Conspectus

The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary

Volume 16

September 2013

ISSN 1996-8167

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A Comparative Analysis of the Song of Moses and Paul's Speech to the Athenians

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Abstract

This essay undertakes a comparative analysis of the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians. One incentive for doing so is the opportunity to address the issue of whether Paul overly diluted his proclamation of the gospel to accommodate the proclivities of his pagan (gentile) audience. A second motivation for considering the relationship between these two portions of scripture is that this topic has received only a cursory consideration in the secondary academic literature. This study concludes that at a literary, conceptual, and linguistic level, Paul connected his message to the Athenians with the theological perspective of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). Another determination is that the apostle did not weaken his declaration of the good news to oblige the tendencies of his listeners. Rather, Paul examined the most exemplary archetypes of secular philosophical thought in his day, compared their dogmas to the truths of scripture, and declared how God's Word is infinitely superior.

[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

The word *Deuteronomy* means 'repetition of the law', and this book is called such because it recites the Law of Moses a second time. Covering the period from about a month before to a month after Moses' death (c. 1406 BC), Deuteronomy contains Moses' reminders to the Israelites about their covenant with the Lord. It also records Moses' transferring leadership responsibilities to his protégé, Joshua. In this book, the Israelite leader recorded a series of speeches to the Israelites about how they were to conduct themselves when they entered the Promised Land. In an effort to prepare them for the challenge of the future, Moses urged them to recall the laws and experiences of their past. He emphasized those laws that were especially needed for the people to make a successful entrance into Canaan.

Just as Deuteronomy is the literary bridge between the Pentateuch and the historical books of the Old Testament, so too Acts spans the gap between the gospel accounts and the letters of instruction that compose much of the New Testament. Moreover, in Acts, the narrative picks up where the gospels leave off, telling about the early days of the Christian church. Acts reveals that after Jesus ascended to heaven, the church experienced phenomenal growth. Jesus did not leave his followers unprepared for the task at hand; instead, he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who filled them with supernatural power. Jesus' followers became a channel for the flow of God's Spirit. It was an extension of God's hand, reaching out to do his work in a world full of need.

The foregoing preliminary background information helps establish the context for the focus of this essay, namely, a comparative analysis of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 and Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17. A cursory glance might suggest these two passages of scripture are unrelated. Nonetheless, a methodical reading

of the respective biblical texts indicates a much closer connection between the two. As this paper argues, Paul connected his message to the Athenians, at a literary, conceptual, and linguistic level, with the worldview of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). One incentive for examining these two portions of God's Word is that doing so addresses the issue of whether Paul overly diluted his proclamation of the gospel to accommodate the proclivities of his pagan (gentile) audience.

A second motivation for considering the relationship between Deuteronomy 32 and Acts 17 is that this topic has received only a cursory consideration in the secondary academic literature. By way of example, while Gärtner (1955:167–70) overviews the 'Old Testament–Jewish tradition in the Areopagus speech', he does not deal with the Song of Moses. Also, even though Hays (1989:163) mentions 'numerous allusions' that Paul makes to the 'Song of Moses in Deuteronomy', Hays does not specifically consider the apostle's speech to the Athenians.

The discussion provided by Soards (1994:95–100) on Acts 17:22–31 only refers to one possible connection between verse 26 and the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:8 (p. 98). Likewise, Stonehouse (1949:33) makes a solitary reference to this verse (specifically in fn. 29). Moreover, Scott (1994:543) allocates just one paragraph to discuss the same intertextual correspondence. Given (2001:49) also devotes only a single paragraph to summarize the 'verbal and/or thematic parallels' between these two biblical passages. Finally, Arnold (2002:390–1), Schnittjer (2006:532–3), and Morgan (2012a:88–9; 2012b:147) each provide less than two pages, respectively, of general comments related to the connection between Deuteronomy 32 and Acts 17.

2. Literary Parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul's Speech to the Athenians

An examination of the secondary literature indicates there is no scholarly consensus concerning the organizational scheme of either the Song of Moses[2] or Paul's speech to the Athenians.[3] It is beyond the scope of this essay to sort out and resolve the disparate views among specialists (assuming it is even possible to do so); instead, this lack of agreement provides an incentive for taking a fresh approach to the way in which these two passages are arranged. What follows are the organizational schemes for the respective biblical texts put forward in this essay, along with an explanation of the relationship between the structural elements. As the discourse below points out, there are potentially intriguing literary parallels that draw attention to the close connection between the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians.

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[2] Cf. Brueggemann 1997:448; Christensen 2002:792; Labuschagne 2013:2–3, 11; McConville 2002:451; Niehaus 1997:539; Skehan 1951:157–60; Thompson 1974:296–7; Tigay 1996:299; von Rad 1966:196; Wright 1996:298.

[3] Cf. Auffret 1978:202; Barnes 1969:417–8; Bock 2007:558; Fitzmyer 1998:602; Losie 2004:228; Marshall 1980:282; O'Toole 1982:187–8; Parsons 2008:245; Polhill 1992:370; Reese 1976:635; Schnabel 2012:720–1; Soards 1994:96.

2.1. The Organizational Scheme for the Song of Moses (Deut. 31:30–32:44)

Prologue: 31:30
God's summoning of witnesses: 32:1–3
    God's accusation of Israel's disloyalty: 32:4–6
        God's loving actions on Israel's behalf: 32:7–14
            God's indictment of Israel's rebellion: 32:15–18
                God's decision to punish Israel: 32:19–25
    God's censure of Israel's foes: 32:26–31
        God's punishment of Israel's foes: 32:32–35
            God's vindication of Israel: 32:36–38
                God's execution of justice: 32:39–42
God's call for songs of praise: 32:43
Epilogue: 32:44

In Deuteronomy 31:1–29, Moses[4] told the Israelites that he was no longer capable of leading them. So, he urged them to be strong and courageous as they entered the land of Canaan. Then, after instructing the people to submit to the leadership of Joshua, the lawgiver presented the written decrees and ordinances to the priests. Moses told them to read the law regularly to God's people. Moses also foretold that after his death, the Israelites would rebel against the Lord.

Next, a representative number of Israelites were summoned to hear their leader recite the words of a lyrical oration. Deuteronomy 31:30 is the prologue to the Song of Moses. The latter is presented as a 'prophetic poem' (Niehaus 1997:530) containing 'didactic and legal strains'

[4] In this essay, Moses is the presumed author of the Pentateuch, including Deuteronomy (cf. Keil and Delitzsch 1981:465–6; Mendenhall 1975:64–6; McConville 2002:451–2; Nelson 2002:509).

(Weitzman 1994:393) on the subject of Israel's future apostasy in Canaan. Verse 30 states that Israel's lawgiver declared the entire content of the ode to the leaders of the nation, who had convened in his presence. Deuteronomy 32:44 is the corresponding epilogue. This verse not only reiterates what is conveyed in 31:30, but also adds that Joshua (Hebrew, *Hoshea*) was with Moses during the recital.

Deuteronomy 32:1–3 is God's summoning of witnesses, namely, the 'heavens' and the 'earth'.[5] Moses depicted his speech as instruction that nourished and promoted life. Israel's leader also regarded the content of his teaching as a proclamation of the Lord's name, which resulted in his people praising God for his greatness (or magnificence). Verse 43 is the matching call for songs of praise. Moses directed the pagan nations to shout for joy with God's people. The reason for doing so was the assurance that Israel's divine Warrior would vindicate the atrocities his foes inflicted upon the Israelites. Moreover, the Commander of heaven's armies would cleanse the Promised Land and its people of the guilt associated with their iniquity.

According to the preceding organizational scheme, a descending stair-step literary pattern is found in verses 4–25 and 26–42, in which the series of verses within each respective group progressively advances or extends Moses' overall train of thought. For instance, verses 4–6 spotlight God's accusation of Israel's disloyalty. This reprimand was warranted because the nation spurned God's loving actions on the people's behalf (vv. 7–14). In turn, Israel's rebellion was the basis for God's indictment (vv. 15–18). Furthermore, the nation's culpability led to God's decision to punish his people (vv. 19–25).

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are the author's personal translation of the respective biblical texts being cited.

The nations God used to discipline Israel were also accountable to him. Verses 26–31, which parallel the thought in verses 4–6, record God's censure of Israel's foes. His reprimand found in verses 32–35 points to the legitimacy of his decision to punish the enemies of his people. This action contrasts sharply with God's covenantal love for his people, as delineated in verses 7–14. In dealing forthrightly with Israel's adversaries, God vindicated the cause of his people (vv. 36–38). He remained virtuous in doing so, for he did not hesitate to also hold the Israelites accountable for their crimes (vv. 15–18). Finally, as God punished Israel (vv. 19–25), likewise he executed justice on the nation's enemies (vv. 39–42).

2.2. The organizational scheme for Paul's speech to the Athenians (Acts 17:16–34)

Prologue: the apostle's discourse with people in Athens: 17:16–17
The Athenian philosophers' intrigue with Paul: 17:18–21
    The Athenians' complete ignorance of God: 17:22–23
        The creation's absolute dependence on God: 17:24–25
            The total reliance of humanity on God: 17:26–28
    The incomparable nature of God: 17:29
        The divine summons to repent: 17:30
            The future judgment of humanity: 17:31
The mixed response of the Athenians: 17:32
Epilogue: the conversion of some in Athens: 17:33–34

It was during Paul's Second Missionary Journey (c. AD 49–52; Acts 15:39–18:22) that he stopped at the city-state of Athens. This centre of Greek learning and culture was located five miles inland from the Aegean Sea (cf. Gempf 1993:51; Martin 1992:513; McRay 2000:139; Witherington 1998:513). At the start of the apostle's excursion from Jerusalem, he took Silas and headed for Galatia by a land route. Then,

in Lystra, Timothy joined the team. The Holy Spirit prevented Paul from proclaiming the Gospel in Asia and Bithynia. Next, the apostle saw a vision summoning him to Macedonia, where the missionaries won converts and faced opposition. After Paul delivered a girl from an evil spirit, he and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi. An earthquake shattered the prison and led to the conversion of the jailer and his family. Thereafter, from Thessalonica to Berea, opposition followed the missionaries. This impelled Paul's supporters to escort him to Athens. Meanwhile, Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea to establish the new believers.

As with the Song of Moses, so too opening and concluding literary elements precede Paul's speech to the Athenians.[6] Specifically, 17:16–17 is the prologue, which records the apostle's discourse with the people in the city. As he got acquainted with the residents, Paul became deeply upset by the sight of the idols throughout Athens. Despite his agitation, the apostle remained tactful as he told others about Jesus and his resurrection. Paul's interlocutors included Jews and God-fearing gentiles in the synagogues, as well as patrons the apostle happened to meet in the city's local marketplace. Verses 33–34 are the corresponding epilogue. The text notes that a modest number of Athenians were converted before Paul left the city.

Verses 18–21 record the Athenian philosophers' intrigue with Paul. Discussing novel views was the favorite pastime of the elitists and resident foreigners. For all that, some regarded the apostle as an unsophisticated scavenger of ideas, while others were suspicious of the foreign deities he seemed to be peddling. Verse 32 puts forward the

[6] The version of Paul's speech to the Athenians recorded in Acts is presumed to be a historically accurate rendition of what the apostle said (cf. Bock 2007:559; Bruce 1988:334; Fudge 1971:193; Witherington 1998:519).

matching disdainful response of the intelligentsia. Their initial attitude toward Paul was pejorative, and this explains why they did not hesitate to scoff when he declared the doctrine of rising from the dead. In turn, their disapproval meant the city's Aristocratic Council presumably barred the apostle from any further proclamation of the gospel in Athens.[7]

As with the Song of Moses, the summary of Paul's speech in Athens consists of two descending stair step literary patterns. To be specific, verses 22–28 and 29–31, respectively, advance or extend the apostle's overall train of thought. For instance, verses 22–23 summarise the Athenians' ignorance of God, which mirrored that of all humankind. Next, verses 24–25 emphasise the severity of this extreme deficit by drawing attention to the creation's absolute dependence on God. Verses 26–28 narrow the focus even further by spotlighting the total reliance of humanity on God.

Humankind's ignorance of God is due in part to his incomparable nature, as pointed out in verse 29. This text also emphasizes God's role as the Creator of all human beings and implies that he is their supreme Lord. In conjunction with the truth recorded in verses 24–25 (that the creation is absolutely dependent on God), verse 30 goes even further by

[7] In the episode involving Paul at Athens, it has been suggested that Luke portrayed the apostle as a philosophical figure whose oratory approach and content mirrored that of Socrates. For instance, the early Greek philosopher (469–399 BC) is said to have dialogued with various interlocutors in the central plaza of the city, introduced foreign deities, and espoused divergent teachings. Also, for these infractions, Socrates was put on trial and sentenced to death by the governing authority. It is beyond the scope of this essay to deliberate whether the data in scripture and elsewhere convincingly support the preceding view. For further information on this topic, cf. Barrett 1998:824, 828–9, 830; Bock 2007:562–3; Bruce 1988:329–40; Dunn 2009:683; Flemming 2002:209; Given 2001:4, 41–2, 56–9, 62–5, 67, 70, 76; Losie 2004:224–5; Marshall

revealing that he is also the Judge of earth's inhabitants. It is for this reason that God summoned everyone to repent. Verse 31 puts a fine point on the declaration found in verses 26–28 that all humanity is totally reliant on God, by revealing that he would one day judge humanity through Jesus, whom the Lord raised from the dead.

3. Conceptual and Linguistic Parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians

The preceding section detailed possible literary parallels in the organizational schemes of the Song of Moses and Paul's Speech to the Athenians. It may be conceded that, as suggestive as these similarities might be, in isolation they do not establish with certainty a strong connection between these two portions of scripture. In point of fact, it is at the conceptual and linguistic levels that the connection becomes clearer and confirms the major premise of this essay. Specifically, as the following discourse emphasizes, Paul connected his message to the Athenians with the theological perspective of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). Accordingly, section 3.1 engages in an analysis of the Song of Moses. Then, section 3.2 examines Paul's Speech to the Athenians. In doing so, the analysis draws upon the information in section 3.1 to call attention to the conceptual and linguistic parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians (technically referred to as 'intertextual echoes'; Litwak 2004:199).[8]

1980:284; Peterson 2009:490; Rowe 2009:30, 31–3, 34–5; Sandnes 1993:20–5; Schnabel 2012:727; Tannehill 1994:214; Walaskay 1998:166–7.

[8] Due to the limitations of this study, only 'scriptural intertexts in Paul's speech' (Litwak 2004:203)—in particular, the Song of Moses, and in general, the Tanakh—are considered.

3.1. An analysis of the Song of Moses

According to the organizational scheme for the Song of Moses adopted in section 2.2 of this essay, Deuteronomy 32:1–3 is God's summoning of witnesses, specifically, the 'heavens' and the 'earth' (cf. Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; Isa 1:2; 34:1; Mich 1:2; 6:1–2). This is paralleled in Deuteronomy 32:43 by God's call for songs of praise from the 'nations' with (or concerning) his 'people' (cf. Rom 15:10). The correspondence between Deuteronomy 32:1–3 and verse 43 is even stronger in the Septuagint version of verse 43, which reads, 'Rejoice, O heavens, with Him'. Then the verse adds, 'Prostrate before Him, all you gods'.

The reason for the above response is given in verses 2–3. In particular, Moses' soliloquy on the Creator's just dealings with Israel and the nations was said to be as spiritually refreshing as a gentle rain on tender grass and nourishing as plentiful showers on newly sprouting plants. The equitable way in which God dealt with all humankind attested to the eminence of his 'name'. 'Lord' translates the 'four Hebrew consonants YHVH' (Tigay 1996:431), which most likely was 'pronounced *Yahweh*'. This 'redemptive, covenant name' (Wright 1996:300) pointed to the distinctive character and attributes of God—who alone is eternally 'self-sufficient' (von Rad 1966:199).

The sacred name also affirmed the 'greatness' (Deut 32:3) of the Creator's divinity (cf. Exod 3:14–15; 33:19; 34:5–6; Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2; Ps. 105:1–2; Kaiser 1980:934; Ross 1997:147; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:584–5). In comparison to Israel's God, all the pagan deities venerated by people were powerless and lifeless idols (i.e. inanimate objects people made from such common elements as stone, metal, or wood). For this reason, God alone deserved to be worshipped. Deuteronomy 32:43 echoes this sentiment and adds that the divine Warrior would punish his adversaries

for shedding the 'blood' of his 'servants' (cf. 2 Kngs 9:7; Ps 79:10; Rev 6:10; 16:6; 18:20; 19:2). Likewise, he would vindicate their cause by making 'atonement' (Deut 32:43) for the Promised Land, as well as cleanse his people of their iniquities.

