signs of the end and Jesus’ coming. It now serves as the new anchor for which all deictic expressions are to be interpreted. All deictic expressions are to be understood relative to this new center.

An equally important concept in discourse context analysis is called deictic projection. In deictic projection, the speaker or writer shifts the deictic center away from the actual speech situation to another perspective.⁴⁵ The speaker or writer brings the listener to see reality from another viewpoint, whether in the past or the future, in another person’s situation, or in an imaginary scenario. The effect is that the listeners will now interpret the language as if they are inside that projected world. There is *personal* projection when Jesus said that “you will hear of wars,” “you will be hated,” and “when you see all these things” (24:6, 9, 15, 33). The original listeners did not experience all these prophetic events yet, but they are projected into those events.

There is *temporal* projection when Jesus said, “when you see all these things, you know that he is near” (24:33). The center is now projected to the future and brings the listeners to that future situation. The verb “know” is present tense, but the projected perspective is into the future and contingent on the occurrence of the eschatological signs, “when you see all these things.” Here, the present becomes future time, and the future is described as present. This answers the preterist proposal of G. DeMar that Jesus referred to the present generation of his disciples (using the second person plural “you,” multiple times) rather than the future generation (third person plural “they”) because he did not say,

⁴⁴ David A. Zubin and Lynne E. Hewitt, “The Deictic Center: A Theory of Deixis in Narrative,” in *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, eds. Judith F. Duchan, Gail A. Bruder, and Lynne E. Hewitt (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 129-155.

⁴⁵ Diessel, “Deixis and Demonstratives,” 6-7.

“When *they* see these things.”⁴⁶ However, in temporal projection into the future, while it is the same current physical audience, a new virtual deictic audience is created, which is distinct from the physical audience at the time of speaking. This virtual deictic audience will see all the signs and know that he is near. Linguistically, the current listeners are treated as participants in that future situation, creating a “deictic double” of the listeners. As in all prophecies, the effect is that the prophecy can speak across all generations without changing pronouns. It spoke to Jesus’ disciples, and through Matthew, it speaks to readers today and eschatological readers who will see themselves as the participants in that eschatological scenario.

The concept of the “deictic double” is akin to the perception of the “unified you,” which is another kind of temporal projection. This is observed when the speaker projects the deictic center to an entity in the narrative—“this generation.” When Jesus said, “This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things take place” (24:34, AT), he was projecting the center to the generation that eventually sees the signs of the end. In that “all these things” are yet unrealized, lacking a first-century historical referent, “this generation” is projected into the future. This is due to the forthcoming nature of the signs of the end and Christ’s coming—“birth pains,” abomination of desolation, tribulation, and cosmic signs of his coming (24:4-33). Jesus’ statement projects the center to a future time of fulfillment of “all these things.” The pending signs of the end *signal* a deictic shift that locates this generation’s “present” in the future. On the part of the listeners (“you”), their perspective is projected to that future event. The current audience of Jesus is present, but the deictic center of “this generation” is now extended forward into a future scenario linguistically—a future world. It places the disciples (“you”) inside this future event. The time of the action cannot be brought into the future without bringing along the audience to the location of the action. Thus, when the event is projected into the future (“when you see”) as a present reality (“you know”), the disciples (“you”) are projected along with it. This creates a deictic temporal projection wherein the “you” of the present and the “you” of the future become unified linguistically (representative personal deixis).⁴⁷ This “unified you” of the present and future will “see all these things” (24:33). In this future, “this generation” living at the end of the age will see all the signs and know that he is near. In effect, Matthew is writing about the present disciples who represent a future generation of disciples (“unified you”) who will see all the signs in the end times. “This generation,” therefore, refers to the projected eschatological generation of believers rather than exclusively to Jesus’ present physical audience.

The “deictic double”/“unified you” conception has a precedent in Deut. 30:1-10. Moses was addressing the Israelites on the plains of Moab before they entered the land.

⁴⁶ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 4th ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), 56, 194; similarly, Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 385; Russell, *The Parousia*, 67, 70; Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 36, 56.

⁴⁷ Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 68-71; Margaret Sim, *A Guide to New Testament Greek Contextualized: Its Significance for Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2010), 112-115.

Yet, Moses projected future events with the use of the Waw consecutive attached to the perfect verb, indicating future action grammatically and contextually (e.g. וְהָיָה, *wəhāyāh*, “it shall come to pass,” NKJV, “it shall be,” NASB; וְהָשַׁבְתָּ, *wahšēbōtā*, “and you [will] call them” [30:1]; וְשָׁבָתָה, *wəšābātā*, “and [will] return,” וְשָׁמַעְתָּ, *wəšāma’tā*, “[will] obey” [30:2]; וְשָׁבָתָה, *wəšābātā*, “will restore,” וְרַחֲמֶנָּה, *wəriḥāmekā*, “[will] have mercy on you,” וְקִבַּעְתָּ, *wəqibbeṣkā*, “and [will] gather you” [30:3]). While Moses’ proximate audience have not yet been exiled, he pointed to “you” (singular) the future generation that will return to God (30:1)—the LORD will “have mercy on *you* and he will gather *you* again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered *you*” (30:3); “God will gather *you*” and “he will take *you*” (30:4, emphasis added). In this prophetic future exile of “you” (singular), Moses addresses his present audience as “you,” thus creating a unified corporate “you.” The “you” of the present is identical to the “you” of the future who will be scattered abroad. The “you” points to two generations at once, the present and the future, merging the identity of the present audience with the future generation, thus creating a “deictic double”/“unified you.”

Grammatically, deictic temporal projection into the future is analogous to the futuristic present, wherein the future is described as a present event. The difference is in the direction. While one’s present is projected into a future event in deictic temporal projection, one’s future is brought into the present in the futuristic present. Like prolepsis wherein a future event is presented as happening,⁴⁸ the futuristic present brings a future event into the present of the listeners as though it is happening already to emphasize the clarity and inevitability of the event.⁴⁹ In Deut. 30:1-10, the “proleptic present” is apparent in that the future actions of restoring the Israelites—gathering the exiles, bringing them back to the land, circumcising their hearts, and putting curses on their enemies—are presented to the present audience as happening presently. In this “Deuteronomistic Now,” the immediate audience (“you”) is made to feel the future like the immediate present. Similarly, in Matt. 26:2, the futuristic present is clear when Jesus said, “the Son of Man is handed over (present indicative παραδίδοται, *paradidotai*) to be crucified” (AT). He will not be handed over until two days later. Yet, Jesus uses the present tense to project the future inevitability into the present. While the futuristic present is verbal and the deictic temporal projection is pronominal (pronoun), there is still linguistic consistency in 24:33, since Jesus brought a future event (“when you see these things”) into the present using the present tense, “you know (present indicative γινώσκετε, *ginōskete*) that he is near.” The disciples (“you”) have not yet seen all the signs, yet the future event of seeing all the signs is transported into their present.

In sum, the 24:34 generation refers to the generation associated with the disciples who shall witness all the signs at the end of the age. The deictic center has shifted from

⁴⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. “Prolepsis,” accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/art/prolepsis-literature>.

⁴⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 535-536.

Jesus' enemies to his disciples. The word in chapter 24 is no longer that of condemnation but of assurance. There is no longer any mention of the "evil generation" as the referent. The referent of "this generation" is anchored in the immediate audience but now extended via deictic projection to encompass the future believing generation of witnesses of the eschatological signs.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF "THIS GENERATION" IN MATTHEW 24

Beyond the syntax and discourse, the contextual evidence suggests that "this generation" in 24:34 refers to the believers who endure until the end, rather than the unbelievers of Jesus' own day. Significantly, there is an evident shift in moral tenor and temporal horizon of "this generation" in 24:34 and contextual clues about "this generation" in 24:4-34. It cannot be the Jewish race, as suggested by W. Henriksen,⁵⁰ since the focus of Jesus' description is moral rather than racial—the evil characteristics of "this generation" in 11:16, 12:41, 42, 45, and 23:36 or the faithful characteristics of "this generation" in 24:4-28. Based on the description of "this generation" in 24:4-28, the contextual sense of "this generation" is this kind of people having the following qualities: they believe in Christ, see false christs, hear of wars, suffer tribulation, endure to the end, see all the signs, be alive until all the signs take place, and know that his coming is near.

Shift in Moral Tone and Temporal Scope of "This Generation" in 24:34

While the same phrase "this generation" refers to the evil generation in previous judgment contexts in Matthew, it does not follow that this pejorative description necessarily applies to "this generation" of 24:34. Matthew frequently employs semantic shifts, where the same words or phrase take on new meaning within different contexts. The same theme of binding and loosing is used in 16:19 and 18:18, but a different meaning is meant in 18:18. In 16:19, the authority to "bind" (forbid) and "loose" (permit) was given to Peter, signifying "evangelical" authority—to forbid or permit entrance into the kingdom to people by his preaching (16:18; cf. 4:23).⁵¹ Yet in 18:18, it was given to the disciples, indicating ecclesial authority—to forbid fellowship with an unrepentant brother or permit it upon repentance. The phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" of 8:12 is recontextualized in 24:51, resulting in a different meaning. In 8:12, it is used for the "sons of the kingdom,"

⁵⁰ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 868-869.

⁵¹ See Acts 2:14-39; 3:11-26; 8:14-25; and 10:1-11:18 about Peter "loosing" the kingdom to people who believe the gospel; and conversely, 4:11-12 and 8:20-23, about his "binding" it from people who reject the gospel. Carson, *Matthew*, 373.

Pace France, who posits "administrative authority" based on Eliakim, the steward in David's kingdom (Isa. 22:20-22). France, *Gospel of Matthew*, Matt. 16:19.

While Peter was the first one to receive the keys, the same keys were also given to the apostles and their representatives, in that they bound or loosed people by their preaching of the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 18:18-20; 28:18-20; John 20:23; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

who were outsiders by their unbelief.⁵² Yet in 24:51, the same phrase is used for the “wicked servant” (24:48) who was an insider but was revealed as one of the fake disciples (24:44)⁵³ or believers who became unfaithful (7:5; Gal 2:13; 1 Pet 2:1-2).⁵⁴ In 5:22, Jesus forbids calling a brother a “Fool” (Μωρό, *Mōres*) in hateful anger. Yet in 23:17, Jesus used the same adjective when he called the teachers of the law and Pharisees “fools” (μωροὶ, *mōroi*) in his condemnation of their misuse of the Scriptures.⁵⁵ Matthew’s semantic drift is seen in the use of the word “fool” as an angry insult to its use as divine judgment.

Thus, it cannot be assumed that the pejorative usage of “this generation” in earlier contexts dictates its meaning in 24:34. For the expression “this generation” undergoes a significant transformation in 24:34, moving from a focus on moral character and the time-oriented nature of “this generation” in earlier passages to a notably eschatological framework.

Rhetorical Use of “This Generation.” In the chapters leading up to the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24), “this generation” is used as a moral condemnation of the kind of generation living at the time that has rejected Jesus’ message.

Matthew 11:16: “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates.” The rhetorical context here is one of rejection of John’s message of judgment and Jesus’ message of joy by “this generation” of Jews.

Matthew 12:41: “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.” This passage frames the Pharisees and scribes as a condemned generation that is unrepentant of Jesus’ preaching.

Matthew 12:42: “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.” The rhetorical situation here is one of judgment of “this generation” for rejecting the wisdom of Jesus.

Matthew 12:45: “Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first.

⁵² The “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” are “elements common to descriptions of gehenna, hell (cf.- 4 Ezra 7:93; 1 Enoch 63:10; Pss Sol 14:9; 15:10; Wisd Sol 17:21; cf. Matt 22:13; comments on 5:29).” Carson, *Matthew*, 203.

⁵³ “These unfaithful servants must be disciples of Jesus during the Tribulation who are not genuine believers. There will be some people who claim to be followers of Jesus in the Tribulation, but who have not trusted in Him for salvation.” Thomas Constable, *Notes on Matthew*, 2026 ed., Sonic Light, accessed February 10, 2026, <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/pdf/matthew.pdf>, 594.

⁵⁴ “In Luke 12:46 the hypocrites are referred to as ‘the unbelievers’ in the NKJV, giving the impression that they are lost. But in that context the words τὸν ἀπιστὸν simply mean ‘the unfaithful.’” Hal Haller, Jr., *Matthew*, The Grace New Testament Commentary rev. ed., ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2019), Matt. 24:51, Aquile Reader)

The phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in 24:51 would mean the anguish of believers at the loss of eternal rewards.

⁵⁵ Carson, *Matthew*, 479.

So also will it be with this evil generation.” The discourse is about an “evil generation” whose refusal to believe leaves them vulnerable to demonic influence.

Matthew 23:36: “Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.” The rhetorical context here is one of condemnation of “this generation” for murdering the prophets.

In these texts, “this generation” refers to the specific group of Jesus’ contemporaries who are hearing Jesus’ sermons and witnessing his miracles but refusing to repent.

Eschatological Use of “This Generation.” Yet in 24:34, there is a shift in the use of the phrase “this generation” from a moral critique to an eschatological marker. The shift is seen in the moral tone and temporal scope of the discourse from an evil (moral) current (temporal) generation in previous texts to a faithful (moral) eschatological (temporal) generation of disciples that will witness the beginning of the end-time “birth pains,” the signs of the end of the age, and Jesus’ coming—events that remain unfulfilled.