The preceding information indicates that the Song of Moses, while having liturgical and wisdom elements (cf. Driver 1986:345; Leuchter 2007:295; Weitzman 1994:377–8), is comparable to a covenant lawsuit oracle in which the Creator presented the evidence and rendered his verdict (cf. Chavalas 2003:577; Oswalt 2003:856; Thompson 1974:207). In this imaginary courtroom scene, God is depicted as the plaintiff and prosecuting attorney, the heavens and the earth are the jury, and the humankind is the accused (cf. Ps 50; Isa 1; Jer 2; Mich 6). On the one hand, Israel was guilty of violating the Mosaic covenant. On the other hand, the surrounding pagan nations were culpable for atrocities they committed against the covenant community. Whether it was the supreme Lord's dealings with Israel (vv. 4–25) or the pagan nations (vv. 26–42), he remained just in his pronouncements and upright in his actions.

With respect to Israel, the nation's disloyalty is summarised in verses 4–6. Throughout the Israelites' existence, God proved himself to be their trustworthy and unfailing 'Rock' (i.e. source of refuge, protection, and strength; cf. Gen 49:24; Pss 18:2; 19:14; Baker 2003:365; Hill 1997:793; van der Woude 1997:1070). His deeds were characterized by integrity and truth, and all his actions were righteous and virtuous (cf. Deut 9:5; Pss 7:11; 36:7; 119:149; Isa 30:18). In contrast to the fidelity and equity the Creator displayed, his people behaved in a perverted manner toward him. This moral stain indicated they had repudiated being God's 'children' (Deut 32:5; cf. Deut 14:1–2; Hos 1:9). Indeed, entire generations were characterized by perversion and duplicity.

It was inconceivable that the covenant community would respond to their Creator in such a 'foolish' (Deut 32:6) and senseless manner. After all, as their 'Father', he cared for, protected, and sustained them. The latter virtues were demonstrated in God's redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, establishing them as a nation, and settling them in the Promised Land (cf. Bray 2000:515–6; Oswalt 2003:854; Payne 1980:5). Deuteronomy 32:6 serves as an important reminder that the 'fatherhood of God' (Wright 1996:306) did not originate with the New Testament; instead, the concept has 'deep roots in the relationship between God and Israel' (cf. Exod 4:22; Isa 63:16; 64:8; Jer 3:19; 31:9; Hos 11:1; Mal 2:10).

Deuteronomy 32:7–14 provides more details concerning God's loving actions on Israel's behalf. This information further established the Creator's integrity and rectitude, while at the same time confirmed Israel's guilt in betraying his trust. The covenant community was directed to recall 'days' from long ago and deliberate on past 'generations'. Younger persons were to seek understanding and insight from their elders concerning the ancient origins of the world, its inhabitants, and the nations that ruled over them. In this context, 'Most High' (Hebrew, *Elyon*, which occurs only here in Deuteronomy) depicts God as sitting enthroned high above his dominion. He is portrayed as the supreme potentate over the cosmos and the sovereign monarch of the earth (cf. Gen 14:18–22; Num 24:16; Pss 18:13; 21:7; 78:17, 35, 56; 82:6; 91:1; 92:1; Baker 2003:361; Carr 1980:669; Zobel 2001:124–5).

Deuteronomy 32:8 (along with the entire Song of Moses) reflects an ancient Hebrew conception of the universe in which God's people divided the world into heaven, earth, sea, and the underworld (cf. Ps 82:5; Prov 8:29; Isa 24:18; Haarsma and Haarsma 2007:112–5; Lioy 2011:42; Walton 2009:12–3). More specifically, they visualized the

earth as being a flat, disc-shaped landmass that was completely surrounded by water. Pillars supported the ground, while mountains located on the distant horizon upheld the sky. The sky itself was thought to be a solid dome or tent-like structure on which the celestial bodies (namely, the sun, moon, and stars) were engraved and moved in tracks. In this ancient three-tiered view of the cosmos, rain, hail, and snow (from an immense body of water located above the overarching sky) fell to earth through openings. God's temple was situated in the upper heavens, which in turn rested atop the sky (or lower heavens). The Jerusalem temple was the earthbound counterpart to the divine abode. The realm of the dead was considered a grimy and watery region located beneath the earth and called the underworld (or *Sheol*).

Deuteronomy 32:8 draws attention to the Creator's goodness and graciousness to all humankind. For instance, after he brought the human race into existence, God divided up the 'nations' and allocated their dominions. He also separated groups of Adam's descendants from one another and established their geographical boundaries (cf. the Tower of Babel incident in Gen 11:1–9). Apparently, the Lord did so with Israel in mind, that is, in conjunction with his plans and purposes for his chosen people. Whereas the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 32:8 reads the 'sons of Israel', the Septuagint has the 'angels of God' and the Dead Sea Scrolls read 'sons of God' (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps 82:6; Jacob 1958:218; McConville 2002:448; Smith 1993:230, 287; Thompson 1974:299). Perhaps in these variant readings, the idea is that the Creator made different members of his heavenly assembly (or divine council) responsible for the oversight of particular nations (cf. Pss 82:1; 89:5–7; Dan 10:13–21; 12:1). In contrast, as Deuteronomy 32:9 reveals, the Lord made his chosen people—collectively referred to as 'Jacob' (cf. Num 23:7, 10, 21, 23; 24:5, 17–19)—his special allotment and prized

'inheritance' (Deut 32:9; cf. Gen 32:28; Deut 4:20; 18:1–2; Albright 1959:343; Clements 1998:527; Craige 1976:379; Miller 1990:229).

Deuteronomy 32:10–14 further specifies how God cared for the Israelites, especially after liberating them from their Egyptian tyrants. Through the episode involving the ten plagues, the Creator demonstrated his utter superiority over the pantheon of deities venerated by Pharaoh and his subordinates. After Israel's emancipation, the subsequent place of the nation's sojourn—the Sinai desert—is depicted as a barren wilderness filled with 'howling' winds and predators. Over the next four decades, the Creator repeatedly surrounded his people with his presence and watched over them as the 'pupil of his eye'. According to one view, this Hebrew idiom refers to the most precious and fragile aspect of the eye, which required safeguarding in order to preserve one's ability to see. According to another view, the phrase denotes the movement of the pupil, which was associated with being alert and attentive. In either case, the emphasis is on the provision of protection, such as that which God graciously provided for Israel (cf. Barabas 2009:266; Harrison 1980:215; Kalland 1992:204; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:256; Tigay 1996:304).

The Creator not only safeguarded his people, but also abundantly provided for them. Deuteronomy 32:11 and 12 compare God to an 'eagle' that stirred up its 'nest' and hovered closely over its 'young' (cf. Exod 19:4). The adult birds of prey regularly 'spread out' (Deut 32:11) their 'wings', caught their nestlings, and used their 'pinions' to lift up their young. In a similar way, the Lord alone upheld and guided his people. Indeed, it was only he who watched over and led them during their time in the wilderness. No assortment of pagan deities (such as those venerated by the nations of the ancient Near East) accompanied or

assisted God in bringing the Israelites to the Promised Land (v. 12; cf. Deut 5:6–7; Hos 13:4).

According to Deuteronomy 32:13 and 14, the Creator alone enabled his people to traverse the elevated portions of Canaan and enjoy the crops the land produced. Moreover, it was only the Lord who provided the Israelites with 'honey' from the surface of the rocks and olive 'oil' from the stony crags (cf. Exod 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 14:8; Deut 6:3; Ps 81:16). Likewise, the supreme and unique God enabled the covenant community to enjoy 'curds' (Deut 32:14) obtained from herds of cattle and 'milk' from flocks of sheep. As well, it was the Lord, not the pantheon of gods and goddesses belonging to the surrounding nations, that gave Israel the means to savour the finest part of young 'lambs', stout 'rams' from Bashan (a fertile locale on the east side on the upper Jordan River; cf. Deut. 3:1–11; Amos 4:1; Huey 2009:521; LaSor 1980:436; Slayton 1992:623), along with goats, the healthiest kernels of wheat (literally, 'fat of the kidneys of wheat'), and fermented, blood-red wine made from the choicest grapes.

God's loving actions on Israel's behalf, as detailed in Deuteronomy 32:7–14, made his indictment of the nation's rebellion, as specified in verses 15–18, all the more stark. Israel is symbolically referred to 'Jeshurun', a Hebrew noun that literally means 'upright one', and draws to mind the reference in verse 4 to God as being 'upright'. Indeed, the underlying Hebrew terms are lexically related (*yeshurun* and *yashar*, respectively; cf. Baker 2003:361; Driver 1986:361; Knauth 2003:454; Wiseman 1980:418). Yet, ironically, what was true of the Lord did not apply to his people, who became perverted in their moral and spiritual character.

God's goodness enabled the nation, like a well-fed animal, to grow fat and bloated. Tragically, the Israelites reciprocated by obstinately

kicking against God's will, thrusting aside any covenantal allegiance to their Creator, and despising the 'Rock' (vv. 4, 15) who brought about their deliverance. Moreover, the Israelites' veneration of pagan deities, along with their participation in abhorrent rituals (including shrine prostitution, child sacrifice, and so on), incited the Lord to jealous anger (v. 16; cf. Num 25:11; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). They made sacrifices to demons, not to God (cf. Lev 17:7; Ps 106:37; 1 Cor 10:20). These were malevolent spiritual entities, whom the Israelites never knew, especially in the way they had experienced the Creator's overflowing and constant provision (cf. Carpenter 2009:518; Hadley 1997:715; Merrill 2003:517). Furthermore, the people prostrated themselves before newly concocted idols (i.e. 'deities-come-lately'; Christensen 2002:806), which the nation's ancestors had never dreaded (Deut 32:17). In summary, the Israelites disregarded the one who, like a nurturing mother (cf. Isa 66:13), brought them into existence, and became oblivious to the one who graciously sustained them (Deut 32:18).

Israel's rebellion, as delineated in verses 15–18, vindicated God's decision to punish the nation, as described in verses 19–25. There is an element of ironic justice at work. Specifically, just as the Israelites had despised and abandoned their Creator, so too he 'spurned' them. This did not mean he ignored the detestable behaviour of his spiritual children. Instead, in an appropriate response, their Rock hid his 'face' from them, which figuratively means he withdrew his protective, sustaining presence (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28). A disastrous outcome resulted as the nation experienced seemingly nonstop natural disasters and war. In keeping with the Lord's accusation in Deuteronomy 32:5, he declared in verse 20 that on-going generations of Israelites were characterised by moral perversion and disloyalty.

Verses 21–25 delineate the consequences of the nation's violations of the covenant detailed earlier in the Song of Moses. For instance, they enraged their Creator by venerating powerless, lifeless 'idols'. The latter renders the Hebrew noun *hevel*, which literally means 'empty things' or 'things of a mere breath' (cf. Pss 39:5–6; 62:9; Eccl 1:1; 12:8; Isa 57:13; Albertz 1997:1:351–3; Johnston 1997: 1003–5; Seybold 1997:3:313–20). In turn, God pledged to vex Israel by permitting unknown foreigners to overrun the nation (cf. Rom 10:19). These foes were thoroughly pagan and seemingly foolish (yet ruthless) in their demeanour. The Lord's righteous indignation was comparable to an inferno that penetrated the depths of *Sheol*, devoured whatever the earth produced, and incinerated the planet's 'mountains' (Deut 32:22) to their 'foundations'.

The divine Warrior promised to overwhelm his people with 'calamities' (v. 23), and, like a hunter, exterminate them with his 'arrows' (cf. the covenant curses detailed in Lev 26:14–39 and Deut 28:15–68). Malnutrition brought on by 'famine' (Deut 32:24) would emaciate the idolatrous Israelites, and disease would devour and destroy them. God would permit the fangs of wild animals to attack his people, and he would let venomous snakes poison individuals. Foreigner invaders would slaughter many Israelites in their towns and farms, as well as terrorize the nation's inhabitants within their residences. All echelons of society would be imperilled—whether young or old, single persons or parents (v. 25).

Even though the Creator would use pagan foes to afflict his wayward people, verses 26–42 indicate that he would not allow the aggressors to act with impunity. For instance, in verses 26–31, God censured Israel's enemies for their relentless brutality. Without the Lord's restraint, the antagonists would have massacred so many Israelites that the surrounding nations would no longer remember that God's people once

existed. Whereas the Hebrew text reads, 'I will cut them to pieces', the Septuagint says, 'I would scatter them abroad'. Both renderings draw attention to how extensively Israel's existence was threatened by the devastation brought by cruel adversaries.

If the Lord had allowed the Israelites to be completely exterminated, his reputation would have been jeopardized by the deriding comments their enemies made (cf. Deut 9:28; 1 Sam 12:22; Ezek 36:21–38). The oppressors would delude themselves into thinking that their military strength was entirely responsible for their victory over God's people. Such a false conclusion indicated that the foes were devoid of prudence and discernment (Deut 32:28). Because Israel's adversaries were bereft of God-given wisdom, they failed to recognise his hand in their victory and in their demise (v. 29). A relatively small number of antagonists were overwhelmingly triumphant over God's people because their 'Rock' (v. 30) had withdrawn his protective presence. In this regard, their foes conceded that the purposes and plans of Israel's God differed radically from the pagan deities venerated by the surrounding nations (v. 31).

God's censure of Israel's opponents was warranted (vv. 26–31) and it justified his decision to punish the antagonists (vv. 32–35). After all, they planted their roots in the depraved soil that previously characterised the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 13:10–13; 18–19; Deut 29:23; Isa 1:10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Lam 4:6; Ezek 16:44–52; Matt 10:15; 11:23–24). The resulting harvest was like snake's 'poison' (Deut 32:33) and a cobra's deadly 'venom'. Similarly, the corresponding fruit would be the bitter experience of the Creator's judgment. Israel's enemies failed to understand that the Lord remained sovereign in deciding either victory or defeat for the nations of the earth. Whatever fate lay in store for them rested entirely with the

Creator (v. 34). Indeed, 'vengeance' (v. 35; or 'vindication') and 'recompense' belonged exclusively to him (cf. Ps 135:14; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30). (In Deut 32:35, the Septuagint alternately reads, 'I will repay', which does not change the essential meaning of the passage.) The surefootedness of Israel's foes was temporary. The divine Warrior declared that at the appointed time, 'calamity' would overtake the antagonists. No matter how hard they tried, they could not avert the swift approach of their impending 'doom'.

By punishing Israel's opponents (vv. 32–35), God would vindicate his people (vv. 36–38). In turn, the Creator would render a favourable verdict on behalf of his beleaguered children. With the wiping out of both slave and free persons among the Israelites, their ability to defend themselves would vanish. So, in a display of compassion, the Lord would relent from permitting the wholesale slaughter of his 'servants' (cf. Ps 135:14). In that moment of deliverance, the one, true, and living God would ask concerning the whereabouts of the pagan deities his people previously fled to for protection (Deut 32:37). These were the idols the Israelites foolishly venerated in ritualistic practices. With a tone of sarcasm, the Lord urged his people to verify whether these false gods and goddesses could really shelter the Israelites from their adversities (v. 38). The nation's experience would prove that God alone was their source of refuge and strength.

Once the Creator brought his punishment of Israel to an end (vv. 19–25), he would complete his execution of justice by trouncing the nation's antagonists and the pantheon of deities they revered (vv. 39–42). He alone could bring all this about, for only he was the self-existent Lord of the cosmos (cf. Exod 3:14–15; 15:11; Deut 4:35, 39; Ps 113:4–6; Isa 41:4; 43:10, 13; 44:6; 45:6–7, 21–22; 48:12). None of the idols venerated by the nations of the world could make this claim. Likewise, there were no gods and goddesses of the ancient Near East

who could challenge the Lord's assertion to be the sole source of death and life. He alone overturned nations and restored peoples, and not a single entity could snatch itself out of his omnipotent 'hand' (Deut 32:40) of judgment.