While the same judgment context is evident in 24:3-34 as in previous contexts, it has shifted from the judgment of a specific evil generation in Jerusalem to that of the whole world (“great tribulation” worldwide, 24:21, 29; “all the tribes of the earth”, 24:30; “all the nations,” 24:9, 14; 25:32; “from the four winds,” 24:31)⁵⁶ rather than merely the persecutors of Jesus’ disciples until he comes.⁵⁷ The characters in focus are no longer the evil Pharisees and scribes but the disciples who will suffer tribulation and see all the signs. Significantly, in the context of the phrase “this generation” in 24:34, believers are in view. It is no longer a pejorative picture.

Thus, in previous texts, the phrase “this generation” functions as a temporal condemnation of the contemporary religious leadership marked by a hostile tone toward their unbelief. However, in Matthew 24, the phrase shifts from a word of judgment to a word of assurance for the disciples, yet located in the future. From instruction and a warning, there is the assurance of prophetic certainty that this generation of disciples will not pass away before they see all the signs. The hostile tone is now absent. This is no longer a condemnation of “this generation” of evil leaders, but an encouragement to “this generation” of disciples. The temporal horizon is now projected from the present evil generation to a future faithful generation that will be alive to see all the signs.

Contextual clues of “This Generation”

In 24:33–34, the grammar and literary structure provide specific clues that help define the meaning of “this generation.” First, “this generation” is the specific group that

⁵⁶ *Pace* France: “‘This generation’ has been used frequently in this gospel for Jesus’ contemporaries, especially in a context of God’s impending judgment; see 11:16; 12:39, 41-42, 45; 16:4; 17:17, and especially 23:36, where God’s judgment on “this generation” leads up to Jesus’ first prediction of the devastation of the temple in 23:38.” (France, *Gospel of Matthew*, Matt. 24:34)

⁵⁷ *Pace* Neil D. Nelson, Jr., who sees “this generation” as the kind of people that persist in deception and the persecution of Christ’s followers until his Parousia. Nelson, “‘This Generation’ in Matt 24:34,” 369-385.

sees all these things and knows the nearness of his coming. There is syntactic parallelism between 24:33-34. Because the same phrase “all these things” defines the scope of both verses, the “generation” in 24:34 is naturally linked to the “you” who sees the signs in 24:33. The demonstrative “this” grammatically links the “generation” to the preceding textual context which is the “you” that will see the signs. Syntactically then, “this generation” is living throughout the fulfillment of all the end-time signs.

Second, in light of the proximate context, the aorist subjunctive verb “take place” is likely a culminative aorist, indicating the consummation of “all these things” before the passing of “this generation.” Thus, “this generation” refers to believers who endure till the end, suffer persecution, and see all the signs at the end of the age (24:34).

Third, several specific characteristics of “this generation” in the context indicate that it refers to a future generation rather than merely the generation in Jesus’ time, as follows:

1. They are disciples, the primary audience of Jesus in 24:1-51, rather than the hypocritical “scribes and Pharisees” of Matthew 23, with the use of the second person plural “you” (ὁμεῖς, *hymeis*) multiple times (24:2, 4, 9, 20, 23, 25-26, 33-34, 42, 44, 47). As the “unified you,” they are disciples living at the end of the age.
2. They will be delivered up to “tribulation” and put to death (24:9).
3. They will be “hated by all nations for my name’s sake” (24:9).
4. They will endure “to the end” and “will be saved” (24:13).
5. They will probably proclaim the “gospel of the kingdom” “throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (24:14).
6. They are part of the “elect” (ἐκλεκτοὺς, *eklektous*) who will suffer for Christ (24:22), be deceived by false christss (24:24), and be gathered from the whole world (24:31). (The triple repetition of the noun “elect” suggests its distinction in the discourse.)
7. They are the generation that will experience the “birth pains,” tribulation sufferings, cosmic signs, and the sign of the Son of Man’s coming and see all these things (24:4-31), as explained in the fig tree parable (24:32).
8. They will “see all these things” (24:33).
9. They will “know” that he is near “when” they “see all these things” (24:33). The conjunction “when” indicates the time of occurrence (of knowing that “he is near”) when the condition is met (“when you see all these things”).
10. They are part of “this generation” that “will certainly not pass away until all these things take place” (24:34). (This is indicated by the repetition of the same phrase “all these things” in the proximal verses 33 to 34.)

Fourth, while Jesus consistently uses the phrase “this generation” in five Matthean texts as a pejorative term for unrepentant Jews, conspiring Pharisees, and hypocritical religious leaders, the discourse in 4:4-24 adopts a different tone. Here, the address is

marked by words of caution, the call to endurance, the promise of hope, and the demand for readiness. This sharp dissimilarity indicates a referential shift: “this generation” in the Olivet Discourse is not the “evil generation” of Jesus’ day, but the faithful remnant ready for his return.

Fifth, taking into account the Jerusalem/Judea-centered prophecy informed by Daniel (Dan. 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) yet having worldwide consequences, this kind of generation will probably be Jewish believers but also Gentile believers of Christ who will believe in the gospel of the kingdom that will be preached worldwide. In the Matthean context, they will become the spiritual children of Abraham (Matt. 3:7-11).⁵⁸ They will be believers only since only they will be able to connect the dots and understand its significance.

“This generation” can only mean the eschatological generation that will see all these things before they will pass away at the end of the age, since: (1) “all these things” (the signs of 24:3-31) must occur within the lifetime of a single generation; (2) “this generation” will “see all these things” in their completion (24:33); and (3) “all these things” were not fully realized in the lifetime of Jesus’ disciples because the Roman army in 70 CE did not bring about all the “birth pains,” tribulation sufferings, and cosmic signs on a global scale as well as the Parousia. Thus, “this generation” cannot be Jesus’ contemporaries, for they passed away before they saw all the signs. It must designate the future generation that will see all the end-time signs.

INTERPRETIVE PROBLEMS OF THE PRETERIST INTERPRETATION RELATING TO “THIS GENERATION” IN MATTHEW 24

The preterist view of “this generation” as Jesus’ generation who experienced all or most of the signs in their lifetime, is fraught with interpretive problems. First, the claim that the signs were all or partially fulfilled in 70 CE is flawed,⁵⁹ as the timing of fulfillment of the signs is largely unspecified (23:38; 24:2). Preterists seem to read 70 CE back into Jesus’ prophecy through the lens of hindsight (one’s understanding of a past event only *after* it has happened) so that 70 CE is now seen as the fulfillment of 24:2. Such a method uses a historical event to interpret the text rather than allowing the text to speak for itself. Concluding the meaning of the text from 70 CE is a *non sequitur* (literally, “it does not follow”) fallacy; for the conclusion (“24:4-34 must refer to 70 CE”) does not follow from the premise (“the temple fell in 70 CE”).⁶⁰ By fitting the “birth pains,” tribulation, and

⁵⁸ du Toit, “‘This generation’ in Matthew 24:34,” 3.

⁵⁹ “We are unpersuaded. The eschatological reference of vv. 6-13, 21-2, and 27-31 is scarcely to be doubted in view of (i) the many Jewish, Christian, and Matthean parallels (cited below), (ii) the dependence upon the eschatological prophecies of Daniel,¹¹ and (iii) the absence of clear indications to the contrary.¹² Further, the addition of ‘nor on a Sabbath’ (v 20) strikes us as odd if after the fact (see below).” Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3:329.

⁶⁰ Elton L. Hollon, “Unsound and Informally Fallacious Preterist Arguments for Mark 13:24-27,” *The Heythrop Journal* 64, 6 (2023): 796-811, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.14260>.

celestial signs into the first century, history becomes the “measure” of the text rather than its “occasion.”⁶¹ It is no longer history that clarifies the text, but one’s view of history.⁶²

Instead, the text specifies temporal markers which are evidently eschatological: it will be at the “end of the age” (24:3); “but the end is not yet” (24:6); “beginning of birth pains” (24:8); “then” (24:9, 10, 16, 21, 23, 30); “to the end” (24:13); “then the end will come” (24:14); “when you see” (24:15); “those days” (24: 19, 22); “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (24:29); “as soon as its branch becomes tender” (24:32); “when you see” (24:33); “near, at the very gates” (24:33); and “until all these things take place” (24:34). To locate the signs within the destruction of Jerusalem is to ignore the eschatological language that extends through the close of the discourse (24:36-25:46).

Second, tying the disciples’ first question solely to the events in 70 CE alone runs into difficulty. The disciples’ use of the plural form “these things” (ταῦτα, *tauta*, 24:3) suggests a scope broader than the temple’s destruction, likely encompassing the full sequence of signs in 24:4-31. In line with OT messianic eschatology (Dan. 2:44-45; 7:13; 9:24-27; 11:31; 12:11; Zech. 12:10-13; 14:1-11; cf. Matt. 23:39; 24:2), the disciples naturally linked the temple’s fall with the Messiah’s return at the end of the age.⁶³ Jesus’ answer reflects the temple’s destruction and the signs of the end and of his coming, all rolled into one unified scenario. It suggests that all the signs occur collectively at the end of the age rather than in the first century—within the lifetime of “this generation” that witnesses them—rather than as isolated historical events spread across centuries.⁶⁴

Third, the partial preterist view also flounders with inconsistent interpretations of different texts. Given the literal wars, literal famines, and literal generation, to suddenly interpret the cosmic signs as the collapse of nations as suggested by N. T. Wright and R. T. France,⁶⁵ without contextual cues,⁶⁶ constitutes a category error. All the preliminary signs (“birth pains,” tribulation) and cosmic signs (sun, moon, stars) are part of the same

⁶¹ “History is the occasion of prophecy, but not its *measure*.” Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to Its Distinctive Nature, Its Special Function, and Proper Interpretation* (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1856), 40.

⁶² A fundamental hermeneutical approach is to interpret the text from the view of the original narrative world rather than from the view of later historical knowledge. It requires a reading of the discourse that keeps its literary unity and avoids imposing a later historical development into it.

⁶³ “Both of the disciples’ questions, occurring as they did together, suggest that the disciples associated the destruction of the temple with Jesus’ return to it and the end of the present age. [Note: Bruce, 1:289.]” Constable, *Notes on Matthew 2025 Edition*, 600. “The disciples assume that these two events will happen at the same time.” Charles L. Quarles, “Note on Matthew 24:3,” in *Faithlife Study Bible*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012). “In the disciples’ thinking, the end of the temple would augur the end of the present world (cf. 13:39–40, 49; 28:20; Hagner 1995a: 688).” Turner, *Matthew*, 569.

⁶⁴ “The connection implied between the parousia and the end of the age, meanwhile, directs the readers’ attention to events that (from their perspective) still belong to the future.” Wilson, *Matthew*, Unit One, Part One (24:1–14).

⁶⁵ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 361; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, Matt. 24:29.

⁶⁶ “Among them are explicit contextual statements, impossible literality, low correspondence with direct sense and the reference, the degree of imaginative exploitation, the ramifications of the author’s own

observable physical reality.⁶⁷ Splitting them into metaphorical (cosmic signs) and literal signs (tribulations) commits an ontological error (nature of being); for the nature of political collapse cannot be ascribed to cosmic signs that do not possess such a nature. Likewise, the cosmos and the earth are different descriptions of the same physical category. Treating them as different types of reality commits the same category mistake.⁶⁸ Further, in 24:29, the coordinating conjunction “and” (καὶ, *kai*) joins four “equal elements” of the same ontological nature (cosmic signs) and syntactic function⁶⁹: “the sun will be darkened *and* the moon will not give its light, *and* the stars will fall from heaven, *and* the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” As these cosmic signs are syntactically and contextually linked to the preceding literal-physical tribulations, splitting them into literal and metaphorical categories without explicit textual signals creates a category mistake. Interpreting the celestial signs requires apocalyptic conventions or internal textual markers (Dan. 7:7, 20, 24; Rev. 1:20),⁷⁰ which Matthew lacks. Furthermore, while apocalyptic poetry may use “stars” to symbolize “rulers,” Matthew’s *prose* lacks the poetic markers, such as parallelism or similes, to support such a metaphor.

The literal meaning of Matthew’s cosmic disturbances is reinforced by the Lukan parallel. Luke wrote, “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves” (Lk. 21:25; cf. 21:11). The sun, moon, and stars are concrete referents in Luke. He used the same word “sun” (ἡλίου, *hēliō*) to refer to a literal sun at the crucifixion (Lk. 23:45). The “distress of nations in perplexity” is descriptive, specifying a concrete entity (“nations,” ἔθνων, *ethnōn*) and an observable state (“distress,” συνοχή, *synochē*; “perplexity,” ἀπορία, *aporia*), suggesting a literal sense. Descriptive language is also used for the “roaring of the sea and waves” (ἀπορία ἡχοῦς θαλάσσης καὶ σάλου, *aporia ēchous thalassēs kai salou*), indicating a visible, literal phenomenon. Moreover, the synonymous parallelism of the heavenly and earthly signs (describing distress) is indicated by both the coordinating conjunction “and” (καὶ, *kai*) joining the two signs and the same nominative-subject syntax (“signs” [σημεῖα, *semeia*] and “distress” with “distress of nations” [συνοχὴ ἐθνων, *synochē ethnōn*] either as a genitive of source [distress coming from nations] or subjective genitive [nations experiencing the distress]). It establishes the same physical nature (cosmic and earthly) and thus suggests parallel literal events. Interpreting the cosmic signs as

imagery, and juxtaposition of images.” Elliott Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 194-195.