Verse 40 metaphorically depicts the Creator raising up his 'hand to heaven' and making a solemn oath as the eternal Lord (cf. Gen. 14:22; Exod 6:8; Num 14:21, 28, 30; Ps 90:2; Isa 49:18; Jer 22:24; Ezek 5:11). He vowed to seize his gleaming 'sword' (Deut 32:41) and make it razor sharp. Then, as he clasped his instrument of 'judgment', he would bring retribution on his opponents. The divine Warrior would repay the tyrants for cruelly oppressing his people. He would satiate his 'arrows' (v. 42) with the 'blood' of his foes, and he would use his 'sword' to consume his enemies. A grisly scene is depicted in which God's instrument of justice adversely struck the enemies' highest-ranking combatants (who possibly grew their hair long to signal religious devotion or to appear more fearsome to their foes; cf. Num 6:1–21; Judg 13:1–5; 16:17; Ps 68:21), along with the slaughtered and captured in battle (cf. Clements 1998:528; Kalland 1992:215; Keil and Delitzsch 1981:491; McConville 2002:450; Miller 1990:233; Thompson 1974: 303).

3.2. An analysis of Paul's speech to the Athenians

The intent here, as noted in section 3, is to examine Paul's speech to the Athenians. This treatise, which is characterised by apologetic, philosophical, and juridical elements (cf. Alexander 2006:197; Barrett 1998:825–6; Fitzmyer 1998:601), calls attention to the 'universal scope of God's saving work' (Tannehill 1994:210; cf. Luke 2:30–32; 3:6; Acts 26:17–18, 23). As the upcoming analysis is undertaken, it draws upon the information in section 3.1 to call attention to the conceptual and linguistic parallels between Paul's speech and the Song of Moses

(and more broadly with that of the Tanakh). In keeping with the approach adopted in section 3.1, the assessment presented below follows the organisational scheme for Paul's speech appearing in section 2.2.

Accordingly, Acts 17:16–17, as the prologue to the apostle's oration, provide the context for his discourse with people in Athens. Paul had time on his hands, since he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to depart from Berea and rejoin the apostle (v. 14). As Paul progressively made his way through Athens, he focused his attention on the multitude of graven images scattered throughout the pagan shrines in the city. The language of verse 16 evokes the 'image of a forest of idols' (Wall 2002:244). It did not take long for the apostle to become exasperated by what he saw and to formulate a 'prophetic anti-idol polemic' (Litwak 2004:2002) in response to his interlocutors at Athens.

The imperfect passive indicative tense of the Greek verb *paroxynō* indicates that Paul's agitation was ongoing, especially as he encountered one idol after another (cf. Polhill 1992:366; Reese 1976:621; Witherington 1998:512). Correspondingly, the apostle took every opportunity he could get (cf. the imperfect middle indicative tense of the verb *dialegomai*) to discourse with a variety of different groups (cf. Rogers and Rogers 1998:274; Peterson 2009:489; Schnabel 2012:724). This included Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (i.e. devout non-Jews who worshipped the God of Israel and attempted to keep the Mosaic Law), both of whom congregated in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Paul also deliberated with the patrons he encountered in the marketplace of Athens (including the Roman Forum and the Greek Agora) from one day to the next (v. 17; Arnold 2002:386; Evans 2004:117; Schnabel 2005:172–3). As the 'main public space in the city' (Gill 1994:445), the downtown plaza was the 'economic, political and cultural heart' for the residents of Athens.

A superficial scan of the prologue might leave readers with the incorrect impression that, for the most part, the apostle's time in Athens was unprofitable. Yet, an entirely different conclusion arises from an examination of the epilogue in verses 33–34. Admittedly, on the one hand, despite Paul's efforts to share the truth of the gospel, it did not result in droves of converts. Still, on the other hand, even as the apostle exited from the Areopagus (v. 33), a modest number of new believers accompanied him (v. 34). Of particular note were such converts as Dionysius, who was a member of the council, along with a woman named Damaris and a few other unnamed individuals. 'Areopagus' literally means 'Hill of Ares', and it was where the Athenian Council met to decide ethical, cultural, and religious matters. Ares was the Greek god of war and thunder. Ares was analogous to Mars in the Roman pantheon; hence, the alternative name for the site of 'Mars' Hill' (cf. Gempf 1993:51–2; Martin 1992:370; Rupprecht 2009:337).

Verses 18–21 state why Paul gave a speech to the members of the Athenian Council. The apostle had caught the attention of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, among whom he dialogued and debated the truths of the gospel. Carson (2000:390) notes that there were 'other Greek and Latin worldviews' in vogue during the lifetime of Paul. For instance, Acts 17 does not draw attention to either the 'sophists' or the 'atheistic philosophical materialists'. Regardless, the apostle endeavoured to proclaim the gospel to people 'deeply committed to one fundamentally alien worldview or another'. More generally, Paul's address 'reflects Stoic ideas about God' (Neyrey 1990); yet, even then, the apostle's oration charts a rigorously biblical course by focusing its 'narrative logic' on 'God's providential action in the world' (a theocentric emphasis) and the 'role of Jesus as Judge' over all humankind (a Christotelic emphasis).

In brief, the Epicureans were materialists who valued sense-experience and mental repose. They also spurned the notion of a bodily resurrection, considered organised religion to be the source of all evils, and regarded pleasure (especially the absence of pain and anxiety) as the chief aim of life. Like the Epicureans, the Stoics rejected the idea of a bodily resurrection. Adherents also embraced a deterministic, pantheistic worldview, as well as emphasised the value of logic (particularly universal reason or the *logos*), an empirical understanding of knowledge, and the importance of virtue coupled with duty. Whereas Epicureans believed that death was the end of all existence, Stoics were convinced that at death the eternal soul disengaged from the temporal body and was united with the divine.[9] While the account in Acts 'singles out the Stoics and Epicureans for special mention' (Wilson 1973:196), these two philosophical views are representative of a 'wider reality' that was prevalent in Greece.

Some regarded Paul as an ignorant forager of confused and incoherent notions, while others were wary of the alien spiritual entities he seemed to be hawking: for example, a male deity named 'Jesus' (a masculine noun in Greek) and a female deity/consort named 'Resurrection' (based on the underlying feminine Greek noun, *anastasis*; cf. Brown 1986:261; Flemming 2002:200; Gempf 1993:52; Martin 1992:52; Witherington 1998:515). These disparaging attitudes, which conveyed 'intellectual contempt' (Jipp 2012:571), resulted from hearing the apostle proclaim the truth about the Messiah, particularly his rising from the dead (v. 18). The intense curiosity of the intelligentsia prompted a group of them to take Paul into custody and escort him to the Areopagus. There, in response to their interrogation, he spoke at length about the 'new

[9] Cf. Asmis 1992:55–60; Barrett 1998:829; Clark 2009a:364–5; Clark 2009b:610–1; Dunn 2009:683–4; Flemming 2002:204; Paige 1993:716; Rost 2004:116–8; Schmeller 1992:210–2.

teaching' (v. 19) the elitists heard him proclaiming. Because the philosophers found the apostle's notions both unfamiliar and startling, they wanted him to explain the meaning and significance of his discourse (v. 20). This interest reflected the common practice among resident Athenians and foreigners to the city of idling their time away by exchanging new and novel ideas with one another (v. 21).

For the preceding reason, the council assembled to pass judgment on Paul's religious ideas. Ironically, his speech would reveal that it was the elitists who were guilty of adhering to a mishmash of chaotic and jumbled thoughts. The apostle began his oration by collectively referring to his listeners as 'men of Athens' (v. 22). This statement reflects the predominately patriarchal nature of Hellenistic culture. Nonetheless, as verse 34 indicates, there were at least a few women in the gathering, including a convert named Damaris (cf. Peterson 2009:504; Schnabel 2012:743; Witherington 1998:532–3). Presumably, the size of the Athenian audience with whom Paul discoursed—while standing in the midst of the Areopagus—was diminutive in comparison to the number of Israelites whom Moses addressed toward the end of his life (v. 22). Nonetheless, based on the strong, mixed response Paul received, as described in verse 32, what he declared was just as substantive and no less provocative. This is to be expected, since, in keeping with the major claim of this essay, and as the following assessment indicates, the apostle's remarks drew upon the monotheistic outlook of the Song of Moses.

Paul astutely used the time he had spent in discourse with the people of Athens (cf. vv. 16–17). He discerned that in every conceivable way, his listeners were extremely 'religious' (v. 22). The apostle's opening statement is technically referred in Greco-Roman rhetoric as *captatio benevolentiae,* a Latin expression that generally means 'an attempt to

establish goodwill' (cf. Charles 1995:54; Majercik 1992:711; Winter 1993:821; Zweck 1989:100). On the one hand, Paul was complimenting his listeners for their piety (cf. Alexander 2006:197; Walaskay 1998:166; Wallace 1996:300–1). On the other hand, as verse 23 indicates, Paul also drew attention to their spiritual ignorance and superstition. The paradox is that even though the members of the intelligentsia considered themselves to be enlightened and sagacious, they were ignorant of and failed to discern God's true nature. There is also an ironic reversal of roles, in which it was the beliefs of the Athenian elitists, not just that of the apostle, which were under scrutiny.

As noted in section 3.1, the Song of Moses is analogous to a covenant lawsuit oracle in which the Creator, after presenting his evidence against Israel and the nation's foes, announced his verdict. Correspondingly, Paul's soliloquy to the Athenians evaluates their beliefs, priorities, and practices and renders the divine verdict of guilt. During the apostle's excursion through the city, he looked attentively at the objects representing the idols the people venerated. Paul found especially noteworthy an elevated platform on which was engraved the epigraph, 'to an unknown God' (v. 23). The implication is that the altar was dedicated to any deity the devout Athenians had failed to consider. The motivation for doing so was their fear of offending some overlooked deity.

The apostle made the preceding altar an appropriate starting point for the main proposition of his discourse (referred to in rhetoric as a *proposition*; cf. Charles 1995:56; Majercik 1992:711; Winter 1993:821; Zweck 1989:100). Paul recognised that the worldview of his Hellenistic audience was characterised by dualism, pantheism, and polytheism. In part, his evangelistic 'strategy' (Muñoz-Larrondo 2012:200) involved 'mimicry', that is, 'appropriating the message of the philosophers' to draw attention to the truth about Jesus. On the one hand, the apostle

used the 'intellectual, philosophical and linguistic traditions of his audience' (Schnabel 2005:184) to create a 'bridgehead for the proclamation' of the gospel. On the other hand, even though Paul avoided saturating his oration with Old Testament quotations, the speech remained thoroughly grounded in the biblical mindset of the Song of Moses. This includes the scriptural truth of God's 'incomprehensibility' (Gerrish 1973:265) apart from special revelation (cf. Ps 18:11; Isa 45:15; 1 Tim 6:16).

In Acts 17:23, the apostle stated that he would disclose what his audience, in their 'ignorance', tried to revere. Put another way, Paul would make known to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (among other elitists) what they failed to recognise and comprehend. The apostle would do so by pointing them to the Messiah, who as the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Son of God, made the Creator fully known (cf. John 1:1–2, 14, 18; 14:6–7; Gerrish 1973:266). As the Song of Moses reveals, the so-called 'unknown' deity was also the only true and living God (Deut 32:39). Both the Israelites and their foes were spiritually deficient in their understanding of his nature. For instance, the Israelites' perversion and duplicity—including their idolatrous practices (v. 5)—pointed to their foolishness and imprudence. Israel's enemies were even more steeped in spiritual darkness (v. 26), and utterly lacked any understanding of the Creator and his ways (vv. 28–29).

In Paul's speech, he used the tension arising from the Athenians' ignorance of God (Acts 17:22–23) to emphasise the world's absolute dependence on him (vv. 24–25). The apostle began by stating that God is the Creator, namely, the one who brought the entire 'universe' (Greek, *cósmos*) into existence, along with all that it contains (whether animate or inanimate, material or spiritual; cf. Gen 1–2; 14:19, 22; Isa

42:5; Jer 10:12, 16; Acts 14:15). According to Paul, God was neither an absent deity nor a peevish demiurge; instead, the Creator was the supreme 'Lord' (Acts 17:24) of the celestial heights above (including its objects) and the earth below (including whatever was on it; cf. Exod 20:11; Matt 11:25). The implication is that God was the moral governor of the universe. In a comparable way, the Song of Moses emphasised the sovereignty of the Lord. The passage reveals that the 'Most High' (Deut 32:8) is also the 'Creator' (v. 6). Furthermore, he is characterised by 'greatness' (v. 3), faithfulness, integrity, and equity (v. 4). For these reasons, he could legitimately claim to have the authority to vindicate Israel and vanquish the nation's foes (vv. 36, 43).

Paul advanced his argument by noting that the supreme Lord and Judge transcended creation. For this reason, he did not dwell in humanly constructed shrines, such as the Parthenon, which was dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of the city. The massive structure, with its Doric columns and statute of Athena, could easily be seen from the Areopagus (Acts 17:24; cf. 1 Kngs 8:27; Isa 66:1–2; Acts 7:48; Hemer 1989:118; Martin 1992:517; McRay 2000:139; Schnabel 2005:173–4; Stonehouse 1949:10). Similarly, the apostle noted, the Creator did not need people to wait on him or make sacrifices to him, for he did not require anything from his creatures for his survival and satisfaction (cf. 1 Chron 29:14; Ps 50:7–15). In reality, every entity throughout the entire cosmos depended on God for its existence (Acts 17:25; cf. Isa 42:5; Matt 6:25–34). Paul's observations reflect the theological orientation of the Song of Moses. It reveals that the Lord was Israel's 'Rock' (Deut 32:4), the one who brought about their existence (vv. 6, 9). This same God established all the nations of the world and fixed the boundaries for the benefit of their inhabitants (v. 8).

The apostle further refined his argument by claiming that along with creation (in general; Acts 17:24–25), humankind (in particular) was

totally reliant on God (vv. 26–28). The Greek text of verse 26 literally reads 'from (or out of) one'. Because the latter is a genitive of source or origin, it most likely refers to biological descent from a common ancestor (cf. Gärtner 1955:229; Rogers and Rogers 1998:276; Schnabel 2012:734). So, the passage is best understood to mean 'from one man', namely, Adam. It is conceded that some Greek manuscripts read 'from one blood'; even so, it does not alter the 'passage's meaning, which still alludes to Adam' (Bock 2007:574). Likewise, this interpretive thrust is consistent with 'Greek philosophical thinking about the one and the many' (Fitzmyer 1998:609).

The implication is that Paul not only affirmed the historicity of Adam, but also his status as the biological progenitor (along with Eve) of the entire human race (cf. Luke 3:38; Rom 5:12, 15–17; 1 Cor 15:21–22, 45–49; Bruce 1988:332, 337; Marshall 1980:287; Polhill 1992:374; Reese 1976:629). The apostle declared that from this first human pair not only did all the nations arise, but also they spread throughout the entire planet. In turn, Paul disclosed that the transcendent Creator marked out the boundaries of the nations' set times (or historical eras) and the borders of their respective territories. These facts accorded with the Torah, which teaches that in the distant past, God specially created Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 2:7, 21–23); and from them, the rest of the human race is biologically descended (cf. 1:26–27; 3:20). Likewise, the Song of Moses clearly affirms these same biblical truths (Deut 32:6, 8; cf. Ps 74:17; Dan 2:36–45).

Paul explained to the intelligentsia in Athens that the Creator graciously provided for humankind with the intent that people would somehow search after God, along with the uncertain hope of coming to know and worship him (cf. Ps 14:2; Prov 8:17; Isa 55:6; 65:1; Jer 29:13). The apostle compared the process to the unsaved feeling around in the dark

for clues about God's existence, even though in their fallen state they were unable to alight upon anything informative. Paul noted that the Creator, though transcendent, was actively involved in human history and not far removed from each human being (Acts 17:27; cf. Ps 145:18; Jer 23:23–24). This declaration is affirmed in Deuteronomy 4:7, which revealed that the Lord remained imminent among his chosen people. Similarly, the Song of Moses asserted that from the earliest days of the Israelites' existence, God safeguarded, preserved, and sustained them (32:10–14), as well as the rest of humanity (cf. Matt 5:45; Luke 6:35).

Paul substantiated his point by quoting from a poem to Zeus titled *Cretica*, which says, 'For in you we live and move and have our being'. The ode was authored by Epimenides, a poet-philosopher and seer from Crete who lived around 600 BC. In the Greek pantheon, Zeus was the supreme god, who allegedly ruled and watched over humankind, as well as meted out evil and good (cf. Bruce 1988:338; Charles 1995:58; Walaskay 1998:165). In citing this poem, the apostle's objective was not to express a 'philosophico-pantheistic bias' (Gärtner 1955:186), but to present 'authentic Judaism made universal through Jesus, the Messiah' (Mauck 2001:131). Accordingly, Paul clarified that it was the true and living God who graciously gave to every person the ability to exist, to journey through life, and to be productive members of society (cf. Erickson 1998:329, 562; Given 2001:50; Horton 2011:231, 233, 244, 248, 261, 264–5, 310, 312, 351).

Next, the apostle quoted from *Phaenomena,* 5, which was a Greek document written by a Cilician Stoic poet named Aratus (c. 315–240 BC). The same quote is also found in the *Hymn to Zeus*, 4, which was penned by Cleanthes (c. 331–233 BC; cf. Bock 2007:567; Wall 2002:247; Longenecker 1981:476). Paul's citation of these pagan sources did not mean he thought they were divinely inspired; instead, the apostle simply regarded the observations they made to be fitting

illustrations of specific eternal truths revealed in God's Word. Acts 17:28 restates the preceding passage as follows: 'For we also are his offspring'. This assertion echoes the revelation in Genesis 1:26–28 of people being made in the image of God. The quote also conceptually aligns with the Song of Moses, which states that the 'Most High' (Deut 32:8) was responsible for giving each nation its land, establishing its boundaries, and enabling it to become populous and prosperous.

The apostle revealed that even though religiously inclined pagans strove to discover and worship the Creator (Acts 17:27), they always failed in their efforts, because they were steeped in spiritual darkness. No matter how hard the unregenerate tried, they were unable to grasp the incomparable nature of God (v. 29). Paul's statements reflect the theological orientation of the Song of Moses. The ode portrayed the Creator as being praiseworthy due to his 'greatness' (Deut 32:3), steadfastness, faithfulness, and integrity (v. 4). He alone, as Israel's 'Rock', was the 'Most High' (v. 8). Only he could bring his chosen people into existence (v. 18), as well as guide and protect them (v. 12). More generally, no one except the Creator was eternally self-existent, along with being the ultimate source of life, death, and salvation (v. 39).

In his speech to the Athenians, Paul joined the truth of God's incomparable nature with the fact that all humankind, through Adam and Eve (cf. Acts 17:26), were the Creator's 'offspring' (v. 29). The apostle reasoned that it was irrational to suppose that the 'nature' of God was comparable to such common earthly substances as 'gold or silver or stone' (cf. Deut 5:8; Ps 1152–8; Isa 37:19; 44:9–20). Paradoxically, unsaved artisans leveraged their God-given 'skill and imagination' (Acts 17:29) to use each of these inanimate elements (as well as 'marble, wood, bronze, ivory, and terra-cotta'; Schnabel 2012:737) to make sculpted figures. Yet, as the Song of Moses

disclosed, the resulting idols venerated by the pagans were powerless and lifeless (Deut 32:21). Despite the Israelites' infatuation with a cadre of these false gods and goddesses, they did not lead God's children out of Egypt (v. 12) and nourish them for 40 years in the Sinai desert (vv. 13–14). Furthermore, the chosen people aroused the divine Warrior's indignation by offering sacrifices to abominations (vv. 16–17).

In light of the idolatry all humankind was guilty of committing—including the Athenian intelligentsia listening to Paul—the apostle declared the divine summons for his listeners to 'repent' (Acts 17:30). The underlying Greek verb refers to a change in one's way of life—including one's thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and actions—as a result of coming to terms with the reality of sin and God's gracious provision of righteousness (cf. Isa 59:20; Jer 15:19; Ezek 14:6; 18:30, 32; Matt 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 3:19; Fitzmyer 1998:265; Louw and Nida 1989:510; Merklein 1991:416; Spicq 1994:475). Even though the apostle's listeners thought they were placing him under the searing scrutiny of their evaluation, in fact they were the ones whom the Creator had placed on trial.

Moreover, while the elitists in the city regarded themselves as being sophisticated and enlightened, Paul referred to the ark of human history since the time of Adam and Eve as the 'era of ignorance' (Acts 17:30). A similar perspective is conveyed in the Song of Moses. For instance, the soliloquy refers to the idolatrous Israelites as people who were 'foolish' (Deut 17:6) and 'imprudent'. Likewise, Israel's pagan neighbours were described as people void of spiritual insight and discernment (v. 21). In Paul's oration, he revealed that the Creator could have wiped out his 'offspring' (Acts 17:29) at any time for their idolatry; yet he purposefully disregarded their transgressions for a season. It was his intent to forestall punishment temporarily so that, at the divinely appointed time at Calvary, he could make his Son the

atoning sacrifice for humankind's iniquities (cf. Acts 14:16; Rom 3:25–26). Paul announced that with the advent of the Messiah, a new era had dawned for the human race. God extended to people everywhere an opportunity to be reconciled to him (cf. Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:20).

While the sophists in Athens might baulk at the notion of repenting, Paul deliberately stressed the reality of a future judgment of humanity (Acts 17:31). Indeed, the certitude of the Creator holding everyone accountable for their actions prompted the apostle to risk being ostracised by focusing his listeners' attention on the future day of judgment. Paul asserted that God had chosen a day known only to him when he would assess all humankind according to the benchmark of his righteous moral standard (cf. Pss 9:8; 96:13; 98:9; Isa 66:16; Jer 25:31; Matt 11:22, 24; 12:36). This emphasis on the Lord's inherent authority to evaluate his children finds its theological foundation in the Song of Moses. Specifically, as Deuteronomy 32:4 reveals, God is characterised by integrity, all his actions are upright, and there is no trace of iniquity in him.

In light of the negative response Paul had already experienced from his Epicurean and Stoic interlocutors, he was well aware of their belief that death was final and permanent (cf. Acts 17:18). Nonetheless, the apostle remained undeterred in focusing the Athenians' attention on the Lord Jesus, who was the 'key figure in God's plan for humanity' (Peterson 2009:503). Indeed, the Creator had chosen and commissioned the Messiah to be the divinely appointed agent of judgment (cf. Dan 7:13–14; Matt 25:31–46; John 5:21–23, 27, 30; Acts 2:30–36; 10:42; Rev 20:12–15). The confirmation of this truth was that God raised the Saviour from the dead (Acts 17:31; cf. 2:24, 32). Even though Jesus came to earth as a helpless infant, and as an adult died on the cross, God resurrected him and in doing so confirmed his status as the 'Son of

God' (cf. Rom 1:4). The Lord intended the reality of this historical event to move the lost to trust in the Redeemer and thereby experience deliverance on the Day of Judgment. This theological orientation is woven tightly into the literary fabric of the Song of Moses. In particular, the divine Warrior promised to 'vindicate His people' (Deut 32:36) and 'take vengeance' (v. 41) on his foes. The latter included making 'atonement' (v. 43) for God's chosen people and the Promised Land.

4. Conclusion

This essay has undertaken a comparative analysis of the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians. The motivation for doing so concerns the seemingly unconventional way in which Paul addressed the Greek intelligentsia at the Areopagus. On the one hand, the apostle did not fill his oration with direct quotes from the Old Testament. On the other hand, he directly quoted from several Greek poets. One legitimate concern, then, is whether Paul overly diluted his proclamation of the gospel to accommodate the proclivities of his pagan (gentile) audience.

The investigation put forward in this treatise indicates that at a literary, conceptual, and linguistic level, Paul connected the theological perspective of the Song of Moses with his message to the Athenians. It may be conceded that the worldview of his Hellenistic listeners was characterised by dualism, pantheism, and polytheism; yet, even though the apostle avoided saturating his oration with direct Old Testament quotations, the speech remained thoroughly grounded in the biblical mind-set of the Song of Moses (and more broadly with that of the Tanakh).

Suggestive in this regard is the literary comparison broached in section 2 concerning the organizational scheme of the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians. Due to the fact that there is no scholarly consensus about the best way to arrange these passages, it was decided in this essay to take a fresh approach. As the discourse in sections 2.1 and 2.2 points out, there are intriguing parallels that draw attention to the close literary connection between the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians. It was acknowledged that as suggestive as the similarities might be, in isolation they do not establish with certainty a strong connection between these two portions of scripture.

The preceding observation notwithstanding, this treatise also proposed that it is at the conceptual and linguistic levels that the connection becomes clearer between the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians. Specifically, as stated in section 3, Paul connected the theological perspective of the Song of Moses with his message to the Athenians. In order to make this relationship explicit, section 3.1 engaged in an analysis of the Song of Moses. Then, section 3.2 examined Paul's speech to the Athenians. Part of the latter process included making use of the information in section 3.1 to call attention to the unmistakable conceptual and linguistic parallels between the Song of Moses and Paul's oration.

For instance, one explicit linguistic parallel would be Deuteronomy 32:17, 'gods they had not known', and Acts 17:23, 'to an unknown god'. Somewhat less overt correspondences include the following:

1. Deuteronomy 32:8, 'gave the nations their inheritance' and 'set the boundaries of the peoples'; along with Acts 17:25, 'gives everyone life and breath and all things'; and verse 26, 'determined … the boundaries of their habitation'.

2. Deuteronomy 32:5, 'his children'; and verse 6, 'is he not your Father, who created you, who made and established you?'; along with Acts 17:29, 'being then the offspring of God' and 'we should not regard the divine nature to be similar to gold or silver or stone, a figure sculpted by human skill and imagination'.
3. Deuteronomy 32:35, 'for the day of their calamity is near'; along with Acts 17:31, 'because he has established a day in which he intends to judge the world in righteousness'.

In addition to the above-mentioned literary and linguistic parallels, there are abundant conceptual correspondences between the Song of Moses and Paul's speech to the Athenians. This is made explicit in the detailed and lengthy discussion appearing in section 3.2. In summary, an objective examination of the biblical data indicates that in Paul's address to the Athenian sophists, the doctrinal perspective found in the Song of Moses dominated the apostle's gospel message. Beyond that, the numerous cross-references appearing in section 3.2 to other Old Testament passages indicate that Paul's address reflected the theological worldview of the Tanakh. One reasonable implication of the preceding assessment is that the apostle did not weaken his declaration of the good news to oblige the tendencies of his listeners. Rather, Paul examined the most exemplary archetypes of secular philosophical thought in his day, compared their dogmas to the truths of scripture, and declared how God's Word is infinitely superior.

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Adultery, Divorce, and Eldership

Kevin G Smith[1]

Abstract

This article applies the methodology of Integrated Theology (Smith 2013) to attempt to answer this question: 'Can a man who has committed adultery and thus caused the failure of his marriage later serve as an elder, meeting the biblical requirements for eldership?' After surveying various pieces of evidence, including biblical and historical evidence, the author concludes the requirements for eldership would generally exclude such candidates, but that the biblical evidence falls short of an absolute prohibition and leaves the door open for the rare exceptions that prove the rule. Therefore, a church can defend either of two positions: an exclusion position or an exception position.

Introduction

The objective of this essay is to evaluate whether a man[2] who committed adultery and thus caused (or at least significantly contributed to) the failure of his marriage can later serve as an elder, meeting the

[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

[2] It is outside the scope of the present study to engage the question of whether women can be elders. The principles discussed in this article would be applicable to male or female candidates for eldership, if a church were open to appointing female elders.

biblical requirements for eldership. The question can be posed in the form of two case studies.

Case 1—Bongani has served the Lord Jesus Christ from childhood. However, two years after he married Sbongile, he committed adultery. He sincerely repented of his sin, and sought to save his marriage, but she chose to divorce him. They had no children. For the past ten years, Bongani has served Christ faithfully. He has been a devoted husband to his new wife and a good father to their three young children. The leadership of his church consider him an outstanding candidate to join the eldership team, but they are uncertain whether the biblical requirements for eldership exclude him.

Case 2—Richard was the senior pastor of a large church. He was married with three school-going children when he had an affair with one of his congregants. As a result of the affair, he divorced his wife to marry his mistress. He stepped down from the ministry, and committed to an extended period of pastoral counselling. He has acknowledged that he transgressed the Lord’s will, and he has received God’s forgiveness for his sins. He fellowships at a local church, which recognises his gifting as an evangelist and teacher, and wonders if it falls outside of God’s will to bring him onto their eldership team.

The question—do the qualifications for eldership that Paul lays down in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 permanently disqualify these men from holding the office of an elder in the local church? In other words, do the requirements permanently exclude all who have transgressed them, or does someone who is forgiven with an extended track record of subsequent faithfulness meet the requirements in spite of his earlier failings? This major question intersects many other questions, especially those related to grace, forgiveness, and restoration after moral failure.

The method—I shall attempt to answer this question by following the South African Theological Seminary's integrated model of theological reflection (Smith 2013; see Figure 1). This model poses a theological problem or proposition; in this instance, the question is posed above and illustrated by means of two case studies. The next task is to examine the perspectives from the history of the church (§1) and the word of God (§2); these two steps can be undertaken in whichever order seems most practical. All the evidence is then synthesised into a theological conclusion (§5), and its practical application in the life of the church is explored (§6). The entire process is informed by the overarching perspectives of a christocentric and missional hermeneutic (§§3–4).

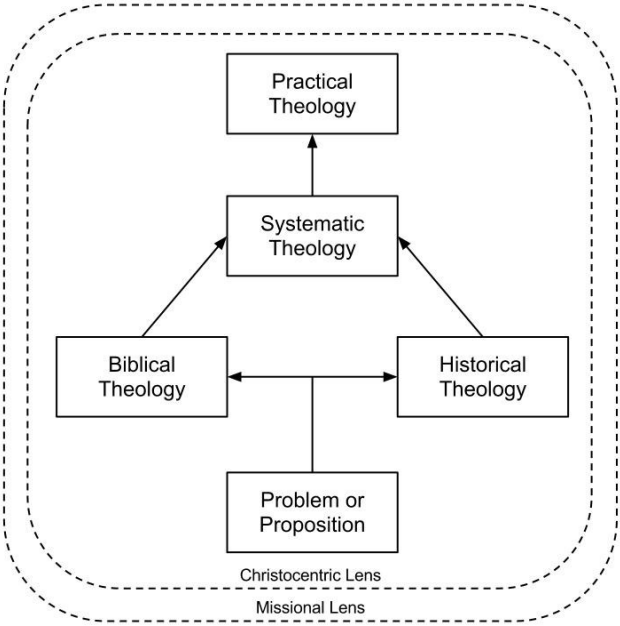

Figure 1: Model of Integrated Theology

1. Historical Survey

The question of whether a divorcee, who caused his marriage to fail by committing adultery, can later serve as an elder permits two basic answers. (a) *Yes*. Because God has forgiven him completely, there is no reason why he cannot be appointed as an elder. (b) *No*. Although God has forgiven him completely, the qualifications for eldership permanently disqualify him from holding that office.

The church fathers would unanimously and permanently exclude anyone who caused his marriage to fail by committing adultery from holding church office. Origen (*Comm. Matt.*, 1897:509) grappled with why a man who had been married twice, though he had been exemplary in his married life, was disqualified from holding office; he observed that often the best candidates for office were disqualified by Paul’s ‘husband of one wife’ restriction. Yet he assumed that even a man twice-married through misfortune could not hold office. In *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (c. AD 300), we find the dominant view that neither a bishop nor his wife should have been married to a previous spouse: ‘Such a one a bishop ought to be, who has been the “husband of one wife,” who also has herself had no other husband’ (*Const. Ap.* 2:2). In his letter to Oceanus, Jerome (*Hom. 1 Tim.*, 1893:141–149) takes a more gracious line than some—permitting a man who had divorced and remarried prior to his baptism to hold office in the church. John Chrysostom teaches that an elder is a model of the exemplary life to which all others should aspire, and a post-conversion scandal would exclude somebody. He argued that one who failed after conversion ‘ought to be ruled, and not to rule others. For he who bears rule should be brighter than any luminary; his life should be unspotted, so that all should look up to him, and make his life the model of their own.’ (Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Tim.*, 438). Theodore of Mopsuestia

(quoted in Knight 1992:158) interpreted the Greek phrase *mias gunaikos anēr* to mean 'a man who having contracted a monogamous marriage is faithful to his marriage vows'. Dodd (1977:115; cf. Knight 1992:159) interprets Theodore as 'excluding polygamy, concubinage and promiscuous indulgence', with the last term encompassing any wrongful divorce. The portrait from the fathers seems quite clear. They interpreted 'the husband of one wife' as excluding anyone who was wrongfully divorced after his conversion from holding the office of a bishop or presbyter. Some would have extended the requirement to one wife for life, but there they were not in agreement.