⁶⁷ Daniel Stoljar, “Physicalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, winter 2021 ed., accessed April 5, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/physicalism/>.

⁶⁸ Ofra Magidor, “Category Mistakes,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, spring 2025 ed., accessed April 5, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/category-mistakes/>.

⁶⁹ “The coordinate conjunction links equal elements together, e.g., a subject (or other part of speech) to a subject (or other part of speech), sentence to sentence, or paragraph to paragraph.” Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 667.

⁷⁰ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 268-269.

metaphorical and the earthly signs as literal breaks the physical parallelism, thereby creating an interpretive shift unsupported by the text. Taking the cosmic and earthly signs as metaphors for political collapse ignores Luke's accent on literal cosmic signs from the shining glory to shepherds to the clouds at Jesus' transfiguration and ascension and darkness at the crucifixion (Lk. 2:9-14, 28-36; 23:44-45; 24:50-51; cf. 21:26; Acts 1:9-11). Thus, the literal cosmic signs in Luke complement the Matthean parallel.

Peter's description of the coming "day of the Lord" provides a strikingly apocalyptic parallel to Matthew 24:29 (2 Pet. 3:10).⁷¹ For Matthew, "the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matt. 24:29); while for Peter, "the heavens will pass away with a roar" and the "heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved" (2 Pet. 3:10). Yet Peter draws a direct historical parallel, arguing that just as the ancient world was physically destroyed by literal water, the current "heavens" (οὐρανοί, *ouranoi*) and "earth" (γῆ, *gē*) will be dissolved by literal fire (2 Pet. 3:5-12). Peter's literal framework strongly reinforces a literal reading of Matthew's cosmic upheaval as actual physical events rather than mere metaphors.⁷²

Fourth, syntactically, Matthew uses future indicative mood verbs for the celestial signs (24:29). As the mood of assertion, the future indicative asserts these cosmic events as future events. The descriptors of the sun ("darkened," σκοτισθήσεται, *skotisthēsetai*), moon ("not give its light," οὐ δώσει τὸ φέγγος αὐτῆς, *ou dōsei to phengos autēs*), and stars ("fall from heaven," πεσοῦνται ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, *pesountai apo tou ouranou*) express the changes in function of these cosmic bodies. Adding such physical details suggests a literal narrative. The syntax suggests that Matthew envisions specific literal physical effects: darkness, light, and falling.⁷³ Construing the signs as symbols of political turmoil requires textual indicators (comparative words such as "as" or "like") that are not found in the text.

Fifth, as to intertextuality, both Matt. 24:29 and Isa. 13:10 share the same language, verbalization, and cosmic imagery, yet they differ in objects. Isaiah judges Babylon (Isa. 13:1, 19), whereas Matthew names no specific nation. This lack of a clear national subject in Matthew suggests his words do not function as an allegory for political collapse. While preterists appeal to apocalyptic imagery to justify a non-literal reading, the lack of a specific national referent in Matthew 24 suggests a global, rather than localized, judgment. Also, while Isa. 13:10-13 signals political upheaval, Matthew does not signal a shift into symbolic language through contextual cues. With no indication of a metaphorical meaning,

⁷¹ "That at least some of it [24:29-31] must be taken literally is clear from II Peter 3:10." William Hendriksen, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 863.

⁷² Cosmic imagery must be grounded in its primary, literal sense (e.g., physical celestial bodies) before addressing secondary symbolic layers. This literal "anchor" provides the exegetical foundation for interpreting cosmic phenomena in OT and NT texts (Isa. 13:10; 34:4; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Hag. 2:6, 21; Zech. 12:10, 13; Rev. 6:12-13; cf. Matt. 24:29-31). "Literal exegesis" remains the mandatory starting point; to prioritize secondary meanings otherwise risks "interpretation by imagination." Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 125.

⁷³ This paper prioritizes the normal sense of the text as the "controlling guide" over the figurative unless the NT suggests otherwise. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 119-124, 253, 266-269.

Matthean literal context takes priority; OT usage does not override it.

Sixth, interpreting the phrase “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” (24:30) as a spiritual judgment of Israel and “this generation” in 70 CE, or his ascent to the Father to receive the kingdom as framed by Wright and France,⁷⁴ stumbles with the following significant hermeneutical hurdles.

1. Since the Son of Man’s appearance is witnessed by “all the tribes of the earth” (24:30; Jub. 1:28; 1 En. 62:3; T. Mos. 10:7; Rev. 1:7) and “this generation” (24:32-34), does a strictly localized 70 CE fulfillment not unduly constrain the scope of the prophecy?
2. Does this not ignore the direction of the Son of Man coming on clouds? In Dan. 7:13, the “clouds” bring the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days (heavenly direction); but in Matthew 24, the “clouds” bring him from heaven to earth in his Parousia (earthly direction), which is seen by “all the tribes of the earth” (24:30).
3. Where is this idea of Christ’s coming corroborated in the context of the discourse and the NT?⁷⁵ On the principle of the entire Scripture interpreting a part of Scripture,⁷⁶ where in Jesus’ and NT teaching about his coming is “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” limited to a local, spiritual, and invisible coming of Christ to Jerusalem in 70 CE only? Yet the coming on the clouds of heaven by the Son of Man is global, visible, and physical (24:23-27, 29-34).
4. Did Matthew intend his words to convey double meanings (literal and figurative) and for his readers to interpret them as such? It is maintained that Matthew conveyed a single intended meaning in the text unless he meant a double meaning by stating it explicitly in the text or providing clues in the context.⁷⁷ Asserting a double meaning without textual indicators risks replacing the author’s single intended meaning with the interpreter’s own imaginative construct.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 360-365; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, Matt. 24:30.

⁷⁵ Craig L. Blomberg noted, “Attempts to take the ‘coming on the clouds of the sky’ as Christ’s coming spiritually in judgment against Israel at the time of the destruction of the temple, so that all of vv. 15-35 refer only to first-century events, have to take *parousia* (“coming”) in v. 27 in a way that is otherwise entirely unparalleled in the New Testament.” Blomberg, *Matthew*, 363.

Parallel NT passages should validate one’s view on the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

⁷⁶ “The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture.” Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 105.

⁷⁷ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 121-123.

⁷⁸ “A study of the commentaries or use of Scripture among the early Church Fathers reveals a fantastic use of the imagination in finding New Testament truth or spiritual truth or theological truth in the Old Testament by the use of allegorical interpretation. This is really an assertion of the plural meaning of Scripture. Believing in the unity of the sense of Scripture eliminates all allegorizing of Scripture, ancient or modern.” Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 111.

5. Which part of the text is to be interpreted spiritually or literally? To interpret one text symbolically and not the other without contextual warrant is to engage in a selective construal of the text. Adopting a spiritualized reading risks falling into allegorical subjectivity, effectively replacing exegesis with eisegesis (reading one's own interpretive framework into the text). A better approach is to employ a consistent grammatical-historical reading, balanced by sensitivity to literary genre and context.
6. What methodology is to be applied in the text without falling into the trap of subjective, arbitrary, and inconsistent interpretation? A literal-contextual-historical method centered on authorial intent is fundamental.⁷⁹ It is better to interpret the clause in light of OT theophany, context, and the repetition of the noun "heaven" (οὐρανοῦ, *ouranou*, repeated four times) in 24:29-31, 35. The Son of Man, whose sign "appears in heaven," will return on the "clouds of heaven" and be seen by "all the tribes of the earth." This event functions like an OT theophany, the divine appearing from heaven to earth,⁸⁰ to gather his elect and judge the nations (24:31; 25:31-46; Acts 1:11; Rev. 1:7).

Seventh, the obvious issue is that the generation of Jesus' day has long since died, yet "all these things" have not yet occurred in part or in whole.⁸¹ The disciples asked two core questions—"when will these things be" and "what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (24:3). Jesus answered that the realization of "all these things" is the precursor to his return and "this generation" will see it all in their lifetime (24:32-34). While C. L. Blomberg restricts the scope of "all these things" in 24:33 to the initial

⁷⁹ See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction*, 117-151; J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Hanoch Herkanus Hamadi, Maria Benedicta Dian Savitri, and Pricilia Manopo, "A Biblical Hermeneutical Study on Literal Interpretation," ADI International Conference Series 4, 2 (2022): 204-213, <https://doi.org/10.34306/conferenceseries.v4i2.936>; James Davis, "Lesson 6: Principles of Biblical Interpretation," accessed December 27, 2025, https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-6-principles-biblical-interpretation#_ftnref7.

⁸⁰ Ex. 13:21-22; 16:10; 20:21; 40:35-38; Lev. 16:2; Num. 14:14; 2 Sam. 22:12; 1 Kgs. 8:10-11; Ezek. 1:4; 10:4; 1 En. 14.8; 2 Bar. 53.1-4. Wilson, *Matthew*, Unit One, Part Two (24:15-31).

⁸¹ Robert H. Mounce has proposed this "insoluble problem" and some suggestions for resolving it. Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary, ed. W. Ward Gasque (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 227-228.

Pace D. A. Carson, who suggested that "all that v. 34 demands is that the distress of vv. 4-28, including Jerusalem's fall, happen within the lifetime of the generation then living. This does *not* mean that the distress must end within that time but only that 'all these things' must happen within it." Carson, *Matthew*, 507.

Carson's view assumes that "this generation" refers to the "generation then living." However, it disregards the sign of Jesus' coming in 24:29-31 and overlooks the futurist language of all the signs in 24:33-34, thus appearing to break the discourse structure. Jesus' prophecy suggests the end of the distress within the lifetime of "this generation" but only when "all these things take place" in the future (24:34).

Leon Morris noted, "A difficulty with this [Carson's] view is that it is not easy to see why all these things should include the events of verses 4-28, but not those of verses 29-31." Morris, *Matthew*, Matt. 24:34, Aquile Reader.

signs (24:4-26)—differentiating the nearness of his return from the event itself⁸²—grammatical and narrative evidence suggest that “all these things” in 24:34 covers the entirety of the preceding signs in 24:4-31.

1. There is no clear indication in the text that “all these things” in 24:34 are only up to 24:26. The restriction of the signs to the 24:26 boundary is an exegetical deduction rather than an explicit textual assertion.
2. There are clear grammatical and syntactical indicators that the phrase “all these things,” in both 24:33 and 24:34, refers to both the initial and cosmic signs of Christ’s coming.
 - a. The Greek phrase “all these things” in 24:33 and 34 is the same. Both share the same neuter plural adjective “all” (πάντα, *panta*) and the same neuter plural demonstrative pronoun “these” (ταῦτα, *tauta*). Although the syntactic function of “all” is different for both phrases (it is the object of the action in the accusative in 24:33 but the subject in the nominative in 24:34 based on the surrounding verbs), it agrees with the neuter pronoun because the latter uses the same form for both accusative and nominative cases.
 - b. The demonstrative “these” identifies a single referent—all the signs. The text lacks contrasting markers or clarifying phrases to justify dividing these signs into distinct groups. Restricting “all these things” in 24:33 to the events of 24:4-26, while applying the identical phrase in 24:34 only to 24:28-31, requires an unsustainable syntactical split that is unwarranted by the text. It relies on an exegetical inference that overrides the natural reading of the syntax. It produces internal inconsistency—artificially splitting “all these things” and disrupting the natural cohesion of the text. The grammar of “all these things” in both texts must refer to the same things and therefore the same set of signs in 24:3-31.
 - c. In 24:33, the demonstrative “these” refers to the same signs in the preceding context from 24:4-31,⁸³ Absent linguistic signals—such as a contrasting noun, marker, or clarificatory note—the reader naturally assumes a constant referent. Thus, the demonstrative “these” refers to the same referent, the same signs. Because the phrase “all these things” and the proximal demonstrative “these” are identical in 24:33-34, they must refer to the same cohesive series of signs in 24:4-31.
 - d. Matthew’s use of the adverb “immediately” (εὐθέως, *eutheōs*) suggests that “all these things” mentioned in 24:33-34 cover both the early signs and the later cosmological events. The clause, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days” (24:29) is an adverbial clause of time indicating *when* the cosmic events will occur which is “immediately,” “at once,” or “instantly”

⁸² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 364.

⁸³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 333.

following the tribulation of those days in 24:15-26 (3:16; 4:20, 22; 8:3, 13:5, 20-21; 14:22, 27, 31; 20:34; 21:2-3; 25:15; 26:49; 26:74; 27:48). It modifies the verb “will be darkened” and succeeding main verbs in 24:29 to tightly *link* Jerusalem’s sufferings in 24:15-26 with the cosmic signs of Christ’s coming in 24:29-31. This suggests an almost simultaneous occurrence of the two macro-events.⁸⁴ In light of this, “all these things” includes every event in the chain of eschatological events from 24:3-31.