When alluding to the husband of one wife requirement, Martin Luther mostly railed against the Roman Catholic prohibition against marriage for priests. However, he did state that he believes it is legitimate for a bishop to remarry after his first wife died (Luther 1999:339).[3] John Calvin (n.d.:58–59) interpreted 'the husband of one wife' as primarily a prohibition against polygamy. He took 'blameless' to mean the elder's reputation must not be stained by anything that would disgrace his name and thus lessen his authority.[4] He deemed that a man who

[3] Luther (1999:339) wrote, 'If in the Greek Church there were a good minister of the Word, if he took a wife and she die, and then if he married another to live chastely, then he is frustrated in his vow, because he has sought a remedy in marriage. Paul speaks against this very thing: 'It is better to marry, etc.' (1 Cor 7:9). If he were to retire because he took another wife, does he not thereby destroy those very good gifts which he has given to the use of the church because of his own personal marriage relationship? This is contrary to the Holy Spirit. When a man has the gifts to be a bishop, why should two marriages hinder him?'

[4] John Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library; www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.pdf), 58–59. He wrote, 'that he must not be marked by any infamy that would lessen his authority. There will be no one found among men that is free from every vice; but it is one thing to be blemished with ordinary vices, which do not hurt the reputation, because they are found in men of the highest excellence, and another thing to have a disgraceful name, or to be stained with any baseness.'

remarried after his wife's death remained 'the husband of one wife' (p. 240). John Wesley (2012, note on 1 Tim 3:2) interpreted Paul as excluding a divorced or polygamous man. Adam Clark (1831, note on 1 Tim. 3:2), a Methodist, wrote on 1 Timothy 3:2, 'The apostle's meaning appears to be this: that he should not be a man who has divorced his wife and married another; nor one that has two wives at a time.'

With respect to our key question—whether a wrongfully divorced man can serve as an elder—church history seems to speak with one voice: the requirement that an elder be *blameless* and *the husband of one wife* disqualifies him. Contemporary church leaders are less convinced. For example, an impromptu survey of opinions amongst academic staff at the South African Theological Seminary turned up the following responses:

- Yes, he can serve as an elder: Dr Chris Peppler (Lonehill Village Church); Prof. Frank Jabini (Plymouth Brethren); Dr Bill Domeris (Anglican); Dr Willem Semmelink (AFM); Dr Mark Pretorius (Rhema).
- No, he cannot serve as an elder: Dr Reuben van Rensburg (Baptist); Dr Zoltan Erdey (Baptist); Prof. Samuel Kunhiyop (ECWA); Dr Elijah Mahlangu (Assemblies of God); Rev. Felix Kantonda (Baptist).

Those who answered 'no' follow similar reasoning to the historical sources surveyed, basing their belief primarily on the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. The 'yes' respondents typically bring five arguments to bear on their view. (a) The husband of one wife means the candidate must be faithful to his present wife. (b) The husband of one wife requirement is a prohibition against appointing a polygamist as an elder. (c) The requirement to be blameless refers to credibility in present lifestyle; nobody is absolutely 'blameless'. (d) It is

alien to the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ to write a man off permanently because of his sins. (e) God's forgiveness is perfect and complete, restoring the person to the status of full sonship.

2. Biblical Teachings

The most important texts about qualifications for eldership are 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9; these two are so similar that it will suffice to examine 1 Timothy 3 in depth. As other biblical teachings, we shall examine the Mosaic regulations regarding the marriage of priests, explore relevant themes from the teaching of Jesus Christ (§3), and consider selected passages in Malachi that have missional significance (§4).

2.1. The marriage of Priests (Lev 21)

The Old Testament also does not address our main question directly, but there are some passages that provide helpful points of reflection. The most important one is Leviticus 21, which lays down marital requirements for priests and high priests. Ordinary priests were prohibited from marrying a prostitute, a defiled woman, or a divorced woman. 'They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God' (Lev 21:7).

The high priest had to marry an Israelite virgin; he was prohibited from marrying a widow, *divorcee*, prostitute, or a defiled woman. 'And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people' (Lev 21:13–14).

The reason for these requirements was that they were holy to the Lord, and they were to be models of holiness that did not profane the name of the Lord. '… that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him' (Lev 21:15).

These requirements cannot transfer directly to New Testament officers, but they do illustrate that God would exclude gifted men from public leadership if their track record did not model holiness. This was not a rejection of the men themselves, but a recognition that they were not qualified to lead because they could not model the holiness that God required in order for his leaders to serve as examples for the community. These laws also illustrate that a leader's marital conduct is an important criterion for leadership in the kingdom of God.

2.2. The husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:1–7)

The passage begins with the umbrella requirement that 'an overseer must be *above reproach*'. The word *above reproach* (ἀνεπίλημπτος) is derived from a verb form that means 'to seize' or 'to grasp'. The noun is the negative form, describing people whose life is such there is no glaring weakness or moral failing that opponents can seize or grasp to pull them down. In this sense, the word means 'blameless', 'inviolable', or 'unassailable' (Delling, *TDNT*, vol. 4:9). The word occurs only three times in the New Testament, all in 1 Timothy and always to describe 'one who cannot be attacked (even by non-Christians) because of his moral conduct' (9). In 1 Timothy 5, Paul is laying down guidelines for widows who should qualify for financial aid from the church. After stipulating that families should care for their own widows, and widows who are self-indulgent should be excluded, he says, 'Command these things as well, so that they may be *above reproach*' (5:7). In 6:14 Paul charges Timothy as a man of God to be *above reproach*. In each case, *above reproach* refers to a minimum set of standards, so general that

failure to keep them would bring reproach upon the church of God in the eyes of insiders and put ammunition in the hands of outsiders.

In 1 Timothy 3:1–7, *above reproach* governs a list of specific examples. In other words, it is the umbrella term and it is applied to a number of particular characteristics in which the elder must be above reproach. The list is:

1. the husband of one wife;
2. sober-minded;
3. self-controlled'
4. respectable;
5. hospitable;
6. able to teach;
7. not a drunkard;
8. not violent but gentle;
9. not quarrelsome;
10. not a lover of money;
11. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?
12. He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil, and, moreover;
13. He must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

There are several observations worth noting about this list.

Firstly, the list consists of ten short criteria (three words or less in Greek) followed by three longer criteria (sentence length). The first

item on each sub-group is a family requirement, relating to his experience as husband and father respectively. Forefronting the family requirements seems to prioritise them in each list (Smith 2006). The family requirements hold pride of place because the church is 'the household of God' (1 Tim 3:15). If the church is a family, its leaders need to be fathers in the house (Puffett and Faulkner n.d.; McNally 2011). Therefore, the most important indicator of a man's readiness to lead in God's house (*oikos theou*, 3:15) is his track record of leading in his own house (*idios oikos*, 3:5). The word translated 'manage' in 3:5 means to 'guide, lead, direct' (Swanson 1997:§4613), with a special nuance of care and concern (BDAG 2000:870).

Secondly, if we follow the ESV translation (as above), then only one of the thirteen requirements is quantifiable—'a husband of one wife'. All the other qualities are a matter of judgement or interpretation. Whether a candidate for eldership is self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, or a lover of money is a matter of interpretation. Even whether he manages his household well or whether he is a new convert is a judgement call. But at first sight, 'a husband of one wife' seems measurable. This immediately raises some important questions for using these criteria to evaluate candidates for eldership. How is a church to evaluate whether someone is a 'sober-minded', 'hospitable', 'not violent but gentle', or 'not a lover of money'? Those nominating and appointing elders have to make a reasoned, prayerful, and Bible-based judgement call on these criteria. They have to interpret the candidate's character in the light of Paul's criteria.

When the criteria are applied to evaluate a particular candidate, seldom do the existing leaders consider the distant past. They are not too concerned about whether the candidate for eldership was hospitable, gentle, quarrelsome, or loved money ten years ago. For almost all the criteria on the list—the husband of one wife requirement being the

exception—churches are satisfied if the candidate's present lifestyle passes the test. In other words, present faithfulness trumps past failure.

Thirdly, the 'husband of one wife' requirement has been variously interpreted in the history of the church. The Greek phrase *mias gunaikos andra* is ambiguous. Smith (2006:31) listed five major interpretations.

- Prohibiting divorce: no divorced person can serve as an elder.
- Prohibiting remarriage: no remarried person can serve as an elder.
- Prohibiting polygamy: nobody with more than one wife can serve as an elder.
- Requiring marriage: no unmarried person can serve as an elder.
- Requiring fidelity: only a faithful husband can serve as an elder.

I have previously argued at length that option 5 is the likeliest interpretation of the phrase in its context (Smith 2006:26–41; cf. Glasscock 1983:255; Lea and Griffin 2001:109–110). An elder must be a *faithful husband*. If he is married, he is to be blameless in his faithfulness and loyalty to his wife. He is neither flirtatious nor promiscuous. He does not interact with other women inappropriately. If he is unmarried, his conduct in relation to women is pure and blameless.

If this interpretation is correct, then it means *even the criterion relating to marriage is interpretive*. The point is not about counting a man's wives, but about weighing his character in relation to the opposite sex. He needs to be blameless in the sense of being the kind of man who can be trusted to treat all women with propriety and to be faithful to his own wife. His track record should speak to his integrity in this area.

Fourthly, the final criterion (number 13 on the list above) is closely related to the umbrella term, *above reproach*. The idea behind ‘above reproach’ is that nobody can legitimately point a finger at him for ‘conduct unbecoming’, for being a disgrace to the gospel. The final criterion says that ‘he must have a good testimony from outsiders’; his appointment should not discredit the light of the church in the world. This is a crucial point: the appointment of an elder must be in the best interests of the church and its witness in the community. If there is an excellent candidate for eldership, who is now in right relationship with God but whose past actions in the public sphere would likely discredit the integrity and witness of the body of Christ, he should not be appointed. This is an interpretive judgement that must be made prayerfully.

Lastly, Paul gives two reasons for requiring that the appointee have a good testimony with outsiders: that he may not fall into (a) disgrace and (b) the trap of the devil. These two purpose statements seem intended to protect both the person and the people of God.

3. Christocentric Lens

The christocentric principle asks, ‘what did the Lord Jesus Christ teach or model that might guide us to a proper understanding of God’s will on this matter?’ It asks how everything we learn about the nature, will, and purposes of the triune God, as embodied in the incarnate life of God the Son, guides our thinking on a particular question. How does all that we understand about God through the words and works of Jesus Christ help us to understand the Lord’s will in a particular case or context?

What did Jesus Christ say and do that might influence our reflections? Jesus never explicitly addressed our question, so we are left to analyse indirect strands of evidence. We shall consider four strands:

1. Jesus on divorce and remarriage
2. Jesus on forgiveness and restoration
3. Peter's failure and forgiveness
4. Jesus on the woman caught in adultery

3.1. Jesus on divorce and remarriage

Our Saviour's words regarding divorce and remarriage are notoriously difficult (Matt 5:31–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18). The stricter interpretations take Jesus as prohibiting remarriage as long as the divorced spouse lives, and may view the second marriage as permanently adulterous union. The middle-ground view sees Jesus as permitting the innocent party to remarry if the divorce was caused by the spouse's unfaithfulness. The more flexible approaches see Jesus's concession in the case of adultery, the so-called 'exception clause', as establishing a principle or a precedent that can apply to other sins too—if one partner has nullified the marriage covenant, the other is free to remarry. (For an excellent survey of the range of interpretive options on the problem of divorce and remarriage, see MacLeod 1992.)

Ward Powers (1987) argued that the principles of law and grace apply to divorce. Divorce is always wrong; the law forbids divorce. Marriage is a lifelong covenant before God, and the dissolution of a marriage is a sin against the vow made to the Lord. However, God always forgives the repentant divorcee; grace covers divorce. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Although some theologians still view marriage as an indissoluble union in the eyes of God, with the result that any second marriage is a permanently adulterous union, this does not seem to be the

best interpretation of Jesus Christ's words. There are actually two different cases of divorce that our Lord addressed. They can be represented by the sayings in Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9.

3.1.1. You remarry after your spouse wrongfully divorces you.

In Matthew 5:31–32, the Lord Jesus Christ mentioned this case. 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'

The man who wrongfully divorces his wife 'makes her commit adultery', making the assumption that she remarries. In biblical times, she might have had to remarry to survive. Even though she is innocent, her second marriage begins with an act of 'adultery', presumably in the sense that she had previously vowed to be intimate with only one man, and now she is breaking that vow, albeit justifiably. Similarly, the man who marries this woman 'commits adultery', in the sense that he participates in her 'adultery'. Neither the woman unjustly divorced nor the man who marries her is guilty. The only guilty part is the man who divorced the woman without cause. The sin that incurs the Lord's censure is the unjust divorce; the couple who participate in the second marriage are innocent, even though their marriage commences with a kind of 'adultery', breaking the previous covenant.

3.1.2. You remarry after you wrongfully divorce your spouse

The Lord's most detailed teaching on divorce is recorded in Matthew 19:1–12 and Mark 10:1–12. For our purposes, the most important statement from each passage is: 'And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits

adultery' (Matt. 19:9). 'And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery"' (Mark 10:11–12).

Powers (1987) argues that Jesus is speaking about a man who divorces his wife *in order to* marry another; the legitimisation of adultery through legal divorce does not deceive the Almighty. This is certainly a plausible interpretation of the grammar, and even more so if the words originate in Hebrew or Aramaic.[5] However, even if we take this more generally as a case of a man who wrongfully divorces his wife and later marries another woman, the implications remain the same. First, the act of divorce is a violation of the covenant made before the Lord, and is a sin against God, wife, and children (see the discussion of Malachi 2:13–16, p. 68). Second, the new marriage begins with an act of adultery, but the new marriage is not a permanently adulterous union.[6] Third, the wrongful divorce is always a transgression of the law of God, but the repentant transgressor is assured a pardon through the grace of God.

In conclusion, the Lord Jesus Christ taught that divorce is a serious sin, requiring heartfelt repentance. A second marriage following a divorce begins with an act of adultery, in that it betrays the former marriage covenant.[7] However, the new marriage is a real marriage rather than an adulterous union. Nothing in the Saviour's words seems to require the

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[5] The challenge in the Matthew text is to make sense of the disciples' response, which expressed shock at the strictness of Jesus's words. The shock could, of course, be at the Lord's absolute prohibition against divorce—divorce is always sinful.

[6] This was established in the discussion of Matthew 5:31–32 (see p. 14), and there is no reason to interpret it differently in Matthew 19, Mark 10, or Luke 16.

[7] The exception is in the case of divorce following the spouse's unfaithfulness, in which case the other's prior unfaithfulness has nullified the marriage covenant. The innocent party cannot, therefore, be the one who irrevocably breaks it by joining himself or herself to another in marital intimacy.

lifelong exclusion of a divorced person from holding a leadership office. Once forgiven, the person who has failed is restored to right standing before the Lord with the full rights and privileges that attach to being a child of God. The Saviour’s teachings do, however, require the church to recognise divorce as a serious sin and not to treat it frivolously.

3.2. Jesus on forgiveness and restoration

The Lord’s love for the lost and broken people of the world is legendary. His entire ministry fulfilled his claim that he had come to call sinners to repentance, to seek and save the lost. The gospels are saturated with accounts of Jesus’s forgiving and restoring love touching the lives of those whom mere human beings would have ‘written off’. He touched broken lives and restored dignity to them. However, these examples mostly concern our Lord reaching out to *the lost* with saving and restoring love, not to him appointing leaders who had failed morally post-conversion. To the best of our knowledge, the apostles he chose to lead the church after his ascension were above reproach in their marital conduct.

We must read Jesus correctly as concerns the relationship between salvation and sanctification. When he saved a sinner, he brought complete forgiveness and wholeness. He invited sinners to come just as they were, but he did not let them remain as they were. After the love of God transformed the sinful heart, Jesus expected the saved person to live a holy life, to produce fruit that lasts. It may or may not be a correct reading of the Lord Jesus Christ to assume he would have applied the same restorative grace to fallen leaders that he applied to lost souls.

3.3. Peter's failure and forgiveness

There is one example in the gospels of a leader failing and being restored by Christ. It is the instance of Peter denying Jesus three times on the eve of the crucifixion. Despite Peter's serious failure, the Lord Jesus Christ restored him to his place of leadership in the early church. Jesus seems to have viewed Peter's failure as part of his preparation. Here is the dialogue between Jesus and Peter before his failure:

> 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.' Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me' (Luke 22:31–34).

When Peter realised that he had denied his Lord, he was a broken man. Mark records, 'And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept' (Mark 14:72). His failure shattered Peter's self-confidence. After Jesus rose from the dead, he restored Peter to leadership.

> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he

> said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:15–17).

Before his three-fold denial, Peter was sure he loved the Lord more than anyone else did. 'Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not"' (Mark 14:29). The pride and self-sufficiency that characterised Peter's earlier response is gone from his conversation with Jesus in John 21. The humility that resulted from his failure and the Lord's forgiving and restoring love equipped him to feed and tend the Lord's sheep and lambs. Peter would be a better shepherd as a result of this experience than he would have been had he never failed and experienced the restoring power of the Lord's forgiveness.

When this argument for restoring an adulterer to leadership was first presented to me, my intuition was that the two situations were not comparable, that it was not comparing apples with apples.[8] When pressed to explain why the two failures are not comparable, I struggled to articulate a satisfactory reason. Peter's case is one of a senior leader, chosen by Christ, who publicly betrayed the Lord and the gospel. His restoration might serve as a sign that Christ condoned his failure, but is better used a public sign of Christ's redemptive and restorative grace. In our second case study (p. 48), Richard's sins likewise betrayed the gospel and publicly shamed the Lord Jesus Christ. If he were restored to eldership, his restoration would have the potential for double-edged interpretation, either (a) as a sign that the church is soft on sin, or (b) as a symbol that God is great on grace.

[8] As best I can ascertain, nobody in the early church, including the apostles, seems to have interpreted Peter's restoration as establishing a precedent that trumps 'the husband of one wife' requirement.

3.4. The woman caught in adultery

Another gospel text that bears consideration is the case of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). Despite the textual problems surrounding this pericope, it does seem to support an ancient oral tradition that faithfully represents an incident from Jesus's life (Metzger 1994:187). Most scholars share Beasley-Murray's (2002:143) conclusion: 'It is clear that the story was not penned by the Fourth Evangelist …, yet there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth.' The Law of Moses appears to mandate the death penalty for adultery. Leviticus 20:10 declares, 'If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.' Yet Jesus did not slavishly follow the penalties of the law, even though he did selflessly uphold its purposes. In this case, the letter of the law seemed to compel Jesus to condemn the woman, but his response shows that sometimes the righteousness of God is better served by redemptive and restorative grace. Admittedly Jesus might have 'saved' the woman on technical grounds. The law, rightly interpreted, did not condone vigilante justice, and Roman law did not confer the powers of capital punishment on the Jewish people. However, Jesus chose not to condemn her, but to give her a second chance. If Jesus could choose not to follow a strict, literal application of Leviticus 20:10 in a particular case of adultery, might he also choose not to follow the 'husband of one wife' regulation slavishly in selective cases?

In conclusion, the evidence from Christ is that he generally upheld the high standards of the law, selected leaders whose marital faithfulness and sexual purity was above reproach, and took a hard line on divorce and remarriage. However, he also epitomised the grace of God in loving and restoring sinners. He followed the spirit of biblical laws rather than

applying them slavishly. If our Lord's teachings against divorce and remarriage are taken in the strictest sense, then they would surely exclude a divorcee from eldership. However, if we take a more moderate view of the Lord's words about divorce and remarriage, as argued above, then the redemptive nature of Jesus's ministry leaves open the possibility of appointing a wrongfully divorced man to leadership.

4. Missional Lens

The missional lens asks how the grand narrative of scripture shapes our understanding of God's will in a particular situation. The grand narrative tells the story of God's mission to reconcile all people to himself and to restore his kingdom reign over all creation. In other words, which position or action would best serve to advance the kingdom of God, his mission to reconcile all people to himself and restore his righteous rule over all things? There are several elements of the mission of God at stake with this question. For the purposes of this article, we shall single out two: the biblical view of the church and the restoration of marriage and family.

4.1. The biblical model of church is at stake

We are living in an era when many pastors look more like CEOs of spiritual corporations than shepherds of the flock of God, more like superstars than servants. The church of Jesus Christ has been commercialised, and many believers relate to their church as a dealer in spiritual services or supplies. This damages the mission of God. *In the biblical model, the church is first and foremost the household of God, the family of God. If the church is a family, then its leaders should be fathers* (Puffett and Faulkner n.d.; McNally 2011). This does not mean

that all leaders must literally be fathers, such that an unmarried man or a man without children is excluded. It means that leaders are to function as fathers in the household of God. Therefore, if they are literal fathers, their track record with their own family is the best indicator of their suitability for fathering the children of God.

If we buy into a commercialised, programme-based approach to church, the selection of leaders will tend to prioritise giftedness over godliness. This is evident in contemporary church. Local churches are often resource-starved organisations desperate for leaders. When able men avail themselves, there is a great temptation to 'snatch them up' with little regard for their character flaws. Scripture and history are replete with examples of the danger of giving power to men with dubious character—it destroys the man, and the man destroys it. Abraham Lincoln astutely observed, 'Nearly all men can handle adversity; if you want to test a man's character, give him power.'[9]

Paul rightly noted, 'if someone does not know how to manage [rule] his own household, how will he care for God's church?' (1 Tim 3:5). Many years earlier, Solomon taught that it is even more important to know how to rule one's own spirit. He wrote that 'he who rules his spirit [is better] than he who takes a city' (Prov 16:32b), and 'whoever has no rule over his own spirit, is like a city broken down, without walls' (Prov 25:28, NKJV). To give power to a man who has proven inconsistent in ruling his own spirit and his household is to court a crisis.

If a person who has shipwrecked his first marriage through his lack of self-control were to be appointed as an elder, it *might* send the message that charisma is more important than character, gifting than godliness,

[9] This statement is attributed to Abraham Lincoln on numerous websites, but I have not been able to track down the original source.

and that the church is more a commercial enterprise than the household of God. *Valuing gifting above godliness contravenes the biblical value system, and is unlikely to be in the best interests of the church of Christ and the mission of God*. Those seeking to be faithful to Jesus and Paul in their selection of leaders would do well to ask themselves the self-critical question, 'Is this candidate's gifting causing us to overlook serious character flaws?'

4.2. The restoration of the family is at stake

From the biblical point of view, the family is the fundamental building block of church and community. From the contextual point of view, the family is in crisis. Divorce has become commonplace. The majority of children in South Africa are growing up in fatherless families, and the effects on the children and the nation are devastating. The restoration of biblical marriages and families as the incubators of godly lives must be a high priority in the kingdom mission of God.

Two passages from Malachi will illustrate the strategic importance of godly families for the restoration of God's righteous and benevolent rule.

1) Malachi 2:13–16. Yahweh turns his face away from men who divorce 'the wife of your youth'. Yahweh's anger burns against the man who betrays his family (2:13, 16). Two reasons are given. First, the Lord sides with the innocent victim, the betrayed wife who has been violated (2:14, 16). Second, the Lord rages against the violence done to the children. He designed a Spirit-filled marriage for raising 'godly offspring' (2:15).[10] Implicit in this verse is the certainty that the divorce

[10] Although the Hebrew text of Malachi 2:13–16 is beset with difficulties, the major points being made here are present almost regardless of how the text is reconstructed and translated.

leaves children fatherless and bearing lifelong scars. Fathers who are faithful raise godly children, but fathers who forsake their families multiply godlessness.

2) Malachi 4:6. Malachi concludes with a reminder to Israel to heed the Law of Moses (4:4) and a promise that the Lord would send Elijah to bring 'revelation, repentance, and reconciliation' (Taylor and Clendenen 2004:463) before the coming of the day of the Lord (4:5). The proof of Elijah's effective ministry is that he would 'turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers' (4:6). 'The point is that fathers and sons would no longer live self-serving lives, but fathers will take their sons to heart and sons will take to heart their fathers, considering the effects of their actions on one another in the course of their lives' (p. 463). This was the evidence that the kingdom rule of God, which has now been ushered in by Jesus Christ, had entered into the hearts of these fathers and sons. Where the kingdom of God comes, fathers exchange self-interest to prioritise their families.

This restoration of godly families is a kingdom priority for the mission of God. In a society in which marriages are crumbling all around, appointing Richard (Case 2) might send altogether the wrong message to the church and the community. No matter how faithful he is now, his past failure might provide a pretext for others to justify turning from their families. His presence on the leadership of the church might reinforce the cultural view that adultery and divorce are not all that serious. Richard's priority should be to turn his heart towards his children (from both marriages)—whose inclination towards godliness is threatened by his faithlessness—and live out his repentance in ways that are redeeming and reconciliatory. He should serve in the church in ways that show humble, servant-hearted faithfulness, and act to reinforce the

message that others should not follow in his footsteps. This argument is less applicable to Bongani (Case 1), since he does not have a family torn apart by his past indiscretions.

5. Theological Formulation

What are we to make of this mass of conflicting evidence? It may be helpful to review the main points of evidence, and then recommend a theological position that makes sense of all the key points.

5.1. Review

1) The general consensus of church history prior to the twentieth century has been that a person who caused his own divorce after his conversion through marital unfaithfulness is excluded from serving as an elder.

2) The Old Testament law excluded from the priesthood men who married divorced women, which almost certainly means it also excluded men who were themselves divorced (Lev 21:1–15). Ensuring that the priests were symbols of holiness took precedence over admitting any particular person to office. However, there are two reasons why this argument is not conclusive. First, this law is not directly transferable to New Testament church office bearers, though it does uphold an important principle. Second, we cannot be sure how strictly this law was followed. The law also prohibited Israelite kings from taking many wives (Deut 17:17), yet we know that it was not applied strictly to the kings of Israel and Judah.

3) The 'husband of one wife' qualification in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 requires that an elder have a proven track record of faithfulness to his wife and purity in his treatment of other women. It excludes anyone

with more than one wife (polygamy) and anyone with a dubious recent track record in his relationship with women. It does not exclude a person justifiably divorced and remarried, and it does not exclude someone whose moral failings were prior to conversion (2 Cor 5:17). The above statements seem clear. What remains unclear is whether it absolutely excludes a man who has failed terribly during his earlier walk with Christ, but has subsequently shown the fruits of repentance through many years of faithfulness and purity. It falls short of an absolute prohibition against appointing a wrongfully divorced man, though it does militate against his appointment.

4) The christocentric evidence depends heavily on how we interpret our Lord's teaching on divorce and remarriage. The view presented here is that a person who has divorced and remarried has committed adultery. However, his second marriage is a real marriage, not a permanently adulterous relationship. He is guilty (law), and forgiven (grace). This also militates against appointing a wrongfully divorced man to leadership, but it does not definitively exclude him. We must be wary of applying the Lord's examples of saving grace too carelessly, since only the case of Peter's denials relates to his restoration of a fallen leader. Nevertheless, the general tenor of Christ's words and works show that he is the Saviour of sinners, the Lord of love whose power restores and transforms lives. We must not pay lip service to the transforming power or the restoring love of Jesus Christ.

5) From a missional perspective, two themes were selected. First, the commercialisation of the church is undermining the biblical emphasis on the church as the family of God, with leaders acting as fathers. This trend puts pressure on the church to appoint gifted leaders to grow the church, with the potential pitfall of prioritising gifting over godliness. Second, the family is in a state of crisis in many parts of the world. In

South Africa, fatherless families are the norm. Scripture shows that the restoration of godly families as incubators of godly children is a high priority in God's kingdom.

5.2. Recommendation

I began this study persuaded that the eldership requirements in the pastoral epistles definitely exclude Richard (Case 2) and probably exclude Bongani (Case 1). They are forgiven and can serve the Lord faithfully, but they may not hold a governmental leadership office in a church. However, if my exegesis is correct, there is no biblical text which unambiguously and unconditionally prohibits a wrongfully divorced man from holding the office of an elder, provided he has been forgiven and faithful.[11] There are, however, various biblical texts and themes which militate against appointing a wrongfully divorced man to the eldership. The preponderance of evidence urges the church to uphold high standards of moral purity and marital faithfulness for its leaders. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ needs to be counter-cultural in modelling the value that the word of God places on family life. Since elders are to be fathers in the household of God, their track record as husbands and fathers in their own families is of paramount importance.

I propose that a local church should adopt one of two positions on this issue.

1. *The exclusion position.* The church can adopt the position that it will not appoint a wrongfully divorced person to the eldership. This decision can be defended either theologically, based on its

[11] Certain interpretations of the gospel texts on divorce and the pastoral texts on the husband of one wife would exclude a wrongfully divorced person, but I do not think those interpretations are correct.

interpretation of particular biblical texts, or missionally on the assumption that this is not likely to advance the kingdom of God.

2. *The exception position.* The church can take the view that in general eldership should be reserved for those who are literally 'the husband of one wife', but in exceptional cases a man who was unfaithful in the distant past, but has borne the fruit of repentance and proven himself devoted and faithful can be considered for office.

Either of these two positions is biblically and theologically defensible, provided that the second is understood and used as a real *exception* rather than as a licence or a pretext to appoint unfaithful husbands to office in the church.

At first glance, it might appear that these are the only two positions available. To the question of whether a wrongfully divorced man may serve as an elder, the exclusion position answers 'no' and the exception position 'yes'. However, many churches that practise restoration do not do so as the exception position requires. They reappoint men with track records of moral failure not as true exceptions to the biblical norm, but as normal practice. They often do so without taking pains to establish that the candidate has truly repented, changed his thinking and behaviour, made restitution (where possible), received counselling, entered into accountable relationships, and established an extended *new* track record. The exclusion position, rightly applied, seeks true evidence of the transforming power of the Christ in restoring the fallen brother and producing fruit that lasts.

6. Practical Application

Now let me return to my two case studies in the light of the above conclusions and recommendations. If a church takes *the exclusion position*, the application is simple. Both Bongani and Richard are permanently excluded from serving as elders. If it adopts *the exception position*, the practical application to the appointment of an elder is critical. I recommend that the leadership apply the following principles in the process of appointing such a person as an elder.

1) The candidate for eldership should be well known to those who are to receive his ministry, and the full history of his case should be made known to all. In other words, the leaders should play open cards with their people.

2) The exceptional nature of his nomination, given his past, should be explained to the congregation. The biblical basis for his candidacy should be taught to the whole church, a potentially valuable exercise in theological methodology.

3) There should be a mechanism for anyone in the congregation who has experience concerning encounters to table them confidentially. (I advocate that the candidate elder must lay down any 'right' to confront his accusers. If his life has been *blameless* in this area for a long time, he should have nothing to fear.)

4) Criteria should be established for taking the congregation's perspective seriously, without allowing isolated voices to dominate the decision. The church context should be taken seriously, especially if this decision marks a change of policy or praxis for the local church.

5) The church's ministry context should be taken into account, especially with respect to how the candidate's appointment might impact upon church's witness in the community. If his chequered past is deemed likely to harm the witness of the church, his candidacy should be withdrawn.

6) The candidate's children should be carefully considered, especially their current perspective on the gospel. If they are bitter or likely to resent his return to leadership, then he should rather seek to turn the heart of the father to his children and the hearts of the children to their father.

Conclusion

This essay sought to evaluate whether a man who is guilty of causing his marriage to fail by committing adultery can later serve as an elder. Does his past failure permanently prevent him from meeting the biblical requirements for eldership, or can he once again meet Paul's 'husband of one wife' criterion?

The weight of biblical evidence strongly militates against appointing to eldership a man who has failed as a husband and father, but that evidence falls short of an absolute, lifelong prohibition. Neither Paul's 'husband of one wife' requirement nor Jesus's teaching about divorce and remarriage has to be applied as a law that trumps the restoring power of God's grace. The power of the gospel can transform a fallen saint into a faithful and fruitful servant of Christ. In exceptional cases, such a person might once again be judged *above reproach* as a candidate for eldership.

A church might legitimately take a conservative view that the weight of biblical evidence makes it wise not to appoint as an elder anyone who has shipwrecked a Christian marriage; this view is defensible. However, it is also defensible for a church to leave the door open to appoint a restored and transformed sinner under truly exceptional circumstances, and after applying a transparent and thoughtful process.

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The Prophetic Witness of Amos and its Relevance for Today's Church in African Countries for Promoting Social Justice, Especially in Democratic South Africa

Noel Woodbridge and Willem Semmelink[1]

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show that the prophetic witness of Amos is relevant for today's church in African countries for promoting social justice, because of the growing corruption in African societies, especially in democratic South Africa. Firstly, relevant concepts relating to the prophetic witness of the church for promoting social justice are defined. Secondly, an attempt is made—using three theological arguments—to demonstrate that the church is called upon by God to be a prophetic witness for social justice in secular society. Thirdly, a biblical examination of the prophetic witness of Amos is presented, especially relating to the context, the call and the message of Amos. Fourthly, a discussion on the relevance of the prophetic witness of Amos for African churches today, especially in South Africa, is provided. Sixthly, recent developments and challenges for today's church in African countries like South Africa to revive their prophetic witness are described. Finally, the

[1] The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

article proposes certain practical guidelines—based on the prophetic witness of Amos—for today's church on how to promote social justice in African countries, especially in democratic South Africa.