- e. The signs of the nearness of Christ’s coming are the signs of the *imminent* appearing of Christ—“at the very gates” (24:33)—rather than the entire age. The disciples’ *recognition* of “all these things” marks the climax of the final eschatological crisis. Similarly, “this generation” refers to the specific group of people who live to see this entire sequence unfold. They will stand on the very threshold of the Son of Man’s arrival. Therefore, the phrase “all these things” covers the complete end-time complex: false prophets, wars, great tribulation, abomination of desolation, and final cosmological upheavals in 24:4-31.
- f. Splitting the referents of “all these things” in 24:34 disrupts the narrative’s logical progression. The discourse moves naturally from the fig tree analogy in 24:32 to the disciples’ recognition of the signs in 24:33, culminating in the assurance that “this generation” will witness their full completion in 24:34. Consequently, the same prophetic signs the disciples “see” in 24:33 will now “take place” in 24:34. Both the disciples and Matthew’s readers would perceive all the signs of this generation to be the same signs that they will see happen. Treating them as separate sets of signs creates an interpretive disconnect in the narrative sequence.
- g. Matthew’s recurring use of “all these things” in 24:33-34 functions as a cohesion device to achieve narrative continuity.⁸⁵ The neuter plural construction “all these things” consolidates all the signs in the preceding context into a unified conceptual “bundle,” signaling that the events the disciples “see” are the same events that “take place” (24:33-34). It allows the reader to comprehend the complex of prophecies as a coherent whole rather than disjointed events.⁸⁶ The message is cohesive without introducing a different group of signs. Breaking these signs into different groups of signs violates the inherent structural and thematic cohesion of the text.

⁸⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1990), Matt. 24:3b, Aquile Reader; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, Matt. 24:29.

⁸⁵ David B. Howell, *Matthew’s Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 42 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 136-137.

⁸⁶ Howell, *Matthew’s Inclusive Story*, 253.

3. The narrative maintains a unified, continuous flow leading up to the cosmic signs of the Son of Man (24:29-31). Matthew's presentation of the events (24:4-31) constitutes a comprehensive and cohesive response to the disciples' questions regarding the sign of his coming and of the end of the age (24:3).

Eighth, if "this generation" is limited to the generation of Jesus' time, then conversely, "all these things" should have taken place (24:34). Yet many of these events did not happen in 70 CE such as massive displays of signs and wonders, messianic and theological deception, the abomination of the image of the Antichrist in the temple as corroborated by Paul (2 Thess. 2:3-4), celestial signs, Christ's coming, mourning of all tribes of the earth, and assembly of the elect.

Ninth, if the aorist subjunctive verb functions as an ingressive aorist—signaling the beginning of the action—then the sequence of "all these things" ("birth pains," great tribulation, cosmic disturbances, return of Jesus, and gathering of the elect) should have *begun* to take place. However, the Roman destruction of the Temple did not occur until 70 CE, nearly four decades later, and the anticipated signs remain unfulfilled. That the temple's destruction is yet future is evidenced by the coming "abomination of desolation" (24:15; cf. Dan. 11:31; 12:11),⁸⁷ an event also framed as a pending expectation by Paul (2 Thess. 2:3-4).⁸⁸

Alternatively, if the aorist subjunctive "take place" functions as a culminative aorist—denoting completion before the passing away of "this generation"—then "all these things" should have been fully realized in the generation then living. However, the grammatical, temporal, and eschatological markers confirm that the entirety of eschatological events has not yet reached consummation. It awaits complete fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

Syntactic, discursive, and contextual evidence in Matthew 24 refutes the preterist identification of "this generation" with Jesus' contemporaries, contributing to a conundrum of interpretive problems. Conversely, the evidence supports a futurist framework: "this generation" refers to the generation witnessing the start of the signs, the sum of the signs, and the sign of the Son of Man—the generation that "will certainly not pass away until all these things take place" (AT).

⁸⁷ "The commentators assume that, if Matthew wrote after AD 70, the prophecy of the temple's destruction would inevitably have been seen as fulfilled. But v. 15 implies that the temple will yet play a role in history." Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 330.

⁸⁸ "The evangelist uses 'the holy city' of Jerusalem (4:5; 27:53) and the holy place would naturally be its temple. Matthew's association of the abomination with the temple thus agrees closely with the portrayal of the antichrist in 2 Thessalonians." David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 88, ed. Margaret E. Thrall (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102.

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BOOK REVIEW*

Reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Introduction. By Mark S. Gignilliat and Heath A. Thomas. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2025. 448 pages. Hardcover: \$38.50

Mark Gignilliat and Heath Thomas's *Reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Introduction* is a great volume in the Reading Christian Scripture Series. The authors guide us through the Old Testament with a Christ-centered focus. They trace the single redemptive plan of God through the Old Testament's narrative.

While other Old Testament introductions use literary, historical/critical, and/or theological methodologies, the authors apply a consistent **biblical-theological method** that links the Old Testament's covenants, institutions, and narratives together, often showing their fulfillment in Jesus. The historical approach often treats the biblical texts as having "meaning" that fits only into that particular moment in time. However, as the authors argue, "we have our Bibles because their contents were recognized and received as sacred Scripture. This confession shapes how we read and receive the Old Testament."

In twenty-eight chapters, the authors cover the whole Old Testament. His first chapter covers the concept of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. The remaining chapters cover the Old Testament books, with three chapters devoted to introductions of the major sections of the Old Testament (following the Hebrew order, Pentateuch/Law, Prophets, and the Writings, that is, the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim—TaNaK).

In their first chapter, the authors admit that the Old Testament is a challenge. Are the "sacrificial mechanics" of Leviticus actually useful? However, we Christians can easily be too familiar with our favorite verses or with the stories we believe we know. But the Old Testament is "a literary bullhorn... needed to rouse us from our religious slumbers.... It startles. It shocks. It comforts and confounds. It confronts our blindness and deafness with large and startling pictures."

The authors prefer to refer to the "Old Testament" as such instead of the "Hebrew Bible." The use of the term "old" means that something new has come to replace it. The

* Spencer Robinson, "Book Review: Reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture (Mark Gignilliat)," accessed December 25, 2025, <https://spoiledmilks.com/2025/10/17/review-reading-old-testament-christian-scripture-gignilliat/>. Used by permission of Spencer Robinson.

history of God's dealings with his people, from Adam and Eve to Abraham, Moses, and Israel on Sinai, and the many lousy kings Judah and Israel had, to the exile, has been written down. The old covenant had come to an end, and as Isaiah promised, something new would break forth (Isa 48:6).

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal to us "God's revelation of himself by the Spirit in the Son." The Old Testament has a particular way of speaking, and this continues on today as a witness to the one God whom we Christians call the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do not have the New Testament without the Old.

As the authors write, "The Old Testament is 'old' because its material form and 'coming to be' had to end in anticipation of a new moment of God's self-unveiling. But it is precisely in its 'oldness' that it continues to shape the way Christians understand our triune God and his redemptive mission for the universe."

After this, they explain why they follow the Hebrew (TaNaK) order, the relationship between the Old Testament and history, and explain their five types of sidebars:

1. **Canonical Connections**—*linking narratives and the Testaments,*
2. **Theological Issues**—*links to Christian theology,*
3. **Reception History**—*examples of how texts have been understood,*
4. **Historical Matters**—*textual background, and*
5. **Literary Notes**—*highlight a text's literary quality.*

Overall Thoughts

I largely enjoyed and appreciated this book. I really enjoy biblical theology, how it connects characters, events, books, and the Testaments, points to Jesus, and offers application to us today. Throughout the book, the authors draw many rightful connections to Jesus, and they aren't afraid to do it. They show typological connections, such as that between Noah and the ark and Moses in his ark-basket, both covered with pitch, both flowing as life-saving vessels through the waters of death. They show us how to read and understand the Old Testament without jumping to allegory (or using it as a last resort).

That said, they do read, for example, the Song of Songs as both literally about human sexuality and canonically about God's love for his bride, the church, in Christ. The human love throughout the book reflects and points us to divine love. The ultimate destiny of all created love is *to participate in the love of God*. The Song of Songs affirms the goodness of creation, love, and sex, while setting the most intense human relationship in the larger canonical story of God's covenant(s) with humanity.

Recommended?

The authors do a wonderful job showing how the Old Testament serves as Scripture for Christians, always pointing us to Christ. They show us the value of both Testaments for

our lives, for it is in both that God's faithfulness to his people is on display. From a biblical-theological perspective, this would be the first Old Testament introduction I would pull from my shelf.

Pair this with Ansberry's volume on the wisdom books and the Psalms and Tully's volume on the Prophets in this same series. If you want to dip into Old Testament introductions that take a different perspective, pair this with the volumes by Hill and Walton (literary/historical perspective), Hess (historical/theological/critical), or Van Pelt and Duncan (Covenant Theology). Gignilliat's volume is similar in some ways to Stephen Dempster's *Dominion and Dynasty*.

Spencer Robinson

RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW

God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology. By J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019. 416 pages. Paperback.

In *God's Relational Presence*, J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays present a straightforward thesis: the Triune God aspires to establish a personal relationship with humankind. He comes into his creation to nurture that relationship with his abiding presence. (1) The whole length and breadth of salvation history in the Bible is a metanarrative of that purpose. The Bible begins with the presence of God in perfect relationship with the first humans in the garden and ends with the same divine presence and relationship with his redeemed people back in the garden. The fall of humans to sin and death resulted in their banishment from the garden, which signaled the development of the biblical narrative of divine redemption outside of the garden so that humankind could get back to a vital relationship with God in the garden. The crux of this story of restoration to God is the presence of God. (20) Thus, the relational presence of God in creation is the starting point in biblical theology and throughout salvation history from Genesis to Revelation, the unifying meta-theme.

The authors explain this meta-theme in six chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the relational presence of God in the Pentateuch. An implication of the image of God in humans is a relationship with God. The expulsion from the garden is an eviction from God's presence. The narratives of the patriarchs, the tabernacle, and the name Yahweh highlight the divine presence.

Chapter 2 explores the relational presence of God in the historical books, psalms, and the wisdom books. God's empowering presence as they conquer and rule the land is the dominant theme in Joshua and Judges. The divine presence is central in the lives of Samuel, Saul, and David, and up to the reign of Solomon, the temple, and the later kings.

Chapter 3 explains God's presence in the prophets. The holy One of Israel makes the temple his dwelling. God's judgment of Israel is separation and deportation from his presence in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as well as from Hosea through Zephaniah. The heart of the future restoration of Israel is the presence of God. God will return to his throne minus the Ark. The restored presence of God is the hub of the new covenant.

Chapter 4 expounds the relational presence of God in the synoptic gospels and Luke-Acts. Jesus is shown as God-incarnate, the kingdom of God as God-present, and kingdom righteousness and discipleship as God-oriented. The presence of Jesus and his mighty works is the presence of God and his kingdom. Jesus embodies the new temple of God's presence, replacing the Jerusalem temple.

Chapter 5 explicates how the theme of God's presence is the center in Paul's letters, Hebrews, and the general letters. The divine presence motif is seen in several sub-themes—God's presence in Jesus' becoming flesh, salvation, union with Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the church, and in the end-times. (221)

Chapter 6 illustrates the relational presence of God in the Johannine corpus. The Word who is God was made flesh and dwelt among people. The Paraclete is God helping and comforting Christ-followers. Knowing, loving, and obeying God are connected with Jesus' presence. The Apocalypse prophesies the fulfillment of the promise of the divine presence in the new Jerusalem.

Duvall and Hays betray their reliance on the opinions of scholars frequently, citing the word "scholars" eighty-seven times in the book. They refer to "a large number of scholars," "most widely held views among scholars" (19), "numerous scholars" (20), etc. Although the authors are scholars themselves, they seem to give the impression, probably unintentionally, that the number of scholars is a determinant of a correct interpretation of the text. It has given rise to a faulty notion among laypersons that the number of scholars rather than the weight of scholarly evidence and arguments is the determining factor in the search for truth. It would be better for writers to present all competing claims of interpretation and then select the preferred view in light of all the evidence instead of merely citing the majority opinion.

The authors wrote, "Petersen's helpful suggestion for viewing restoration fulfillment in Zechariah 1–8 as 'somewhere in between' is similar in many regards to the NT 'already but not yet' understanding of the kingdom of God." (161) However, as to how Petersen's view of restoration fulfillment in Zechariah 1-8 is similar to the "already but not yet" view of the kingdom, the authors do not bother to explain it. It is apparent in the rest of the book that the already but not yet kingdom view of the writers is unfortunately an assumption without warrant in their work.

The authors noted the following interesting detail:

In this final scene the holiness normally associated with utensils within the temple itself has now expanded, not only to the pots throughout Jerusalem and Judah but also to the bells on horses, traditionally an unclean animal (Lev. 11:1–

8). Thus the presence of God dwelling in Jerusalem makes that which was unclean to be clean and holy, eliminating every distinction between holy and profane . . .” (163)

If this is the case, it may well be an indication of a change in “dispensation,” in that the holy/profane distinction of the law is now being eliminated under a new dispensation of the presence of God in the temple. One rationale for the holy/profane distinction in the holiness code of Leviticus is the divine maintenance of sacred space—the holiness of God in the temple. The elimination of that distinction with the divine presence in end-time Jerusalem is a contradiction of that view. On the other hand, it may likely be a dispensational change in divine administration.

Duvall and Hay’s thesis is well-explained, coherent, and balanced. It traces the theme of divine presence across biblical history. Yet it would be far more compelling if they adopted elements of Andy Naselli’s model, specifically by: (1) grounding the theme in a thorough exegetical analysis of the referenced passages; (2) showing how the theme of God’s presence would relate to a covenantal framework or any other selected biblical theology framework for comparison; (3) identifying OT promise and NT fulfillment through the NT writer’s use of the OT; (4) bringing the theme to a Christological climax, with Christ as the ultimate culmination of relational presence; and (5) concluding with a doxological application.

Henry Trocino, Jr.