1. Introduction

An examination of the prophetic witness of the church in African countries, especially in South Africa, is relevant for the reasons listed below.

Firstly, there is growing corruption in African societies. In spite of obtaining independence, many African countries have 'inherited indelible scars of exploitation, injustice and misery from colonial rule' (Nyiawung 2010:791). Since then, the situation has declined resulting in 'an ever growing chasm between a few elite in leadership positions who oppress and a vast majority of followers grounded by the load of oppression' (Nyiawung 2010:791).

The situation of corruption in post-apartheid South Africa appears to be no different. Charles Ayoub, in an article entitled, *Corruption in South Africa* indicates that 'the 2010 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index assigned South Africa an index of 4.8, ranking South Africa 54th out of 178 countries.' He further states that in South Africa corruption includes 'the private use of public resources, bribery and improper favouritism' (Ayoub 2011).

Notable incidents of fraud and corruption in South Africa include the following:

- 'The Travelgate scandal, in which 40 members of parliament were found to have illegally used parliamentary travel vouchers

worth R18 million for personal use' (The Guardian, 25 January 2005).

- 'Former National Police Commissioner and ex-President of Interpol, Jackie Selebi, was convicted on corruption charges in July 2010, for receiving (at least) R120 000 from alleged crime-syndicate boss, Glenn Agliotti' (BBC News, 20 July 2010).
- 'Evidence of a long list of fraud, corruption, tender-rigging, kickbacks, irregular appointments and other cases of wrongdoing has been uncovered by the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) at municipalities nationwide.' In the Tshwane Metro 'the SIU unmasked 65 municipal officials with interests in 66 companies doing R185 million worth of business with the municipality. It emerged that this was just the tip of the iceberg' (IOL News, 30 July 2012).

Secondly, there are glaring weaknesses of the prophetic witness of the church in African societies today; 'hence the need for the development of a "relevant theology" that keeps abreast with African realities'. Nyiawung (2010:791) points out the following weaknesses in the prophetic witness of today's church in African societies:

- most African countries have adopted democracy, without defining what it means;
- 'many people have lost confidence in the church in times of misery';
- 'churches seem to have established a dichotomy between theology and societal realities';
- the church has up to now mainly focused most of its efforts on evangelising the faithful churchgoers and has ignored those on the streets;

- 'armchair sermons' have created passive citizens, rather than challenge them to make every effort to achieve responsible stewardship.

Thirdly, there is a great need for the church in South Africa to speak out against social injustices. Von Broembsen and Davis (2008), in an article entitled, *South Africa Must Address Social Justice* express the following concern:

> Amongst poor communities, there is a growing disillusionment and frustration at being treated unjustly: crime and a lack of delivery in critical areas such as education, housing and health provision are just some of the factors fuelling this discontent. Now … the new challenge is the achievement of social justice as set out in our constitution.

79.8% of South Africans indicated their religious affiliation in the 2001 census as Christian (SouthAfrica.info 2011). This question arises: how should Christians react when confronted with corruption? Theron and Lotter claim that instead of withdrawing from the world, Christians should rather participate in transforming of all areas of society. Instead of keeping silent about political, social, and economic evils, they should be willing to meet the challenge of addressing these problems in society 'by applying biblical, moral and ethical principles' (2009:467, 487). Jesus confirmed this view when he stated that his followers ought to be like salt and light in the world (Matt 5:13–15).

The purpose of this article is to show that the prophetic witness of Amos is relevant for today's church in African countries for promoting social justice, especially in democratic South Africa.

2. Social Justice from a Biblical Perspective: Defining Relevant Concepts

Firstly, an examination of the prophetic witness of the church for promoting social justice requires the definition of the relevant concepts.

Wehmeier (2000:648) defines justice as 'the fair treatment of people'. The Christian understanding of justice is based on divine justice, as depicted in Jeremiah 9:24: 'I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth' (Jer 9:24, ESV). Divine justice implies that 'rather than showing favouritism, God treats all persons fairly and impartially'. It also 'entails compassion, especially for the less fortunate' (Grenz and Smith 2003:65).

Social justice focuses on 'the common good of the community', as manifested in areas such as 'the fair and equal distribution of goods and benefits', as well as 'respect for the rights of others' (Grenz and Smith 2003:65).

A democratic society is one of freedom, where people exercise equal rights. It is a society where governance is by consent and in the interest of the people. In such societies, government institutions and policies are such that they respond to the needs and priorities of the people (Hyden 2006:10).

According to Vorster (2011:1), corruption is 'the misuse of a public office or a position of authority for private material or social gain at the expense of other people'.

Prophetic witness is 'God authorising a voice to speak on his behalf' (Nyiawung 2010:792).

Churches have a special function to serve as God's agents in civil society. Their prophetic witness can be a vital source of guidance for public discourse in the social arena, since, through a knowledge of the scriptures, they know 'the undisputable moral truths on which a society depends, such as the dignity of every human being' and the need for the poor to be protected against social injustices—a moral principle for which the biblical prophets stood (Bedford-Strohm 2010).

In this article, prophetic witnessing will not be confined to people who are ordained ministers, since there is a strong spiritual link between Old Testament prophets and all believers. Therefore, the duty of prophetic witnessing is that of every believer (Williams 2003:171).

Also, a discussion on the prophetic witness of the church requires a description of social justice from a biblical perspective. The question arises: to what extent are the themes of justice and social justice (as applied to individual believers) raised in the Old Testament, continued in the New Testament?

It is evident that Old Testament prophetic messages were focused on public interest. For example, Amos prophesied against societies that 'trample the heads of the poor as upon dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed' (Amos 2:7, NIV). In the New Testament, Jesus used the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to illustrate prophetic witnessing against the exploitation of the poor that was earlier championed by former Old Testament prophets (Luke 16:19–31). Nyiawung (2010:793) elaborates:

> This parable symbolises a society imbued with injustice and the passive attitude of the rich *vis-à-vis* the poor. The prophetic witness of the church is the mouthpiece of Jesus, because, if society fails to listen, its inhabitants will not be convinced if someone should rise

> from the dead to communicate God's anger against injustice (Luke 16:30).

It can be argued that the themes of justice and social justice (as applied to individual believers), raised in the Old Testament are continued in the New Testament. Prophets such as Isaiah and Amos raised their voices on behalf of the poor and the marginalised in society. 'The fifth chapter of Amos contains some of the most striking and most famous "justice" language in the Bible.' God rebukes his people 'for turning justice into wormwood' (5:7) (Dominik 2011). Micah 6:8 is the most beloved 'social justice' passage of all; 'Should God's people bring a burnt offering or a thousand rams or a river of oil' (vv. 6–7)? The resounding response is, no! 'The Lord requires that His people do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with [their] God' (6:8) (DeYoung and Gilbert 2011:159). In his ministry Jesus develops a Christian ethics of love. The ultimate goal of the Christian life is 'to love God and one's neighbour' (Mark 12:28–34). Jesus urges his disciples to consider always how best to help one's neighbour in poverty. This is clearly portrayed in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) (Dominik 2011).

3. Theological Arguments in Support of the Prophetic Witness of the Church for Promoting Social Justice in Secular Society

The prophet Amos was clearly called by God to speak against the social ills of the people of God. To what extent is the New Testament church (and individual believers) called upon to play a similar role in relation to secular society? Isn't it the specific task of the church to proclaim the gospel of Christ and call people to saving faith? What is the relationship between Israel and the Church? In this section an attempt will be

made—using three theological arguments—to demonstrate that the church is called upon by God to be a prophetic witness for social justice in secular society.

Firstly, it is important to establish the relationship between Israel and the church. According to Replacement Theology, 'the Church has replaced Israel in God's plan' (Parsons 2013). Proponents of Replacement Theology 'believe that the Jews are no longer God's chosen people, and that God does not have specific future plans for the nation of Israel' (What is Covenant Theology 2013).

On the other hand, Covenant Theology 'does not see a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church. Israel constituted the people of the God in the OT and the Church (which is made up of both Jews and Gentiles) constitutes the people of God in the NT … The church doesn't replace Israel; the Church is Israel and Israel is the Church (Gal 6:16)' (What is Covenant Theology 2013).

The book of Amos begins with a series of eight prophetic oracles which pronounce judgement on the nations that surround Israel. In terms of both Replacement Theology and Covenant Theology, it can be argued that, just as God called Israel (his people) to be a prophetic witness to the nations ('secular' societies), denouncing their sins and calling them to repentance, so God calls the church (his people) to be a prophetic witness to secular society, calling for social justice.

Secondly, it is necessary to define the task of the church, as portrayed in the New Testament. The spiritual mission of the church is to go into the entire 'world proclaiming the saving message and making disciples' (Mark 16:15; Matt 28:18–20). 'In the course of fulfilling the spiritual commission, the church and individual believers with reasonable limits are to do good' to all people, especially to those of 'the household of

faith' (Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 5:3–16; 6:17–19) (Dominik 2011). 'New Testament passages like 2 Corinthians 8–9 and Galatians 6:1–10 demonstrate the gospel motivation for mercy ministry. Because we have been given grace in Christ, we ought to extend grace to others' in his name (DeYoung and Gilbert 2011:174). Tim Keller is correct when he says that 'ministering to the poor is a crucial sign that we actually believe the gospel' (Keller 2008:8–22).

Thirdly, in defining the contemporary role of the church, it is necessary to discuss current trends amongst Evangelical Christians. The 'movement among evangelicals to take up a social and spiritual commission for the church began in a significant way at the First International Congress on World Evangelization called by evangelist Billy Graham, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974' (Thomas 2003). In his paper at the congress entitled, 'A new vision, a new heart, a renewed call', Rene Padilla asks the questions: 'How is the mission of the church defined? What is included in its mission?' He responds as follows: 'The mission of the church is multifaceted because it depends on the mission of God, which includes the whole of creation and the totality of human life' (Padilla 2005). To challenge the worldwide church the Micah Declaration was compiled at the congress. It was based on 'the prophetic word of Micah to "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (6:8)' (Micah Declaration 2008). Padilla 'approvingly quotes from the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together' (Padilla 2005). 'David Bosch puts this conception of the church's mission in a mathematical analogy: Evangelism + social action = mission' (Sterling 2011:85). According to Bosch's view, the mission of the church is the total task that God has set for reaching the world.

'The church's mission becomes one of saving souls and societies' (Sterling 2011:97).

However, one needs to add *a note of caution regarding 'the social and spiritual commission for the church',* as discussed in the previous paragraph. Donald Guthrie has provided a useful 'review of the New Testament teaching on social responsibility'. He concludes: 'Social relief and social reform are not the gospel, but they flow naturally from it' (Sterling 2011:95). Since the primary mission of the church is evangelism and discipleship, it can be argued that 'if we try to combine and balance a spiritual and social mission we may end up doing neither well and may eventually minimize the spiritual mission and drift to a primary social mission. The YMCA and the Salvation Army are good examples of such a drift' (Sterling 2011:97).

4. The Prophetic Witness of Amos: the Context, the Call, and the Message

Firstly, an understanding of the historical setting, in which Amos delivered his oracles to Israel, will help to define the context of his prophetic witness.

During the reign of Jeroboam II, Israel reached what was probably its height in terms of economic prosperity. Helped along with collusion amongst royalty and judges, a wealthy aristocracy emerged at the expense of the poor. They lived in luxurious dwellings in the cities. It is clear 'that this economic prosperity was not accompanied by a fair distribution of the nation's wealth, hence while some were getting richer from the expanded markets owing to the expansion of Israelite territory and foreign markets, the majority of the people remained poor' (Gunda 2010). The prophet sums up the economic prosperity that was

experienced by the elite in Israel: 'Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall' (Amos 6:4, ESV).

'It would appear from the prophet Amos that corruption among the leaders, particularly the judiciary system, was rampant' Barton 1995:1532). For the wealthy people in Israel, economic prosperity led to complacency and corruption. 'With all the comfort and luxury in Israel came self-sufficiency and a false sense of security. But prosperity brought corruption and destruction' (Barton 1995:1532).

When discussing the judges of his time, Amos says: 'For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate' (5:12, ESV).

Excessive wealth in Israel led to the creation of an elite upper class—characterised by power and leisure—that increasingly adopted a decadent lifestyle, which included sexual immorality and idolatry. These greedy people profited from trade and benefited from slave labour and usury. They bought up food in the countryside and resold it to a captive audience in the cities making enormous profits in the process (Stuart 2002).

Secondly, Amos was called by God to the prophetic ministry. He was a humble shepherd and a cultivator of sycamore trees from the village of Tekoa, near Jerusalem, when the Lord called him to be a prophet. He was not an official member of the Jewish religious establishment (Wiersbe 2007:1415). While he was tending the flock, Amos heard the voice of the Lord telling him: 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel' (Amos 7:15, ESV). During the reign of Jereboam II God gave Amos 'a profound vision concerning the state of Israel.' It was clear from the

vision that Amos was God's 'chosen person to declare God's message to Israel' (Word of life 2010).

Thirdly, Amos employed a unique literary style to ensure that his message was clearly understood and perceived as a message that was communicated to him by God himself. The style of Amos's prophetic witness can be illustrated in the following ways (Introduction to Amos 2012):

- 'In his discourse he employs the style of a messenger' speaking on behalf of God: 'This is what the Lord says' (1:3, 6).
- 'He sings a funeral lament for Israel in anticipation of its fall (5:1, 2)'.
- 'He uses many popular metaphors that he learned when he was a shepherd and farmer (1:3; 2:13; 3:12; 4:1; 9:9)'.
- Amos uses his writing skills to join 'a series of proverbs together until reaching a climax (1:3–2:10)'.

In his writings, it is clear that 'Amos had a high view of God as the Creator, and periodically his prophecy breaks into peals of praise' (New World Encyclopedia 2012). Amos 4:13 (NIV) is a good illustration of his view of God: 'He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth—the Lord God Almighty is his name.'

Fourthly, a closer look at the message of the prophet Amos reveals that, although he addressed various issues, his central theme focused on sin and judgment.

The prophetic witness of Amos was against sin—the social injustices of the people of Israel. The wealthy got rich by exploiting the poor. On behalf of God, 'the prophet Amos denounced luxury and urged the

people to care for the poor.' He particularly condemned 'their expensive houses … their drinking … and their costly parties.' Yet, these same people 'were "religious" and faithfully participated in temple services.' However, their 'religion' was merely a cover-up for their sins (Wiersbe 1991:584).

In chapters three through to six, Amos delivers three sermons to expose Israel's sins. In his prophetic witness Amos's words are both frank and brutal, as he denounces sin and calls for repentance. George (2006:138) describes the social and religious problems in Israel during the time of Amos, explaining that the wealthy people were greedy and cruel and through heavy taxation, they exploited the poor. God condemns them for taking bribes and for depriving the poor of justice. Although these rich people profess to serve and worship God, their hypocrisy is shown in their lavish lifestyle. In fact, there is 'a total absence of social justice and morality' (George 2006:138).

The prophetic witness of Amos was a message of judgment on behalf of God. Amos makes it clear that commitment to God must go deeper than worship rituals, such as bringing offerings to the altar (5:18–17). God requires from his people 'genuine repentance and righteous living'. Amos indicates what will happen to the people of Israel, if they do not turn from their wicked ways: 'They will be taken away as captives in a foreign land' (6:1–14) (Knight 2003:193). God would not change his mind, because the transgressions of the Israelites were too many. Their rejection of God's covenant and his repeated warnings had made the destruction to come inevitable. God cried out against their unjust practices that were harming the poor. 'Their attention to ceremony and sacrifices, has left the heart of the worshiper untouched' (Finley 1985:411–412).

Despite his message of judgement, Amos interceded on behalf of the people of Israel. He pleaded with God (ch. 7), to which God reacted by changing his mind. Because of Amos's intercession on behalf of Israel, the first two judgments of locusts and fire did not take place. However, 'Amos did not intercede after the third vision, for the nation had been measured and found wanting' (Wiersbe 1991:587).

5. The Relevance of the Prophetic Witness of Amos for African Churches Today, Especially in South Africa

The 'exploitation of the poor remains a concern in our society today.' It can be argued that the eighth century BC condemnations of Amos are essentially relevant in the quest for social justice in African countries today, especially in democratic South Africa. Gunda argues that the collusion described by Amos between the wealthy elite in Israel, the 'judiciary and the religious leaders in the exploitation of the poor, remains a concern in our society today.' However, Amos's condemnation of the wealthy elite was 'not so much targeted against the political stability and economic prosperity, but against the injustices that were nurtured in these environments' (Gunda 2010).

To assist today's church in promoting social justice in African countries, the authors propose the following four biblical principles, derived from the prophetic witness of Amos:

First, social justice is required of God's people. God speaks out against the abuse of wealth, power, and privilege. The book of Amos 'stands as an eloquent witness against those who subordinate human needs and dignity to the pursuit of wealth and pleasure' (Nelson 1996:249).

Second, the prevalence of social injustices in African countries calls for a relook at the role of the church as a prophetic witness and

representative of God. We are living in a society where it has become apparent that God is no longer a factor in the lives of the majority of people. Godless people are showing the same symptoms that we read about in the book of Amos. Finley (1985:411) suggests that the message of Amos 'has much to contribute to discussions of social justice.'

Third, the prophetic witness of Amos serves as a challenge to African churches today to take up their role as God's representatives within society (as 'salt and light') and to speak out against the socio-economic and political wrongs of our time. Nyiawung (2010:798–799) claims that it is the urgent task of the church to fight against social justices, through its prophetic witness. Furthermore, the church should continue to denounce injustices for as long as the poor and oppressed exist in today's society. 'It should remind society of its responsibility towards God, through committed and responsible stewardship' (Nyiawung 2010:798–799).

Fourth, the prophetic witness of Amos serves as a challenge to the ordinary believer to speak out on behalf of God against injustices committed in society, whether acting as an individual, or in collaboration with other fellow believers or even globally. In his exposition of the phrase, 'maintain justice in the courts' (Amos 5:15, NIV), Motyer (quoted in Finley 1985:413) raises the challenge, 'What a call this … constitutes to Bible Christians to rediscover the moral and social teaching of Holy Scripture.'

6. Recent Developments and Challenges for Today's Church in African Countries like South Africa to revive their Prophetic Witness

It is clear that the African churches need to revive their prophetic voice, especially in the current socio-economic and political climate in South Africa. The following recent approaches for promoting social justice need to be developed and applied, especially in democratic South Africa.

Firstly, African churches need to develop a 'relevant theology'. African churches and theologians have not been entirely indifferent towards the plight of the poor and oppressed. In fact, the serious situation has resulted in a trend towards dynamism in theology in recent years to address the wrongs during the colonial and apartheid eras. This has encouraged developments in the field of theology, i.e. Liberation Theology, Black Theology and African Theology. This, in turn, has led to the development of 'relevant theology,' which focuses on contextualisation—interpreting the Bible in conjunction with God's purpose for mankind within a particular context (Nyiawung 2010:791).

Secondly, African churches need to respond to the call to action by the Cape Town Commitment of the 2010 Lausanne Congress. The Lausanne Congress in 2010 in Cape Town compiled 'the Cape Town Commitment a "Confession of Faith and a Call to Action." In Part II, section IIA of the document the Church is called upon to bear "witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic, globalized world."'

The Cape Town Commitment acknowledges the importance of bearing witness to the truth in the interconnected public 'arenas of Government, Business and Academia', which 'have a strong influence on the values

of each nation and, in human terms, define the freedom of the Church' (Lausanne Movement 2011: Part II, § IIA, ¶ 7).

The Cape Town Commitment (Lausanne Movement 2011: Part II, § IIA, ¶ 7A&B) calls the Church to action in the following ways:

- 'We encourage Christ-followers to be actively engaged in these spheres, both in public service or private enterprise, in order to shape societal values and influence public debate. We encourage support for Christ-centred schools and universities that are committed to academic excellence and biblical truth.'
- 'Corruption is condemned in the Bible. It undermines economic development, distorts fair decision-making and destroys social cohesion. No nation is free of corruption. We invite Christians in the workplace, especially young entrepreneurs, to think creatively about how they can best stand against this scourge.'

7. Conclusion

God wants all people to come to know him and to be in a right relationship with him. There is only one remedy for sin—'Seek the LORD and live' (Amos 5:6, NIV). Sin seeks to destroy. However, hope is found in seeking God (Barton 1995:1540).

The world, with its growing economic, political, social, and ecological crises has imposed an urgent responsibility on the prophetic witness of the church. 'This mission is about the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which has a social, political and economic dimension' (Malina 2001). Sider calls for 'deep changes in the Christian lifestyle to reflect concern for the poor'. He makes a connection between evangelism and social action by pointing out that 'the world is attracted to the gospel

when it sees a demonstration of caring and loving concern for society' (Finley 1985:418, 419). For this reason, Christ calls upon his people to perform a two-fold ministry:

> Jesus calls Christians to be 'witnesses', to evangelize others, but also to be deeply concerned for the poor. He calls his disciples *both* to 'gospel-messaging' (urging everyone to believe the gospel) *and* to 'gospel-neighbouring' (sacrificially meeting the needs of those around them whether they believe or not!). The two absolutely go together (Keller 2008:18).

God calls upon us to love our neighbours, including the poor, as ourselves. Such love for the poor is demonstrated in our deeds of compassion. It is also expressed through exposing everything that oppresses and exploits the poor. As Christians, 'our loving duty towards our suffering neighbours requires us to seek justice on their behalf through proper appeal to legal and state authorities who function as God's servants in punishing wrongdoers' (Lausanne Movement 2011:Part 1, § 7C&D).

A high responsibility rests on the today's clergy to deepen the awareness of churchgoers to what the Bible says about social morality. With all the issues raised by Amos regarding the need for social action, it is important for believers to remember that prayer combined with the proper exegesis of scripture will help them to gain a comprehensive knowledge of God's will for personal, social, and governmental reform (Finley 1985:420).

Finally, the question arises: how can today's church promote social justice in African countries, especially in democratic South Africa? In response to this question, five practical guidelines, based on the prophetic witness of Amos, are presented: (a) support those believers

who speak out against the evils in our time: crimes, injustices within the socio-economic and political climate of our time; (b) address issues, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual misconduct and AIDS from a Biblical stance; (c) make people aware of the needs of our time; (d) motivate people to get involved in the sustainable development of their environment, and in addressing issues such as unemployment and poor education; and (e) support those people who are still oppressed, maltreated, abused and belittled.

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Review of Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple: How Could Everybody be so wrong about Biblical Prophecy*

Noel Woodbridge[1]

Waldron SE 2008. *The end times made simple: how could everybody be so wrong about biblical prophecy*. New York: Calvary Press.

1. Introduction to the Author and the Book

Solid Ground Books (2013) provides the following information about the author of the book, Samuel Waldron:

> Dr. Sam Waldron serves as the Professor of Systematic Theology at the Midwest Center for Theological Studies. This is an institution dedicated to the training of God's servants for both the vocational pastorate and effective service to the Lord Christ in other vocations. Prior to moving to Kentucky to pursue his doctorate at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, he was a pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church of Grand Rapids from 1977 to 2001. He is the author of numerous books and pamphlets including A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

The introduction to the book below includes its background setting, its eschatological position and a synopsis of the book.

Nowadays there is much confusion in the field of eschatology. On the one hand, believers are being advised to 'follow the unbiblical, complex and bizarre scheme of Dispensationalism with its "Secret Rapture," political Anti-Christ and worldly Millennium' (WTS Books 2013).

On the other hand, the 'full preterists' inform us 'that all biblical prophecy has been fulfilled', and they say that we ought not to expect Christ to descend from the sky in judgment and triumph. However, in his book, *The end times made simple,* Waldron claims that both of these end-time schemes are incorrect and that the Bible teaching on the end-times is actually quite straightforward (WTS Books 2013).

Although he does not state it explicitly, Waldron holds an amillennialist *position*. One of the main differences between amillennialism and premillennialism revolves around the question as to 'whether the thousand years of Revelation 20:1–6 is present or future' (Waymeyer 2008). He elaborates as follows: 'according to the amillennial interpretation, this thousand-year period consists of the present age which extends from the first coming of Christ to His second coming. In contrast, premillennialism teaches that the thousand years of Revelation 20 is future and will take place immediately after the second coming' (Waymeyer 2008).

The following synopsis provides a good introduction to the book (Ebay Books 2007):

> Rapture? Pre-Trib? Post-Trib? Millennium? Confused? You should be! In today's Evangelical Christian world, eschatology—or the study of the 'Last Things'—has been turned into a sort of pseudo-science with a plethora of authors claiming to know exactly the

scenario of events that are to take place just prior to the Lord Jesus Christ's return, as well as what the eternal state will be like. Often, these authors come to rather bizarre and unbiblical conclusions. Piece by piece, Samuel E. Waldron strips away years of false teaching and faulty exegesis thrust upon the church to reveal what the Bible, in its own simple but profound way, says about what will happen at the end of this present age.

2. A Summary of the Book

In his book, *The End Times Made Simple*, Waldron demonstrates the truth of the title. Although an understanding of 'the end times will never be as simple as many other biblical doctrines', Waldron demonstrates that the doctrine of the end times is not so difficult to understand as it is often made out to be (Wayne 2003).

In chapter three of his book, Waldron introduces 'crucial principles of Biblical interpretation' (p. 28). He maintains that when interpreting Bible passages dealing with prophecy, one should study 'the clear before the difficult, the literal before the figurative and the general before the detailed' (Waldron 2008:28). Usually, when people want to discover the meaning of the end times, they go directly to 'two of the more difficult, figurative and detailed books in the bible' (i.e. Daniel and Revelation) (Wayne 2003).

Waldron indicates that eschatology is 'not confined to certain prophetic books of the Bible (like Daniel and Revelation). Prophecy permeates the whole Bible' (Waldron 2008:28). The serious Bible prophecy student should, therefore, first read this material since it provides a platform for studying the more difficult books, such as Daniel and Revelation. We need to interpret 'the prophetic books in light of the rest of the Bible, rather than the other way around' (Wayne 2003).

Waldron claims that 'the two ages are divided by the judgement of the wicked and the resurrection of the righteous at Christ's return (1 Cor 15:22, 23, 50–55, 1 Thes 4:16)' (Waldron 2008:41). Waldron describes in detail 'the two-age view of world history' and in so doing 'shows the beautiful simplicity of God's prophetic plan' (Wayne 2003).

Waldron explains that 'this terminology or part of it' is used in the following sixteen New Testament passages: 'Matt 12:32 (in parallel with Mark 3:29); Mark 10:30; Luke 16:8; Luke 18:30; Luke 20:34–36; Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20; 1 Cor 2:6, 8; 1 Cor 3:18; 2 Cor 4:4; Gal 1:4; Eph 1:21; Eph 2:2; 1 Tim 6:17–19; Titus 2:12; and Heb 6:5' (Reformed Baptist 2011; Waldron 2008:32–34). It can be concluded that 'this simple two-age view is clearly a basic building block' of eschatology in the New Testament (Reformed Baptist 2011).

Waldron spends a great deal of time comparing the two-age model (structure) with various other end-time views. He shows that the two-age model has, amongst other things, the following implications for eschatology (Waldron 2008:37, 40, 52–53; 91–92):

- 'This age and the age to come taken together exhaust all time, including the endless time of the eternal state' (p. 37).
- 'There is no period between "this age and the age to come"' (p. 40).
- 'There is no period after "the age to come"' (p. 40).
- 'This simple biblical structure of redemptive history is inhospitable to both premillennialism and postmillennialism' (p. 52–53).
- An exposition of the internal structure of Revelation 20:1–10 provides strong proof that the amillennial view of eschatology is the biblical view (p. 91–92).

In the last section of the book, Waldron provides the answers to many difficult questions relating to Bible prophecy, such as 'the relationship between the Church and Israel, the intermediate state, heaven, hell, eternal punishment.' In so doing, he covers the most important issues relating to the end times (Wayne 2003).

The book is divided into twenty-five chapters. The content of these chapters is divided into Parts and Sections as follows (WTS Books 2013):

'Part 1: How old is your eschatology?' (Chapters 1–2)
'Part II: Eschatology made simple!' (Chapters 3–13)
'Part III: Next question please!' (Chapters 14–25)
'Section 1: Questions related to the Present Gospel or Church Age' (Chapters 14–17)
'Section 2: Questions related to the Imminent Return of Christ' (Chapters 19–22)
'Section 3: Questions related to the Resurrection' (Chapter 23)
'Section 4: Questions related to the Eternal State' (Chapters 24–25)

3. Strengths of the Book

The book has four recognisable strengths.

Firstly, it is *scrupulously biblical*. In the light of this book, those who write off the amillennialists 'as "non-literalists" or as those who don't take the Bible seriously will have to reconsider their view.' It is regrettable that nowadays amillennialists 'are often dismissed in evangelical circles' (Wayne 2003).

Secondly, it is a *useful handbook* for information on anything dealing with the end times. It is 'not confined to simply looking at post, pre, or

amillennial viewpoints.' It also discusses 'many questions relating to Heaven and Hell, Christ's second coming, the state of believers after their death, the Day of Judgment, eternal punishments, the new Heavens and the new earth.' In addition, it deals with some common misunderstandings regarding the relationship between Israel and the Church (Three 17 Blogspot 2004).

Thirdly, it is a *relatively simple book*. At first glance one might be a bit sceptical about the title of the book. However, 'Waldron avoids the excessive use of technical jargon, and is easy to follow.' He includes 'a few diagrams along the way to make matters even clearer.' 'The most complicated diagrams' are used to explain 'the complex schemes that have been devised by various men.' The book is, in fact, correctly entitled, 'The end times made simple' (Three 17 Blogspot 2004).

Lastly, it is '*a practical book*.' 'Throughout the chapters' Waldron indicates the practical application of the Bible 'on this subject to different areas of our lives' (Three 17 Blogspot 2004).

4. Weakness of the Book

The following is a summary of the description by Waymeyer (2013), a premillennialist, of *a* fundamental weakness in Waldron's amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20: Waymeyer (2013) points out that the 'first hermeneutical principle cited by Waldron involves the historical context of Revelation 20.' He quotes Waldron (2008:85) who explains that:

> The first and most basic principle of biblical interpretation is known as grammatical-historical interpretation. Simply stated this fundamental principle says that the Bible must be interpreted in terms of the normal grammatical meaning of the language and in a

> way that makes sense in light of the historical context of the passage. The original sense of the words for the original author and readers is the true sense.

According to Waymeyer (2013), Waldron insists that 'a commitment to the grammatical-historical approach poses a significant problem for the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1–10,' because the book of Revelation was written by John 'to local churches in the first-century province of Asia' that were undergoing persecution (Waymeyer 2013). He quotes Waldron (2008:86), who argues as follows:

> A credible interpretation must exhibit a clear line of connection with this historical context. Since the premillennial interpretation of this passage asserts that this passage has to do with a drastically different and far distant period of time after the return of Christ, it faces up front a problem with the principle of historical interpretation.

Waymeyer points out that, on the one hand, Waldron argues that Revelation 20:1–10 cannot refer to 'a time period after the second coming of Christ if it is required to "exhibit a clear line of connection" with the historical context of the book of Apocalypse' (Waymeyer 2013). On the other hand, Waymeyer indicates that Waldron 'agrees that the judgment described in Revelation 20:11–15 will take place in a far distant period of time after the return of Christ' (Waymeyer 2013).

According to Waymeyer, Waldron's argument 'violates the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation … in precisely the same way that he accuses the premillennialist of doing with Revelation 20:1–10' (Waymeyer 2013). The problem arises: how can Waldron, as an amillennialist, conveniently accept 'Revelation 20:11–15 being in the far and distant future', but ceremoniously discard the possibility that the

events described in verses 1–10 could likewise take place in the future? (Waymeyer 2013).

5. Conclusion

As 'a reformed Baptist scholar', Waldron seeks 'to serve the larger Church.' This book offers 'a comprehensive view of eschatology from the amillennial perspective' (Internet Monk 2013). As such, it surpasses almost any other book (except for Kim Riddlebarger's book, entitled, *A case for Amillennialism*) (Internet Monk 2013).

'Waldron's book is actually readable by someone who has read the *Left Behind* book series. It's well written, illustrated with graphs, approaches the subject through the issues raised in Left Behind, and isn't overwhelmed with a polemical tone even though it is a polemic' (Internet Monk 2013).

There are numerous good scholarly good books on the topic of eschatology and Revelation. However, this book has 'the best potential for presenting an alternative eschatology to any person eager to examine the subject' (Internet Monk 2013). I strongly recommend this book as a source that can best bring you a clear and straightforward understanding of eschatology from an amillennial perspective.

This book needs to be 'widely circulated so that the Church can see that the amil view … is clearly taught in the Scriptures.' However, that does not imply that 'there are no problems' relating to the amillennial view or that there are certain issues that cannot be debated (Wayne 2003).

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